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Nigeria: how British American Tobacco undermines the WHO FCTC through agricultural initiatives: invited commentary

As Nigeria took a giant step in domesticating the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control with the passing of the National Tobacco Control Bill (NTCB) in March 2011, British American Tobacco Nigeria (BATN) has come up with new strategies to undermine the treaty.

Through a rigorous Corporate Social Responsibility programme, BATN now presents itself as a stakeholder in Nigeria's agriculture sector, targeting rural farm communities that make up 70% of Nigeria's population.

As soon as the bill was passed, BATN moved swiftly to organise a Farmers' Productivity Awards in Oyo State. The event was adequately publicised in the media and as part of this image whitewash, 207 tobacco farmers from Iseyin were rewarded for their bumper yields in the 2010 crop year. Loyal farmers received water pumps, knapsack sprayers and fertilisers, among other 'awards'.

However, the event revealed more than mere image laundering. It also showed how much the company had wormed its way into the heart of the Nigerian government, as Ahmed Abdullah, the agriculture minister, spent time commending BATN for contributing to agricultural development in Nigeria.

That endorsement from the federal government was the stimulus BATN needed to expand its activities to other rural

communities beyond Oyo. In subsequent months, the company organised farmers' events in two other states—Ekiti and Ogun.

In Ekiti, the company donated a 4.5 million nairas cassava processing cottage industry to the Odo-Oro community as part of what it claimed was a poverty alleviation initiative.¹

In Ogun State, a cassava processing plant allegedly built for N4.5 million was donated to another community at an event graced by a representative of the state governor, who also eulogised BATN's intervention in agriculture.²

This evolving relationship between BATN and the Nigerian government is another attempt by the company to pull the wool over the faces of Nigerians. However, tobacco control groups have mounted a campaign urging all levels of government at all levels to stop endorsing the tobacco industry's activities that portray it as 'responsible'. We will continue doing this by pointing out relevant sections of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control that condemn such partnerships.

Philip Jakpor

Correspondence to Dr Philip Jakpor, 397b George Crescent, Agbalajobi Estate, Ogba, Lagos 23401, Nigeria; philitorium@yahoo.com

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Tobacco Control 2012;**21**:220. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2011-050411

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