EDITORIALS

Tobacco smoke and environmental injustice

Burning the developing world's resources

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"My country, Malawi, has lost most of its forests to tobacco," Paul Desanker, a manager in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change adaptation programme, told the eighth conference of parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control last week.

Tobacco smoking remains a leading preventable cause of death, killing more than seven million people a year,¹ with health effects across a huge range of acute and chronic conditions.² The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, established 15 years ago, is the first ever global health treaty. Ratified by 181 countries, and covering 90% of the world's population, the treaty calls on parties to implement policies that protect individuals and limit the activities of the tobacco industry.

Key measures are highlighted in the MPOWER framework³—monitoring tobacco consumption; protecting people from passive exposure through smoke free laws; offering support to quit; warning of the dangers of tobacco; enforcing bans on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship; and raising taxes on tobacco. Evidence is compelling that these measures are effective, with a strong correlation between the extent of implementation and reductions in smoking prevalence.³ However, although ratification of the treaty is now almost universal, the extent of implementation remains inadequate and uneven, ranging from 13% to 88% across the treaty's articles.⁴

Mindful of this, the eighth conference of the parties (COP8) adopted a new global strategy to accelerate tobacco control designed to guide countries in achieving the high level objective of a 30% fall in smoking rates by 2025. The strategy encourages parties to identify where current approaches are falling short and target activities appropriately, ordering priorities for action and focusing attention on them. Particular focus is needed on tax increases, which save lives and generate revenue to support development spending, and limiting tobacco industry influence in policy making, widely reported as an obstacle to progress.⁴

Clearer targets, with delivery mechanisms, should make it easier to attract funding because the return on investment will be more transparent. With increasing scrutiny of aid budgets, it is important to highlight that supporting global tobacco control is a high value intervention. It is also a moral obligation for the UK, given that two of the largest tobacco companies, BAT and

Imperial Tobacco, are based here. The UK and Australia are already funding the framework's 2030 project to support implementation in low and middle income countries.⁵

Wider than health

Synergies with action on other areas of global concern are important, with the potential to promote policy coherence and bring additional resources to each problem.⁶ A new element in tobacco control is the increasing focus on the environmental effects of tobacco. The health effects of smoking are widely appreciated, but the environmental consequences of tobacco cultivation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal much less so. Tobacco cultivation makes use of land, labour, water, and other finite resources that could be more beneficially deployed, most obviously for food production.⁷

Importantly, tobacco is more challenging to grow than many food crops, requiring land clearance or extensive use of fertiliser and pesticides. These lead to ecosystem toxicity, acidification, and eutrophication. Child labour is endemic to tobacco production, harming children directly and limiting their access to education.⁸ Curing tobacco to produce the dried leaf used for cigarette manufacture is energy intensive, dependent on heat from coal and wood. This, together with land clearance, drives deforestation.

Crucially, while profits from the tobacco industry accrue in the rich world, the largest environmental burdens fall on low and middle income countries. Of the top 10 tobacco producing countries, nine are developing and four are defined as low income, food deficit countries.⁹ Smokers in high income countries like the UK are literally and metaphorically burning the resources and the future of the most vulnerable people on our planet.

As well as squandering resource inputs, the outputs of the tobacco product life cycle pollute water and land and contribute to climate change. An estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are released into the environment—toxic trash that poisons water and land.¹⁰ Actions to tackle this include demanding extended product liability from the industry so that it takes responsibility for the whole life cycle and externalities are costed in.

Countries need to be supported to provide and promote alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers, but the only effective

response to the environmental effect of the tobacco industry is to reduce tobacco consumption.

Tobacco is a barrier to achieving the sustainable development goals,^{6,11} not only those directly related to health but others including food security, sustainable production and consumption, life on land, life in water, and climate change. As such, those responsible for delivering these objectives must now engage with tobacco control as a part of the solution. Smokers, and clinicians advising them, need to be aware of the environmental effect of the tobacco industry. Cigarettes should be thought of as an unethical product, not just as one that is harmful to individual consumers.

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