

The Devastating Link of Tobacco, Hunger, and Poverty



Tobacco use has far-reaching consequences on poverty risk. Those with lower levels of education and income are more likely to smoke, which results in a disproportionate burden of disease and deaths. Driven by addiction, smokers spend a large percentage of their income on tobacco products, which not only puts a strain on their finances, but also diminishes their ability to allocate resources towards essential needs like food, education, and healthcare. In the short-term, smoking increases expenses, ultimately reducing funds that could be put towards basic needs. For households with low income, the diversion of resources from food to tobacco worsens food insecurity and contribute to hunger for both children and adults¹ and exacerbates malnutrition² and its negative impact on physical and mental development

and learning. In the long term, tobacco use can have a profound impact on poverty when serious illnesses lead to substantial medical expenses and loss of income due to disability or premature death.

TOBACCO REMAINS CHEAP WHILE FOOD PRICES ARE RISING

In Southeast Asia, the price of a cigarette remains cheaper than the price of basic goods. Food prices are rising due to inflation, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. However, despite these economic challenges, smokers persist in diverting financial resources away from essential goods towards tobacco products.












Price of most popular cigarette brand vs. Price of rice and other food products (in USD)

Item	KH	ID	LA	MM	PH	VN
• Price of most popular foreign brand (per stick)	0.08	0.13	0.08	0.07	0.16	0.084
• Per pack of 20 sticks	1.65	2.28	1.68	1.39	3.27	1.69
• Price of most popular local brand (per stick)	0.03	0.13	0.029	0.03	0.12	0.049
• Per pack of 20 sticks	0.53	1.88	0.52	0.63	2.54	0.97
1 kg rice	0.68	0.96	0.75	0.63	0.80	0.32
1 kg sugar	0.86	0.85	0.87	0.56	2.00	0.74
1 loaf of bread	1.11	0.96	1.97	1.39	1.45	1.23
1 liter of milk	2.05	1.30	2.38	0.69	1.82	1.44
1 dozen eggs	1.50	1.82	0.81	1.04	1.82	1.36
1 kg chicken	4.18	2.93	4.36	2.78	3.51	3.22
Typical fast food chain combo meal	2.50	3.25	2.03	2.00	2.73	4.03

¹ Sreeramareddy CT, Ramakrishnareddy N. Association of adult tobacco use with household food access insecurity: results from Nepal demographic and health survey, 2011. BMC Public Health. 2017 Jul 24;18(1):48. doi: 10.1186/s12889-017-4579-y. Available at <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-017-4579-y>

² de Beyer J, Lovelace C, Yürekli A. Poverty and tobacco. Tobacco Control 2001;10:210-211. Available at <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/10/3/210.info>

Annual opportunity costs of a pack a day cigarette smoker (local brand):

	 Cambodia	 Myanmar	 Indonesia	 Philippines	 Lao PDR	 Vietnam
	USD 193	USD 230	USD 686	USD 927	USD 190	USD 354
↓↓↓ CAN BUY ↓↓↓						
	284 kg of rice	365 kg of rice	715 kg of rice	1159 kg of rice	253 kg of rice	1106 kg of rice
	174 loaves of bread	165 loaves of bread	715 loaves of bread	639 loaves of bread	96 loaves of bread	288 loaves of bread
	129 dozen eggs	221 dozen eggs	377 dozen eggs	509 dozen eggs	235 dozen eggs	260 dozen eggs
	46 kg chicken	83 kg chicken	234 kg chicken	264 kg chicken	44 kg chicken	110 kg chicken

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, are a call to action to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and justice. The following goals are especially relevant in relation to tobacco and poverty:

1 NO POVERTY 	2 ZERO HUNGER 	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 
SDG 1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere	SDG 2 End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture	SDG 3 Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

In Southeast Asia, cigarettes have become more affordable over the past two decades,³ providing an incentive for those with limited financial resources to continue buying and using cigarettes, perpetuating the cycle of addiction and adverse health outcomes. Increasing tobacco tax, which increases price and reduces affordability, is one of the most effective

tobacco control measures to reduce tobacco consumption.⁴ Higher tobacco taxes can generate more income for the government, which can further help address the development needs of the population if the additional revenues are allocated to tobacco control and measures that benefit the poor, such as food security programs and universal health care coverage.

³ Tan YL. and Dorotheo U. (2021). The Tobacco Control Atlas: ASEAN Region, Fifth Edition, December 2021, p.87. Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA), Bangkok, Thailand.

⁴ World Health Organization, "Raising taxes on tobacco," Available at <https://www.who.int/activities/raising-taxes-on-tobacco>

TOBACCO IS NOT FOOD; GROWING TOBACCO IS NOT USEFUL AND IS HARMFUL ALL ROUND

1. Tobacco farming contributes to food insecurity

Contrary to the tobacco industry narrative, tobacco farming is not profitable for smallholder farmers. Tobacco farming is labor-intensive and traps farmers in a cycle of poverty. Research shows that smallholder tobacco farmers remain poor as leaf prices are typically extremely low and controlled by big companies. They also miss out on other economic opportunities due to the difficult nature of tobacco farming,⁵ and many farmers are trapped in burdensome contracts with tobacco companies that often result in a negative net income when factoring in labor costs.⁶

2. Tobacco growers are exposed to numerous harms

Tobacco farmers and growers are exposed to harmful pesticides, which can cause health harms, including birth defects, benign and malignant tumors, genetic changes, blood disorders, neurological disorders, and endocrine disruption.⁷ Workers who handle uncured tobacco leaves absorb nicotine through the skin causing Green Tobacco Sickness. Tobacco farming also has significant negative consequences for the environment. The cultivation process involves the use of a considerable amount of toxic chemicals⁸ that seep into and contaminate both the soil and the waterways surrounding tobacco farming communities.

3. Tobacco depletes the soil and causes deforestation

Tobacco also depletes soil nutrients by taking up more nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium than other major crops. Additionally, land clearing and tree cutting for tobacco growing and curing contribute to up to 5% of global deforestation.^{9, 10} Furthermore, agrochemical pollution and deforestation contributes to food insecurity as they destroy the land and ecosystem that could have been used for cultivation of food crops.¹¹

FOOD CROPS BRING HIGHER INCOME THAN TOBACCO

A World Bank study in Indonesia found tobacco cultivation was not profitable for most farmers and most tobacco-farming households were spending more on their tobacco cultivation than the income they obtained from it.¹² On the other hand, many former tobacco farmers were making a better living growing other food crops such as corn, sweet potato and green vegetables. For example, former tobacco farmers in Jember are selling significantly more corn and chili in the dry season than their tobacco-growing counterparts.

In the Philippines, for 2020-2021, tobacco was planted in over 26,000 hectares by around 39,000 growers, producing over 46 million kilos with varying prices per grade.¹³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, some tobacco farmers were given vegetable seed packs to enable them to produce their own food and raise additional income for their families, as farmgate prices for food crops are generally higher than those for tobacco.¹⁴

5 The Tobacco Atlas. Available at: <https://tobaccoatlas.org/challenges/growing/>

6 Hu TW, Lee AH. Tobacco control and tobacco farming in African countries. *J Public Health Policy*. 2015 Feb;36(1):41-51. doi:10.1057/jphp.2014.47. Epub 2014 Nov 27.

7 WHO, Tobacco and its environmental impact: an overview, p.4, 7 (2017), p.9. Available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/255574/9789241512497-eng.pdf>

8 Supra note 7, at 5.

9 Discussion Paper: The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control: An Accelerator for Sustainable Development. United Nations Development Programme (May 2017), citing Geist, HJ. Global assessment of deforestation relation to tobacco farming. *Tob Control* 1999; 8:18-28. Available at <https://www.undp.org/publications/who-framework-convention-tobacco-control-accelerator-sustainable-development>

10 Supra note 7, at 5.

11 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.

12 World Bank Group. The economics of tobacco farming in Indonesia. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/161981507529328872/pdf/120307-REVISED-PUBLIC-WBGIndoEconomicsTobaccoFarming.pdf>

13 National Tobacco Administration. 2021 Annual Report. Available at: <https://www.nta.da.gov.ph/accomplishment-reports/>

14 Philippines Statistic authority. Farm Price Situation of Agricultural Crops in Ilocos Sur November 2022 Feb 6, 2023. Available at: <http://rsoo01.psa.gov.ph/content/farm-price-situation-agricultural-crops-ilocos-sur-november-2022>

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY IS NOT A PARTNER IN FOOD SECURITY

To obscure the numerous problems associated with tobacco growing, the tobacco industry conducts corporate social activities among farmers, including providing seeds, building water supplies, or handing out scholarships to their children. These activities whitewash the industry's bad reputation and earn access and political mileage with policy makers. In Malaysia, British American Tobacco recently launched a community farm garden in Selangor to support vulnerable communities in growing their food.¹⁵

Evidence of poor farmers trapped in a cycle of poverty is illustrated in the use of child labor in tobacco production. According to the US Department of Labor's latest list of goods produced with child labor or forced labor, 17 countries were found to use child labor in tobacco production including Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.¹⁶

Addressing hunger is important and requires urgent attention, especially in developing countries. One way to address hunger is by implementing alternative livelihood programs for tobacco farmers, as significant portions of arable land used for tobacco cultivation could have been utilized for food crops.

Parties to the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) committed to implement economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers, growers, and sellers (Article 17), as well as to protect the environment and health of persons in relation to the environment (Article 18). By providing sustainable alternative livelihood options, farmers can transition away from tobacco cultivation and use the land for growing food crops instead. This will not only contribute to food security but also provide farmers with a sustainable source of income and protect their health. In addition, this will help protect the environment, enhance productivity of the land, and contribute towards the achievement of the SDGs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Governments should protect tobacco farmers against the health and socio-economic harms of tobacco production** by developing policies and strategies that help farmers shift to growing food crops, which will provide financial rewards and healthier life to farmers and their families.
- ▶ **Governments should end subsidies for tobacco growing and implement land use policies that prioritize food agriculture and environmental protection.** These can help ensure food security and good nutrition, especially in low-and-middle-income countries, by making sure that arable land is used efficiently and sustainably. Moreover, a comprehensive approach should be taken to ensure that healthy food is affordable and accessible.
- ▶ **Governments should implement higher tobacco taxes to make tobacco products less affordable,** especially for the youth and the poor, reduce the demand for tobacco, and generate revenues that can be used for health and socio-economic development programs that benefit the poor.
- ▶ **Governments should ban tobacco-related CSR activities.**



#FoodNotTobacco

¹⁵ New Straits Times, 'BAT Malaysia unveils farm garden to support vulnerable communities,' Available at <https://www.nst.com.my/business/2023/03/887396/bat-malaysia-unveils-farm-garden-support-vulnerable-communities>

¹⁶ Available at https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2021/2022-TVPR-List-of-Goods-v3.pdf