

Evaluation of Excise Policy Reform: Downtrading and the Shadow Economy Surge in Indonesia

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Purpose: This study evaluates the effectiveness of Indonesia's tobacco excise policy (CHT) reform from 2020 to 2025, specifically examining the market dynamics following aggressive tariff hikes, including adjustments in market structure shifts (downtrading) and indicators of tax evasion. **Method:** Adopting a descriptive quantitative approach, this study utilized publicly available administrative data and information acquired via official requests from the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DJBC), integrated with 22 recent empirical studies. The analysis employed descriptive trend mapping to compare the trajectory of cumulative tariff hikes against production shifts from Tier 1 to lower tiers (downtrading indicator) and seizure volumes as a proxy for illicit circulation. **Findings:** The study revealed a "Fiscal Policy Trade-off." The cumulative tariff increase of 66.4% (2020-2024) has triggered a severe downtrading effect and fuelled a 75% surge in illicit cigarette seizures. While enforcement initiatives have positively contributed to revenue recovery, the market distortion suggests that the policy might be approaching the limits of compliance as conceptualized in the Laffer Curve. **Implications:** The findings urge a reassessment of the excise roadmap. Exclusively depending on tariff instruments without strengthening the track-and-trace system and optimizing the Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH-CHT) is counterproductive.

Keywords: Downtrading; Laffer Curve; Shadow Economy; Tax Evasion; Tobacco Excise.

JEL Classification: H26, H32, K42.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tobacco Excise Tax (*Cukai Hasil Tembakau* or CHT) fundamentally serves as a strategic fiscal instrument in Indonesia, mandated to optimize state revenue while simultaneously controlling the consumption of harmful goods. Marbun (2025) confirms that excise revenue contributes significantly to the State Budget (APBN), acting as one of the most reliable sources of non-oil and gas revenue amid global economic volatility. Globally, Chaloupka *et al.* (2019) recognize excise taxation as the most effective instrument for reducing tobacco use and mitigating its associated health burdens, contingent upon a well-structured tax structure. However, the implementation of

this policy in Indonesia is constrained by a complex “fiscal trilemma,” wherein the government must navigate the conflicting objectives of achieving aggressive revenue targets, reducing smoking prevalence, and maintaining the sustainability of the labor-intensive tobacco industry (Ashar & Firmansyah, 2015). This trade-off is further complicated by the oligopolistic structure of the cigarette industry, which grants major manufacturers significant power to affect price transmission and market dynamics, often at the expense of tobacco farmers (Suprihanti *et al.*, 2018).

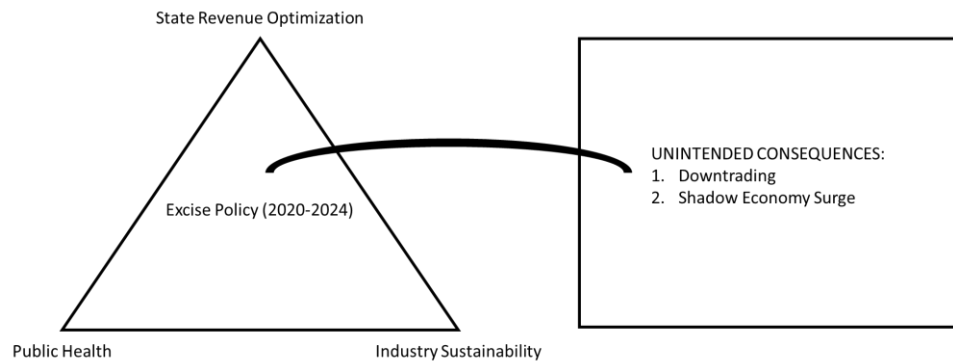
From 2020 to 2024, the Ministry of Finance adopted a “Shock Therapy” strategy characterized by continuous double-digit tariff hikes and a roadmap for tier simplification. This aggressive fiscal stance was primarily driven by the urgent national agenda to reduce the high prevalence of smoking, particularly among the youth demographic. Irawan (2024) provides empirical evidence indicating that this policy yielded some positive results, as the simplification of excise layers effectively reduced youth smoking prevalence by approximately 2%. Nevertheless, the aggregate market response has demonstrated rigidity, as Tirtana & Ariutama (2022) empirically found that the price elasticity of cigarette demand in Indonesia remains inelastic at -0.317. This inelasticity implies that consumption does not decrease proportionally with price increases; instead of quitting, rational consumers tend to maintain their nicotine intake by seeking more affordable alternatives, a behavior aligned with the rational addiction theory cited by Putra & Adrison (2024).

This inelastic demand response has triggered a massive structural shift in the market known as “downtrading,” as consumers migrate from high-tax Tier 1 products to lower-tier legal brands. Gunardi *et al.* (2021) highlight that continuous fiscal pressure has forced even major manufacturers to restructure their operations, often lowering their production class (*turun golongan*) to access lower excise tariffs, thereby eroding the premium tax base. On the supply side, Putra & Adrison (2024) identified a “Price Smoothing” strategy, where cigarette firms absorb a portion of the tax burden to increase prices gradually rather than abruptly, in an effort to prevent a sudden demand shock. This strategic pricing behavior is particularly prevalent in the labor-intensive Hand-Rolled Cigarette (SKT) and Machine-Made White Cigarette (SPM) segments, effectively cushioning the intended impact of the tax policy on consumer behavior.

The most critical and unforeseen outcome of this aggressive policy regime is the unprecedented surge in the circulation of illicit cigarettes. Aziz *et al.* (2025) utilize the Law of Demand to elucidate that the cumulative tariff hike of 66.4% from 2020 to 2024 has significantly widened the disparity between legal cigarette prices and consumer purchasing power, hence creating a powerful economic incentive for tax evasion. Kasri *et al.* (2021) highlighted the severity of this latent crisis, estimating that illicit cigarette consumption had already reached 59 billion sticks by 2018, causing a potential state revenue loss of up to IDR 42 trillion. This phenomenon represents a “systemic failure” of the taxation system, where high tariffs combined with complex administrative structures and low compliance create fertile ground for the shadow economy (Saukhan Aulana *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, global evidence reviewed by Paraje *et al.* (2022) suggests that although tax rates are a contributing factor, the scale of illicit trade is determined more decisively by the strength of governance and enforcement capacity than by the tax burden alone.

To visualize the core conflict of this study, Figure 1 illustrates the policy trade-offs and their unintended outcomes.

Figure 1. The Fiscal Trilemma of Indonesia's Tobacco Excise Policy and Its Unintended Consequences



Source: Author's synthesis based on Ashar & Firmansyah (2015) and Marbun (2025)

Despite the daunting challenges in controlling the shadow economy, the customs authority's enforcement initiatives have demonstrated significant fiscal productivity. Recent empirical analysis in East Java by Ardana *et al.* (2025) confirms a significant positive correlation between enforcement actions (seizures) and excise revenue recovery. Similarly, a case study in Bandung by Sutarya *et al.* (2025) indicates that increasing supervision intensity directly correlates with higher detection rates. From a macroeconomic perspective, Bella *et al.* (2024) demonstrated through input-output analysis that, despite micro-level market distortions, tobacco taxation generates a net positive impact on Indonesia's economy in terms of output and employment through government spending redistribution. This is further supported by Yandri *et al.* (2020) regarding the positive impact of the Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH-CHT) on regional growth.

This study aims to empirically evaluate the impact of the 2020–2025 excise policy regime by synthesizing administrative data and recent literature. Unlike previous studies that often isolate health outcomes or revenue targets, this study integrates the latest 2024–2025 enforcement data from the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DJBC) with a systematic review of 22 academic sources.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: The Laffer Curve and Tax Evasion Incentives

The theoretical foundation of excise taxation is intrinsically linked to the Laffer Curve, which posits an inverted-U relationship between tax rates and tax revenue. While determining the exact revenue-maximizing rate requires complex econometric modeling, the concept provides a critical framework for understanding the “prohibitive range” of taxation. In the context of tobacco control, this range is not necessarily defined by a decline in total revenue, given the inelastic nature of demand (Tirtana & Ariutama, 2022), but rather by a disproportionate surge in tax evasion and avoidance practices.

Chaloupka *et al.* (2019) argue that excise taxes are effective only when the administrative capacity to control the shadow economy is strong. When tariff hikes grow disproportionate to consumer purchasing power, the market reaches a point where the marginal incentive to evade taxes exceeds the cost of compliance. Aziz *et al.* (2025) identify this as the manifestation of Rational Choice Theory; as the price gap between legal and illegal products widens due to aggressive tariffs, rational consumers substitute legal products with cheaper illicit alternatives.

Empirically, the position on the Laffer Curve in Indonesia is influenced by the specific excise system. Surjono (2013) demonstrates that this system triggers an over-shifting effect, where retail prices rise higher than the tax increase itself. Consequently, the valid indicator for inferring that the policy is approaching the “prohibitive range” is not merely revenue stagnation, but the structural

break in compliance, as evidenced by a sharp divergence between legal production volume and illicit seizure trends.

Market Distortion: “Price Smoothing” and “Downtrading”

The market response to aggressive fiscal policy is not immediate but strategic. Putra & Adrison (2024) identified a phenomenon called “Price Smoothing,” where cigarette firms do not pass the full tax burden to consumers immediately but increase prices gradually to prevent a sudden demand shock. This behavior is particularly prevalent among lower-tier producers and for Machine-Made White Cigarettes (SPM). Furthermore, Gunardi *et al.* (2021) highlight that continuous fiscal pressure forces manufacturers to restructure their operations, often “downsizing” or lowering their production tier (*turun golongan*) to access lower excise tariffs. This structural shift, known as downtrading, effectively moves the market composition towards lower-value products, eroding the premium tax base.

The complexity of Indonesia’s multi-tiered tariff structure further incentivizes this behavior. Irawan (2024) notes that while tariff simplification aims to close these loopholes and has successfully reduced youth smoking prevalence by 2%, it also inadvertently encourages consumers to switch to cheaper legal cigarettes if the price gap remains too wide. Additionally, Suprihanti *et al.* (2018) analyzed that the oligopolistic nature of the industry often allows large firms to pass the tax burden backward to farmers by suppressing clove and tobacco prices.

The Shadow Economy: Systemic Failure and Enforcement Dynamics

The proliferation of the shadow economy is a critical indicator of policy leakage. Saukhan Aulana *et al.* (2025) describe the rampant circulation of illegal cigarettes as a “systemic failure” of the taxation system, driven by complex tariff structures, low fiscal compliance, and a lack of data integration. Kasri *et al.* (2021) provide staggering evidence of this scale, estimating that illicit cigarette consumption surged to 59 billion sticks in 2018, causing state losses of up to IDR 42 trillion. Ahsan *et al.* (2014) argue that, unlike many countries where smuggling is the main issue, in Indonesia, domestic illicit production is the primary source of leakage.

Globally, Paraje *et al.* (2022) emphasize that the size of the illicit trade is determined more by the strength of governance and enforcement capacity than by tax rates alone. In the Indonesian context, enforcement has proven to be a vital countermeasure. Ardana *et al.* (2025) empirically demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between enforcement actions (seizures) and excise revenue recovery in East Java. Similarly, Sutarya *et al.* (2025) confirmed that increasing supervision intensity directly correlates with higher detection rates of illegal cigarettes in Bandung. To modernize this supervision, Astri & Yopan (2025) recommend the adoption of Digital Excise Stamps with track-and-trace features.

Macroeconomic Impacts and Regional Redistribution

Debates on tobacco taxation often center on economic trade-offs, particularly regarding employment and regional welfare. Bella *et al.* (2024) debunk the myth of economic loss, demonstrating through input-output analysis that a 45% tax increase would actually generate a net positive impact on Indonesia’s economy, increasing output by IDR 84.2 trillion and creating 400,300 jobs, due to the redistribution of government spending into high-multiplier sectors. At the regional level, Yandri *et al.* (2020) provide evidence that the Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH-CHT) significantly boosts economic growth in tobacco-producing areas like Rembang. However, Ashar & Firmansyah (2015) warn of a trade-off where specific sectors, particularly the cigarette industry itself, suffer output losses. Sriyanto (2023) underscores that the allocation of DBH-CHT must be strictly monitored to ensure it effectively supports health infrastructure and law enforcement.

Table 1. Summary of Key Empirical Studies on Tobacco Excise in Indonesia

Author (Year)	Research Focus	Key Findings	Relevance to This Study
Kasri <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Illicit Consumption	Illicit trade reached 59 billion sticks in 2018 (IDR 42T loss).	Baseline scale of shadow economy.
Tirtana & Ariutama (2022)	Elasticity	Demand is inelastic (-0.317); revenue rises but quitting is low.	Explains downtrading behavior.
Putra & Adrison (2024)	Industry Strategy	Firms use “Price Smoothing” to delay tax transmission.	Explains market lag response.
Ardana <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Enforcement	Seizures have positive, significant correlation with revenue.	Proves enforcement productivity.
This Study (2025)	Policy Reform	Analyzes 66.4% tariff hikes vs 75% illicit seizure surge.	Evaluates 2020-2025 trade-offs.

Source: Author's Synthesis (2025)

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive policy evaluation approach utilizing longitudinal administrative data analysis to examine the structural market shifts in the Indonesian tobacco industry under the aggressive excise policy regime of 2020–2025. This methodological approach aligns with Kasri *et al.* (2021) and Ahsan *et al.* (2014), who utilized secondary administrative data to measure the magnitude of illicit cigarette consumption. Furthermore, this study adopted a Policy Evaluation framework similar to Wardani & Khoirunurrofik (2022), analyzing the correlation between fiscal instruments (tariffs) and market outcomes.

Data Sources

The data used in this study were divided into two categories:

1. Primary Administrative Data (2020–2025): Obtained through publicly available reports and official information requests to the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DJBC). This includes:
 - a. Tariff Regulations: Annual weighted average tariff rates based on Minister of Finance Regulations (PMK), as analyzed by Irawan (2024);
 - b. Production Data: Aggregated production volumes of Machine-Made Cigarettes (SKM) and Hand-Rolled Cigarettes (SKT);
 - c. Enforcement Data: The volume of illicit cigarettes seized (*Barang Hasil Penindakan*), used as a proxy for enforcement intensity, following the methodology of Ardana *et al.* (2025).
2. Secondary Literature Data: A systematic review of 22 empirical studies (2013–2025) derived from Scopus-indexed and nationally accredited journals.

Operational Definitions and Variables

To ensure analytical precision, the key variables were defined based on previous literature:

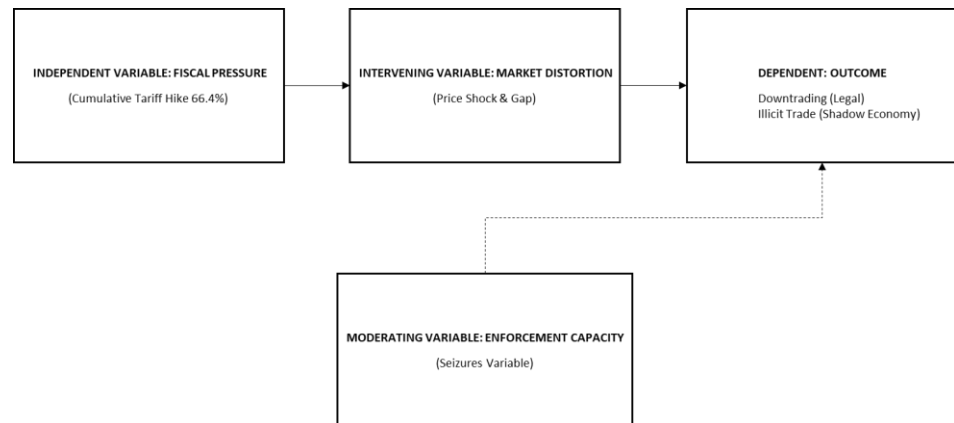
1. Fiscal Pressure (Policy Variable): Defined as the cumulative percentage increase in the weighted average excise tariff (*Tarif Rata-Rata Tertimbang*) over the observation period (2020–2025). This variable served as the primary policy input that alters the cost structure of the industry, based on the regulations analyzed by Irawan (2024).

2. Downtrading Effect (Market Response): Operationally defined as the structural shift in production composition from the Machine-Made category (SKM/SPM) to the Hand-Rolled category (SKT). While we acknowledge that the SKM category contains both Tier 1 and Tier 2, this study utilized the aggregate Machine-Made category as a proxy for the “High-Tax Segment” and the Hand-Rolled category as a proxy for the “Lower-Tax Segment”. This proxy is valid based on the hierarchical tariff structure in Indonesia, where the excise rate for Machine-Made cigarettes is consistently and significantly higher than Hand-Rolled cigarettes due to labor-protection policies. Therefore, a divergence trend, characterized by a negative slope in Machine-Made production coinciding with a positive slope in Hand-Rolled production, served as a robust indicator of consumers and manufacturers seeking a lower tax burden (downtrading).
3. Illicit Trade Proxy (Leakage): Defined as the volume of illicit cigarettes seized (*Barang Hasil Penindakan - BHP*) by Customs. While direct measurement of the shadow economy is impossible, this study used seizure data as a proxy for market leakage. We acknowledge, as noted by Paraje *et al.* (2022) and Saukhan Aulana *et al.* (2025) that this variable is influenced by two factors: the actual size of the illicit market and the intensity of enforcement efforts. Therefore, an increase in seizures was interpreted as an indicator of detected leakage, rather than the absolute total of the shadow economy.

Analysis Technique

The collected data was analyzed using Gap Analysis and Trend Mapping. Trend mapping visualizes the trajectory of tariff hikes against legal production volumes to identify the “Downtrading Point,” mirroring the approach of Suprihanti *et al.* (2018). Gap analysis compared the growth of enforcement seizures against the tariff index. The analytical framework is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Analytical Framework of Excise Policy Impact



Source: Author's Design (2025)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Shock Therapy: Aggressive Fiscal Policy Analysis (2020–2024)

The fundamental catalyst for the observed market distortion lies in the government's pursuit of a highly aggressive fiscal strategy. Within a short span between 2020 and 2024, the Ministry of Finance implemented a series of double-digit hikes resulting in a cumulative tariff increase of 66.4%, a rate that significantly outpaced both national inflation and economic growth. Marbun (2025) offers a critical perspective on this rationale, arguing that the policy was driven by an urgent ‘dual necessity’: the imperative to optimize state revenue for post-pandemic fiscal consolidation and the mandate to rigorously control consumption prevalence. However, this rigid fiscal approach created a severe affordability shock in the market. Surjono (2013) empirically demonstrated that under

Indonesia's specific excise system, tariff increases are rarely absorbed by producers; instead, they are over-shifted to retail prices, causing the final price burden on consumers to rise disproportionately compared to the tax hike itself. The comprehensive trajectory of this aggressive policy regime is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The Trajectory of Tobacco Excise Tariff Policy in Indonesia (2020–2025)

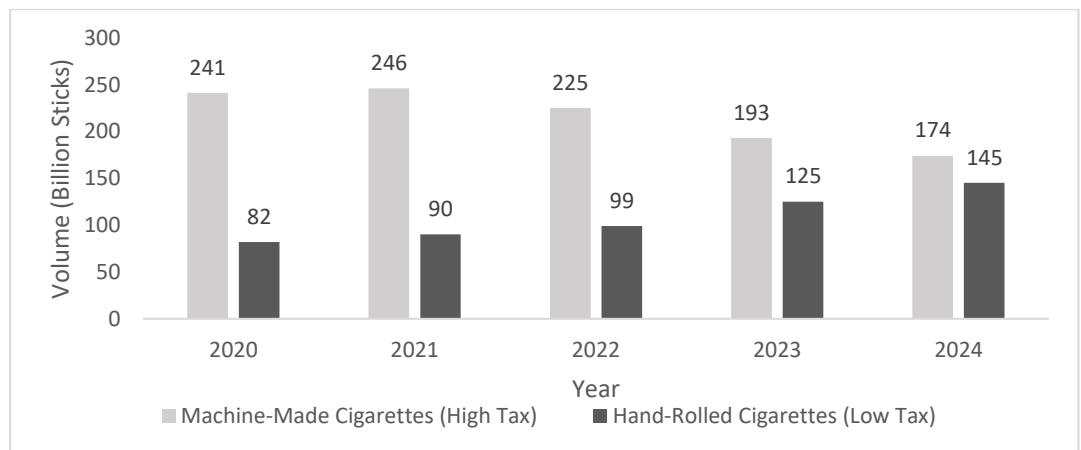
Year	Regulation (Basis)	Tier 1 Rate (IDR/Stick)	YoY Increase
2020	PMK 152/2019	Rp 740	23.0%
2021	PMK 198/2020	Rp 865	16.9%
2022	PMK 192/2021	Rp 985	13.9%
2023	PMK 191/2022	Rp 1,101	11.8%
2024	PMK 191/2022	Rp 1,231	11.8%
2025	(Status Quo)	Rp 1,231	0.0%
Total	Cumulative	+ Rp 491	66.4%

Source: Synthesized from Ministry of Finance Regulations / PMK (2025)

Market Response: Structural Downtrading and Price Smoothing

The market did not respond to this price shock with a simple cessation of consumption. Instead, a massive structural shift occurred, characterized by “Downtrading”. Consumers migrated from high-tax Tier 1 Machine-Made Cigarettes (SKM) to lower-tax Hand-Rolled Cigarettes (SKT). Gunardi *et al.* (2021) found that this fiscal pressure forced major manufacturers to “downsize” or lower their production tier (*turun golongan*) to access lower excise rates. Figure 3 illustrates this divergence.

Figure 3. Structural Downtrading Trend: The Divergence between Tier 1 Machine-Made and Hand-Rolled Cigarettes (2020–2024)



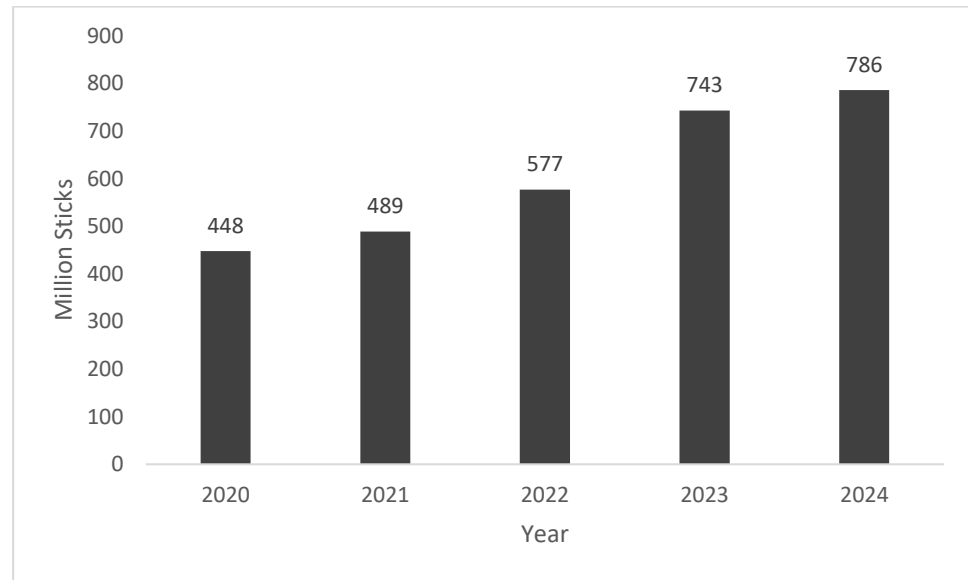
Source: DJBC Processed Data (2025)

On the supply side, firms employed a “Price Smoothing” strategy. Putra & Adrison (2024) identified that cigarette firms absorbed a portion of the tax burden to increase prices gradually, preventing immediate demand shock but squeezing margins.

The Surge of the Shadow Economy: Crossing the Laffer Curve

When legal downtrading options still exceed the consumer's reservation price, demand spills over into the shadow economy. Enforcement data reveals a disturbing trend: seizures of illicit cigarettes surged by 75%, from 448 million sticks in 2020 to 786 million sticks in 2024.

Figure 4. The Shadow Economy Surge: Volume of Illicit Cigarette Seizures (2020–2024)



Source: Directorate General of Customs and Excise Data (2025)

This surge empirically validates the Laffer Curve hypothesis. Aziz *et al.* (2025) explain that as legal prices soar, the demand for affordable illegal substitutes rises proportionally. Saukhan Aulana *et al.* (2025) categorize this as a “systemic failure.” However, Ardana *et al.* (2025) found a significant positive correlation between enforcement actions and revenue recovery, suggesting that improved supervision also contributes to higher seizure numbers.

Macroeconomic and Regional Implications

Despite the micro-level distortions, the policy remains defensible from a macroeconomic perspective. Bella *et al.* (2024) utilized input-output analysis to demonstrate that tobacco taxation generates a net positive impact on Indonesia’s economy, increasing output and creating jobs, as the government redistributes tax revenue into high-multiplier sectors. At the regional level, Yandri *et al.* (2020) provide strong evidence that the Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH-CHT) significantly boosts economic growth in tobacco-producing areas. However, Ashar and Firmansyah (2015) warn of a trade-off where the cigarette industry itself suffers output losses, necessitating mitigation via DBH-CHT.

5. CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concluded that Indonesia’s aggressive tobacco excise policy reform from 2020 to 2025 has resulted in critical unintended consequences and fiscal trade-offs. The cumulative tariff increase of 66.4% coincided with severe market adaptability challenges, triggering distinct structural distortions. Specifically, the descriptive trends indicate a massive “downtrading” shift from Machine-Made to Hand-Rolled categories and a recorded 75% surge in illicit cigarette seizures. Theoretically, these indicators suggest that the compliance burden may be approaching the prohibitive range of the Laffer Curve. However, this interpretation requires caution, as the surge in seizures serves as a proxy for illicit circulation and may also reflect increased enforcement intensity rather than purely an expansion of the shadow economy. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of leakage signals that relying solely on tariff instruments has reached a point of diminishing returns regarding market control.

Policy Recommendations

To address these unintended consequences, this study proposed the recommendations in Table 3.

Table 3. Strategic Policy Recommendation Matrix

Identified Problem			Proposed Solution	Supporting Reference
Compliance	Gap	(Illicit Trade)	Digital Excise Stamps (Track-and-trace system via QR Code).	Astri & Yopan (2025); Paraje <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Downtrading (Avoidance)			Tariff Simplification (Reduce price gap between tiers).	Irawan (2024); Tirtana & Ariutama (2022)
Regional Trade-off (Welfare)			Optimization of DBH-CHT (Earmark for health & enforcement).	Yandri <i>et al.</i> (2020); Sriyanto (2023)
Market	Contraction	(Saturation)	Export Incentives (Shift focus to global markets).	Suparmono <i>et al.</i> (2022)

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

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