

WHO bullying burley tobacco growers

Having failed to reduce the demand for tobacco, the World Health Organisation is directing its attack at "the soft underbelly" of the industry - the growers, says Francois van der Merwe, chairman of the Africa region of the International Tobacco Growers' Association.



"Their aim seems to be nothing less than obliterating tobacco as a crop from the planet," he says. "This will cost hundreds of thousands of jobs and livelihoods throughout Africa."

Van der Merwe says the "extreme legislation" proposed by the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control treaty and adopted by many countries, including South Africa, will make it "impossible to smoke".

"We are fully in agreement that smoking is harmful and we would support a drive to reduce tobacco consumption if we were consulted. But the convention has seen fit to ignore us entirely," Van der Merwe says.

He believes tobacco has been "unfairly" singled out among many other products - "such as sugar" - as unhealthy.

Van der Merwe believes cigarette-making will be driven underground, with sellers of illicit cigarettes benefiting most and all control and tax income for governments falling away.

Ahmed Ouma of the convention secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland, has laughed off the complaint: "Our reason for not inviting the tobacco industry to our deliberations is simple. They are not welcome. They cannot expect to sit at the same table as us."

He is equally dismissive about the association's claim that the proposals, if implemented, will cost many livelihoods.

"That is a lie. The tobacco industry does not have a divine right to the money that is spent on cigarettes.

"The money that is used to buy tobacco products can just as easily be spent on other products that do not kill people like tobacco does - and jobs will then be created in other areas," Ouma says.

The WHO has predicted there will be 1,6-billion smokers worldwide by 2025.

Van der Merwe says tobacco growers have been singled out because they are "most vulnerable". And though the convention has a mandate to investigate alternative crops to replace tobacco growing as livelihoods for the thousands who will be rendered jobless, it has not done so.

"They have ignored their own stipulations. Tobacco farmers are business people. They are not stupid. If the demand dropped, they would have to look for alternatives."

Malawi, the world's biggest producer of Burley tobacco, could see its industry destroyed overnight, with devastating consequences, Van der Merwe says.

"About 70 000 farmers cultivate tobacco in Malawi and 100% of its crop is sold to international cigarette makers," he says. "An estimated 70% of Malawi's population derives an income from tobacco and related industries."

Similarly, Mozambique produces 180-million kilograms of Burley tobacco through 100 000 farmers and the people who work for them, he says. In Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya losses of livelihood will be similarly huge.

South Africa has a relatively small tobacco industry, but Van der Merwe says, the country will still be affected by the ban and its consequences. "If the region is disadvantaged, all of us, including South Africa, are disadvantaged."

Source: *Financial Mail* via I-Net Bridge.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>