

4. Ministries of agriculture can take important first steps to advance tobacco control and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Ministries of agriculture have a critical role to play, working with ministries of labour, finance and others to progress their economies beyond tobacco production and protect the environment from the negative consequences of tobacco. Guidance and successful examples from countries are available.ⁱⁱ

Ministries of agriculture can take important first steps to advance tobacco control through the following measures:

- Eliminate tobacco farming subsidies and other investment incentives for the tobacco sector, exploring instead how to advance sustainable food systems and other sustainable alternatives.
- Consider the promotion and support of economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers, growers and as the case may be, individual sellers, as called for by WHO FCTC Articles 17.
- Work with other parts of government to protect public health policies with respect to tobacco control from tobacco industry interference, in line with WHO FCTC Article 5.3 and its guidelines for implementation.
- Strengthen independent data collection on the impacts of growing tobacco and raise awareness on the harms of the tobacco product 'life cycle'.
- Require transparent and accurate information from the tobacco industry.

ii For example, in ensuring access to financial aid, including access to small loans, providing tailored training and sensitization to farmers and their families, leveraging available international support, and strengthening supply chains for alternative crops. See Secretariat of the WHO FCTC, "Viable Alternatives to tobacco growing: An economic model for implementing Articles 17 and 18" and Secretariat of the WHO FCTC, "Country practices in the implementation of Article 17 (Economically sustainable alternatives to tobacco growing) of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control", December 2019.

In line with the Convention Secretariat's [Global Strategy to Accelerate Tobacco Control 2025](#) and [UNDP's Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#) and [HIV, Health and Development Strategy \(2022-2025\)](#), these briefs emphasise the importance of a coordinated, multisectoral whole-of-government approach to tobacco control, empowering Parties to work across sectors to achieve policy coherence.

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Tobacco Control

What Ministries of Agriculture Need to Know

Key Points

- 1 Tobacco growing negatively impacts health, the environment and sustainable development.
- 2 Tobacco and food insecurity are interconnected.
- 3 Ministries of agriculture can invest in alternatives to tobacco growing that are also investments in people, planet and prosperity.
- 4 Ministries of agriculture can take important first steps to advance tobacco control and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) aims ‘to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.’¹ One of the means of achieving this goal is to strengthen implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in all countries, as appropriate (Target 3.a).

The WHO FCTC is a legally binding treaty that reaffirms the right to health.² It was developed in response to the tobacco epidemic and currently has 183 Parties, covering more than 90 percent of the global population.³

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1. Tobacco growing negatively impacts health and the environment, impeding sustainable development.

Tobacco farming causes up to 5 percent of deforestation in developing tobacco-growing countries.⁴ Growing and curing tobacco also increases greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., carbon dioxide and methane) and contributes to global warming, land degradation and irreversible biodiversity loss.⁵

Tobacco production pollutes the air and soil, and threatens access to clean water. Tobacco crops strip soil of nutrients to a greater extent and faster than other major food and cash crops.⁶ The chemicals in fertilizers used to promote growth pollute nearby waterways, with yet-unquantified implications for the quality of drinking water,⁷ and cause widespread environmental erosion.⁸ Moreover, more than 22 billion tonnes of water (equivalent to 8.8 million Olympic-sized swimming pools) are used each year to grow tobacco, often in countries that already face difficulties with water supply.⁹

Tobacco growing prevents sustainable development. Tobacco growing is linked with food insecurity, sickness for farmers, child labour, poverty and debt.¹⁰ Together, these factors prevent countries' sustainable growth and development through decreased access to education and poor health, among other spillover effects. Tobacco farmers also face a plethora of health risks, including nicotine poisoning from harvesting the tobacco leaves.¹¹ Moreover, cigarette manufacturers and leaf buying companies often exploit tobacco farmers, including through low-paid and bonded adult labour as well as unpaid child labour.¹²

THE DEADLY CONSEQUENCES OF TOBACCO AND WHY GOVERNMENT SECTORS MUST WORK TOGETHER TO IMPLEMENT THE WHO FCTC

The social, economic and environmental impacts of tobacco consumption and production are staggering. Without adequate investment in tobacco control it is estimated that up to 1 billion people could die from tobacco-related diseases during this century alone.¹³ Smoking-attributable diseases cost the global economy over a trillion US dollars annually, due to medical expenses and lost productivity.¹⁴ The environmental impacts, due to plastic pollution, deforestation and soil degradation from tobacco growing, as well as water and soil pollution from pesticide use and cigarette littering, are of growing concern. Levels of tobacco consumption and production in society are determined largely by policies beyond the health sector. This means that the development consequences of tobacco are largely avoidable through better policy coherence and common strategies that deliver shared gains for all sectors involved, accelerating progress against multiple SDGs.

2. Tobacco and food insecurity are interconnected.

Almost 90 percent of tobacco is grown in developing countries; yet most of the industry profits wind up in developed countries.¹⁵ This model, wherein low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) endure the social, economic and environmental impacts while most benefits



are siphoned elsewhere – is both unfair and unsustainable.

As part of the Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs by 2030, bold actions are needed to advance healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems.¹⁶ Shifting from tobacco production must be part of the solution. Many countries are shifting from tobacco growing to economically viable alternatives, including nutritious food production. They are being rewarded with increased food security, diversified economies, restored biodiversity and sustainable land resources, among other development returns.¹⁷

At the same time, WHO FCTC implementation broadly works to reduce demand for tobacco products. This frees up scarce resources for individuals, households and communities to invest in nutrition, education and other inputs to break poverty cycles and reduce inequalities.¹⁸

TOBACCO GROWING – AN OPPORTUNITY COST FOR FOOD SECURITY

- Four out of the 10 top tobacco-producing countries are low-income food-deficit countries (LIFDCs).¹⁹
- Despite the fact that more than half of the population experiences severe food insecurity,²⁰ Malawi dedicates large amounts of land to tobacco growing. By switching from tobacco to growing food, Malawi could feed 750,000 people.²¹
- Land use for tobacco production, which could otherwise be devoted to growing food crops, is expanding in Zambia (a top tobacco-producing country) – even as the 2013 Global Hunger Index classified the situation in Zambia as “alarming”.²²
- A hectare of land in Zimbabwe could produce 19 times more potatoes than the 1-1.2 tonnes of tobacco cultivated. Potatoes result in 8 times less water depletion and between 2-3 times lower contribution to climate change in comparison to tobacco cultivation.²³

3. Investments in alternatives to tobacco growing are investments in people, planet and prosperity.

Tobacco farmers typically have significantly lower household and economic resources than non-tobacco farmers.²⁴ Contrary to the claims of tobacco companies and their front groups,ⁱ tobacco farmers often experience net losses from growing tobacco. Many tobacco farmers are dissatisfied but lack the means to transition.²⁵

Parties to the WHO FCTC have committed to securing alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers that are healthier, more economically beneficial and more environmentally friendly (WHO FCTC Articles 17 and 18). This commitment aligns with Agenda 2030 commitments to strengthen implementation of the WHO FCTC in all countries, end hunger and protect the planet.

Innovative approaches have been taken to addressing tobacco production:

- In 2018, Zambia, jointly with the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC, UNDP, other UN agencies and the American Cancer Society, developed a proposal for the first tobacco control social bond (T-SIB). A feasibility study for the T-SIB in Zambia indicated that an US\$8 million investment would deliver more than US\$12 million in benefits over five years, in increased farmer profits and carbon sequestered (by protecting 17,000 hectares of forest from deforestation). Once piloted, the T-SIB could be scaled through a financing facility to serve many more tobacco farmers regionally and globally. The T-SIB initiative is now collaborating with BNP Paribas and Tobacco Free Portfolios to identify donors and investors.
- Kenya was the first country to participate in a joint effort of the World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) to transition tobacco farmers to more profitable, easier to grow and nutritious crops like high-iron beans. By January 2023, growers had sold more than 550 tonnes of beans to the WFP, school programmes and the open market. The experience is now going to be extended to a second tobacco-growing country in the region.²⁶

ⁱ The tobacco industry has frequently used tobacco growers' associations to represent their interests, such as the tobacco industry-supported 'International Tobacco Growers' Association', which subverts local growers' groups to promote industry goals. The environment and agriculture sectors must carefully examine the nature of organizations that claim to represent the interests of growers.