

MALAWI: TOBACCO VERSUS DEVELOPMENT

Recently, the International Tobacco Growers Association (ITGA) issued a petition against the implementation of Articles 9 and 10 of the FCTC. Antonio Abrunhosa, ITGA's leader, said in comments directed at health advocates, "These people should get on a plane and travel to Malawi to explain to 700,000 families that they've decided to make them grow potatoes instead of tobacco and see their reactions."

The ITGA and its membership comprised of cigarette and leaf companies portray themselves as friends of tobacco farmers, but they promote a crop that increases poverty, economic inequality and environmental degradation in Malawi and other countries.

Malawi is the top global producer of burley tobacco, used in Marlboro and other cigarette brands. The country derives up to 70 per cent of its foreign earnings from tobacco. Tobacco agriculture creates economic marginalisation, not wealth, for Malawians.

Francois van der Merwe, ITGA's Africa chairman, asserts the tobacco industry position that tobacco helps alleviate poverty. According to Van der Merwe, "Africa cannot achieve its Millennium Development Goal of ending poverty if countries are handicapped by an enforced end to growing certain tobacco types."

In Malawi, tobacco cultivation actually obstructs five Millennium Development Goals: ending poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Sixty-five per cent of Malawians survive on two dollars or less a day and the men and women who cultivate tobacco rarely earn the daily minimum wage of US\$0.75.

In Malawi, 78,000 child labourers produce leaf. Many tobacco families send their children to the fields, instead of school, to meet labour demand. An estimated 300,000 tobacco tenant families are denied their basic rights to adequate food, clean water, proper housing and fair payment for their crop.

Workers and farmers are exposed to green tobacco sickness through dermal absorption of nicotine. Tobacco cultivation destroys forests. Wood for tobacco drying sheds is scarce and many small farmers dry leaf in their houses, increasing risks of respiratory infection through tobacco dust.

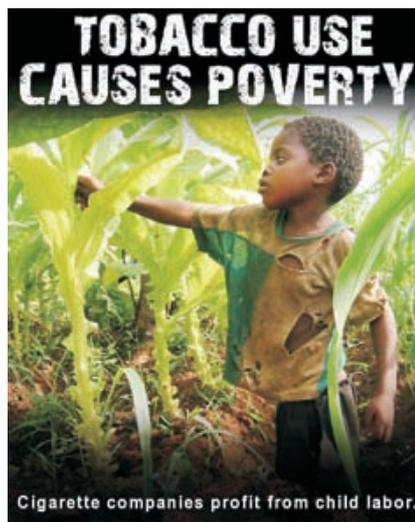
Tobacco contributes to food insecurity. Tenant families eat less than one proper meal a day

and have little or no access to food crops due to the expanding tobacco sector.

Furthermore, overproduction and collusion between global tobacco companies over leaf prices in Malawi led to decreasing prices for tobacco during the past decade.

Cultivators who receive low prices are unable to cover costs of inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. In 2007, the Malawi government introduced minimum prices for tobacco. In 2010, global leaf companies with pre-arranged contracts with cigarette manufacturers paid prices 37 per cent below the government-set average minimum price.

Small farmers keep growing tobacco since the sector's marketing, distribution, and transportation infrastructure dominates the country's economy. Infrastructure and auxiliary services for alternative crops are virtually non-existent.



Malawi is not a Party to the FCTC and will likely maintain this position due to tobacco industry pressure on government authorities. Additionally, government officials, farmers' representatives and civic groups lack information about the FCTC, and wrongly believe that the FCTC bans tobacco cultivation.

Global donors also contribute to Malawi's reliance on tobacco agriculture. The World Bank encourages tobacco production through recommendations to the government to strengthen leaf marketing structures. Donors such as the United States Aid for International Development are reluctant to question the tobacco sector. Malawi's need for hard currency poses challenges to

genuine diversification away from tobacco.

Malawi's addiction to tobacco agriculture and its inability to counter the influence of the tobacco industry is an opportunity for health advocates to rethink traditional approaches to tobacco control. Five key tasks are to:

1. Recognise that promoting reduced smoking is only half the public health problem. The other problem is asserting the rights of tobacco farmers and farm workers to produce healthy crops that pay a living wage, and ensuring that existing tobacco workers receive living wages and improved health benefits;
2. Collaborate with Malawi and other governments to demonstrate how the tobacco industry appears to support tobacco-growing developing countries when in actuality it is primarily concerned with low-paid labour and the use of farmers and farm workers to buy reputations;
3. Create an online global repository of best practices of farmers and farm workers who devise their own alternative crop solutions to their dependency on tobacco farming;
4. Encourage the Bloomberg Initiative and all other major global public health donors to fund tobacco agricultural research and projects focused on tobacco farmers and workers who engage in crop diversification and in efforts to counter tobacco industry influence;
5. Commit to scheduling an upcoming World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Africa, where the tobacco industry increasingly entraps people through tobacco growing, support the call for tobacco agriculture as a *World No Tobacco Day* theme, and circulate cigarette packaging warning labels that feature the human and ecological costs of tobacco farming.

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