

Tobacco growing in Uganda: the environment and women pay the price

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In 1900, Uganda had a beautiful, green landscape with 31 000 km² of forest cover. Today there is less than 6 000 km².¹ This is partly because of the timber industry, but it is also because of the large quantities of wood fuel consumed by some agro-industries, including the tobacco industry. In Uganda, about half of the 4 000 tonnes of tobacco grown annually is flue-cured.² This has had a great impact on the forest cover in the region, which is of particular concern as the region is one of those already classified by the Food and Agriculture Organisation as a "wood deficit zone".³

The relationship between tobacco and loss of forest cover in Uganda is well illustrated in a recent PANOS study,⁴ in addition to the findings reported in this paper. The PANOS study was carried out in Uganda's West Nile region, which produces about 80% of the country's tobacco. The natural forest cover in the tobacco-growing area has been reduced from 7 225 to 3 000 ha. State-owned forest reserves have also been encroached on by tobacco growers, with the full knowledge and permission of officials. The government is aware of this. President Yoweri Museveni has often stated publicly that the economic benefits of tobacco are higher than the damage caused to the environment. The British American Tobacco (BAT) monopoly makes annual profits of billions of shillings. Tobacco taxes are also one of the main revenue sources of the Treasury. In 1991, the Ministry of Finance pocketed 20 billion shillings in tax revenue from tobacco - 10% of total tax revenue that year.

The 12 000 peasant tobacco-growing families are also said to benefit from the high prices of tobacco and from prompt payment, as opposed to growers of other cash crops such as cotton and coffee. The impression created by BAT is that tobacco is the highest paying crop in Uganda and therefore the farmers are well off.⁵ However, in reality, most peasant growers are still poor. In 1992, for example, there were several complaints by tobacco farmers, as well as political intervention from Arua district authorities, protesting against low prices and delayed payments.^{6,7} There is a general feeling among farmers that BAT cheats them by paying miserable prices for their crops. According to the Minister of Finance's budget statement, they are paid 1 415 shillings per kg (US\$ 1.30) for top-grade flue-cured tobacco, and 250 shillings per kg (US\$0.30) for the lowest grade. Growers are demanding that the

price be raised to at least 2 400 shillings per kg for the best grade and 800 shillings per kg for poor grade. A typical complaint of peasant growers is: "Comparing the amount of work involved and the money we get, there is nothing much to gain. We are only growing tobacco because there is no other avenue to earn a living."

Numerous stories highlighting the disadvantaged position of the farmers have appeared in the influential newspaper, *The Monitor*, and also in the government-owned *The New Vision*. On paper, farmers get about 30% of the real value of their crops. In reality, though, what the farmer is left with is not at all commensurate with the labour and time spent on tobacco growing. Instances of farmers being left with meagre profits of 1 000 shillings per kg (less than US\$1), after deductions for the inputs and loan servicing to BAT through the Tobacco Cooperative Union, are widespread in the West Nile region.

The burden on mothers and children

Much of the burden falls on children who often leave school to help their parents in the fields. Women are also supposed to keep up the homes and grow food crops, and are obviously over-burdened. They do not have enough time to tend the food crops or to care for their children. Families are typically devoting more land to tobacco, and reserving smaller plots for millet, cassava, sim-sim, and other food crops. This arrangement deprives the family of food. Mrs Erina Angio, an established tobacco farmer, told me in an interview: "There is too much work for us on tobacco. Some months I don't even find a single hour to plant and harvest food crops." This is a basic reason which many farmers advance for not having enough food in granaries. Farm work on tobacco stretches from September-October to August of the following year.



It is important to note that women and children are vital at all stages of tobacco growing, and they are assigned the most torturous jobs. A housewife, Mrs Anna Vukoni, told me that tobacco has added to her traditional burdens at home. "I even fail to breast feed my four-month-old baby," she says. Another problem which women face is the way their husbands "misbehave" when they earn income from tobacco sales. Husbands often purchase alcohol with the money, or they use it to make arrangements to marry another wife. This demoralises the women who labour on the farms. In most cases, the new wives are younger and more energetic than the senior wives.

Cultivating tobacco denies many growers' children entry to schools as they are kept at the farms throughout the year. At all stages of tobacco cultivation, including curing, firewood collection, and transporting the crop to stores for sale, children provide essential labour. Official statistics indicate that about four in every 10 boys, and six of every 10 girls of school-going age, are unable to join schools.⁸ Another basic reason for this is that parents do not raise enough surplus income from tobacco sales to pay for education.

Impact on agriculture

As the forests disappear, it is again the farmers who suffer as wood fuel becomes increasingly scarce. To find firewood, even for domestic purposes, farmers now have to look as far as 17 km from their homes. With loss of forest cover, there are now also higher rates of soil erosion, leaving behind infertile, sun-baked soils. In 1990 alone, more than 60 000 m³ of wood, mostly from gazetted forest reserves, were used to flue-cure tobacco in the West Nile region. Last year, tobacco curing consumed 72000 m³ of eucalyptus annually, the equivalent of 200 ha. Farmers I talked to revealed that they use as much as 130 kg of wood fuel to cure 1 kg of tobacco. The government and BAT underplay the real magnitude of the problem by putting the figure at 100 kg of wood fuel per 1 kg of tobacco cured. Nevertheless, these official figures are still high given the fact that reforestation strategies are lip-service programmes, buried in government and BAT project papers.

As the Secretary-General of the West Nile Tobacco Union admits, there is no immediate substitute for wood fuel in curing tobacco. In Zimbabwe, coal is used, but Uganda still lacks such technology. BAT's efforts are limited. They have, for instance, tried to improve the high-wood-consuming furnace to the more efficient MKII version developed in Kenya. Afforestation is also encouraged amongst individual farmers. But there is a wide gap between planned acreage and what is actually planted. The plan to reafforest the area has had a lukewarm response during the last decade. Farmers complain that the Tobacco Union, which levies an annual wood tax of 4000 shillings from each farmer through its collectors, fails to inject the funds into reforestation programmes. Most growers have been

angered by this and have subsequently abandoned the privately owned eucalyptus woodlots. According to West Nile Tobacco Union statistics, this has led to the decrease of the size of personal plots from a total of 264 ha in 1980 to 70 ha in 1994.

BAT public relations

BAT Public Affairs Manager, Mr Mike Gwoke, insists that the reforestation programme since 1985 has been successful. He says: "Since the programme started, BAT has planted 2900 ha and assisted farmers to plant over 1000 ha on their plots. We are targeting self-sufficiency in wood fuel supplies by 1996, although we don't have the means to afforest the entire district of Arua. We are also modifying barn furnaces to enhance efficiency in curing, and hope to reduce wood fuel consumption by 40% after that". Unfortunately, the type of tree that replaces the indigenous species is the notorious eucalyptus, which is not an environmentally friendly tree, especially because it uses up vast quantities of water.

Of course, BAT says otherwise. Mr Gwoke adduces statistics exonerating BAT as the major culprit of deforestation. He says that domestic firewood consumption in the West Nile region is far higher than that used for curing tobacco. Figures from the Ministry of Natural Resources (Department of Environmental Protection) indicate that 0.5 million eucalyptus trees (the equivalent of 72 000 m³ of wood) are cut for tobacco curing, and 2.5 million trees (the equivalent of 3747 600 m³ of wood) for cooking.

This argument, that the peasants' kitchens are responsible for the disappearance of forest in West Nile, is pure sophistry. Farmers who were interviewed denied cutting trees for domestic use. It is common knowledge in Uganda that village folk seldom fell trees for firewood: they pick up dry, fallen twigs for the kitchen. The culture amongst Uganda's tribes dictates that women and children are the only collectors of firewood in forests. At the same time, they are prevented from handling pangas and axes, the only tools that cut trees. This in itself limits them to gathering twigs and dried branches for kitchen requirements, and helps to maintain the ecological balance. Farmers also have other sources of fuel for domestic use: they use dry cassava and maize stems, maize cobs, and sometimes cotton plants after harvesting the crop.

- 1 Mwaka V. *Population dynamics with reference to Uganda setting*. Department of Geography, Makerere University, 6 April 1990.
- 2 US Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agriculture Service. *World Tobacco Situation* 1993; June: 17.
- 3 Wanja J. *The impact of tobacco industry on rural development in Arua, Uganda*. Masters Thesis, Makerere University, Uganda, 1990.
- 4 Aliro OK. *Paying the price of growing tobacco*. London: The PANOS Institute, 1993.
- 5 BAT (Uganda) Dossier for 1991.
- 6 Awuyo AST. Farmers unhappy. *The New Vision* 1992; 28 December: 3.
- 7 Awuyo AST. Christmas with little cash. *The Monitor* 1993; 1 January: 6.
- 8 Ministry of Local Government Statistics, Kampala, Uganda, 1991.