

Future of farming must be food not tobacco

Raphael Lencucha 

FUTURE OF FARMING MUST BE FOOD NOT TOBACCO

This year's World No Tobacco Day theme, 'We need food, not tobacco', comes at a critical juncture in world affairs and converges with momentum being built around the implementation of Article 17 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (alternative livelihoods). We are halfway through the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), which call for transformation of global systems. Food systems feature prominently in this transformative agenda. The call for transformation was born out of the recognition that current systems involved in food supply can have detrimental impacts on health, environment and social well-being.¹ At the beginning of this supply chain are farmers, and according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, five out of six farms fall in the category of family farms.² Over 80% of farms are under 2 hectares and provide roughly 35% of food in the world.² There is massive heterogeneity in the size and production of farms around the world. In most countries, tobacco is grown on small family farms, although countries like the USA are notable exceptions. Given that tobacco is largely grown by families on small plots of land, there is potential to directly transform the livelihoods of millions when governments pursue Article 17. In 2019, the United Nations launched the Decade of Family Farming (2019–2028), which aims to draw attention to and support the potential of family farms to achieve the vision of 'a world where diverse, healthy and sustainable food and agricultural systems flourish, where resilient rural and urban communities enjoy a high quality of life in dignity, equity, free from hunger and poverty'.³

The transformation of agricultural systems remains tenuous: policymaker efforts to encourage transformation are challenged by the desire to scale up cash-earning export commodities like tobacco and the recognition that many of the cash-based monocropping systems, especially

tobacco, often generate little profit for farming households, damage ecosystems and pose significant health risks for growers.⁴ In agricultural systems, not all crops are created equal in terms of their environment and labour impacts and their contribution to societal well-being, and tobacco is one of the worst. How can we move from these harmful crops and industries to ones that foster food security, individual and community flourishing, and ecosystem diversity and sustainability?

Food systems are highly complex, and it can be difficult to know where to start in linking the agenda to find alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers, including alternative crops, and the larger agenda to transform food systems. While the tobacco control community is gaining a deeper understanding of the problems associated with smallholder tobacco farming, the wider agriculture and development community is recognising similar problems in existing food systems. Several ills result from the current industrial food system, including the impacts of dominant monocropping approaches to agricultural production on ecosystems and the diets of populations.^{5–7} The mass industrial production of single crops is driven in part by the unyielding drive by large companies to source cheap crops for transformation into high-margin, long-lasting, highly processed and often unhealthy foods.⁸

Yet there is now a new focus on building sustainable, healthy and often local food systems by identifying and supporting diverse food crops that are aligned with local environmental conditions. Local food systems have many environmental and social benefits, including shorter distances from farm to market. These are the types of considerations that should be and are informing efforts to pursue alternatives to tobacco growing. As Wendell Berry, the farmer, writer and poet, wrote in an essay published in 1979 when 'world hunger' loomed large, 'The problem of 'world hunger' cannot be solved until it is understood and dealt with by local people as a multitude of local problems of ecology, agriculture, and culture' (Berry, p280).⁹ The problem of smallholder tobacco growing, then, is the commodification of communities and lives strictly for an economic enterprise whose monetary

benefits are only seen at the level of the transnational tobacco company. The profit margins of these companies are massive¹⁰ and in part derived from an exploitative supply chain.^{11 12} This type of agriculture is what requires transformation. Transformation from harmful commodities like tobacco to healthy and sustainable food crops can contribute not only to feeding the world, but also to helping individuals, families and communities be healthy and flourish in diverse and rich ecosystems.

A multiagency report published by the United Nations in 2021 on mechanisms to transform agricultural production illustrates clearly the intersecting benefits of healthy food systems and governments' involvement in this process: 'The policies that shape how and where we use land and other natural resources to feed the world's population have extraordinary potential to promote healthy consumption and sustainable production patterns which, in turn, are key to reducing emissions and protecting our planet and its biodiversity'.¹

In light of these considerations, it is important that in our pursuit of alternatives to tobacco, we do not limit ourselves to the promotion of cash-crop production for international markets. While international markets may serve as one destination for food crops grown in place of tobacco, these international markets are fraught with challenges. Pervasive imbalances in resources between countries and the uneven application of these resources to strengthen local cultivation leaves many smaller countries at competitive disadvantage. How can a country like a Malawi with a total gross domestic product of just US\$12 billion hope to compete in the international soy or maize market when countries like the USA and China subsidise agricultural production to a tune of US\$53 billion (2020) and US\$216 billion (2016), respectively? Governments have also imposed different quality standards on food-based agricultural crops, leading to unpredictable export markets from year to year. The case of aflatoxin standards imposed by the European Union and the devastating impact this had on groundnut exports from countries in the African continent is just one example.¹³ This is not to say that such standards are not warranted as new scientific findings emerge. Rather, these are just some examples of the host of challenges confronting the supply of staple foods to global markets. Smallholder farmers trying to access global markets are often beholden to powerful corporate actors (eg, costly inputs and poor prices). The power of 'big

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food' companies, along with institutional and political conditions that allow these companies to 'lock in' current supply chain dynamics, as with tobacco, adds to the challenge of finding viable food-based alternative crops.^{8 14 15}

With these challenges in mind, one way to think about efforts to successfully shift from tobacco growing to alternatives, particularly food crops, is the need for coordination and creativity. Coordination involves being systematic about sharing learning across contexts, with the understanding that what works in one location may not work in another, while also orienting to the common lessons and experience that can shape adaptation. The Tobacco-Free Farms Initiative is a good example of the application of these principles.¹⁶ This pilot project initiated in Kenya applies lessons from rigorous research on tobacco farming across countries and within the regions where the project is being implemented. It also brings together communities, government agencies and intergovernmental organisations to identify appropriate crops that are nutrient-rich and environmentally sustainable and require limited inputs. It has also established a system to ensure a guaranteed market for the new crops being grown and the provision of necessary inputs like seeds, fertilisers and equipment. The establishment of predictable and stable supply chains is critically important to encourage alternatives to tobacco.^{17 18}

What is also needed, as many working in this field have noted, are creative solutions that expand beyond a singular focus on the profitability of alternative crops and consider local food needs, community well-being and cohesion, and resource sharing arrangements. Alternatives hold greatest promise when they emerge out of conscientious deliberation with communities and rigorous assessment of local, national and international contexts. Governments can foster arrangements that facilitate cooperation and collective action, recognising that trust within communities and between communities and suppliers of inputs has been found to be a key ingredient for success in smallholder agricultural production.¹⁹ As we see with the issue of sustainable food systems, it is not merely a matter of producing more food but of producing food that is good for the environment and human health,

delivered by cohesive and fair supply chains. It is about transforming how we think about food in relation to economics, environmental protection, human health, social well-being and the host of factors that intersect to either foster sustainability and human flourishing or erode the fabric of society and our planet. Governments are reimagining food systems in ways that bring out synergies across sectors while reorienting sectoral goals to foster coherence around shared principles of sustainability, inclusion and participation. The potential for Article 17 implementation to contribute to the development needs of countries and sustainable and healthy food systems is enormous.

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