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Tobacco Control and Tobacco Farming in African Countries

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Abstract

During the past decade, tobacco leaf production has shifted from high-income countries to developing countries, particularly those in Africa. Most African governments promote tobacco farming as a way to alleviate poverty. The economic benefit of tobacco farming has been used by the tobacco industry to block tobacco control policies. The tobacco industry is active in promoting the alleged positive aspects of tobacco farming and in “protecting” farmers from what they portray as unfair tobacco control regulations that reduce demand. Tobacco farming has many negative consequences for the health and wellbeing of farmers, as well as for the environment and the long-term wellbeing of the country concerned.¹⁻³ We provide an overview of tobacco farming issues in Africa. Encompassing multi-dimensional issues of economic development, there is far more to it than tobacco control questions.

Keywords

Africa; Tobacco Farming; Tobacco Economics; Tobacco Control

I. Introduction

In 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), an international treaty to reduce demand for tobacco products and address supply issues. In addition to demand reduction strategies, the treaty specified that signatory countries should promote economically viable alternatives to tobacco for farmers; to reduce the amount of land cultivated for tobacco leaf; and to protect the environment and health of farmers.

World production of tobacco leaf has continued to grow since 2003, up 25% from 6.03 million tons in 2003 to 7.5 million tons in 2012. African countries produced 650,000 tons, or 8.7% of the world production of tobacco leaf in 2012, compared to 440,000 tons or 7.3% in 2003. Total area harvested for tobacco in African countries increased by 66%. and output increased by 48%. In this same period, area harvested for tobacco in the United States decreased by 18% while production decreased by 5%. For Europe, the decrease is 40.4% in

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the area harvested and 43% in production.⁴ The source drift from high income to low income countries is evident.

In 2012 five countries in Africa were among the top 20 producers of tobacco leaf in the world: Malawi (6th), Tanzania (8th), Zimbabwe (9th), Zambia (16th) and Mozambique (17th).⁴ Most of the tobacco growing countries in Africa are among the world's poorest countries. The countries view tobacco leaf export as an important source of income, and as a means to alleviate poverty. We provide an overview of tobacco farming issues in relation to tobacco control policy in Africa, and offer a better understanding of the African tobacco farmers' needs, options, and policy approaches. Section II provides a description of current situation of tobacco farming in Africa. Section III analyses issues of tobacco farming in Africa. Section IV is a discussion. Our conclusion is in Section V.

II. TOBACCO FARMING IN AFRICA

1. The economics of tobacco farming

Most African governments are encouraged by the tobacco industry, based on an economic point of view, to promote tobacco farming. The industry typically argues that tobacco farming contributes to tax revenue, improves farmers' employment and income—especially cash income—and relieves household poverty. Growing tobacco also takes advantage of less fertile land that would otherwise be underused. Most importantly, they argue that tobacco farming generates export earnings, and promotes local economic development in these countries.⁵

In 2011, the five African countries among the top 20 tobacco leaf growers produced over 530,000 tons. These same five countries had produced 372,000 tons in 2000. Only Zimbabwe and Malawi had been in the top 20.⁴ Total export of tobacco leaf from African countries increased by about 47% from 2000 to 2011, an increase in value of 73%.⁶

Tobacco leaf exports in these five countries play an important role in their export trade. For the year 2011, tobacco leaf was the top agricultural export for Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. It ranked as the 2nd agricultural export in Tanzania and 3rd in Zambia.⁶ In Malawi, one of the most heavily tobacco-dependent economies in the world, tobacco accounts for over 60% of the country's total annual earnings, and accounts for 13% of the economy as measured by the GDP.⁷ In Zimbabwe, tobacco leaf accounted for 22.64% of total exports in 2011.⁶ In Mozambique, tobacco accounted for 7.8% of total exports in 2011.^{6, 8} The total export value of tobacco leaf from these five countries grew more than 70% from around US\$960 million in 2000 to US\$1.658 billion for 2011. The export value of tobacco leaf from the entire African continent increased from US\$1.03 billion in 2000 to US \$1.79 billion in 2011, a 74% increase.⁶ Note that the value of tobacco leaf exports includes the value added for the handling of exports, such as grading, packaging, and transporting. Comparing the unit price of a country's tobacco leaf export with the auction price from the trading floor shows that a significant portion goes to intermediary processes and to middlemen. The individual small land holder tobacco farmer typically lives in poverty.

2. The asymmetry between the seller and the buyer of tobacco leaf

In tobacco growing countries in Africa, it is common to find farmers growing tobacco on small farms. Farm workers are often family members, including women and children. Their harvest is sold under the contract system or the auction system. Under the contract system, tobacco farmers are contracted to sell their leaf to tobacco leaf companies—often the local subsidiaries of international tobacco leaf companies or cigarette manufacturers. Most of the world's major multi-national cigarette companies and tobacco leaf companies are active in Africa.

Pitted against powerful multi-national tobacco leaf companies, the imbalance in power is obvious. The companies give the farmers loans so they can buy inputs such as seed, fertilizer, and pesticides. Because of the contracts, farmers anticipate a ready market and cash income. But because the price they can get for their harvest is decided by the leaf companies, which grade the leaves and set the price, tobacco farmers are often trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and indebtedness. After paying their loans, farmers' income is often in the negative, when they factor in their labor costs and those of their family members.⁹ This situation is aggravated, as the farmers bear the risk if a natural disaster or other crop failure. With the increasing cost of imported inputs, the farmers may find themselves in a lifetime debt bondage.

Even when farmers sell their crop under the auction system, the advantage that should accrue to them when buyers bid against each other disappears when competition is limited. Governments often issue licenses to a limited number of buyers at the auction markets. This easily results in collusion among a handful of buyers. As in the case of the contract system, buyers under the auction system grade the leaves, thus putting farmers at a disadvantage.

3. Economic return of tobacco farming and the livelihood of farmers

Both the tobacco industry and governments claim that tobacco growing relieves poverty for tobacco farmers by keeping farmers employed and earning them cash payments. The tobacco industry is active in promoting these supposed positive aspects of tobacco farming, and in “protecting” the farmers from what they portray as unfair tobacco control regulations such as smoke-free public places that might reduce demand. The FCTC is demonized as ignoring the livelihood and welfare of farmers.

To help policymakers understand how tobacco farmers benefit from tobacco farming when compared to alternative crops, empirical studies of costs and returns are necessary. A number of studies have shown that the returns from alternative crops are higher than growing tobacco leaf. A technical document prepared in 2007 for the Ad Hoc Study Group on Alternative Crops established by FCTC's Conference of Parties looked at a number of countries, including Malawi and Zimbabwe, and examined the comparative efficiencies of several crops as compared with tobacco leaf.¹⁰ Depending on marketing arrangements, it found that in Malawi crops such as paprika, tomatoes, rice, groundnuts, and coffee can bring in more income than tobacco farming.

An Institute for Natural Resources and Technology Studies (INRS) 2007 case study in Kenya assessed the social and economic costs and benefits of tobacco cultivation compared

to other commercial crops. It showed that tobacco has the lowest economic return per acre compared to other commercial crops, including passion fruit, watermelon, soybeans, pineapples, and peppers.¹¹ The report also showed that according to Kenyan government statistics, the Kuria district in the Nyanza province, that produces the largest amount of tobacco, is also the poorest district in the country.

In a recent study in the Tabora region of Tanzania, the main tobacco producing region of the country, researchers conducted a comparative analysis of the technical efficiency of smallholder tobacco farmers and maize farmers. The market value per unit of tobacco leaf is three times higher than that of maize in this country. The picture is however reversed when the cost of inputs, such as labor are included. Maize farmers have two crops per year as opposed to one for tobacco.¹²

4. Environmental impact of tobacco farming

Growing tobacco negatively impacts the environment. A literature review published in 2012 showed that tobacco farming, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, leads to deforestation and soil erosion because of the clearing of land for tobacco farming and curing, and the pollution of rivers and streams with agrochemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers that are used extensively. These in turn lead to ecological disruptions.³

Governments and tobacco companies have tried to address the deforestation issue by encouraging reforestation; providing tree seedlings to farmers. But the amount of reforestation is much less than mandated by the government or what is necessary to stem the rate of deforestation. Such schemes have little positive impact. Often the trees planted are non-native, and they tend to be the fast-growing type that can then be used in tobacco production. Some trees that are planted, such as eucalyptus and cypress, absorb a lot of water, adversely affecting the water supply for other food crops and for drinking water. After decades of reforestation efforts by the tobacco industry, deforestation remains a common phenomenon in these tobacco growing countries.¹³

5. Health impact of tobacco farming

Tobacco cultivation requires pesticides, fertilizers and other chemicals. These are often sold in bulk without proper labeling or instructions. Farmers have little knowledge of the toxicity of such chemicals and don't know the right way to store, handle, and use them. Tobacco workers' exposure to such chemicals may poison them. Furthermore, the health of the villagers, even if they are not tobacco farm workers, can be affected because of the improper disposal of containers and runoff of pesticides and other chemicals into rivers and streams that are the source of the village water supply.³

Farm workers, often women and children, also absorb nicotine through their skin when they harvest the leaves, a problem inherent in the crop itself. The risk is substantially higher when the leaves are moist from rain, or when the workers do not wear protective clothing, which is often the case. Tobacco farmers try to save money by not providing such protection. Farmers have little knowledge about nicotine exposure. Green tobacco sickness can result from such exposure.

Given all these adverse health impacts, the revenue generated by tobacco farming for a country has to be seen in the context of its health care costs. While Tanzania earns about US \$50 million annually from tobacco, more than US \$40 million is spent to treat tobacco-related cancers alone.¹⁴

6. Child Labor

The use of child labor in tobacco farming puts the children at risk for illness and commercial exploitation. The problem is endemic in African countries. Children in African families contribute to the labor supply, and many families have many children. Driven by poverty, these children work on tobacco farms. They work long hours, stooped and for very little pay, sometimes being paid only each six-months or yearly, going without education, and suffering from the adverse health consequences of farming tobacco.¹⁵

Growing tobacco is painstakingly labor intensive, and children are often used in the manual work of preparing the land, planting the seeds, watering, weeding, applying fertilizers and pesticides, harvesting, stringing and hanging the leaves for curing, carrying the harvested leaves from the farms to the curing barns, and then packing them. No overall number of children working on tobacco farms in Africa can be found in the literature. Some estimates are available for specific countries. In Malawi, Lecours et. al. reported that 30% of the labor force on tobacco farms is children, some as young as 5 years old, who are picking and stringing tobacco leaves.³ A 2013 United Nations report puts the number of children in Malawi working on tobacco farms at 78,000, where the legal minimum wage is \$1.12 per day, and where the actual pay will depend on the quality and quantity of leaf harvested.¹⁶ Studies of individual areas provide a glimpse of the conditions these children work in. In Tanzania, an estimated 1,500 children aged 8 – 17 work on tobacco plantations and farms in Iringa District and 800 in Urambo District. In the Iringa Rural District, children are paid as little as \$0.25 a day and earn as little as \$80 for an entire season.¹⁷ As the major work in tobacco farming takes place during the months of January to May, children working on farms are not be able to attend school. Lack of schooling further aggravates the plight of these children and results in a cycle of poverty.

7. Food Insecurity

Food and nourishment, especially for the young, is a major concern in Africa. According to the 2013 Global Hunger Index developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute, Zambia (with a score of 24.1), Mozambique (with a score of 21.5), and Tanzania (with a score of 20.6) fall into the “alarming” category. Zimbabwe and Malawi, with scores of 16.5 and 15.1 respectively, fall into the “serious” category of the index. The Global Hunger Index measures the proportion of a country’s population that is undernourished, the prevalence of underweight children under age 5, and the mortality rate of children in this age group.¹⁸

Despite this food and nutrition situation, tobacco leaf production and land use for tobacco leaf growing in these countries have been increasing dramatically. More land devoted to tobacco farming means less arable land available to grow other crops for food. Clearing land for tobacco growing, the cutting down trees to cure tobacco, the depletion of soil nutrients

by tobacco growing, and the use and contamination of the water supply as a result of tobacco farming all have negative effect on growing staple crops. This contributes to malnutrition in the communities that farm tobacco. Tobacco farming further diminishes food security in these countries.

III. DISCUSSION

The tobacco control community, armed with the provisions enshrined in the FCTC, attempts to address the supply side of the tobacco epidemic by promoting crop substitution for tobacco farmers. The landscape for tobacco leaf substitution is very complicated and multidimensional, as tobacco farming is situated in the wider context of economic development.

From the perspective of these countries, the labor-intensive nature of tobacco farming gives employment to many in rural areas, including women and children. When unemployment is high, especially among youth, this opportunity for employment is particularly important. The export value of the tobacco crop is an important source for foreign exchange. Growing tobacco is perceived as good for the country's economic development.

With all the negatives of tobacco farming described above, how does a country weigh the pros and cons in considering a policy approach? Earning foreign exchange is obviously an important consideration for these developing countries, particularly in the short term. But government officials need to realize the long-term effect of tobacco farming and consider whether relying on tobacco farming perpetuates the cycle of poverty. The adverse socio-economic consequences and the harm done to the environment are long-term costs that the country will have to bear.

The tobacco farming issue is thus an economic, political, equity, and humanitarian issue. While full scale crop substitution for tobacco farming in these countries may not be a realistic goal, at least in the near to medium term, encouraging tobacco farmers to shift to other crops has intrinsic benefits—because of the health hazards that farm workers including women and children face, the poverty that they suffer, and the adverse environmental impact on the countries concerned. Governments should invest in the infrastructure that will help the farmers grow and market other cash crops.

The efforts of the tobacco control community, including international non-government organizations to build tobacco control capacity in these countries, should be focused on helping tobacco farmers have the choice, knowhow, and opportunity to shift to alternative crops. In the final analysis, it is the economic development of these countries that will determine whether tobacco crop substitution has any chance of success.

IV. CONCLUSION

Given that tobacco farming is deemed beneficial to the economy of these African countries, a large scale effort to push for tobacco crop substitution lends itself to attack by tobacco companies as being detrimental to farmers. The debate will shift from the public health benefit of tobacco control to the supposed harm that tobacco control will do to the livelihood

of the farmers. The intrinsic injustice perpetuated by the systems to which the farmers are subjected is a main cause of the cycle of poverty experienced by farmers, but is conveniently forgotten in this debate. The whole issue becomes a distraction, drawing resources away from other tobacco control initiatives.

Unchecked, tobacco farming in Africa will continue its upward trajectory. Research studies, including those done by international organizations, have already identified alternative crops that can give greater income to tobacco farmers. Crop substitution will require sustained efforts with financial and technical support to enable farmers to break out of tobacco farming. Small crop substitution programs will demonstrate to both farmers and governments alternative ways to alleviate poverty do exist. More empirical evidence will be needed to show governments that tobacco farming causes environmental degradation and perpetuates its exploitative nature. Given empirical evidence, governments may not stand in the way of crop substitution efforts and pilot projects.

Against the backdrop of an asymmetrical power relationship between farmers and tobacco companies, and with governments keen on the foreign exchange income from tobacco leaf, is there any chance that crop substitution for tobacco farming will move forward, as enshrined in the FCTC? It can be a long-term aim. The international tobacco control community, together with major international organizations such as the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and philanthropic organizations can play an important role in improving the health and livelihood of tobacco farmers and them the knowledge and skills to try alternatives, by supporting and sponsoring crop substitution projects.

With increasing tobacco controls in the developed world, Africa can be seen as the last frontier for the tobacco industry. Smoking prevalence here is still not high. Without effective tobacco control regulations, the market potential in Africa for the tobacco industry can be immense. Low labor cost, as well as the right climate conditions, make these African countries easy prey for the tobacco companies. The tobacco control community must be vigilant in this fight for Africa.

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Biography

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