

The Solomon Islands

Overall score:

49

Summary of Findings

1. Industry participation in policy development

As it stands, Solomon Islands has not maintained direct involvement or participation from the tobacco industry with regards to policy development or implementation. In spite of this, the tobacco industry seems to have a strong foothold in policy-making through its constant lobbying with the government.

In 2018, the Ministry of Finance and Treasury (MFT) increased excise tax to 100% which resulted in the tobacco industry making a submission to the Honorable Minister responsible. In its submission, it stated that the increase would impact its overall sales volume. Unfortunately, a copy of the submission cannot be made available to the public. As a result of the excise, the price of cigarettes has been increased to five dollars (SBD) per packet, which is still quite low compared to other countries in the Oceania Region.

Prior to the legislation of the current Tobacco Act of 2010, the industry went ahead to seal a deal with the MFT and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Labour and Immigration (MCILI) from the period of 2005 to 2015 to make sure that the tax cap would not go beyond 2.5%.

The tobacco industry does not have a seat on any committee that sets public health policy in the country. There was a push by the industry prior to the commencement of the Tobacco Control Act of 2010, but it was rejected.

2. Industry CSR activities

It is interesting to note that the Solomon Islands Tobacco Company Ltd. British American Tobacco (SITC-BAT) is advancing its influence and leverage by sponsoring and aiding politicians in their

constituency projects. The MFT Director confirmed that in 2019, they sponsored 100,000 SBD towards farmers' tool and seedlings to North East Guadalcanal constituency and another 100,000 SBD towards a water supply project in the Auki Langalanga constituency. There is an urgent need to de-normalize and regulate activities described by the industry as socially responsible.

3. Benefits to the industry

The tobacco industry has free access to any government line ministries, especially the ones that are of interest and value to them, such as MFT, the Customs Department and the MCILI. Until the current Tobacco Control Act undergoes review to address this, it will remain a challenge and a problem for some time to come. The former minister of MCILI used his influence and position as a government minister to pressure the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) to issue Oceanic Oasis an operating license and permit.

The weak enforcement of the Tobacco Control Act stems from the lack of financial backing, commitment, political will and prioritization, among other issues and challenges the MHMS has to address. It has left the tobacco industry much room to continue to take advantage. However, the MHMS also governs the issuance of licenses for both tobacco importers and manufacturers and in 2018 denied a manufacturing license to Oceanic Oasis for issues of illegal production and sale of tobacco products.

On another positive note, when there were efforts made by the tobacco industry to slow down the implementation of pictorial health warnings (PHW), their arguments were rejected by Tobacco Control Technical Advisory Group (TCTAG), which comprised of formidable personalities that refused to give in to their plots and schemes.

4. Unnecessary interaction

A lot of government high-ranking officers, politicians, Ministers of the Crown of respective government line ministry have not been fully aware of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and Article 5.3. This had allowed the tobacco industry direct access to senior officials. On a positive note, the new and current Honorable Minister of MHMS began to cut all connections made with the industry after he was briefed on Article 5.3.

5. Transparency

It is clear that all those working within all branches of government do not hold the tobacco industry accountable. Records of meetings and interaction of government officials with the tobacco industry are not accessible to the public. There is a need for clear policies and guidelines on avoidance of conflicts 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 the 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 and to seek 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.

On the other hand, there has been no record of current government officials and relatives holding position in tobacco business.

7. Preventive measures

The current Tobacco Control Act does not have any provision to do with 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 economic power, marketing and lobbying to discredit research and influence decision-makers to propagate the sale and distribution of tobacco products. The current review will make a provision for inclusion of WHO FCTC Article 5.3 Guidelines to be part of the structural formation of the Tobacco Control Act.

Recommendations

1. Raise awareness of the WHO FCTC and specifically Article 5.3 within the whole of government.
2. Establish a government taskforce to oversee implementation of Article 5.3, under the MHMS.
3. Establish an overarching national standard guideline procedure for transparency when government officials interact with the industry.
4. Prohibit and regulate tobacco industry contributions to politicians.
5. Prohibit all tobacco-related CSR donations, sponsorship and funding assistance.