

The importance of WHO FCTC Article 5.3 in the implementation of WHO FCTC Articles 17 & 18: An Information Brief

WHO World No Tobacco Day 2023: “Grow Food, Not Tobacco”

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 349 million people across 79 countries are experiencing acute food insecurity, many of these individuals residing in LMICs where tobacco farming is prevalent.¹ To celebrate World No Tobacco Day 2023 under the theme “*Grow Food, Not Tobacco*”, WHO has called on Governments, particularly those in tobacco-growing countries, to promote economically viable alternatives to tobacco farming by implementing Articles 17 and 18 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) as a way to address food insecurity.

Tobacco Farming: Present situation and challenges

Tobacco is grown as a cash crop in many countries around the world. Globally tobacco farming is accounted for 3.2 million hectares of land, about the size of Belgium. According to WHO, over 124 countries grow tobacco and the top three producers are China, Brazil and India accounting for 60% of global leaf production.² Tobacco industry has presented tobacco as a lucrative crop by promoting economic benefits to those who grow tobacco. Many low-income countries continue to pursue tobacco growing as a means to strengthen rural livelihoods and their economies. The drive to scale up growing in these countries is also driven by multinational tobacco companies seeking to lower production costs, such as labor cost, in order to increase their profit margins.³ While tobacco farming can generate income for farmers and governments, the promise of long-term prosperity is rarely realized. The environmental, economic, and social problems associated with tobacco growing are extensive.

Despite the tobacco industry’s claims on the benefits of tobacco farming, growing tobacco creates numerous harms to tobacco farmers and their communities in terms of health, environment and economic well-being. One of the primary health impacts is the exposure to

¹ WHO. World No Tobacco Day 2023 – Grow food, not tobacco Q&A. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2023.

² *Ibid.*

³ Lencucha R, Drope J, Magati P, *et al* Tobacco farming: overcoming an understated impediment to comprehensive tobacco control *Tobacco Control* 2022;**31**:308-312.

heavy chemical and nicotine leading to wide range of health problems for farmers and their families.⁴ The cultivation of tobacco damages the environment including deforestation, soil depletion and water pollution since it requires heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers.⁵ In terms of economic well-being, many tobacco farmers, particularly smallholder farmers in LMICs, are under contractual arrangements with tobacco companies, which can create economic dependence and limit their ability to diversify their crops and livelihoods.⁶ Additionally, tobacco farmers can be exploited by engaging them in unfair contracts, including low prices provided for their tobacco leaf. These unfair practices can further contribute to economic vulnerability and limit the ability of farmers to achieve economic well-being.⁷

Tobacco industry playbook in tobacco farming

The tobacco industry has a long history of using various tactics to exert influence over all aspects of the tobacco supply chain. These tactics include lobbying governments, opposing crop diversification, misleading farmers about the risks of tobacco farming, manipulating prices and influencing government policies related to tobacco farming.⁸ The tobacco industry often uses “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” schemes to gain favor with communities, and indirectly or directly undermine the implementation of Articles 17 and 18 of the WHO FCTC. The tobacco industry claims that its CSR schemes are established to safeguard public health, environment and economic well-being of farmers as well as protect against child labor, while, the industry often opposes government measures that would regulate these domains. This is commonly referred to as “greenwashing”.⁹ Additionally, the tobacco industry often uses tobacco farmers to lobby policymakers and oppose policies that promote the substitution of tobacco farming with economically viable alternatives, such as food crops, to protect their profits and economic interests, even if it comes at the expense of aggravating global food security concerns.¹⁰

⁴ Schmitt, N.M., Schmitt, J., Kouimintzis, D.J. *et al.* Health risks in tobacco farm workers—a review of the literature. *J Public Health* 15, 255–264 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-007-0122-4>

⁵ Lecours N, Almeida GEG, Abdallah JM, *et al* Environmental health impacts of tobacco farming: a review of the literature *Tobacco Control* 2012;**21**:191-196.

⁶ Warner KE The economics of tobacco: myths and realities *Tobacco Control* 2000;**9**:78-89.

⁷ Lencucha R, Drope J, Magati P, *et al* Tobacco farming: overcoming an understated impediment to comprehensive tobacco control *Tobacco Control* 2022;**31**:308-312.

⁸ University of Bath. Tobacco Tactics. Tobacco Farming. <https://tobaccotactics.org/article/tobacco-farming/>; 2020.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Tobacco Control Playbook. Does Tobacco Control Harm Tobacco Growers?. <https://tobaccoplaybook.net/en/015-tobacco-growers.html>; 2017.

Malawi is one of the largest tobacco producers in Africa, and tobacco is the country's most important export crop. The Government of Malawi heavily relies on tobacco as a major source of revenue which gives the tobacco industry significant influence over the country's economy and policies related to tobacco farming.¹¹ Furthermore, Malawi is not a Party to the WHO FCTC, there are no legally binding provisions to limit or prevent the interactions between the tobacco industry and the government.¹² This allows the industry to undermine efforts to implement effective tobacco control measures which involves lobbying against policies that benefit tobacco farmers, such as minimum wages laws and regulations on child labor, and conduct fake CSR programs and initiatives as a way to greenwash their practices and avoid regulatory scrutiny.¹³¹⁴

In Thailand, the Thai Tobacco Monopoly (TTM), now called the Tobacco Authority of Thailand (TAOT) is a state enterprise operated under the supervision of Ministry of Finance, Thailand. TOAT is the single legal entity permitted to produce cigarettes in Thailand, and it also has authority over the tobacco farming contract system in the country.¹⁵ While multinational tobacco companies are allowed to sell their products in Thailand, tobacco production and distribution in the country is largely monopolized by TOAT.¹⁶ Although Thailand has implemented strong tobacco control measures and is a Party to the WHO FCTC, the direct relationship between the government and the industry creates challenges of industry interference in regulations related to the entire supply chain of tobacco products, including tobacco farming, and even more broadly, in relation to tobacco control. TOAT and other multinational tobacco companies like Philip Morris International (PMI) encouraged Thailand Tobacco Growers' Association to be part of the International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA) and use them as front groups to oppose tobacco control policies that may affect their profits, such as tobacco product control regulations, e-cigarette bans and tobacco tax increases.¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹ Despite the close relationship between Thai tobacco farmers and the tobacco

¹¹ Smith J, Lee K. From Colonization to Globalization: A history of state capture by the tobacco industry in Malawi. *Rev Afr Polit Econ*. 2018;45(156):186-202. doi: 10.1080/03056244.2018.1431213. Epub 2018 May 11. PMID: 31467461; PMCID: PMC6715304.

¹² Framework Convention Alliance. Parties to the WHO FCTC (ratifications and accessions). <https://fctc.org/parties-ratifications-and-accessions-latest/>; 2017.

¹³ M. Chapalapata, [Limbe Leaf donates K40m school equipment to Mzimba: 'Corporate social responsibility'](#), Nyasa Times, 12 November 2020.

¹⁴ University of Bath. Tobacco Tactics. Malawi Country Profile. <https://tobaccotactics.org/article/malawi-country-profile/;2023>.

¹⁵ Tobacco Authority of Thailand (TAOT). <https://en.thaitobacco.or.th/about-us/>

¹⁶ MacKenzie R, Ross H, Lee K. 'Preparing ourselves to become an international organization': Thailand Tobacco Monopoly's regional and global strategies. *Glob Public Health*. 2017 Mar;12(3):351-366. doi: 10.1080/17441692.2016.1273369. PMID: 28139965; PMCID: PMC5553431.

¹⁷ Patanavanich R, Glantz SA. How to combat efforts to overturn bans on electronic nicotine delivery systems: lessons from tobacco industry efforts during the 1980s to open closed cigarette markets in Thailand. *BMJ Glob Health*. 2021 Jan;6(1):e004288. doi: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004288. PMID: 33500264; PMCID: PMC7843299.

¹⁸ Framework Convention Alliance. International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA): Frequently Asked Questions. https://www.fctc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ITGA_FAQ.pdf; 2014.

¹⁹ Tobacco Asia. Farmers Seek Help from Politicos Against Tax Hike. <https://www.tobaccoasia.com/leaf-news/farmers-seek-help-from-politicos-against-tax-hike/>; 2019.

industry, the farmers suffer from a number of negative impacts such as reduction in tobacco cultivation quotas imposed by TOAT, health hazards associated with tobacco farming, poor quality of life, and the impacts of natural disasters.²⁰ Therefore, it is critical for Thailand to address the tobacco industry interference in policies related to the tobacco supply chain so that tobacco farmers can receive support and achieve a better life.

An example of successful response to tobacco industry interference

The Government of Bangladesh has taken several steps to disengage the tobacco industry from interfering with tobacco farming policies. Between 2005-2016, there were various efforts initiated by the government to assist farmers to switch to other crops such as provision of soft loans to tobacco growers for transitioning to alternative crops, and establishment of a district and sub-district taskforce committee to encourage farmers to diversify their crops.²¹ In addition, the Government of Bangladesh has taken legislative measures to discourage tobacco cultivation. One of the key measures was dropping tobacco from the list of cash crops as well as stopping subsidies on fertilizers for British American Tobacco (BAT), a major tobacco company present in the country.²² These actions have helped farmers shifting to alternative livelihoods, promoting a more sustainable agriculture and disengaging the tobacco industry from interfering with tobacco farming policies.

The critical role of integrating implementation of Article 5.3 and Articles 17 and 18 of the WHO FCTC

Implementation of Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC is critical in the context of tobacco farming because the tobacco industry has a long history of interfering with tobacco control policies to protect its own interests. The establishment of multisectoral coordinating mechanisms and adoption of a whole government approach is crucial in preventing and addressing tobacco industry interference in tobacco control policies, including in policies related to tobacco farming. This involves creating multi-stakeholder partnerships among health, agriculture, finance and trade, as well as engaging civil society and academic experts. It is also important to develop clear guidelines and codes of conduct of interactions between government officials

²⁰ Phetphum C, Prajongjeep A, Keeratisiroj O, Simsin S, Thawatchajareonying K. Deteriorating Quality of Life and a Desire to Stop Growing Tobacco Among Virginia and Burley Tobacco Farmers in Thailand. *JCO Glob Oncol*. 2022 Aug;8:e2200180. doi: 10.1200/GO.22.00180. PMID: 36049151; PMCID: PMC9470139.

²¹ WHO FCTC. Countries practices in the implementation of Article 17 (Economical sustainable alternatives to tobacco growing) of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Geneva, Switzerland. 2019.

²² Ibid.

and the tobacco industry, as well as to provide training and resources to prevent potential conflicts of interest.

According to the WHO FCTC Article 5.3 Guidelines *“Parties should not accept, support or endorse any offer for assistance or proposed tobacco control legislation or policy drafted by or in collaboration with the tobacco industry”*.²³ However, it is common for tobacco companies to sit alongside government representatives on tobacco boards, commissions and research agencies that govern and support tobacco growing in order to interfere with tobacco farming and tobacco control policies. These types of arrangements must be changed and repurposed to remove tobacco companies and support alternative crops. Such measures can help ensure that policies related to tobacco farming are based on public health objectives and are not unduly influenced by the interest of the tobacco industry.

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²³ WHO FCTC. Guidelines for Implementation Article 5.3. Geneva. Switzerland. 2013.