

UNICEF Rebuttal to Claims Made in “The Tobacco Industry and Children’s Rights” Article

The article “The Tobacco Industry and Children’s Rights,” authored by van der Eijk et al,¹ contains serious inaccuracies and misrepresentations of both past engagement of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) with the tobacco industry and UNICEF’s current advocacy for tobacco control. We were surprised and disappointed that UNICEF was not given any opportunity to respond to the allegations set out in the article before it was published, which would have been standard practice. With this letter, we therefore identify and rebut the most serious of these inaccuracies.

UNICEF’s corporate engagement guidelines, which were developed in 2001, codified a preexisting, organization-wide policy of not accepting funding or entering into partnership with tobacco manufacturers. This position was not revised or loosened in any way in 2003, and revisions to the guidelines in 2011 and 2016 did not soften UNICEF’s longstanding no-funding, no-partnership policy with the tobacco industry.

The authors reference a project document by the Eliminating Child Labor in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT) published in 2003² as evidence of UNICEF’s engagement with ECLT. This document, developed without the involvement or knowledge of UNICEF, references UNICEF in a single sentence, “ILO/IPEC and UNICEF will be performing advisory functions.” UNICEF was not, in fact, involved in this project in an advisory or any other capacity. UNICEF’s interactions with ECLT have been focused on sharing information and increasing awareness about child rights issues related to the industry’s supply chain. This engagement is entirely in line with UNICEF’s corporate engagement guidelines and longstanding

programmatic and advocacy work, under which the organization does not refrain from sharing information, promoting tools, or making technical recommendations that may be important to identify, prevent, address, and remediate child rights violations resulting from specific business practices.

The authors’ allegations that UNICEF received funding from tobacco manufacturers are also unfounded. UNICEF did not receive any funding from Philip Morris International (PMI) or Japan Tobacco International (JTI).

UNICEF is actively engaged with our government partners around the world in efforts to reduce tobacco-related harm to children. These efforts, in countries including, for example, Bhutan, Brazil, Burundi, China, Mongolia, Namibia, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda, and Zambia, are primarily focused on substance abuse prevention and education programming. UNICEF has also been an active member of the United Nations’ Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, which works on tobacco control at the global level, since the Task Force was created in 2013.

Because UNICEF, unfortunately, was offered no opportunity to comment on the article before it was published and thus had no opportunity to correct these inaccuracies in advance, I must ask that you publish this letter in its entirety.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author has indicated he has no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Authors’ Response

In our article,¹ we recognized that UNICEF does important work to support children’s rights and that it played an important role in tobacco control when the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was being negotiated.

At the same time, the article reveals that UNICEF is not immune to tobacco industry targeting. Tobacco companies carefully orchestrate their attempts to infiltrate organizations, often in a covert manner through third parties and front groups, to minimize awareness within the organization that they are being targeted by tobacco companies. They also use the good reputation of United Nations (UN) agencies to bluish² their image, often without the consent of these organizations.

Peterson³ states that UNICEF was not involved in or aware of the 2003 ECLT project although ECLT claims that UNICEF had an advisory function to this project.⁴ ECLT again claimed UNICEF was part of a working group in a 2005–2009 project in Kyrgyzstan. At the very least, this situation reveals that ECLT was using UNICEF’s good reputation to promote its ECLT work and thereby the interests of the tobacco companies that created ECLT. This is, at a minimum, an example of “bluishwashing.”

According to Peterson, we make unfounded claims that UNICEF received funding from PMI and JTI. However, according to UNICEF Kazakhstan’s 2010 annual report⁵ (cited in our article), UNICEF engaged with PMI, which resulted in a proposal

for a \$2 million investment. We point this out as an example of tobacco industry engagement with UNICEF. In addition, we do not state that UNICEF received funding from JTI; we report that a JTI employee is listed as a contributor on the recent UNICEF publication “Obligations and Actions on Children’s Rights and Business: A Practical Guide for States on How to Implement the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No.16”⁶ as another example of tobacco industry engagement with UNICEF.

Authors of previous work have documented how tobacco companies infiltrated and partnered with UN organizations such as the World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, and United Nations Global Compact to undermine the UN’s tobacco control initiatives.^{7,8} We, similarly, show how tobacco companies attempted to neutralize UNICEF’s tobacco control work by positioning itself as a partner.

We hope that our article will be used to raise awareness at UNICEF, and among children’s rights advocates more generally, to formalize a policy of not having any kind of direct or indirect involvement with tobacco industry and to stress the important

role UNICEF has in protecting children from tobacco.

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