

Solomon Islands

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Summary of Findings

1. Industry participation in policy development

On July 15, 2020, in Honiara, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the Honorable Prime Minister and the Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI). The Solomon Islands Tobacco Company Ltd.- British American Tobacco (SITC-BAT) is a major key stakeholder of SICCI, and their CEO is a member of the SICCI Executive team and an influencer representing the private sector interest in the country. This MOU is indeed a massive setback.

The official arrangement and structural text of the MOU has given the SITC-BAT an entrance and leverage into the system and intelligence apparatus of the Solomon Islands government (SIG) machinery thus giving them direct proximity to influence policy.

Solomon Islands has not maintained direct involvement or participation from the tobacco industry in policy development or implementation. In spite of this, the tobacco industry seems to have a strong foothold in policymaking with the MOU being recently signed thus creating a functional space for an endless avalanche of lobbying and deceptive tactics to flourish.

2. Industry CSR activities

No doubt corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the number one tool and tactic that the industry has used to date to advance its cause and hidden strategic agenda, especially on the political front.

Political instability and the constant change of political leadership is one of the core reasons why it's difficult to get the message of Article 5.3 across to politicians in spite of several efforts made with the caucus through the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).

As alluded to and reported by the director, Ministry of Finance and Treasury (MFT), the current government has an open policy to any CSR project initiatives taken by the industry to aid politicians and their respective constituencies. According to the director MFT, CSR is a positive contribution—the industry can give back and invest in the broader community. Such an open hand policy approach taken by the current government demonstrates the need for a speedy and comprehensive effort championed by the Tobacco Control Unit through the Ministry of Health and Medical Service (MHMS). One of the positive ways forward that should be of high priority is to accelerate the passage of the recommendations tabulated in drafting instructions to the current Act, which should include guidelines that are directly extracted from Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) Article 5.3 Guidelines.

Additionally, according to the director MFT, the CSR seed money cap given and allotted to members of parliament from SITC-BAT sits at SBD 100,000 (USD 12,525).

There is an urgent need to de-normalize and regulate activities described by the tobacco industry as socially responsible.

3. Benefits to the industry

The MOU signed by the Honorable Prime Minister on the 15th of July, 2020, in Honiara with SICCI for which the SITC-BAT is a sitting Executive member, is a massive setback which gives the industry huge leverage in terms of affecting the current government policy strands as explicitly stipulated in narration of the MOU.

The MOU will give the tobacco industry free access to any government line ministries especially the ones that are of interest and value to them, such as the MFT, the Customs Department, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Labor and Immigration (MCILI). Until the current Tobacco Control Act undergoes a holistic and thorough review to address this, it will remain a challenge and problem for some time to come.

4. Unnecessary interaction

It's obvious that much needs to be done in terms of developing a consistent comprehensive advocacy program to heighten SIG high ranking officials, politicians, Ministers of the Crown on the WHO FCTC and Article 5.3.

Whilst the Permanent Secretary and Honorable Minister of the MHMS have made some bold and courageous stands to cut all connections made with the industry after they were briefed on FCTC Article 5.3, more needs to be done.

5. Transparency

It is clear that those working within all branches of government do not hold the tobacco industry accountable. Records of meetings and interactions of government officials with the tobacco industry are not made accessible to the public. There is a need for clear policies and guidelines on avoidance of conflict of interest for government officials, employees and consultants.

6. Conflict of interest

Solomon Islands Political Party Integrity Bill of 2014, Section 57, made a provision for

disclosure of campaign funds post-election, but it does not cover nor prohibit contributions from the tobacco industry or any entity working to further its interests to political parties, candidates or campaigns nor does it require full disclosure of such contributions from them during or prior to election. Nearly all government ministers and parliamentarians have had projects funded by the tobacco industry.

7. Preventive measures

The current Tobacco Control Act does not have any provision addressing tobacco industry interference. In the current undertaking championed by the MHMS, a comprehensive drafting instruction is underway to review the Act. Under Area 14, Industry Interference, the MHMS realized that the tobacco industry uses their economic power, marketing and lobbying to discredit research and influence decision-makers to promote the sale and distribution of tobacco products. The current review will make provision for inclusion of WHO FCTC Article 5.3 principle guidelines to be part of the structural formation of the Tobacco Control Act.



An MOU between the government and SICC gives the tobacco industry free access to any government agency especially the ones of value to them, such as the Ministry of Finance and Treasury and the Customs Department.



Recommendations

1. Raise awareness of the WHO FCTC and specifically Article 5.3 within the whole of government machinery starting from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Caucus. Substantive support and resources will be needed to advance this awareness raising.
2. Establish a permanent and fully funded taskforce that should include both SIG and non-state actors and should be incorporated within the structure and operation of the MHMS. The taskforce would be set up to oversee the implementation of Article 5.3. Prevention of tobacco industry interference must also be enshrined as one of the priority agenda items to be built into the host of recommendations as part of the review of the current Tobacco Control Act.
3. Conduct a thorough appraisal of the country's compliance with Article 5.3. The findings of this report should provide useful information.
4. Draft guidelines and steps to prevent interference by the tobacco industry in public health policies relating to tobacco control. This set of guidelines should be incorporated into the public service General Order (GO) as well as in the Tobacco Control Act.
5. Incorporate Article 5.3 into the International Public Service Administration (IPAM) where all public servants undergo induction and progressive Public Service training.
6. Establish an overarching national standard guideline procedure or code of conduct to uphold the rule of transparency when government officials interact with the industry. This must include records of all interactions and standards of conduct for dealing with the industry.
7. Prohibit and regulate tobacco industry contributions to politicians.
8. Prohibit all tobacco industry CSR donations, sponsorships and funding assistance.
9. Protect tobacco control policies from the commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.