

OP029

Reported tobacco industry interference during COVID-19 pandemic in South Asia

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Introduction

Articles 13 and 5.3 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) recommend banning sponsorships and restricting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of the tobacco industry (TI). It is known that TI uses catastrophic situations to promote its image through CSR activities.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore TI activities during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Asia from March 2020 to February 2022.

Methods

A mixed methods design was used. Investigative research techniques were used to gather data. Media reports, websites, industry reports and social media posts during the pandemic were analysed using content analysis methods.

Results

A total of 132 incidents were identified and 122 directly involved 10 tobacco companies. The highest were reported in India (80), Bangladesh (27) and Sri Lanka (18). The majority of incidents (73) were related to ITC Limited India.

Influencing media (41), promotion (31), CSR activities (donating money/medical equipment/food/ hygiene goods) (15), and partnering with governments (15) were the commonest incidents. Lobbying governments and officials, increasing accessibility to products, receiving awards, directors/ executive officers featuring in conferences, and sponsorships were other themes identified.

These received wide positive media coverage. Media highlighted the drop in revenue and later recovery of sales.

Online cigarette sales and home delivery services were initiated in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In Bhutan, the trade ban was lifted, and cigarettes were added to the essential goods list and sold in “state-owned duty-free” sales outlets.

Conclusion

TI used the pandemic to promote its image via CSR activities, sponsorships and partnering with governments violating FCTC and national laws.

Key words: *Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), CSR Activities, Promoting image*