

Tobacco cultivation

Tobacco farming: a vicious circle of poverty, illness and debt

The tobacco industry promotes the cultivation of tobacco to farmers, claiming it will bring them prosperity, and exaggerates its economic importance to countries. However, tobacco farmers are facing increasing costs of production and declining global prices for tobacco. As new countries enter the global supply market, and as yields improve with new production techniques, global prices for tobacco leaves have been decreasing.

Many tobacco farmers barely make a living producing a crop that is labour- and input-intensive, and brings with it health and environmental dangers, while endangering food security by diverting scarce land for tobacco cultivation.

Tobacco farming and debt

Tobacco cultivation relies heavily on bonded labour, trapping farming families into cycles of debt and poverty. For many farmers, the earnings from tobacco barely cover their costs. In a number of countries, the tobacco companies operate a “contract system” whereby they provide credit in the form of seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and technical support. The farmers are usually obliged to sell all their leaf to the company at a set price, which sometimes ends up being less than the value of the initial loans.

The companies grade tobacco according to a number of variables, including leaf colour, position on the stalk and size. Tobacco growers have no influence on how their crop is graded. Since there are usually no more than a handful of purchasers, farmers are forced to accept whatever prices are offered to them. The result is that in many countries farmers are falling deeper and deeper in debt to the tobacco companies.

Health risks of tobacco farming

Tobacco cultivation poses a number of serious health risks, including crop-induced intoxication such as green tobacco sickness (GTS), pesticide intoxication, respiratory and dermatological disorders and certain types of cancer. Children and adults working with tobacco frequently suffer from GTS, which is caused by absorption of nicotine through the skin from contact with tobacco leaves. Common symptoms include nausea, vomiting, headaches, weakness and dizziness, and possibly abdominal cramps and breathing difficulties, as well as fluctuations in blood pressure and heart rates.

Large and frequent applications of pesticides are required to protect the tobacco plant from insects and disease. One survey of tobacco farmers in Brazil found that 48% of family members suffered pesticide-related health problems.

Common highly toxic pesticides include:

- ▶ aldicarb, an insecticide suspected of causing genetic damage in humans;
- ▶ chlorpyrifos, which affects the nervous system leading to nausea, muscle twitching and convulsions;
- ▶ 1,3-dichloropropene, a soil fumigant that causes respiratory problems, skin and eye irritation, and kidney damage.

The link between tobacco cultivation and mental health problems

Exposure to organophosphate pesticides among tobacco workers seems to have neuropsychiatric effects, with studies indicating increased rates of depression and suicide among tobacco farmers. In one city in the major tobacco-producing area of Brazil, suicide rates were nearly seven times the national average (1). Over 60% of those who



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had committed suicide had worked on tobacco farms, with the majority dying during the part of the season when the use of organophosphate pesticides is highest (1).

Child labour in tobacco farming

The use of child labour in the tobacco fields is common practice in many countries. These children are at risk of injury and illness, and miss out on educational opportunities that could help lift them out of poverty. Children working with tobacco are often forced to work because of the economic situation of their families, exacerbated by the tobacco companies, which do not pay their adult workers enough to survive without their children's labour.

Harm to the environment from tobacco cultivation

Tobacco cultivation causes pollution, soil degradation and deforestation, contributing to adverse climate change and biodiversity losses. Environmental degradation is caused by the tobacco plant, which leaches nutrients from the soil, as well as by pollution from pesticides and fertilizers applied to tobacco fields. In many developing countries, wood is used as fuel to cure tobacco leaves and to construct curing barns, leading to deforestation. By harming the environment on which people depend for sustenance, tobacco farming contributes to poverty.

Tobacco manufacturing also produces an immense amount of waste. In 1995, the global tobacco industry produced an estimated 2.3 billion kilograms of manufacturing waste and 209 million kilograms of chemical waste [1]. This does not include the enormous amount of litter caused by the non-biodegradable cigarette butts, cigarette packaging, lighters, matches and other waste by-products of tobacco use.

Best practices and the way forward

Farmers need to be assisted in shifting towards sustainable alternatives to tobacco growing. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), in Article 17, calls for the promotion of economically viable alternatives for tobacco growers. A combination of different crops, or of crop and non-crop alternatives, is more likely than single crop alternatives to be effective.

While tobacco farming persists, there needs to be regulation of the pesticides used in line with Article 18 of the FCTC on the protection of the environment and the health of persons involved in tobacco cultivation and manufacture.

These approaches should be developed in consultation with farmers and in cooperation with relevant intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, and should be integrated into broader sustainable development strategies.

References

1. *World No Tobacco Day, 2004: Tobacco and poverty, a vicious circle*. Cairo, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2004.