TOBACCO | POVERTY | HUNGER

How Tobacco Control can contribute to achieving Development Goals 1 and 2

BACKGROUND

The UN General Assembly formally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015. The goals are universal and apply equally to all countries. Amongst other, the goals aim to eliminate poverty and hunger worldwide, protect the climate, ensure access to education, and improve health, by 2030.

Tobacco control is also included in Development Goal 3. With good reason, considering the fact that around 6 million people die every year as a result of consuming addictive tobacco products. This is the most preventable cause of death through a non-communicable disease. Tobacco control is however also relevant for the achievement of other development goals. For example, the reduction of tobacco consumption and production contributes to the eradication of poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2).

TOBACCO CONSUMPTION AND POVERTY

Around 1 billion people around the world consume tobacco products.[1] More than four fifths of these consumers live in low- and middle-income countries.[2] However, a lot of tobacco is also consumed in high-income countries. Across the world, it is most often the poorest parts of the population that are most affected, rather than the wealthier segments of society.[3]

Socially disadvantaged groups are indeed more likely to start smoking in the first place. Smoking is used as a means of dealing with stress in difficult situations and also provides short term relief at an affordable price. Yet smoking is associated with addiction and diseases, which in turn can lead to less income and thus to more poverty. This in turn increases the likelihood that someone will continue smoking and creates a vicious cycle.[4]

In the short-term, tobacco use primarily leads to an increase in the consumers' household expenses. Expenditure on tobacco reduces the amount of resources available for other purposes – such as food and education – with devastating consequences for the poorest parts of the population. For example, in the Philippines a poor family spends on average around 0.40 USD per head on tobacco every month. The same sum would have however allowed the family to purchase 26% more fish or even 200% more leaf vegetables per person.[5]

More than ten million malnourished people in Bangladesh could receive adequate nutrition, if money were spent on food rather than on tobacco. This could save the lives of 350 children every day.[6] In Indonesia, smoking households spend after all three times more money on tobacco than on education.[7]

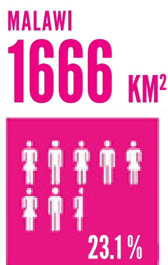
In the long run, the consumption of tobacco products leads to more spendings on medical treatment and care, and even to loss of income as a result of the inability to work. The death of the main wage earner also increases the risk of poverty for the entire family.[8] It is estimated that, alone in India, an additional 15 million people fall below the poverty line, once the effects of tobacco consumption within the family are taken into account.[9]

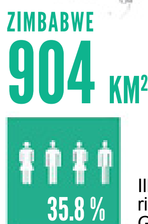
ENDING POVERTY AND HUNGER

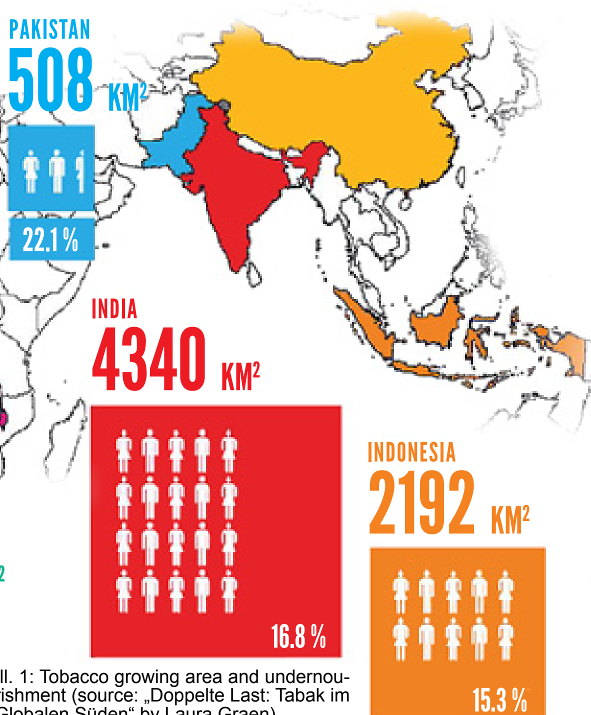
SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

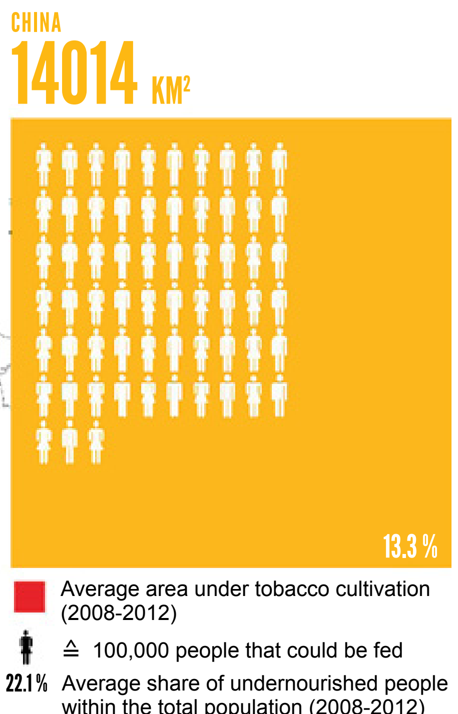
SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

More than 10 million people could be fed, if food crops were grown instead of tobacco in these countries.









Average area under tobacco cultivation (2008-2012)

≙ 100,000 people that could be fed

22.1 % Average share of undernourished people within the total population (2008-2012)

Ill. 1: Tobacco growing area and undernourishment (source: „Doppelte Last: Tabak im Globalen Süden" by Laura Graen)

TOBACCO PRODUCTION AND FOOD INSECURITY

More than 17 million people around the world work in tobacco farming – primarily in low- and middle-income countries.[10] It is a fact that tobacco farming goes hand in hand with poverty in several countries. Research shows that farmers have difficulties in making a living from tobacco growing, since the earnings are often so low that there is no money left to pay any workers. This in turn fosters the use of child labour.[11] Farmers in Brazil, Kenya, Bangladesh, Vietnam and other countries have also complained that the quality of their harvest is regularly being undergraded, in an effort to bring the prices down.[12] In Malawi, Spain and Italy it was proven that the tobacco industry had been fixing prices.[13] Many farming families have even become indebted to tobacco companies.[14]

Tobacco farming is also linked to food insecurity in a number of countries. For instance, landless tenant farmers working on tobacco plantations in Malawi regularly receive very small food rations and live in extreme poverty.[15] Given that land in Malawi is scarce, the use of land resources for tobacco growing therefore also leads to food insecurity for landowning smallholders.

On tobacco farms, more than two thirds of children suffer from stunting (SDG 2.2), compared to other farms, where 40% of children are affected.[16]

In other countries, such as Kenya and Bangladesh, tobacco cultivation has replaced food crops and has led to local food insecurity.[17] In low-income countries that are dependent on food imports, the area under tobacco cultivation has increased by 38% between 2007 and 2012 alone. In six of the top ten tobacco producing countries a significant share of the population is undernourished (see Ill. 1). More than ten million people could be fed, if food crops were grown instead of tobacco in these countries.[18] In Malawi alone, where 23% of the population is undernourished, it would be possible to grow food for 750,000 people on the crop area currently being used for tobacco cultivation.[19]

WHAT CAN BE DONE

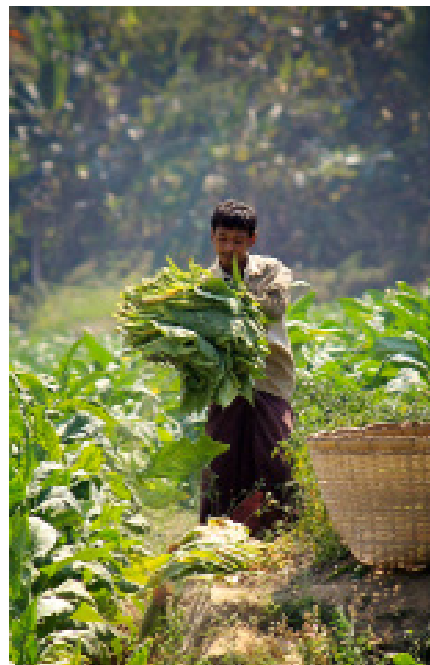
A reduction in tobacco consumption – particularly in low- and middle-income countries – could contribute to a significant reduction in poverty (SDG 1), an increase in resilience against social and economic crises (SDG 1.5), and to increased food security (SDG 2). The implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) is important for reaching these goals (SDG 3.a). Proven tobacco control measures include tobacco tax increases, health education, and smoking cessation programmes. It is often argued that increasing tax disproportionately burdens the poorer segments of the population. It has however been shown that poorer consumers do respond to price increases and stop smoking.[20] This process can be further supported through smoking cessation programmes tailored for the poorer parts of the population.

In order to combat poverty (SDG 1) amongst tobacco growers, in the short term, it would be necessary to act against tobacco companies' collusion over prices. Quality inspectors employed by the state could be deployed for this purpose. Particularly in Malawi, the Tenancy Labour Bill, which has been called for since 1995, needs to be passed in order to ensure basic rights for tenant farmers.[21]

In the long term, it is however important to support the creation of alternative livelihoods, in order to achieve sustainable agriculture and food security (SDG 2). The provision of alternative livelihoods is established in Article 17 of the WHO FCTC.[22]

TOBACCO CONTROL IS PART OF THE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

With **SDG 3**, the United Nations want to *"ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages"*. This includes target 3.a, which aims to strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).



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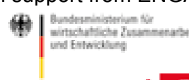
Berlin, May 2016 (revised translation July 2017)

Unfairtobacco.org informs about human rights violations, exploitation and environmental destruction by the tobacco industry.

With financial support from ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL, on behalf of


With the kind support of

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Berlin Working Group on Environment and Development (BLUE 21 e.V.) and do not reflect the views of Engagement Global gGmbH, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development or the Senate Department for Economics, Technology and Research.

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