

## Social Justice Impact of Tobacco

*“Tobacco use is unlike other threats to global health. Infectious diseases do not employ multinational public relation firms. There are no front groups to promote the spread of cholera. Mosquitoes have no lobbyist” World Health Organization, Zeltner Report, 2000*

Tobacco use and production is the single greatest preventable cause of disease. Science established a link between tobacco use and lung cancer in the 1950's. Studies since then continue to add to the list of negative health impacts associated with smoking. Despite overwhelming evidence that tobacco use kills, over 1000 new smokers under age 18 start each day. Perhaps it's time to look at the social impact of tobacco use and production, not just the personal health effects.

While US production of tobacco has decreased in recent decades, international production has increased by leaps and bounds. China has quietly become a leader in tobacco and cigarette production, producing a third of the tobacco crop annually. US tobacco leaves bring top dollar.<sup>1</sup> Consequently the US exports approximately half of the tobacco leaves we grow and imports roughly the same amount for US tobacco production.<sup>2</sup> Tobacco is regulated as a non food product; USDA does not subject tobacco imports to the same level of scrutiny as food imports. USDA limits testing on tobacco imports to pesticides banned in the US using a decades old list of banned pesticides, despite the fact that new pesticides have been developed in the intervening years.<sup>3</sup> In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulates pesticide use on tobacco to reduce the risk to tobacco farm workers. However, given the known health risk associated with using tobacco, EPA does not assess the long term risk of pesticide residue to smokers. Cigarettes manufactured in the US contain ever increasing amounts of imported tobacco potentially exposed to pesticides that are not controlled by USDA, nor studied by the EPA.

Most tobacco is grown in low to middle income countries, contributing to undernourishment since arable land is used to produce a non food item. Land used for tobacco production could grow food to feed over 20 million people.<sup>4</sup> Additionally many tobacco farmers are stuck in a cycle of indebtedness and poverty through bonded labor. The tobacco companies provide loans for seed and equipment then control the market price for leaf tobacco, assuring the farmer will never generate sufficient profit to pay off the debt.

Tobacco farming poses personal hazards. Green tobacco sickness (GTS), caused by absorbing nicotine through the skin, and pesticide exposure are risks faced by tobacco farmers, many of which are children. A recent report by US Department of Labor found child labor working in tobacco farming or production in 17 of the 116 countries investigated<sup>5</sup>. In Malawai, an estimated 78,000 children work on tobacco farms. Children are particularly susceptible to nicotine exposure and underage workers often report symptoms of GTS.

Tobacco farming is also an environmental hazard. Tobacco rapidly depletes soil nutrients, leading most farmers to apply large quantities of pesticides and fertilizers which can run off to the environment polluting water and food sources. Tobacco drying and cigarette production drives the demand for lumber and paper, leading to deforestation. It is estimated that one tree is consumed for every 300 cigarettes produced.<sup>6</sup> Tobacco filters are made from a form of plastic, not cotton, are slow to degrade in the environment and release toxins as they degrade. Animals also mistakenly ingest discarded butts and can become sick or die. The most frequently littered item is tobacco products.<sup>7</sup>

Tobacco lobbyists wield significant political power and tobacco firms actively engage in deceptive marketing. In 2008 tobacco companies expended 9.9 billion dollars marketing cigarettes in the US alone.<sup>8</sup> Tobacco firms also contribute to election campaigns in an apparent effort to sway political outcome. In 1998 a comprehensive tobacco reform was defeated in the Senate; politicians voting against the measure had received four times the funds from tobacco firms in the previous two years than politicians voting in favor of the legislation.<sup>9</sup>

Second hand smokes is attributed to over 600,000 global deaths annually; over a quarter of those are children. Known health risks of second hand smoke include lung cancer and coronary artery disease in adults and respiratory illness and SIDS in children.<sup>10</sup> There is no safe exposure limit to second hand smoke and 100% smoke free areas are crucial to protect the health of non smokers.

Tobacco companies manufacture a product that addicts and kills, take advantage of the very farmers who supply their raw product, and continue to practice deceptive marketing. Cigarettes pose an environmental and personal hazard during farming, harvesting, production, use and disposal. Smoking not only affects the health of the user, but negatively impacts the health of everyone around them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.who.int/tobacco/en/atlas16.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who.int/tobacco/en/atlas19.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03485.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://no-smoke.org/document.php?id=326>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/ocft/pdf/2010TVPRA.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=3992>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.kab.org/site/DocServer/Executive\\_Summary\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf?docID=4601](http://www.kab.org/site/DocServer/Executive_Summary_-_FINAL.pdf?docID=4601)

<sup>8</sup> [http://tobaccoatlas.org/uploads/Images/PDFs/Tobacco\\_Atlas\\_2ndPrint.pdf](http://tobaccoatlas.org/uploads/Images/PDFs/Tobacco_Atlas_2ndPrint.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.who.int/tobacco/en/atlas24.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [http://tobaccoatlas.org/uploads/Images/PDFs/Tobacco\\_Atlas\\_2ndPrint.pdf](http://tobaccoatlas.org/uploads/Images/PDFs/Tobacco_Atlas_2ndPrint.pdf)