

Swabi growers seek sustainable alternative to tobacco crop

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Tobacco growers of Swabi (Khyber Pakhtunkhawa) have requested the government to intervene and devise a global, national and local funding mechanism to assist tobacco farmers of the area to reduce their economic reliance on tobacco and move towards a healthy alternative of tobacco crop.

Liaqat Yusufzai secretary general Kaashtkaar Co-ordination Council at a press conference at the Islamabad Press Club organised by The Network for Consumer Protection, an NGO working for tobacco control, said: "We do not want to grow tobacco as we know the federal government's Tobacco Board that has been captured by tobacco industry, multinational companies and big tobacco growers are exploiting us. But we do not have an alternative except to grow tobacco," he added.

Speaking on the occasion, Nadeem Iqbal, Executive Director of The Network said that the federal government was having double standards by having a toothless Tobacco Control Cell to control tobacco use and on the other hand having Pakistan Tobacco Board for tobacco promotion under the guise of protecting small farmers interest. Pakistan has signed and ratified international public health treaty of World Health Organisation (WHO), 'The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004.' Article 17 & 18 of FCTC obliges parties to adopt sustainable alternatives to tobacco crop and take measures for the protection of environment & health of people.

Pakistan had a deadline to adopt and introduce FCTC guidelines by February 2010 but ostensibly under the tobacco industry's pressure Pakistan has conveniently missed the important deadline. Speakers at the press conference condemned the recent statements of an official of Pakistan Tobacco Board, saying that there is no ambiguity in FCTC and the government which is addicted to tobacco revenue should realise that tobacco is adding to the disease burden that cannot be borne by the meager budgetary allocations for health.

The country is paying the worst human health and environmental cost of tobacco cultivation. Tobacco related annual deforestation in Pakistan is more than 20% and human health cost increases due to growing tobacco related sicknesses in tobacco farmers' community. Pakistan needs to comply with obligations to FCTC by understanding the human factor associated to tobacco farming. Severe health threats to tobacco farmers include bladder cancer and irritant and allergic skin disorders and green tobacco sickness are commonly observed in tobacco growers' community in Pakistan. Also the cumulative seasonal exposure to nicotine is equivalent to smoking goes by at least 180 cigarettes.

About 16 applications of pesticides are recommended during three month tobacco growing period that causes respiratory, nerve skin and kidney damage in tobacco farmers. On the other hand, Child labour in tobacco farming remains a blatant violation of fundamental human rights by tobacco industry. Children as young as 5 years old are involved in tobacco farming and are more vulnerable to poisoning from pesticides, fertilisers and other injuries. Pakistan is bound under United Nations Convention on the 'Rights of The Child' and International Labour Organisation Convention to take immediate and effective action to prohibit and eliminate child labour.

Hazrat Jamal, another farmer said that tobacco cultivation is labour intensive and all the members of a family are involved in its cultivation and afterward drying in furnace. "Therefore", he pleaded, "we need those alternate where the same cultivation model can be applied." Ashfaq, Program.

Manager Community Development Organisation (CDO) which is working with tobacco growers for alternative tobacco crop says that tunnel farming is the answer as under it a farmer can cultivate through out the year and his whole family is also involved. He informed that there have been successes in tunnel farming and many tobacco farmers have opted for alternative safe farming. He also said that raising support price for tobacco is not an answer to the issue as raising price will give more incentive to farmers to grow tobacco which jeopardise the food security as farmer will not be growing wheat or vegetable.

Tobacco growers of Swabi (Khyber Pakhtunkhawa) demand government to intervene, devise and support global, national and local funding mechanisms to assist tobacco farmers to reduce their economic reliance on tobacco and move towards a healthy alternative of tobacco crop. It is evident from different researches that replace of tobacco with healthy food crops could feed up to 20 million people and reducing the world's current 28 million undernourished people to 8 million.

Pakistan Tobacco Board which is a body to support tobacco farmers is unfortunately promoting and supporting tobacco companies rather than tobacco growers. "Our backs are against the wall, the tobacco industry, the Pakistan Tobacco Board and Government doesn't seem to understand the importance of human factor, multinational companies and Pakistan Tobacco Board are exploiting tobacco growers" stated tobacco growers of Swabi while criticising the policies of Pakistan Tobacco Board and sharing their woeful plight.

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