ISO 44001 Collaborative business relationship management systems—

The objective to limit or even to ban tobacco is on the health and regulatory agenda. The so-called endgame strategy is an official goal in many countries, including New Zealand and Ireland. More globally, the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) has been negotiated and adopted in 2003 and has been ratified by more than 180 countries to date. This convention is composed of a set of articles to reduce tobacco demand and supply and is seen as an accelerator for sustainable development.

Even if a total ban seems unrealistic at the moment because politicians know that prohibition leads to criminality, tobacco product manufacturers cannot ignore this objective and its possible consequences on the performance of their tobacco business, which is legal. It appears clearly that such a regulatory agenda will have massive impacts along the whole value chain from the production of the raw material up to sale, and sustainable value creation may well require serious business transformations in the near future.

There are several options for the tobacco industry to demonstrate its responsible approach. Compliance with regulations (mandatory); ISO certification or other acknowledged standard(s) (voluntary); disclosure of relevant information to the public and/or the authorities (mandatory or voluntary); and scientific research and publication in peer-reviewed journals (voluntary). The possibility to link the manufacturers will own and manage autonomously a partnership to prepare a consensual program that the partners will own and manage together; and a full delegation to a partner for elaborating and managing a program.

There is always a reason to choose one type of partnership rather than another, depending on the level of interconnection, shared responsibility or independence expected. Each type of partnership can be justified and understood for some given situations, but the reporting of partnerships in a public annual report should be associated with a transparent communication of the governance rules. The analysis of the degree of interaction and interdependence between stakeholders and the related risks is an essential step because a key stakeholder involuntarily ignored and isolated (for example, the community) could impair the success of the joint project; ISO Standards 26000 and ‘Shared Value’ are the guidelines in this area.

Transparency is a way to avoid misinterpretations or even the worst suspicions that can totally undermine the good intentions of the partners. Governance is a way to avoid unintended consequences of partnerships, for example, a conflict of interest. The need for science-based methods for assessing impacts of actions for transformation should open a field for transparent and productive scientific partnerships, contributing to accelerate the U.N. agenda and to achieve a shared vision of a better world. There are principles and values in science that are universal (common to public and private sectors), such as transparency on assumptions and results, honesty and clarity in interpretations or capacity to replicate experiments.

The process of peer-reviewed publication is also a good protection against junk science; the fact remains that several journals have decided not to publish any work from scientists working for, or from independent scientists working with, the tobacco industry, peer-reviewed or not. However, it is unfortunate to observe that too many battles of numbers still highlight a lack of consensual methods among specialists, which extends the time spent on discussions and finally postpones the implementation of actions. An example illustrates this point: In 2018, the WHO published a global environmental footprint10 relating to cigarette smoking. The document reported a 2.6 ton carbon dioxide equivalent per million cigarette sticks while British American Tobacco and Philip Morris International reported 0.79 ton and 0.6 ton carbon dioxide equivalent per million sticks, respectively. The WHO was unable to understand why the figures were different but assumed a difference in scope and varying assessment methodologies. This point highlights a need for more transparency in scope and consensus in methodologies even if general publicly available protocols already exist.11

An association like Coresta12, promoting cooperation, can be the platform that the stakeholders need. It is in a privileged position to initiate new scientific and transparent partnerships and forge a consensus on methodologies for example far from political positioning, strategic fragmentation and the isolation of legitimate players.