

PATH Canada Guide

International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA)

*ITGA uncovered:
Unravelling the spin – the truth behind the claims*

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Summary

The International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA) describes itself as “the representative body for the world’s tobacco growers”, and claims to speak “on behalf of the 33 million people who are involved in the growing and early stage processing of leaf tobacco.”¹ But internal tobacco industry documents made public through recent litigation against the tobacco industry in the United States, as well as current material on lobbyists’ websites, show that the truth is very different. Far from being “an independent international trade association”², the ITGA is in reality a public relations vehicle created by the tobacco industry in the 1980s to front its lobbying against international tobacco control initiatives by giving the industry a human face and a Third World grassroots voice.

Publicly accessible documents show that the ITGA:

- was created by the tobacco industry in the 1980s;
- has received funding from the tobacco industry;
- is currently run by a PR company based in the UK, which also includes British American Tobacco (BAT) amongst its clients;
- has already been successful to some extent at delaying UN action against the tobacco industry, or altering its course in the industry’s favour.

¹ ITGA. Undated, ‘The ITGA – frequently asked questions’. Appeared on its website www.tobaccoleaf.org in June 2000.

² ITGA. *ibid.*

How was the ITGA formed?

ITGA claims that it was formed by growers’ organisations agreeing to work together:

“It [ITGA] was formed in 1984 by growers’ organisations from six tobacco exporting countries – Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Malawi, United States and Zimbabwe.”³

Tobacco industry documents show that the ITGA was in fact created by the tobacco industry who appropriated an earlier organisation which they regarded with contempt:

In an internal document in 1988, INFOTAB (an international consortium of tobacco industry officials) discussed proposals to develop the ITGA, stating: “We need to develop the agriculture lobby. Its ‘integrity’ and independence are of great potential value, both at NGO and regional level....The nearest thing to a ‘global’ organisation is the International Flu-Cured Tobacco Growers’ Association. It is poorly run and inadequately funded, but it contains the core of a genuine ‘ITGA’The ITGA could ‘front’ for our third world lobby activities at WHO...”⁴

The following year, in May 1989, the Philip Morris Boca Raton Action Plan Status Report, notes under the heading “WHO/UICC/IOCU Redirection/Containment” that the “Action plan for mobilizing international tobacco growers” had been “approved by INFOTAB Board of Directors in June.”⁵

³ ITGA. *ibid.*

⁴ Bloxcidge J. October 11, 1988, [Fax to INFOTAB Board Members], British American Tobacco Company 502555415-5417, Guildford Document Depository.

⁵ Philip Morris. 1989, Boca Raton Action Plan: Status Report for the Period Ending 31 May, Philip Morris Companies inc. 20215926752-64, www.pmdocs.com

Earlier, in May 1984, INFOTAB held a meeting with representatives of the international leaf dealers asking: "At an international level, would they be prepared to monitor... the various anti-tobacco activities that are being planned or carried out". INFOTAB also sought to "engage their advice and assistance in devising strategies and actions appropriate to neutralise or moderate such activities."⁶

Who funds the ITGA?

ITGA makes different statements on different occasions about who funds it:

In a publication from summer 2000, ITGA admits to funding by the tobacco industry: "There has been direct and indirect funding from manufacturers to ITGA. This has helped supplement ITGA's ability [to] monitor public affairs issues on an international scale and keep its membership informed of major developments."⁷

Yet in August 2000, in its submission to the WHO's Public Hearings on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, ITGA makes no mention of tobacco industry funding and claims instead that: "The ITGA is funded by its members' fees, advertisements in the organisation's newsletter and specialist advisory services."⁸

⁶ INFOTAB. May 4, 1984, [Meeting with representatives of international leaf dealers], Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company 690155210-33, www.bwdocs.aalatg.com

⁷ ITGA. Undated, 'The ITGA – frequently asked questions'. Appeared on its website www.tobaccoleaf.org in June 2000.

⁸ ITGA. August 30, 2000, 'Submission for the Public Hearings on Tobacco Control', www.who.int

Internal tobacco industry documents show the true extent to which the tobacco industry has funded ITGA:

A 1988 INFOTAB plan for ITGA explains: "Manufacturers, through INFOTAB, would 'control' the primary funding of the organisation, and would thus be able to ensure it stuck to politics..."⁹

Bob Ely of BAT, discussing the practicalities of funding ITGA in the late eighties, notes that: "I believe that it is well worth doing it through INFOTAB. Our share of the cost, while we are still members, would be approximately one quarter i.e. US\$50,000 or some 30,000 pounds."¹⁰

Martin Oldman, the former Assistant Secretary of INFOTAB, went on to become Head of Agro-Tobacco Services, which coordinated much of ITGA's work. In a March 1991 memo he summarizes the role played by the tobacco manufacturers: "By providing the resources necessary to transform the ITGA from an introspective and largely ineffective trade association to a pro-active, politically effective organisation, the industry created the opportunity to capture the moral high ground in relation to a number of fundamental tobacco-related issues."¹¹

⁹ Bloxcidge J. October 11, 1988, [Fax to INFOTAB Board Members], British American Tobacco Company 502555415-5417, Guildford Document Depository.

¹⁰ Ely, B. October 19, 1988, Letter to B. Bramley, British American Tobacco Company 502555415, Guildford Document Depository.

¹¹ Oldman, M. March 13 1991, Letter to Gaye Pedlow (BAT) 'The Agro-Tobacco Programme – Some Background Notes', British American Tobacco Company 502555358, Guildford Document Depository.

Who runs the ITGA?

ITGA claims that the organisation is controlled by its membership and run from an office in Portugal:

“The membership controls the Association. It has appointed a Portuguese tobacco-grower Antonio Abrunhosa as its executive director. He runs the ITGA as a two-person organisation from modest offices in the east Portuguese city of Castelo Branco.”¹²

Tobacco industry documents show that from its beginnings in the 1980s, the ITGA has been run by consultants who are in turn answerable to the tobacco industry:

In a 1991 memo, Martin Oldman outlines his proposal for the new Agro-Tobacco Services consultancy: "Agro-Tobacco Services (ATS) will be established as a consultancy to execute an agreed program of work determined by the major international tobacco companies (the Principal Clients)."¹³

In a 1992 letter to David Bacon from BAT, he continues: "The principal role of the new consultancy will be to control the international voice of agro-tobacco on behalf of its clients, ensuring that best use is made of the ITGA as a vehicle for targeted lobby activities. In particular, the consultancy will provide the co-ordination, facilitation, and motivation necessary to realise the full potential of the tobacco growers' lobby."¹⁴

¹² ITGA. Undated, ‘The ITGA – frequently asked questions’. Appeared on its website www.tobaccoleaf.org in June 2000.

¹³ Oldman, M. November 1991, Agro-Tobacco Services Proposed Plan, British American Tobacco Company 502552655-67, Guildford Document Depository.

¹⁴ Oldman M. [Letter to David Bacon, BAT], January 7, 1992, British American Tobacco Company 502552645-2654 at 2647 Guildford Document Depository.

The identity of the consultancy hired by the tobacco industry to run ITGA has changed over the years, but this mode of operation continues today:

Currently, ITGA is run by Hallmark Public Relations from the prosperous city of Winchester in southern England. Hallmark PR specialises in “PR Negotiation and community lobbying”, and takes pride in the fact that “Communicating contentious messages to communities and opinion leaders is a specialist task in which Hallmark PR has considerable expertise.”¹⁵

The role played by BAT in hiring Hallmark is made clear from internal documents. In 1995, Tom Watson of Hallmark wrote to David Bacon of BAT commenting: “Thank you for asking whether Hallmark would be interested in acting as your public relations link with the ITGA. I would confirm our strong interest. At this stage, I am digesting Martin Oldman's notes but can't help but feel they show a touch of bunker mentality... Is there not a case for the ITGA to work with manufacturers like yourself and develop an international campaign which is aimed at a wider audience than governments? The campaign could use local voices (ie quotes and pictures) to make a case that tobacco is a fundamentally important cash crop which has high agronomic and foreign exchange value to a wide range of developing countries.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Hallmark Public Relations. Undated, ‘Communications and consultancy’, www.hallmarkpr.co.uk

¹⁶ Watson, T. March 21, 1995, Hallmark Public Relations [Letter to David Bacon, BAT], British American Tobacco Company 50255227-9, Guildford Document Depository.

A Hallmark newsletter, on its website in March 2001, details its recent activities on the ITGA account: “Dr Tom Watson and account manager Steve Wilson planned and implemented a strategy to take ITGA’s messages to key government decision-makers in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya and India in an intensive 12-day Roadshow. Hallmark set up a select series of briefings in capital cities where up to 100 invited guests – government ministers, MPs, media and other opinion leaders – were informed of ITGA’s position on current issues in the industry.”¹⁷

In another issue of the consultancy’s newsletter, Hallmark PR boasts of winning “three major awards in one of Africa’s top PR competitions” for “the consultancy’s Africa Tobacco Newsletter” which is “published three times a year for the ITGA”. It goes on to explain how the newsletter is produced: “All the text, illustrations and suggested layouts are prepared at Hallmark’s Winchester office and emailed to Zimbabwe where they are assembled into the newsletter format, then printed and distributed throughout east, central and southern Africa.”¹⁸

Hallmark PR lists BAT (UK and Export) among its clients. It also devised and runs a new initiative called “Eliminating Child Labour – an international partnership for establishing best practice in action in tobacco farming.”¹⁹ There are three partners in the initiative: the ITGA, the IUF (the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations), and BAT.

¹⁷ Hallmark Public Relations. Undated, ‘On the Record’, www.hallmarkpr.co.uk

¹⁸ Hallmark Public Relations. Undated, ‘On the Record’, www.hallmarkpr.co.uk

¹⁹ see www.hallmarkpr.co.uk

What are the aims of the ITGA?

ITGA states that it aims to foster cooperation and information-sharing between its members:

“The aim of the association is to share non-competitive information and monitor market conditions, build mutual understanding and protect members and their dependants. Its policies and activities are developed by the growers to further their own interests.”²⁰

Tobacco industry documents show that the overall aim of the ITGA is to advance specific tobacco industry lobbying positions, especially on Third World issues:

In a letter to David Bacon of BAT in 1992, Martin Oldman of Agro-Tobacco Services describes the ITGA as a “vehicle for targeted lobby activities.” He goes on to explain how, through the ITGA, his consultancy “will create and manage lobby opportunities. Of particular current importance are the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and the World Bank.”²¹ Spelling out the level of control which the tobacco industry sought to have over ITGA, John Bloxcidge writes in a 1990 memo to Barry Bramley of BAT, concerning the pilot issue of ITGA’s publication ‘Tobacco Forum’, that: “‘Tobacco Forum’ is a 100% INFOTAB product, and can thus guarantee an editorial content which is acceptable to our sponsor companies.”²²

²⁰ ITGA. Undated, ‘The ITGA – frequently asked questions’. Appeared on its website www.tobaccolleaf.org in June 2000.

²¹ Oldman, M. Jan 7, 1992, [Letter to David Bacon], British American Tobacco Company 502552645-54, Guildford Document Depository.

²² Bloxcidge, J. August 23, 1990 [Letter to B. Bramley, BAT], British American Tobacco Company 50255387, Guildford Document Depository.

Specific aims of the ITGA in the early nineties included diluting the tobacco control efforts of the World Health Organization by broadening the base of the UN's work on tobacco beyond WHO, and highlighting supposed "negative socio-economic effects on tobacco-producing countries which a successful Tobacco or Health program will induce."²³

ITGA believes that with the passing of the so-called 'Malawi Resolution' at the 1992 World Health Assembly, these aims were achieved: "At this year's World Health Assembly a resolution proposed by, among others, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe was passed...This development is important for a least two reasons. Firstly, it formally extends the scope of the tobacco debate in UN agencies not inherently prejudiced by perceived health concerns. Secondly, it provides ITGA with the opportunity – indeed, the challenge – to present its case on a wide variety of issues to specialist UN agencies. To the extent that we are able to contribute effectively to the debate on a wider front, the ambitions of the "Tobacco or Health" program may be thwarted, or at least modified."²⁴

Subsequently, ECOSOC established a tobacco issues "Focal Point" within the UN system. This delighted the ITGA: "Up until now, it has been the World Health Organization which has provided the major thrust in international anti-tobacco activities. It has, however, been persuaded that some of the issues – particularly those to do with economic, environmental, and social aspects – are beyond its competence. We can therefore expect a number of UN agencies to get into the act. It is to be hoped that they do not bring to their participation any

²³ 1992/1993, Agro-Tobacco Services Programme Review Number 1, British American Tobacco Company 502552606-11, Guildford Document Depository.

²⁴ ITGA. 1992/1993, 'The Way Ahead', British American Tobacco Company 502552621-2727 at 2623-2624, Guildford Document Depository.

prejudicial anti-tobacco sentiments and that we can expect a rational and objective treatment of our common concerns."²⁵

For more on the ITGA's historical aims and activities as revealed by internal tobacco industry documents, see the July 2000 report by the World Health Organization's Committee of Experts on Tobacco Industry Documents, 'Tobacco Company Strategies to Undermine Tobacco Control Activities at the World Health Organization.'²⁶

²⁵ Oldman, M. November 3 1993, [Letter to H. Ntaba], British American Tobacco Company 502555324-28, Guildford Document Depository.

²⁶ see www.who.int