

For Immediate Release



International tobacco control policy expert warns that tobacco is not only harmful to health but also to the economy

Beirut, Lebanon- 03/03/2011 - Not only is tobacco smoking harmful to health and the economy, but so is tobacco farming, warned an international tobacco control policy expert from AUB, refuting tobacco industry arguments.

Wardie Leppan, a senior program specialist at the Canadian International Development Research Center, said that once tobacco companies lost their crusade in promoting smoking as a harmless and attractive habit, they turned to making a case for tobacco farming as a solid income for countries.

"For many years, tobacco companies used every trick in the book to undermine the growing health evidence against tobacco use. They lost the argument," said Leppan. "The links are irrefutable and it is now common knowledge that nearly 6m people died in 2010 due to tobacco related diseases and that by 2030 this toll will likely rise to 8m per annum."

About 70 percent of these deaths take place in low- and middle-income countries, such as Lebanon, where the majority of smokers reside. In addition to communicable diseases, these countries now face the added burden of non-communicable diseases caused by tobacco.

Leppan was speaking at a recent seminar organized by the Faculty of Health Sciences, which has a number of IDRC-funded research studies under way.

Having lost the health argument, tobacco companies are now attempting to scare policy makers out of implementing laws aimed at limiting demand, such as creating smoke-free workplaces, banning tobacco advertising, increasing taxation on tobacco products. Their claim: Tobacco production has economic benefits both in terms of exports and employment.

"In fact, the rising rate of non-communicable diseases caused by tobacco consumption is creating a negative economic impact on these countries," said Leppan.

For example, in 2000, in India, three tobacco-related diseases, heart disease, cancer and stroke, alone cost the country \$5.8 billion, the policy expert added.

Even the claim that tobacco creates many jobs and produces the most lucrative crop for small farmers is not accurate, said Leppan.

In many cases, farmers have not done well at all, economically, he said. In Lebanon, for instance, many farmers barely break even, only because of subsidies from the Regie. In numerous countries, farmers are contracted by tobacco companies to farm tobacco. They are given loans for the inputs and then have to sell their crop back to the company, which more often than not undergrades the tobacco, claiming it to be of lower quality than it really is and therefore of less value. The result: The farmer often gets caught up in a vicious debt cycle.

In research around the world, supported by the IDRC and others, small-scale farmers have complained bitterly about the negative health, environmental, social, and economic impacts of tobacco farming, noted Leppan.

Health impacts include:

- Green Tobacco Sickness due to poisoning through absorption of nicotine through the skin during handling
- Respiratory problems due to: 1) smoke inhalation during the drying process; and, 2) inhalation of the fine tobacco dust from the dried tobacco which is often stored in the household due to lack of storage space
- Excessive exposure to chemicals and pesticides which the tobacco crop, in particular, requires in abundance

In fact, a research study showed that 64 percent of farmers in South Lebanon store the tobacco in their homes which has grave implications on their respiratory health, noted Leppan.

Leppan also highlighted the environmental impacts of tobacco farming, noting that tobacco is known for leeching the nutrients out of the soil leading to a slow decline in soil fertility. Also, the runoff from the pesticides and chemicals used is a serious problem affecting rivers and fish populations but one of the most obvious is that of deforestation, he added.

"Where tobacco needs to be dried in kilns, huge amounts of wood are required and this has led to serious deforestation in those tobacco-growing and surrounding areas," he explained.

Tobacco also has serious social impacts, often resulting in women being overworked and children being pulled out of school to help harvest one of the most labor-intensive crops around.

The only reason that farmers remain attracted to tobacco farming is because it is the only type of farming that offers extension help and where there is a developed market infrastructure, argued Leppan.

"Research has shown that farmers are keen to make the switch but are not sure of the alternatives nor how to make the transition," he added.

Leppan highlighted some location-specific solutions; for example, tobacco farmers in Western Kenya have made the switch to bamboo, in Malawi to diversifying with groundnuts, in Bangladesh switching to multiple food crops grown organically. "The projects' successes were due to ensuring that the farmers were consulted and involved in the research to assess alternatives and that alternative market infrastructures were developed," Leppan noted. "Tobacco companies scare tactics are just that," concluded Leppan. "Introducing legislation to limit the demand for tobacco products will not cause misery for the farmers. Most are quite miserable already and want to make the change now."

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Note to Editors

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