

## TOBACCO GROWING IN KENYA: VIABLE ALTERNATIVE INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES FOR THE FARMERS

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### Tobacco Farming

Arising from the campaign mounted against tobacco in the West, multinational tobacco firms are increasingly turning to the developing countries where their activities face little challenge, if any. Accordingly, the companies have developed very strong strategies targeting particularly the youth. In Kenya, besides promotion of smoking, agricultural production of tobacco is assuming a very significant prominence.

Tobacco growing introduced into the country 30 years ago has increased tremendously over the years. Today, it is grown by about 20,000 small scale farmers over on 15,000 hectares of land. Current annual production is estimated at 16,000 tonnes. The Kenyan Government, as most other developing countries, treasures the tobacco firms because of the revenues generated by the tobacco firms through taxes remitted. In fact between the tobacco firms, the farmers and the government, it is the government that is the greatest beneficiary. For instance, in 1997, BAT Kenya Ltd - one of the leading tobacco firms in the country - had a gross turn-over of over Kshs. 10 billion and remitted over Kshs. 6 billion. During the same period the farmers in the country earned about Kshs. 900 million.

### Negative Impacts

Past and current trends in tobacco control havenbeen geared towards campaigning against smoking alone, very little, if any, effort is directed at assessing the impact of tobacco growing on the farmers and the environment.

Many questions remain unanswered in regard to tobacco growing in the country. A lot of biomas is used in processing tobacco leaves. How safe is this practice to the environment? How commensurate are tobacco earnings to the effort put in by farmers? And what are the health implications of tobacco growing on the farmers? These are very important questions that need to be answered. They can only be answered properly after a well-executed study.

Nevertheless, preliminary investigations reveal that tobacco farming is highly labour-intensive-involving almost an entire family, leaving no room for growing of food crops. The effect is perpetual famine in the tobacco growing zones leading to malnutrition especially amongst the children.

Earnings from tobacco are not commensurate with the input by the farmers. Tobacco farmers are not in positions to feed, educate or clothe their children adequately. Child labour and school drop-out are common features in the tobacco growing zones.

During drying of tobacco leaves (curing) a lot of biomass from indigenous flora is used. This leads to deforestation and even soil erosion. Moreover the curing plants (barns) are designed in such a way that the farmers are exposed to tobacco smoke - potentially making them candidates for tobacco-related diseases.

Attempts to persuade farmers to opt out have not been successful. While some farmers understand the dangers inherent in tobacco farming, majority do not understand and are not ready to opt out. In Rangwe Division, for example, an important tobacco growing zone, the farmers do not envisage any alternative income generating activities as lucrative as tobacco farming. After all the tobacco firms provide inputs on easy terms and readily available market for the tobacco leaves and pay promptly. The farmers find this to be a very good deal indeed! The tobacco firms, aware of the scheme of the anti-tobacco crusaders, have used their massive financial prowess to thwart those attempts accordingly, they have succeeded in making the farmers addicted to growing tobacco.

#### Alternatives Income-generating Activities.

Rangwe, generally, like most tobacco growing zones is endowed with fertile land, adequate and consistent rainfall and therefore supports most crops. Horticultural products (tomatoes, onions and cabbages) do well in this region, the main drawback is lack of viable market for products, especially, when produced in large quantities. Another potential strategy of trying to disengage the farmers (most of whom are aged between 30 - 40 years and therefore still energetic) from tobacco farming would be to introduce and support micro technical enterprises e.g. carpentry, masonry, brick-making, welding, shoe repair, etc. In this regard provision of electricity at strategic centers/points and provision of start-up funds would be important towards diverting the attention of the farmers from tobacco.

#### Take Action

From the foregoing, it is evident that there is very little chance of

influencing the farmers to drop tobacco farming unless the anti-tobacco campaigners come up with strategic and viable alternatives. The world bodies (WHO, UNEP, World Bank, FAO, etc.) working on controlling the epidemic of tobacco in the world should take the tips and come in appropriately. Obviously the Kenyan Government should not sit contented with receiving the revenues from this dangerous weed and assume that all is well. Through its various ministries concerned (Health, Agriculture, Environment, etc.) the government should take the initiative and address the tobacco menace in totality. Otherwise the anti-tobacco crusaders should strive to catch up with the tobacco promoters or shut up.

Tobacco war is a big challenge and calls for a wider partnership. Networking involving local NGOs and even CBOs is very crucial.

Unfortunately WHO and even World Bank have not been giving the ideas from CBOs and NGOs positive hearing. These organisations need support to conduct their activities. And above all they need exposure at international tobacco meetings like the forthcoming 11th World Conference on Tobacco OR Health. World Bank, WHO and United Nations Drug Control Programme should give support to these organisations..

SocialNEEDS Network has been involved in campaign against use of Alcohol, Tobacco and other drugs in Kenya for more than 5 years. Contact the author for other related articles and exchange of information.