



SEATCA Tobacco Industry Monitoring (TIM) Bulletin

July – December 2020

BEST PRACTICES IN TOBACCO CONTROL IN THE ASEAN REGION:

Tobacco Industry Interference: Did Asian/ASEAN countries PASS OR FAIL?

#TheUnfilteredTruth Webinar Series: Exposing tobacco industry interference

PASS OR FAIL: Findings from Asian & ASEAN Tobacco Industry Interference Indexes

Friday • 20 November 2020 • 2:00 - 3:00pm (GMT-7, Bangkok)

<p>Introduction & Closing Remarks</p> <p>Dr. Mary Assunta Senior Policy Advisor, SEATCA Head of Research and Advocacy, Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC)</p>	<p>Multisectoral approach to curbing tobacco industry interference</p> <p>Dr. Susan Mercado Special Envoy of the President for Global Health Initiatives, Republic of the Philippines</p>
<p>Tobacco Industry Interference Index: Asia and ASEAN</p> <p>Ms. Jennie Lyn Reyes Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, SEATCA</p>	<p>Way Forward</p> <p>Dr. Ferdinal Fernando Director & Head of Health Division, ASEAN Secretariat</p>
<p>Asia's most improved country - Pakistan</p> <p>Dr. Malik Muhammad Saff Federal Director General (Health), Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, Pakistan</p>	<p>Dr. Judith Mackay Director, Asian Consultancy on Tobacco Control</p>
<p>Weaponizing IT's CSR activities to interfere with COVID-19 pandemic</p> <p>Dr. Mahesh Rajasuriya Director, Centre for Combating Tobacco, Sri Lanka</p>	<p>Register at https://bit.ly/2TPzWu1 on or before 18 November 2020</p> <p>For more info, email: wendell@seatca.org</p>

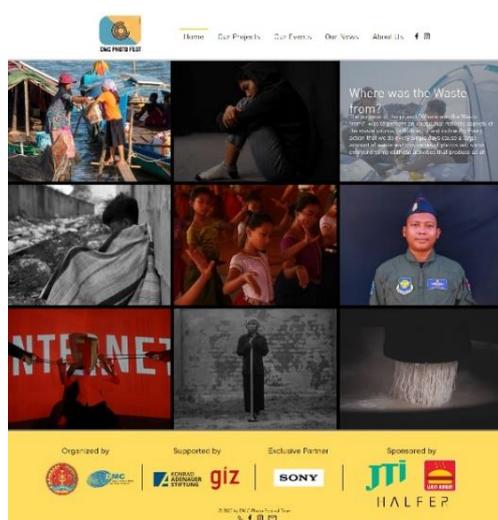
20 November 2020: SEATCA's 2020 Asian and ASEAN Tobacco Industry Interference Index reports covering 18 countries were launched through a webinar, which gathered together public health experts, tobacco control advocates, and government agencies.

Find out how your country fared:

- Asian Tobacco Index:
<https://bit.ly/AsianIndex2020>
- ASEAN Tobacco Index:
<https://bit.ly/ASEANindex2020>
- Infographics on the Index:
<https://bit.ly/TIIinfographics2020>.
- Customized fact sheets for each country:
<https://globaltobaccoindex.org/>

To know more about tobacco industry tactics, see: [TImonitorwebsite](http://TImonitorwebsite.com).

Cambodia: GIZ removes its name from being associated with JTI



In July 2020, JTI sponsored a Career Day activity with Cambodia's Royal Phnom Penh University. The promotional poster included the GIZ (German government's international assistance agency) logo and was promoted on the Cambodian Department of Media and Communication website. This was a surprise since the GIZ is pro-tobacco control and had previously supported the launch of the Cambodian NCD Alliance.

The Cambodia Movement for Health (CMH) lodged a complaint with the GIZ, citing this sponsorship as a violation of World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Article 5.3, and alerted SEATCA. SEATCA contacted a German advocacy group, which raised the matter with a policymaker supportive of tobacco control.

A few weeks later, GIZ had its logo removed from the promotional materials of the Cambodian Department of Media and Communication to remove any association with JTI. Apparently, GIZ had sponsored a similar activity the previous year, and, despite not participating in this year's program, its logo was placed on this year's poster without its approval.

Raising the issue with the German government led to prompt action in Cambodia. This successful outcome illustrates the importance of monitoring the tobacco industry, and when needed, engaging with relevant agencies for strategic advocacy action.

Myanmar: Guidelines adopted for health officials on interaction with tobacco manufacturers, distributors, and sellers

17 August 2020: The Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS) of Myanmar adopted a new [Directive](#) that restricts staff and officials from meeting with tobacco industry representatives unless the meeting is conducted with permission from the Permanent Secretary. The new [Directive No.91/2020](#) will increase transparency and disclose details of meetings with the tobacco industry, such as meeting date, time, objective, location, and attendees. Besides seeking prior permission and meeting requirements, tobacco industry representatives cannot use these meetings to promote their business. Only the tobacco control unit of the MOHS (not the industry) has the authority to release to the public any information on such meetings. Congratulations to Myanmar on a milestone in addressing tobacco industry interference through the implementation of WHO FCTC Article 5.3.

Singapore: Webinar featuring the PMI-funded grantee cancelled

20 August 2020: PROGGA, a tobacco industry watch group in Bangladesh alerted the international community about a webinar titled '[The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control – the Policy and Practice Gap](#)' and organized by the Singapore-based Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore (NUS). A significant concern raised was that the main speaker for the event, Dr. Sudhanshu Patwardhan, Medical Director, Policy, the [Centre for Health Research and Education \(CHRE\)](#), UK, is a grantee of the PMI-funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World. The webinar was to have been chaired by Prof. Tikki Pangestu, a noted harm reduction proponent who has been speaking at various fora in Southeast Asia. On 26 August 2020, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy announced this webinar had been [canceled](#).

Thailand: Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) returned funds for dubious e-cigarette research project

11 August 2020: Although e-cigarettes are banned in Thailand, the Department of Disease Control (DDC), Ministry of Public Health received a request for an interview from the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) on policies and laws related to innovation and the e-cigarette business. According to the TDRI researcher, information from DDC will form part of an Innovation Regulatory Index in five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand. The research was funded by Alliance for Trade Integrity (ATI), a think tank registered last year in Hong Kong. The ATI website provides no details about its activities on integrity and no information about its partners or funding. The DDC rejected the request for an interview.

For context, in 2018, a European watchdog, the Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), exposed the [“innovation principle”](#) trap as an invention of dirty-business multinational corporations (including British American Tobacco – BAT and Philip Morris International – PMI) to lobby against legislation drawn up on the precautionary principle. According to CEO, by calling it a “principle”, an impression is created that the concept has a legal basis of some kind, which is untrue. Since e-cigarettes are banned in Thailand, Singapore, and three other countries in the ASEAN region, this is an attempt to conduct research using “innovation”, a positive term appealing to governments, to reconsider the ban.

In 2019, the Thai Vice Minister of Commerce and other senior officials attended the US-ASEAN Business Council (US-ABC) annual business meeting with [38 American companies](#) including PMI. This year in August, the Vice Minister, who is also the Chairman of the Trade Competition Commission, had a meeting with TDRI to conduct [research](#) on an “Innovation Regulatory Index on Performance of Asia-Pacific on Emerging Issues”.

8 September 2020: after internal advocacy led by SEATCA and Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), the board of TDRI decided to return the research fund to ATI, a small but important achievement in preventing tobacco industry interference.

Vietnam: Harm of ENDS/HTPs exposed through nationwide TV program

5 July 2020: Ms. Tran Thi Trang (middle), Deputy Director of the Ministry of Health Legislation Department, and Ms. Le Thi Thu (right), Program Manager of HealthBridge Foundation of Canada, were guests on the program “One hour with hot line to protect children” at VOV Giao Thông Channel to talk about the tobacco industry’s (TI) advertising tactics to promote ENDS/HTPs targeting youth. Tobacco industry is targeting young people as new customers for its new tobacco products.



Ms. Trang spoke on risks and harmful health effects of ENDS/HTPs, referring to a World Health Organization (WHO) statement that there is no conclusive evidence these products are less harmful than cigarettes. Ms. Thu advised listeners to obtain information about ENDS/HTPs from reliable sources such as the WHO, the Ministry of Health, and health agencies. Parents need to know about the harms of these products so they can advise their children not to use ENDS/HTPs.

14 September 2020: [Life without Tobacco Smoke](#), a video correcting public misconception that ENDS/HTPs are less harmful than conventional cigarettes, was aired on Vietnamese television. The video corrects the misconception that e-cigarettes can be used in smoking cessation as claimed by the tobacco industry. Thailand’s ban on ENDS/HTPs was presented in the video to provide information to support a similar ban in Vietnam.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE REGION:

1. ENDS/HTP front groups get more vocal across the region:

- **Pro-ENDS/HTP front groups are lobbying national standards bodies to interfere with ENDS/HTP regulation:** Industry interference through the national standards body has been seen in at least five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

3 November 2020: Dr. Mohamad Haniki Nik Mohamed, President of the Malaysia Association of Adolescent Health’s letter-to-editor in the New Straits Times, [Ban alternative tobacco products to save lives](#) countered a misleading letter from an ENDS/HTP proponent.

- **Pro-ENDS/HTP front groups exploited human rights and consumer rights:** Front groups of the tobacco and ENDS industry are framing themselves as ‘consumer groups’ with the ‘human right’ to use ENDS and HTPs and are occupying media space demanding such ‘rights’ be respected.
- **Pro-ENDS/HTP speaker participation in public health webinar:** Prof. Tikki Pangestu, a noted harm reduction proponent at various fora in Southeast Asia was a speaker in a webinar on 'Enhancing Health Systems and Resilience in the Context of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework' organized by the ASEAN Secretariat on 14 December 2020.

2. Unregulated sale via e-commerce and online communication platforms: Some online retailers illegally sell ENDS/HTPs on Facebook, Telegram, Lazada, etc. This is a problem in countries where

these products are banned, such as Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, and where online sales regulations are weak or non-existent.

3. **Tobacco-related CSR activities - TI exploited a religious occasion and the poor in Thailand:** The Tobacco Authority of Thailand (TOAT) exploited a Buddhist festival to promote its CSR activity. On [10 October 2020](#), TOAT representatives and employees donated money to a temple in Ayudhaya Province. TOAT also organized the mobile medical unit from TOAT Hospital to provide medical checkups to people living in the temple's community.
4. **TI used the media to fight tax increase in Malaysia:** BAT Malaysia and the other tobacco companies ran an aggressive campaign to undermine and thwart tax increase. Besides promoting Oxford Economics' flawed illicit trade report, which it sponsored, BAT also launched a Facebook campaign drawing attention to the black market. Malaysia has not had a tax increase in 5 years. SEATCA responded to this aggressive industry tactic by sending a letter-to-the-editor: [Government must use tax measures to protect public health](#).
5. **Tobacco business group met with high-level policy makers:** The US-ABC conducted a [meeting](#) with high-level Filipino officials on the Philippine economy and recovery during COVID-19. PMI is the [Vice Chair](#) of the US-ABC Philippine committee and [participated in this meeting](#). These business meetings with ASEAN governments are an annual event on the US-ABC calendar where they meet with policy makers.

Contact us: worrawan@seatca.org