



Frequently asked questions

Alternative crops to tobacco

Q: What are the key trends in growing tobacco?

There will be no decline in global demand for tobacco leaf. Overall consumption of tobacco products will actually increase for the next several decades, driven by the growth in population and rising rates of tobacco use in low- and middle-income countries. Consequently, the global tobacco leaf market will remain substantial enough to sustain the current generation of tobacco farmers, most of whom sell a product that goes into global markets.

Corporate strategies of a monopolistic industry carry much more weight in driving demand for and production of tobacco globally and in particular national contexts. The real source of vulnerability of tobacco farmers to fluctuations in demand and falling farm-gate prices for tobacco leaf has to do with their weak bargaining position in the leaf marketing chain and is not due to tobacco-control measures. Enacting laws that reduce the demand for tobacco will not negatively affect producers, particularly smallholder farmers.

Q: What are the effects of growing tobacco?

Tobacco farming is labour intensive with serious negative environmental, health and social impacts. Four serious health risks are prominent in tobacco-growing communities: green tobacco sickness, exposure to agrochemicals, respiratory diseases and food insecurity due to the displacement of food crops. Other environmental impacts include severe deforestation, land and soil degradation, pollution of waterways and a host of other ecosystem disruptions.

Comprehensive cost calculations (that include the cost of unpaid family labour) demonstrate that tobacco farming rarely generates a net gain and often leaves farmers indebted to tobacco companies. Tobacco farming is extremely labour intensive, and as a result, child labour is frequent and leads to missed educational opportunities for children; and women's unpaid labour is dedicated to tobacco farming rather than producing food or independently generating income and resources for the family.

Furthermore, tobacco farming is not a very lucrative cash crop, particularly for smallholder farmers, who are often impoverished by growing tobacco.

Q: What are the viable agricultural alternatives to growing tobacco?

Viable agricultural alternatives exist, with support from WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Developing sustainable alternatives to tobacco farming suitable for smallholder agriculture should form the core of government policy for tobacco control. Where support for smallholder agriculture was non-existent or had been reduced (particularly as a result of structural adjustment programmes), many farmers felt they had little choice but to turn to tobacco where the industry provides the missing market infrastructure and extension services needed. Despite this challenge, many other crop combinations, farming systems and livelihood strategies offer better opportunities for farmers. Although the current generation of tobacco farmers will not be affected by tobacco-control measures, given the harsh nature of the work, it will be important for governments to help farmers transition to alternative crops.



The transition will require a national vision for sustainable rural development. Such a vision should include support for market infrastructure and extension services for alternative crops that were previously missing. Furthermore, access to public financing for tobacco-farming transitions is justified, and can be financed in part through domestic taxes on the consumption of tobacco and, where it exists, the removal of public funding for tobacco cultivation. The active participation of farmers and other stakeholders in the development of new options is key to success.

Alternative farming has been tried in many countries. For example, China, Bangladesh and Brazil. In China, farmers' income increased by up to 110% over a 4-year period.