



PRESS STATEMENT | 30TH MAY 2025

For Immediate Release

SERI Urges Stronger Tobacco Tax Measures on World No Tobacco Day to Safeguard Public Health and Advance Equity

Kuala Lumpur, May 30, 2025 - In conjunction with World No Tobacco Day 2025, Social & Economic Research Initiative (SERI) calls on the Malaysian government to take decisive action in addressing the urgent public health crisis caused by tobacco use by increasing tobacco taxes. This aligns with SERI's commitment to advancing evidence-based policies that bridge inequality and foster a healthier, more inclusive Malaysia.

Despite ongoing efforts to curb tobacco use, smoking remains a leading cause of preventable death in Malaysia, contributing to 10.7% of all deaths in 2021 and costing the country RM18.4 billion annually. Alarming, cigarettes have become increasingly affordable over the years, weakening public health efforts and straining the national budget. While smoking rates have slowly declined from 23.1% in 2011 to 19.5% in 2023, progress has plateaued, and Malaysia is not on track to meet its goal of reducing prevalence to below 5% by 2040.

"Tobacco taxation is one of the most effective, evidence-backed strategies to reduce smoking," said Muhammad Daniel Kittu, a researcher at SERI. "The affordability of cigarettes in Malaysia today undermines years of public health progress. Increasing tobacco taxes is not only essential for reducing consumption, but it's a matter of health equity and fiscal responsibility."

Contrary to common claims, SERI's analysis shows that higher taxes are not the main driver of the illicit cigarette trade. Instead, systemic corruption and enforcement weaknesses are the root causes. Encouragingly, recent strides in enforcement, including RM19.4 million in seizures in just the past three months and the establishment of the Malaysian Border Control and Protection Agency (AKPS), show that Malaysia is better equipped than ever to tackle illicit trade.

SERI advocates for a comprehensive reform of tobacco taxation that reflects international best practices and is responsive to Malaysia's current public health and economic context. Strengthening tobacco tax policy will not only reduce smoking rates and prevent disease, but also generate critical revenue for public services and reinforce ongoing enforcement efforts.

Such reforms are inherently progressive, as they most benefit low-income Malaysians who are more sensitive to price increases and disproportionately affected by tobacco-related illnesses. A

well-designed tax policy can help close health disparities, protect vulnerable groups, and support a more equitable society.

This World No Tobacco Day, SERI reaffirms its commitment to championing inclusive and evidence-based policies that promote the well-being of all Malaysians. Tobacco taxation reform is not simply a policy decision, but also a public health imperative.

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