

Anti-Tobacco Campaigns Ignore Tobacco's Socio-Economic Contribution

IN FOCUS

This year's World No Tobacco Day (WNTD 2017) was held on 31st May with the theme "*Tobacco: A threat to development*". The Campaign unleashed by the WHO for the occasion tried to undermine the huge socio-economic importance of the crop to several countries worldwide, including India. While labelling unsubstantiated allegations on the environment impact of tobacco growing, the WNTD 2017 also overlooked the fact that sustainable tobacco farming practices in the major tobacco growing countries such as India are directed at removing any threat to the environment.



Tobacco is grown in over 125 countries worldwide generating significant economic benefits in terms of remunerative agricultural employment, sizable tax revenue and foreign currency earnings for the Governments. The advantage of growing tobacco primarily lies in the fact that tobacco thrives in poorer and marginal soils, providing farmers with a much higher income than other agricultural crops.

The US\$ 20 billion worth crop contributes significantly to the economies of tobacco growing countries, be it the world's leading economy, China, or an economically weak country like Malawi.

As for India, tobacco generates enormous economic benefits in terms of agricultural employment, farm incomes, revenue generation and foreign exchange earnings.

An ASSOCHAM-TARI study Tobacco Economics in India: The Voice of the Farmer and other Stakeholders found that the tobacco growing areas of the three major tobacco producing States in India, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Gujarat are better off in several socio-economic parameters as compared to the non-tobacco growing areas of these States.

The Indian Government has acknowledged the economic importance of tobacco in the Report on Tobacco Control in India, published by the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare in 2004, "*Tobacco occupies a prime place in the Indian economy on account of its considerable contribution to the agricultural, industrial and export sectors.*"

Sustainable Tobacco Farming in India

Tobacco cultivation in India has witnessed several sustainable farming initiatives which include farm mechanization, advanced curing systems, assistance and education to farmers on contemporary farming practices in order to bring in efficiency and avoid causing any adverse environmental impact through tobacco growing. There is no deforestation as a result of tobacco production in India or any impact on soil fertility and erosion. Even the potential for water pollution from tobacco production is limited.

Importantly, there is no instance of tobacco displacing any food crop in India. Farmers in the country are free to move in and out of tobacco production based on their own assessments of the risks and opportunities. There is no evidence of coercion, enforcement or entrapment of farmers in tobacco cultivation.