

Feature

# Tobacco Threat to our environment

ACCORDING TO THE FIGURES OF THE PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 600,000,000 TREES HAVE BEEN CHOPPED DOWN TO MAKE CIGARETTES, WHILE 84,000,000 TONNES OF CO2 EMISSIONS WERE RELEASED INTO THE AIR BECAUSE OF THAT. AND 22,000,000,000 LITRES OF WATER WAS ALSO USED TO MAKE CIGARETTES



**W**e all know the consequences of tobacco and cigarette consumption. It is a topic that has been discussed for decades. But still the consumption rate has not decreased much. Sometimes, it seems the opposite: the rate has become increased. For instance, in 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that smoking and other tobacco use kill more than seven million people each year.

But five years later, in 2022, the WHO said the use of tobacco led to over eight million deaths around the globe annually. Of them, about seven million are due to direct tobacco use while about 1.2 million are of non-smokers that are exposed to second-hand smoke. From these figures, it is not difficult to see the actual picture behind the anti-tobacco industry campaigns and their enthusiastic efforts. But is this mean that those movements should stop their efforts? No, not at all, on the contrary, their campaigns should be strengthened against transnational tobacco companies.

### Established in 1987

Anyhow, World No-Tobacco Day falls on the day after tomorrow. This day or May 31 was first established by the World Health Organization in 1987. It was intended to drum up awareness around the dangers of tobacco consumption, the business practices of the tobacco industry, as well as to pressure governments around the world to step up policies that work to reduce smoking and the use of other tobacco-based products. So, since then, World No-Tobacco Day is observed each year on May 31.

What is the theme for this year? It is 'Tobacco: Threat to our environment'. It is a timely theme because we have comparatively less focused on the serious threats to the environment by the tobacco industry. According to the figures of the Pan American Health Organization, 600,000,000 trees have been chopped down to make cigarettes, while 84,000,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions were released into the air because of that. And 22,000,000,000 litres of water was also used to make cigarettes. As such, the WHO, through this year's theme, aims to raise awareness among the public on the environmental impact of tobacco – from cultivation, production, distribution and waste. It will give tobacco users one extra reason to quit from it.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Environment Program has renewed its collaboration with WHO to mark the day, and the renewed collaboration contributes to the 2022 World Environment Day theme #OnlyOneEarth, with the focus on 'Living Sustainably in Harmony with Nature' as well.

### 'Greenwash' campaign

The WHO's global campaign has another aspiration, among others: it is to expose tobacco industry's effort to 'greenwash' its reputation and products by marketing themselves as environmentally friendly. Reporting environmental impacts and funding environmental corporate social responsibility projects and organisations are some of the projects in their 'greenwash' campaign. The tobacco industry invests heavily in it because they want to hide their practices that are disastrous to the environment.

At the beginning of Test cricket in Sri Lanka, the main sponsor of the Sri Lanka cricket team was the Sri Lanka Tobacco Company. They spent large amounts of money for the cricketers and live broadcasts. But, in turn, they advertised in the television channels in between the live broadcast. There is another reason for the inability to mitigate the activities of tobacco compa-

nies. It is lack of objective data as well as limited and inconsistent legislation at international and local levels. So, exposing their evil practices is a main task.

As per the WHO, the tobacco industry contributes to climate change and reduces climate resilience, wasting resources and damaging ecosystems. They partake in emitting 84 megatons of carbon dioxide equivalent. Also, around 3.5 million hectares of land are destroyed for tobacco growing each year. Growing tobacco contributes to deforestation, especially in the developing world. Deforestation for tobacco plantations also promotes soil degradation and 'failing yields' or the capacity for the land to support the growth of any other crops or vegetation.

### Dangerous for developing countries

The WHO's Director of Health Promotion, Dr Ruediger Krech, on the threat to the environment by tobacco and its products said, "The environmental impacts of tobacco using add unnecessary pressure to our planet's already scarce resources and fragile ecosystems. This is especially dangerous for developing countries, as that's where most of the tobacco production happens. Every cigarette you smoke, you are literally burning resources where they are already scarce, burning resources where our very existence depends upon."

The WHO said that the environmental burden falls on countries least able to cope with it, and the profits are made by transnational tobacco companies that are based in higher-income countries. The WHO said, "With about 90 percent of all tobacco production concentrated in the developing world, tobacco has an immensely uneven impact on different socioeconomic groups. In low- and middle-income countries, many farmers and government officials see tobacco as a cash crop that can generate economic growth. However, the short-term cash benefits of the crop are offset by the

**POISONING OUR PLANET**  
#TobaccoExposed

Throughout its lifecycle, tobacco pollutes the planet & damages the health of all people.

long-term consequences of increased food insecurity, frequent sustained farmers' debt, illness and poverty among farm workers, and widespread environmental damage in low- and middle-income countries."

### Continuous disaster

The WHO said reducing tobacco consumption needs to be identified as a key lever for achieving all of the sustainable development goals, not just those directly related to health. So, the campaign of the WHO correctly calls on governments and policymakers to step up legislation, including implementing and strengthening schemes to make producers responsible for the environmental and economic costs of tobacco product waste.

Below are some of the important facts by the WHO that show the real impact of the tobacco industry to the environment. Those facts are presented as Q and A format.

#### How does tobacco destroy our forests?

- An estimated 1.5 billion hectares of (mainly tropical) forests have been lost worldwide since the 1970s due to tobacco, contributing to up to 20 percent of annual greenhouse gas increase.
- Trees are cut down to clear land for tobacco farming, in addition wood is burned for the curing of tobacco leaves after harvest. It takes around one entire tree, to make 300 cigarettes.
- Around 200,000 hectares of land is cleared annually for tobacco growing and curing.
- Tobacco farming accounts for about five percent of the total national deforestation, disproportionately affecting tobacco growing regions of the world, including Southern Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, South America and the Caribbean.

#### How does tobacco farming harm our soil?

- Fertile land that could be used to grow nutritious crops is used for tobacco. The soil depletion caused by tobacco growing further contributes to food insecurity and nutrition challenges.
- Rehabbing the soil after tobacco farming is costly. Based on data collected in 2014, it would cost 20.6 million USD to reverse the negative effects on soil in Bangladesh caused by one year of tobacco farming.
- Desertification attributable to tobacco growing is now being seen within many countries including Brazil, India, Jordan, and Cuba.

#### How does the growth and use of tobacco affect water supplies?

- The entire life cycle of a single cigarette requires around 3.7 liters of water, this includes the growing, manufacturing, distribution, use,

and disposal. The average smoker could save up to 74 litres of water per day if they quit smoking.

- Tobacco growing depletes water tables. The cultivation stage of tobacco alone requires the same amount of water that a person would need for an entire year.
- Based on the number of cigarettes produced in 2015 in Brazil, the 3rd largest producer of tobacco, 263,813,700,000 litres of water was utilised to produce its annual supply. Given that the average person drinks about 700 litres of water per year, if all this water were to be converted to drinking water, it would be able to hydrate around 3.7 million people, which is about the entire population of its capital, Brasilia.
- It is now well established that cigarette filters (butts) are among the topmost polluting and toxic substances found in water bodies. It takes a cigarette butt around 10 years to decompose, allowing time for nicotine and chemicals to leach into surrounding ecosystems.
- A study from the EPA concluded that when cigarette butts are soaked in freshwater for 96 hours, about half the fish died.

#### How does tobacco pollute our air?

- To produce a single cigarette, 14g of CO2 is emitted throughout its lifecycle.
- Tobacco production contributes almost 84 million metric tons of CO2 equivalent emissions annually. That is equivalent to 280,000 rockets launching into outer space.
- Tobacco smoke contributes to higher air pollution levels and contains three kinds of greenhouse gases: carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxides, which pollutes indoor and outdoor environments.

#### How does tobacco contribute to littering?

Globally, the approximate weight of waste generated annually from the overall tobacco life cycle is around 25 million metric tons.

Almost all commercial cigarettes have a cellulose acetate filter attached; this additive is poorly degradable and a source of microplastics contamination of the environment.

Around 4.5 trillion cigarettes are discarded in the environment every year.

Surveys of littering behaviour have found that around 65 percent of smokers discard cigarette butts improperly (e.g., on pavements and beaches)

There are over 7,000 chemicals released into the environment from use of a cigarette – 70 of which are known carcinogens.

#### How does e-waste contribute to environmental pollution?

- e-waste in general is already an overwhelming problem, with 99

risk of infertility and reproductive issues.

#### What are the humanistic and economic burdens of tobacco use?

- Tobacco use is associated with substantial humanistic and economic burden. Smoking is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and more.
- Smoking tobacco in indoor spaces, is a major contributor to air pollution, as it releases toxicants into the air, increasing risk of exposure of bystanders. Second-hand smoking is responsible for the premature death of 1.2 million people globally every year, in addition to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.
- Based on results from a 2018 study, the total global economic cost of smoking, from both health expenditure and productivity losses, is equivalent in magnitude to 1.8 percent of the world's annual gross domestic product (GDP). About 40 percent of this cost occurred in developing countries.

#### What tactics does the tobacco industry use to greenwash their reputation?

- Deceitful tactics are used by the tobacco industry to greenwash its reputation and portray itself as a sustainable and eco-friendly industry.
- These tactics are used to hide the fact that tobacco farming, production, consumption, and use are detrimental to both the surrounding environment as well as the health of farmers and tobacco users.
- For example, the intent of the industry's self-reported data is to mislead the public into minimising the effects of tobacco growing on the environment and communities of countries worldwide.
- The marketing and eco-labelling of cigarettes as 'natural' and 'organic' makes tobacco users believe the products are not harmful to them.
- Tobacco companies fund schools, health systems, environmental and disaster relief organisations, and clean-up of tobacco product waste programs, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, to be recognised for contributions to society.

#### How can countries address the problem?

- Under Article 18 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, parties "agree to have due regard to the protection of the environment and the health of persons in relation to the environment in respect of tobacco cultivation and manufacture within their territories".
- Countries can impose the 'Extended Producer Responsibility Policy Principle' to mitigate the problem of tobacco and e-cigarette product waste, and to hold tobacco and related industries accountable for clean-up and waste disposal costs.
- Governments can impose an environmental tax levy on tobacco manufacturers, distributors and consumers for carbon emissions, air pollutants, and other environmental costs caused during the supply chain of tobacco products.
- Countries recognise the use of single use non-biodegradable plastics in cigarette filters and other nicotine products and should take appropriate action to phase out the use of plastics in nicotine and tobacco products.
- Farmers can be supported through government incentives to participate in crop substitution by growing more sustainable crops that will benefit the livelihood of the community.

Compiled by Ravindra Wijewardhane

**THINK AGAIN.**  
Tobacco's Toxic Life Cycle

- 600 MILLION TREES ARE CHOPPED DOWN globally every year to make...
- 6 TRILLION CIGARETTES PER YEAR keeping 1 billion smokers addicted to the tobacco industry's deadly products
- 4.2 MILLION OF THEM END UP FILLING BEACHES and waterways.
- In total, cigarette butts generate 1.69 BILLION POUNDS OF TOXIC WASTE annually.

THEY'RE THE MOST LITTERED ITEM ON THE PLANET

Don't be fooled. Our world is being #BurnedByTobacco