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For Immediate Release

The Tobacco and Smoking Control Act Will Help Protect The B40 Group

JULY 12, 2022 - With the government expected to table the Tobacco and Smoking Control Act in the upcoming session of the Dewan Rakyat, SERI firmly believes that the introduction of this bill will be beneficial to Malaysians, especially those in the B40 category.

Smoking-related diseases are a serious predicament for financial and health reasons. They have been identified as the main cause of disability-adjusted life years and lost years of life among Malaysians, with 10,000 smoking-related deaths reported each year.

Although everyone has an equal and just opportunity to live as healthily as possible, smoking disproportionately harms the less fortunate. The burden on health caused by the use of commercial tobacco products is unfairly borne by those with low socioeconomic status.

Throughout Malaysia, smoking is more prevalent in the B40 group (65%) compared to M40 at 31%, and the T20 group at 5%.

Revenue provided by the sin tax on tobacco products (approximately RM3 billion a year) fails to remotely cover the costs incurred by the healthcare industry for treating smoking-related diseases (more than RM10 billion per year). Furthermore, the indirect costs of smoking e.g. lost productivity & poor quality of life, often greatly exceed the direct costs - Smoking was estimated to incur RM275.3 billion in loss of productivity to Malaysia.

Health inequity is a systemic issue that unequally affects B40 groups. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) described the manifold ways that this happens:

1. Tobacco companies strategically target the low-income population as they are more susceptible to falling into marketing traps. Some studies show a higher number of stores selling tobacco in poor neighborhoods and schools. The more advertisements and tobacco products available, the higher the number of smokers in the area.

2. Educational attainment is highly linked to one's income level and lower educational attainment results in lower health literacy. Low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals are less aware of the dangers of tobacco and have less information on tobacco education, prevention and termination. For example, low-income individuals face more barriers to quitting smoking, such as not knowing the correct treatments to help them stop consuming tobacco.

3. Lower-income individuals also face barriers to quality healthcare in Malaysia. Difficulties taking time off from work, a lack of physical access to a hospital or clinic, the lack of healthcare services in rural areas, and the cost of missing school are some of the indirect costs that disproportionately affect the poor.

4. People often smoke as a way to reduce stress. Mental health problems are more prevalent among individuals in lower-income groups who face more financial problems, discrimination and precarious living conditions, thus causing stress which encourages smoking as a form of relief.

The impact on non-smokers is also worse in the B40 group. Non-smoking underprivileged individuals are twice more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke. Their working and living conditions are less likely to implement smoke-free air policies. Children living in lower-income residential areas like apartment complexes are more likely to experience secondhand smoke due to tight living arrangements.

Policymakers must take into account how smoking affects the B40 population and not make their lives more difficult with the burden of smoking-related diseases.

SERI welcomes the Ministry of Health's proposal for a generational endgame and its initiatives to help the B40 population quit smoking. We call for Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum to support this Act, which is a holistic approach to addressing public health instead of seeking quick-win, short term measures.

Such moves will undoubtedly help achieve the long term goal of reducing healthcare inequality. However, proper enforcement is essential and the government must continue with efforts to improve healthcare literacy and provide fully subsidised quit smoking services to the B40 group.

SERI is a non-partisan think-tank dedicated to the promotion of evidence-based policies that address issues of inequality, particularly at the intersection of technology and society. For more information, please visit www.seri.my or email us at hello@seri.my.