

MW/MTIII2025/PC

MTIII 2025 : PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

Assalamu'alaikum

Distinguished guests, members of the media, colleagues, and allies in the fight for public health:

I stand before you with a deep sense of urgency and responsibility — for this is no ordinary press conference. Today, MyWATCH launches the **2025 Malaysian Tobacco Industry Interference Index (MTIII-2025)** — the sixth in our biennial series, developed in close collaboration with the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA). Over the past decade, SEATCA's steadfast support—in particular through **Dr. Mary Assunta**—has been instrumental in shaping these Reports. I take this moment to express MyWATCH's profound gratitude to Dr. Mary Assunta for her guidance and collaboration.

Today's occasion is not just to share observed data findings, but more importantly, to galvanise action — because the tobacco industry does not rest; and nor must we.

WHY DOES THE MTIII MATTERS?

The MTIII is not just a report; it is a mirror, a warning signal, and a rallying tool. Drawing upon the global Tobacco Industry Interference Index methodology, it evaluates the extent to which the tobacco industry — and its proxies — is able to infiltrate, influence, or derail public health policies. More importantly, it reveals how the Malaysian government, at all levels, has responded or failed to resist those incursions.

Effective tobacco control demands that the Government do not merely passes laws, but also protects its institutions, processes, and personnel against corporate influence.

Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), the international legal tool that Malaysia has been a Party to since 2005, provides the structural guardrail. Our findings show that Malaysia is dangerously vulnerable.

KEY FINDINGS OF MTIII-2025

1. Escalating Industry Access & Influence

Despite public health rhetoric, top-level officials across multiple ministries continue to entertain invitations, partnerships, and “consultations” with tobacco companies and their front groups. These interactions are often framed as “essential for regulation” but lack transparency or clear boundaries.

2. CSR as a Trojan Horse

The tobacco industry continues to leverage corporate social responsibility programs (e.g., environmental cleanups, community development grants, youth outreach, “anti-litter” campaigns) to gain social legitimacy, access to policymakers, and influence over regulatory agendas.

3. Privileges, Delays, and Exemptions

The 2025 MTII Index detects new instances where laws are delayed, regulations are softened, or exemptions are granted under industry pressure — particularly in emerging product categories like heated tobacco products and e-cigarettes. We witness ad hoc leniencies granted to industry players under the guise of “innovation,” “jobs,” or “tax revenue.”

4. Opacity, Weak Oversight, and Gaps in Disclosure

Many interactions with the industry remain off the record. In the absence of public posting of meeting minutes, registers of lobbyists, or mandatory disclosure rules, the public cannot scrutinize which officials met whom, when, and with what outcome.

5. Conflict of Interest and Revolving Doors

Worrisome cases emerge of retired government officials or relatives of officials taking consultancies with tobacco or vaping firms soon after leaving public office — or simultaneously serving in advisory bodies with oversight responsibilities. Mechanisms to manage or prohibit these conflicts are weak or unenforced.

6. Lack of Preventive Safeguards

The long-awaited **code of conduct for civil servants** dealing with the tobacco industry remains incomplete or dormant. Procedures to monitor compliance, sanction violations, or protect whistleblowers are largely absent.

Overall, compared with the reports in 2021 and 2023, Malaysia's score in the 2025 Index remains high; reflecting a persistent and rising degree of interference.

TRENDS AND MALAYSIA'S PERFORMANCE: 2021 → 2023 → 2025

In 2021, Malaysia's score was **66** (a higher score means greater interference).

By 2023, the score leapt to **76**, signaling a marked deterioration in institutional resistance to industry pressure.

Now in 2025, regrettably, Malaysia's score is **77** maintaining the upward trend (i.e. a worse outcome), with yet more evidence of interference penetrating policy channels.

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What does this tell us?

1. **Backsliding.** Over a four-year span, Malaysia has not improved its safeguards, instead it's weakened.

2. **The industry innovates faster than governance can adapt.** As new products (vapes, HTPs) emerge, the industry tests loopholes and shifts tactics. Our institutions are ill-prepared.

3. **Momentum is not self-sustaining.** Good policy remnants [e.g. the Generational EndGame (**GEG**) proposal] faced pushback - completely paralysed. The 2023 Index, analysts already warned that "tobacco industry interference in Malaysia is worsening" — citing the declassification of liquid nicotine from the Poisons Act, lack of excise tax increases, stalled legislation, and industry lobbying in non-health ministries. Yet, unfortunately, the 2025 results confirm that those warnings were not heeded.

IMPLICATIONS

The upward trend in interference has grave consequences:

1. It weakens the integrity of health policy formulation, turning regulation into negotiation.

2. It delays or dilutes life-saving measures such as plain packaging, display bans, taxation, or generational prohibitions.

3. It undermines public trust: citizens deserve to know that policy decisions are based on health and science — not industry influence.

4. It risks eroding Malaysia's FCTC obligations and credibility.

In short: if we do not confront interference, our tobacco control policies become theatrical.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Ministry of Health (as Secretariat of Malaysia's FCTC obligations), the Cabinet, all relevant agencies, and every tobacco control advocate, MyWATCH presents the following urgent, non-negotiable recommendations:

1. **Enact and enforce a National Code of Conduct for Civil Servants (and public officials) interacting with the tobacco industry**

The code must explicitly prohibit accepting gifts, favors, sponsorships, or in-kind contributions from tobacco or vaping firms.

It must require **advance disclosure**, **public posting** of meeting minutes, and **sanctions** for violation.

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It must include **whistleblower protection** and independent oversight.

2. **Strengthen and institutionalize transparency mechanisms**

Mandate a **public register of all industry lobbyists and front organizations**.

Require that **all relevant interactions** (even "necessary" ones) be recorded and disclosed in a timely manner.

Insist that **tobacco industry must submit periodic disclosures** of marketing, lobbying, financial links, CSR programs, and product data.

3. **Impose strict conflict-of-interest rules**

Prohibit former civil servants, regulatory staff or ministers from joining tobacco or related firms for a cooling-off period.

Ban tobacco industry representatives from sitting on advisory, policymaking or inter-ministerial committees on public health, taxation, environment, trade, or youth.

Exclude those with conflicts from participation in delegations to Conference of Parties (COP) or any WHO FCTC meetings.

4. **Limit and regulate interactions — only when strictly necessary**

Any interaction with industry must be justified transparently, documented, and limited to regulatory oversight, not policy development.

Refuse offers of collaboration, "voluntary codes," or CSR programs that carry reputation risks.

5. **Reject industry partnerships, sponsorships, or incentives**

Government agencies must refuse industry funding, sponsorship, or charitable overtures.

No incentives — tax, import, regulatory — should be offered to tobacco, vaping or heated tobacco firms.

Ensure that national/ state investments, procurement, or pensions do not have exposure to the tobacco industry.

6. **Engage all Ministries — especially finance, trade, agriculture, environment**

These agencies must be brought into the WHO FCTC Article 5.3 framework so that the health agenda is not undermined from within.

Cross-ministerial training on industry tactics must be mandatory.

7. Re-submit and accelerate the passage of firm provisions on the generational endgame (GEG) into the Control of Tobacco Product & Smoking Act without dilution.

8. Support civil society, watchdogs, and academic monitoring

Allocate resources to independent monitoring of industry behavior, media investigations, and transparency compliance.

Invite civil society participation in oversight, with secure channels to report interference.

CONCLUSION: A MOMENT FOR MORAL LEADERSHIP

We convene today not merely to release a report, but to confront a pervasive threat. The tobacco industry is cunning — it dresses interference as collaboration, influence as invitation, and delay as prudence. If we allow that disguise to stand unchallenged, our public health vision will be undermined from within.

Malaysia deserves policies crafted in the public interest, not engineered by corporate interests. Let this MTIII-2025 be more than a publication — let it be the spark of Institutional Reform. Let us move from rhetoric to resilience. Let us build walls of integrity, transparency, and accountability.

To the Ministry of Health, to all government agencies, to Parliament, and to every advocate across Malaysia: the time is now. Let us rise together, reclaim governance from interference, and deliver a healthier future for our children and our nation.

Thank you