

CLEAN-UP-DAY: CLEANING UP THE STREETS OR **THE **TOBACCO INDUSTRY'S** **IMAGE?****



Every year in Switzerland, thousands of people participate in Clean-Up Day to collect trash. Among the partners of the organization coordinating this initiative is Japan Tobacco International (JTI), even though cigarette butts are among the most common types of litter and represent a significant source of pollution. By funding and participating in cleanup campaigns, the tobacco industry is thus attempting to polish its image and portray itself as part of the solution, while at the same time diverting attention from its own responsibility for environmental pollution that is directly linked to its products.

CLEAN-UP-DAY: JTI AMONG THE PARTNERS

On September 18 and 19, 2026, the Association for a Clean Environment (IGSU) will organize the 14th national Clean-Up-Day. In addition to promoting the event, the IGSU supports municipalities, companies, schools, and clubs in their local cleanup efforts by providing information, offering the opportunity to order supplies such as trash bags and gloves for the cleanup, and organizing a competition for participating groups.

The IGSU was founded in 2007 and describes itself as the “Swiss Center of Excellence Against Littering” (1). Founding members were the IGORA Cooperative for Aluminum Recycling and the PET Recycling Switzerland Association. Since then, additional members, partners, and sponsors have joined, including Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, as well as retailers such as Coop, Migros, and Valora.

Japan Tobacco International (JTI), one of the world’s leading cigarette manufacturers, is also a project partner. The Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) and the Swiss Association for Municipal Infrastructure (SVKI) are the institutional partners.

The partnership with JTI is not limited to the Clean-Up-Day. In the run-up to the event, IGSU organizes “poster commitment campaigns” in public spaces.

During these campaigns, signatures are collected from the public on a poster bearing the statement, “Trash belongs in the trash can. We’ll stick to it.”

JTI is a project partner and funds the posters (2).

Local and national politicians are also invited to participate in these “commitment campaigns”, which brings additional media attention to IGSU’s initiative. For example, on August 27, 2026, Zurich Cantonal Council member Sandra Bienek (GLP) and National Council member Nik Gugger (EVP) (fig. 1), among others, were present on the Zurich lakefront promenade and signed the “commitment campaign”.



Figure 1: Screenshot of IGSU Instagram post, August 27, 2026 (3).

CIGARETTE BUTTS: A TELLING EXAMPLE OF WASTE FROM THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

Cigarette butts are among the most littered items worldwide. In international cleanup campaigns, they account for about 30–40% of the waste items counted (4).

In Switzerland, slightly more than 10 billion cigarettes and other tobacco products are consumed each year. Assuming that 30% of cigarette butts end up in public spaces or the natural environment, OxySuisse estimates their number at over 3 billion per year.

The filter is a major part of the problem. It consists mainly of cellulose acetate, a plastic, and can take up to 15 years to decompose gradually releasing microplastics into soil and water.

However, cigarette butts are not just plastic waste. They also contain more than 700 toxic chemicals, including known carcinogens (5). Once released into the environment, these substances can contaminate soil and water and harm living organisms and ecosystems. Each cigarette butt pollutes up to 1,000 liters of water (6).

This pollution is all the more problematic given that filters have no proven health benefits. They were introduced and marketed specifically to give the impression that they reduce the dangers of smoking **In fact, filters do not reduce the health risks associated with cigarette consumption and may even lead to deeper inhalation** (7). The tobacco industry has long used them to give the impression that a filtered cigarette is less harmful.



FROM CLEANUP TO GREENWASHING

While picking up litter is a worthwhile activity, it neither prevents the generation of waste nor stops it from being discarded into the environment.

By participating in Clean-Up Day events, **the tobacco industry is attempting to divert attention from its own responsibility for the waste caused by its products.** This allows it to present itself as part of the solution, even though the products it manufactures and distributes account for a significant portion of the collected waste. The responsibility for disposing of this waste is then typically shifted onto consumers, volunteers, and government agencies. Collecting and removing cigarette butts costs municipalities approximately 52 million Swiss francs annually (8).

Tobacco companies use sponsorship and their voluntary participation in such initiatives to improve

their public image. They encourage their employees to participate in a Clean-Up-Day and publicly highlight this commitment, particularly on the websites of Philip Morris International and Japan Tobacco International (fig. 2), but also in their employees' posts on LinkedIn (9).

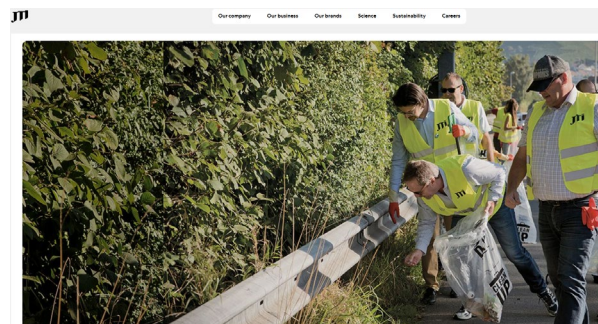


Figure 2: Screenshot of the JTI website (August 28, 2026)(10).

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

The involvement of players from the tobacco industry is not limited to cleanup campaigns. They are also represented on the committees where measures to combat plastic pollution are discussed.

In 2025, international negotiations on a global agreement regarding plastics failed. The goal was to reach a legally binding agreement to combat plastic pollution throughout the entire life cycle (11).

Although cigarette filters are among the main sources of plastic waste, organizations with ties to the tobacco industry were represented at the negotiations in Geneva. The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control shows that

at least six accredited organizations with such ties were represented, including Eastman Chemical, a major manufacturer of cellulose acetate, which is used primarily in cigarette filters, the TerraCycle Global Foundation, and the United States Council for International Business, whose members include Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco (12).

Thus, **stakeholders with ties to the tobacco industry have access to policy-making bodies where measures to combat environmental pollution,** some of which is caused by the very products manufactured and marketed by precisely this industry, are discussed.

CHILDREN COLLECTING CIGARETTE BUTTS?

The IGSU Clean-Up-Day mobilizes schools, families, and children on a large scale. Raising young people's awareness of environmental protection is a positive thing. However, their participation takes on a special dimension when it occurs as part of an initiative supported by a cigarette manufacturer.

In particular, the use of images of children to promote a campaign co-funded by the tobacco industry raises questions (fig. 3) (13). It helps to

highlight the individual responsibility and commitment of young people to solving a problem they did not cause, rather than emphasizing the responsibility of the companies whose products account for a portion of the collected waste. The paradox is particularly striking when children are encouraged to pick up cigarette butts as part of an initiative sponsored by a manufacturer of those very cigarettes.





Figure 3: Children signing the "commitment campaign" of IGSU and JTI, Instagram post from 08.08.2025 (13)

This connection to the world of children is further reinforced in 2026 by the selection of Globi as the patron of the IGSU Clean-Up-Day (fig. 4) (14). A parallel can be drawn here: Globi, a character particularly popular among children and families in Switzerland, was created in 1930 as the advertising

mascot for the Globus department store, specifically to attract children as new customers (15). Thanks to magazines and books, he later became one of Switzerland's best-known characters.



Figure 4: Globi picks up a cigarette butt (14).

BEYOND CLEANUP: ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSE

Cleanup campaigns remove litter and raise awareness, but they do not address the root causes. Measures that prevent cigarette litter, such as expanding smoke- and nicotine-free zones, are more effective.

IGSU's Clean-Up-Day is also supported by the FOEN and the SVKI: Thus, the public sector contributes to its funding alongside the private sector. The application of extended producer responsibility (EPR) would make it possible to

impose on the tobacco industry the environmental costs caused by its products.

The participation of cities and municipalities in an initiative supported by the tobacco industry should also be critically examined, as it can legitimize and normalize cooperation with this industry.

Sustainable solutions therefore address the root cause: reducing tobacco consumption, expanding smoke- and nicotine-free zones, applying the polluter-pays principle, and eliminating filters (16).

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