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Reducing Indonesia's Health Risks: Filtering a Smoke-Free ASEAN?

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Synopsis

Despite a tobacco control bill, the holding of a tobacco exposition in Jakarta this week 19-21 September thwarts the Indonesian government's smoke-free initiatives. The expo has the effect of making the bill appear to be a mere attempt at filtering the strong influence of the tobacco industry in the region.

Commentary

THE WORLD Tobacco Asia 2012 exposition in Jakarta this week is an unfortunate, even unwelcome, event for ASEAN's Smoke-Free campaign. As the only ASEAN member which has not signed or ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), Indonesia's hosting of the event does not bode well for ASEAN's goal to make the region smoke-free.

Besides, it complicates ASEAN's efforts at preventing or decreasing the prevalence of non-communicable or lifestyle-related diseases by the end of this year.

Health Crisis in the Making

Lifestyle-related diseases may not be as worrying as infectious diseases but tobacco consumption is the leading risk factor for preventable non-communicable diseases and is a grave threat to health security. With more than 125 million smokers and with 20 per cent of tobacco-related deaths occurring in the region, ASEAN is in distress.

With the increase in restrictions and strict regulations in high-income countries, the tobacco industry has moved its target to low and middle-income countries where more poor people smoke. Alarmingly, some 80 percent of the world's one billion smokers are poor. Not only does tobacco consumption contribute to mortality in ASEAN, expense on tobacco also diverts critical income from basic necessities like food, water, health care as well as education in poor families.

ASEAN's Focal Points on Tobacco Control, part of its efforts to institutionalise cooperation in health development, has considered tobacco use as a health crisis. Tobacco-related illnesses are a burden on healthcare costs and pose long-term health risks. Last July, ASEAN health ministers apparently recommended that tobacco be excluded from the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) tariff list. It is, however, uncertain where this proposal has led to.

Pressure from ASEAN and Indonesian Civil Society?

A tobacco control coalition in Indonesia has sounded the alarm on the WTA event and has called on the Indonesian government to ban one of the largest gatherings of the tobacco industry in the region. Collectively called MATA, the coalition has been urging the Indonesian government to ratify the FCTC since Jakarta hosted the World Tobacco Asia convention in 2010. The group sees the event as insulting to the Indonesian nation as it paints the picture that the government is 'promoting death' instead of the people's well-being.

The tobacco expo targets the tobacco communities not only in Indonesia but also in Australia and the rest of Asia-Pacific. Given the millions of smokers in Indonesia alone, with more and more women contributing to the statistics on the prevalence of smoking, the health risk to unborn children is also increasing.

Considering how friendly the Indonesian government seems towards the tobacco industry, this was considered offending to the Indonesian nation by the tobacco control coalition and in turn undermines ASEAN's Smoke-Free campaign. Hosting the tobacco conference in Jakarta will serve as a rebuff to the campaign launched during the World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Singapore last March and to ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan who declared the ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta as smoke-free last May.

Smoke Gets in Indonesia's Eyes

Indonesia's National Health Law of 2009 does not require the tobacco industry to disclose information on its advertising, promotion and sponsorship activities and expenditures. This lack of restriction and monitoring made it easier for the tobacco industry to organise the event in Jakarta for the second time, much to the tobacco control coalition's frustration. Aside from most of its regulations' lack of alignment with the FCTC, the implementation of any restriction on the tobacco industry requires local government legislation.

Commentators have labeled Indonesia "the last haven", "final frontier" and a "paradise" for the tobacco industry because the government seems not to want to forego the 'easy-to-get' revenue from cigarette excise which reached US\$1.75 billion in 2011.

The influence of the tobacco industry on the Indonesian government maybe waning as parliament has concluded the inter-ministerial deliberations on a comprehensive tobacco control policy in August. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has expressed his commitment to sign the bill into law. Policy-making however is the easy part in tobacco control - the greater obstacle is effective implementation.

Would this change the picture for Indonesia and guide it to ban future tobacco expositions in Jakarta? Indonesia's tobacco farmers have protested against the restrictions set out in the bill through massive demonstrations last July. Indonesia will need to plan long-term and provide an alternative for 237,000 people employed by the country's tobacco industry, with the country being the world's seventh-largest tobacco leaf producer.

While this may not be enough to secure the health of future generations of Indonesians, legislation is the first critical step towards a healthier society.

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