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Michael Bloomberg and STOP have Big Tobacco in their sights

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Michael Bloomberg, president of Bloomberg Philanthropies. Picture: DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS / AFP

Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg is putting \$20m into countering the tobacco industry's attempts to undermine tobacco control measures, with the creation of a new global watchdog called Stopping Tobacco Organisations and Products (STOP) that will be run by his foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies.

The initiative was launched as the 17th World Conference on Tobacco or Health gets under way in Cape Town this week. Tobacco kills 7-million people a year, and more than 80% of the globe's 1-billion smokers live in low- and middle-income countries, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

STOP aims to identify deceptive tactics employed by the tobacco industry, and provide support to countries to counter Big Tobacco's influence, said Kelly Henning, who heads Bloomberg Philanthropies' public health programme.

"There is concern about tobacco industry behaviour in SA as there is in all of sub-Saharan Africa," she said.

"We are trying to protect the gains being made globally and not let the tobacco companies divert us from progress," she said.

Henning said Philip Morris International's (PMI's) recent launch of the Foundation for a Smoke Free World, which has been widely condemned by public health experts as an attempt by the industry to gain access to policy-making processes, was the latest in a series of industry attempts to counter tobacco controls. The foundation was launched last September, and PMI said it would provide it with \$80m a year for the next 12 years.

The WHO said at the time that if PMI truly supported a smoke-free world it would support policies such as increased taxes and graphic warnings, rather than opposing them. It said it would not partner the Foundation for a Smoke Free World, and advised governments and the public health community to follow suit.

STOP plans to publish regular reports on industry activities and provide grants to help governments and non-profit organisations (NGOs) to counter interference from Big Tobacco.

"Over the last decade tobacco control measures have saved nearly 35-million lives, but as more cities and countries take action, the tobacco industry is pushing to find new users, particularly among young people," Bloomberg said in a statement.

"We cannot stand by as the industry misleads the public in an effort to get more people hooked on its products — and this global watchdog will help us hold the industry accountable," he said.



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