

## Corporate social responsibility and the challenges in creating a smoke-free environment

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) whereby companies work to lessen societal and environmental harm caused by their activities, and contribute to the betterment of society, is becoming a popular concept in commercial governance. Malaysian public policy supports and encourages CSR. But what are the limits for tobacco control if the tobacco industry succeeds in establishing its claims to being socially responsible?

This presentation uses the case of British American Tobacco Malaysia (BATM) to explore critically how Malaysia's leading cigarette manufacturer has sought to present its activities as ethical, supportive of government economic and development policy, sensitive to the problem of under-age smoking and environmentally friendly. CSR activities included annual *Social Reports*, subsidies for tobacco growers, charitable donations, scholarships, support for anti-smuggling measures, school-based 'youth smoking prevention' programs and tree planting to achieve carbon neutrality.

The relationship of BATM to the state is complicated by the fact that government-owned or controlled entities are the largest local investors in the company's shares. In effect the Malaysian state is part of the tobacco industry. Moreover, BATM has appointed men with important political linkages to its board of directors.

BATM has received recognition from the highest political level as a socially responsible corporation. This is despite its inability to explain how its products can be used safely by its customers: one of the crucial questions in CSR assessment. BATM, along with the other tobacco corporations in Malaysia, argues that smoking is an adult and legal choice, made with the full knowledge of its health risks. This activity therefore has a legitimate place in Malaysian society. Such a view is apparently endorsed by the Malaysian government, which is also a major shareholder. CSR demands an accommodation with tobacco control policies and implies that both tobacco use and efforts to curtail it will co-exist. Participants in the seminar are challenged to consider consequences of CSR activities for the control of tobacco in the global context