

# 'Smoke, mirrors' of tobacco sector

**ALTHOUGH** the term "Smoke and mirrors" may not have anything to do with a person using a mirror to smoke, it can describe the "good deeds" of the tobacco industry.

In 2008, Zambia joined the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO-FCTC) in a bid to combat the significant health issues and fatalities linked to tobacco consumption.

Yet, efforts to implement the FCTC locally through a dedicated tobacco control law have faced pushback from the tobacco sector.

In this piece, journalist **THANDIWE MOYO** sheds light on how the tobacco industry in Zambia leverages its CSR initiatives to obscure an epidemic while resisting regulatory measures.

**WEBSTER'S** Dictionary describes "smoke and mirrors" as something intended to disguise or draw attention from an often embarrassing or unpleasant issue.

WHO classifies tobacco as an epidemic and one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced, killing over eight million people a year.

More than seven million of these deaths are as a result of direct tobacco use while around 1.3 million are because of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke.

The FCTC explicitly states that the profit-making interests of the tobacco industry are fundamentally irreconcilable with public health interests. According to WHO Zambia country representative Nathan Bakayita, Zambia loses 7,100 lives to tobacco-related causes every year, meaning 140 deaths every week.

WHO studies on cancer prevalence in Zambia formed the basis for the country to sign the WHO-FCTC in 2008.

The Tobacco Control Data Initiative estimates that this loss of human life costs Zambia K2.8 billion (US\$165 million) annually.

Therefore, to address the heavy disease burden and associated deaths, Zambia ratified the WHO-FCTC in 2008, with the intent to domesticate the FCTC through the implementation of legislation to regulate the consumption of tobacco through tobacco control legislation.

Sadly, not much progress has been made, partly due to interference by the tobacco industry, which has been using CSR activities to prevent the government from legislating tobacco use.

While tobacco control legislation has been slow and more than 20 people die every day due to causes directly attributed to it, the tobacco industry has been very busy in its attempts to cleanse the image of tobacco.

From Chipangali in the Eastern Province to Nkayema in the Western Province and other places, tobacco companies have been seeking to portray themselves as good corporate citizens by making contributions to deserving causes or, by otherwise, promoting "socially responsible" elements of their business practices. These include addressing the social, environmental, and health impacts associated with tobacco products and the operations of tobacco companies.

The Japan Tobacco International (JTI) Leaf Zambia Limited, for instance, is one of the tobacco companies operating in Zambia.

To enhance its image, JTI has launched a series of quarterly school debates, alongside poetry and drama activities, under the banner of "We Prosper".

This initiative, active in the Chipangali District of Eastern Province, spans more than 30 educational institutions, encompassing both primary and secondary schools. Participating schools, including Kachube

Secondary, Chipangali Day, and St Margaret, are engaged in discussions aimed at combating child labour in communities where JTI operates.

The debates tackle pressing issues such as whether child domestic work should be considered child labour and the implications of child labour on the development of responsible citizenship.

JTI's efforts in CSR in rural Chipata are overshadowed by ongoing accusations of overlooking child labour.

It is not uncommon to see young boys labouring on tobacco farms alongside their parents.

The CSR initiatives, designed to motivate communities involved in tobacco production, often have the unintended consequence of normalising tobacco exposure among children who, lacking proper oversight, may begin to misuse tobacco products.

This troubling trend frequently leads to school dropouts, counteracting the intended benefits of educational programmes.

Furthermore, these CSR activities are largely focused on urban areas within the Chipangali District, failing to reach the rural outskirts where the majority of tobacco farming occurs, thus perpetuating the cycle of child labour and educational neglect.

This means that these CSR activities have no impact, especially since there is no law to prevent children from accessing tobacco products.

Minors should not use or have access to tobacco or other nicotine-containing products.

Ironically, this is in direct contrast to JTI's purported values of "restricted access of tobacco to youth and children" as promulgated on their website.

Early this year (2024), JTI announced a donation of \$150,000 to \$300,000 to support education and healthcare in Eastern Province.

The company improved Kachube School in Chipangali by expanding classrooms, building toilets, constructing a teacher's residence and providing 200 desks as well as 40 textbooks.

In Western Province's Kaoma District, JTI established a new school in Kakanda, complete with a teacher's house, desks, textbooks, toilets and a solar-powered borehole for water access.

JTI has also drilled over 50 boreholes in Eastern Province and is involved in the ARISE initiative to combat child labour in tobacco-growing areas, in partnership with Winrock International and the International Labour Organisation.

The Tobacco Board of Zambia (TBZ) is responsible for "guiding all tobacco stakeholders in the industry" and is now starting a borehole construction project in five provinces, costing around K3.5 million.

Recently, TBZ chairperson Phil Daka launched eight boreholes for the Eastern Province.

This project aims to supply clean and safe water to rural communities.

"Apart from Eastern Province, other regions benefiting from this water project are Southern, Central, Lusaka and North-Western," he said.

Mr Daka said Chipangali, Lumezi, Lundazi, Chipata and Chama were among the districts in Eastern Province that were benefitting from the project.

Each district received one borehole.

He said his organisation was alive to the impact of climate change and would continue to set the agenda for players in the tobacco industry to remain conscious of the changes and align their interventions accordingly.

This year, over 40 boreholes have been sunk in the chiefdoms of Chief Mwase and Chief Chikomeni in Lundazi District.

Alliance One, yet another tobacco company, has initiated over eight projects related to tobacco, including planting eucalyptus, acacia and baobab trees.

The industry claims this aims to improve soil, wildlife habitats and biodiversity as well as address climate change.

In Chipili Village, Lundazi District, dams have been constructed to support these tree-planting efforts.

These are some of the CSR activities that the tobacco industry has been using to manipulate the governance bodies and the communities at large.

The said activities are a serious interference towards the enactment of the bill and there is need to address such in accordance with the WHO-FCTC.

The FCTC explicitly says the profit-making interests of the tobacco industry are fundamentally irreconcilable with public health interests.

The tobacco sector's purported "corporate social responsibility" is categorised under TAPS, which stands for Tobacco Advertising, Promotion and Sponsorship. WHO-FCTC mandates that parties implement a thorough ban on advertising, promotion, and sponsorship as such measures are essential for curbing tobacco product consumption.

**CSR prompts interference in public health policy**

The Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index (Global Tobacco Index) is a global survey conducted by the Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control.

It is a survey on how governments are responding to tobacco industry interference and protecting their public health policies in the tobacco industry's commercial and vested interests as required under the WHO-FCTC.

It rates countries on their response to tobacco industry interference through a survey questionnaire.

The questionnaire, developed from Article 5.3 Guidelines, contains 20 questions covering seven indicators of industry interference on which countries are scored. Notable among these indicators are industry participation in policy development and the tobacco industry's CSR.

Zambia is currently poorly ranked at 79 out of 90 countries participating in the Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index in 2023, with a score of 77.

This is significantly due to unnecessary government interaction with the tobacco industry through their CSR activities which soften the Government's attitude towards tobacco companies as they are postured as a partner in



**•OUT-OF-SCHOOL teenagers in Lusaka's Bauleni Township smoke cigarettes freely because they are easily accessible. Picture by THANDIWE MOYO**

development.

For instance, speaking in March 2024 when JTI handed over a three-classroom block, 90 desks and executive chairs to Kalale Secondary School in Nkayema District of Western Province, Kapelwa Mbangweta lauded the company, saying the "public-private partnerships enable the government to procure and deliver public infrastructure, services and leverage the resources and expertise of the private sector".

Similarly, Chipangali District Commissioner Paul Sakala officiated at the recent debate held at St Margaret School while Chipangali Member of Parliament (MP) Andrew Loubusha was guest of honour during the commissioning of the boreholes by JTI.

WHO-FCTC, which Zambia assented to, demands that the tobacco industry must be prohibited from promoting its CSR activities.

The Government must not condone the tobacco industry to continue ignoring the dangers of tobacco while company representatives manipulate communities with CSR activities.

The tobacco industry must be held accountable because of the nature of its business.

As already indicated, Article 5.3 of the WHO-FCTC legally obligates parties to the treaty to protect the public health policies related to tobacco control from commercial and other vested interests of the industry.

Further, Article 5.3 is against the tobacco industry's attempts to dilute and weaken effective and life-saving tobacco control legislation.

It calls for enactment and implementation of laws and policies aimed at preventing the tobacco industry's interference with tobacco control measures.

The advocacy of the tobacco industry's CSR at such events has overshadowed the necessity to implement the tobacco control Bill.

In addition to this, the Center for Primary Care and Research (CPCR) has noted the tobacco industry's use of its CSR and economic power to lobby and manipulate the media to discredit scientific research and influence governments in order to propagate the sale and distribution of its products without any form

of control.

CPCR senior researcher Richard Zulu noted in an interview that the diversity of these disruptive strategies demonstrated the mission of the tobacco companies to thwart tobacco control at global level.

He said this was based on the broad objective of establishing the tobacco industry as being "socially responsible" and a "partner" with government in tobacco control.

According to Mr Zulu, the tobacco industry tried to achieve this by using front groups.

The industry mobilises individuals and entities with no direct connection to the tobacco industry to undertake actions or arguments that favour its cause, which the industry then uses to boost its interventions or make a good name for itself.

A well-placed Government official, who could not be named, said the delay to enact the tobacco control Bill was not only because of the tobacco industry's interference but also a result of some ministries not agreeing with the contents of the proposed Bill.

Apex University doctor-in-charge Teddy Mulenga estimates that the Cancer Disease Hospital alone spends nearly K3 billion every year to treat tobacco-related cancers, which represents 1.2 per cent of Zambia's gross domestic product.

Dr Mulenga said tobacco-related diseases, such as lung cancer, heart diseases and chronic obstruction, cost Zambia huge amounts of money which were detrimental to the national Budget.

The medical practitioner, who has practiced for over 35 years, says using tobacco products caused a huge disease burden which Zambia could not afford.

According to Ministry of Health focal person on tobacco control, Mweene Nseluke, it was unfortunate that the tobacco control Bill had dragged due to differences among the ministries of Agriculture, Commerce, Trade and Industry, and Finance.

Dr Nseluke said although the three ministries seemed to have challenges with the contents of the Bill, the Ministry of Health had been having talks with representatives from the three ministries and all the parties were moving towards enacting the Bill because everyone was

aware that it had dragged.

He said the Ministry of Health was currently explaining the contents of the Bill to the other ministries so that they could understand it and the engagements had progressed.

He stated that as the Ministry of Health, Article 5.3 of the WHO-FCTC should be adhered to by ministries because Zambia was mandated to not support the tobacco industry.

He said it was unfortunate for some ministries to engage in supporting the tobacco industry's CSR activities.

When asked about the tobacco industry's disruptive tactics in the implementation of the tobacco control Bill, recently-appointed Health Minister Elijah Muchima, who is also Ikelong'i MP, said he was yet to familiarise himself with contents of the Bill.

"I am new in the office. I will need to read the contents of the Bill to be able to give an update," Dr Muchima said.

The minister noted that tobacco use remained one of the most significant public health challenges currently, looking at how young people were abusing the product.

He said President Hakainde Hichilema was, therefore, directing attention towards the alarming trend of the tobacco industry's targeted marketing towards children, as exemplified by the trending of smoking shisha and other related cigarettes in public places like malls and a number of places in suburbs.

And a Cancer Diseases Hospital specialist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said treating cancer was expensive and so was the equipment used.

According to him, the CT scan and MRI machines cost in the range of K500,000 and K1.5 million to purchase.

This is besides the additional costs of maintenance and deploying specialists to operate the machines.

"Treating tobacco-related illnesses such as respiratory tract cancers diseases is a cost. It's hard to even quantify the figures because we are talking of expensive drugs, expensive machines, the maintenance of the machines, paying specialists.

"These costs can never be equated or compared to [the tobacco] industry's CSR activities like building classrooms and boreholes,

which is a drop in the ocean compared to the cost of cancer treatment," he said.

The cancer specialist said there was need for leaders to regulate the use of tobacco products.

Failure to implement regulation of tobacco products will extinguish any hopes that were raised when Zambia signed the WHO-FCTC in 2008, which would spell victory for the tobacco industry.

While these CSR activities may seem to be acts of benevolence that are simple and straight-forward, the details are complicated and configured to cause problems.

Tobacco industry CSR activities in Zambia can be categorised into three focus areas, namely climate change, children and youth education and traditional leader rapport.

Zambia National Public Health Institute (ZNPHI) director general Roma Chilengi noted that enforcing regulations and encouraging responsible behaviour within the tobacco industry were two more ways of stopping children from using tobacco.

Supporting the Bill represents, in summary, an investment in the long-term health and sustainability of the Zambian people as a whole.

Professor Chilengi said on the ZNPHI Facebook page that he "firmly endorsed Tobacco Bill No.10 of 2022, as the institute mandated to address public health security in the country, we cannot keep quiet on tobacco, the bill will bring us close to protecting the community," he said.

**Climate change**

Climate change specialist Abel Musumali says the scanty planting of trees by tobacco companies is a drain on the environment and the ecosystem as tobacco exposes farmers and their families to toxic chemicals and further brings about degradation, leading to deforestation.

Tobacco is a major factor of deforestation and contributes to the accumulation of greenhouse emissions. "The trees being cut by the industry lead to habitat loss and disruption of ecosystem and, since trees cannot grow overnight, the planting of trees by the industry does not help towards climate change. It takes years for trees to grow and this planting of trees by the industry is an

anomaly.

"Eastern Province has a high rate of deforestation and mainly due to the activities of the tobacco industry. If left unregulated, the country will continue facing climate change issues. The seasonal planting of trees by the industry does not change anything," he emphasised.

A 2017 WHO report titled "Tobacco and its environmental impact: An Overview" states that "from start to finish, the tobacco life cycle is an overwhelmingly polluting and damaging process".

"It is not just about the lives of smokers and those around them, or even those involved in tobacco production. What is now at stake is the fate of an entire planet."

The dams and water sources done by the industry are mainly meant for their and benefit not to mitigate climate change as tobacco requires large amounts of water, exacerbating water scarcity in already water-stressed countries like Zambia.

**Children and youth education**

The tobacco industry stands accused of targeting children's education with sinister ulterior motives in contributing to Zambia's public education system.

Violet Mwesa, a Lusaka psychologist, says children have a pure untainted perspective of the world and that they are born without a pre-conception of bias or malice.

Ms Mwesa says, however, that with the influence and heavy dependence on the tobacco industry for sustainability, these sponsored children and students are being molded to be cheerleaders of the industry.

"Now that the tobacco industry has tailored its concentration in schools, the said acts of sponsorship are likely to drift the minds of these pupils and students to being loyal to the industry," she said.

**Traditional leaders**

The tobacco industry deliberately targets traditional leaders as it views them as soft targets.

Tobacco Control Consortium of Zambia (TCCZ) chairperson Albert Phiri claimed in a recent interview that tobacco companies deliberately misrepresented the harmful nature of tobacco to traditional leaders by sugarcoating it with promises of development, employment and education of subjects of the chiefdoms.

"The alarming impact of deforestation caused by tobacco cultivation in Eastern and Western provinces has been deeply troubling. We are particularly worried about the tobacco industry's involvement with traditional leaders in Luapula Province. The environmental destruction and ecosystem damage inflicted by tobacco in Eastern, Western, Southern, and Central provinces pose a serious threat to Luapula, further worsening the effects of climate change. We humbly beseech our esteemed royal leaders in Luapula and the Northern Circuit not to open the door to tobacco companies to prevent them from inflicting similar harm in their region," Mr Phiri said.

Through these three focus areas, which invariably involve interactions with government officials, the tobacco companies which are vectors of an epidemic, seek to reimage themselves and thwart tobacco control legislation.

The advocacy of the tobacco industry's CSR at such events has overshadowed the necessity to implement the tobacco control Bill.

It is all about smoke and mirrors.