Mohammed Madai - Should the Government of Tanzania Ban Tobacco?: the Hard Answers

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World no tobacco day (WNTD) is the day which is observed around the world in every year on May 31. This day is intended to encourage a twenty four (24) hours practice of stopping from all forms of tobacco consumption around the whole world.

The day is also intended to draw attention to the widespread of tobacco use and to negative health effects which currently lead to nearly six (6) million deaths each year worldwide, including six hundred thousand (600,000) deaths of non smokers being exposed to second hand smokers. The member states of World Health Organization (WHO) created WNTD in 1987. This paper explores the significance of WNTD to modern Tanzania.

Tobacco is the cash crop that is cultivated in different parts of Tanzania such as Tabora region, Chunya district etc. The main product of tobacco is cigarette. In Tanzania, the main manufacturer of cigarette is Tanzania Cigarette Company (TCC). Tanzania also imports cigarette from other countries. The majority of cigarette smokers are men, while a small percentage of smokers are women.

Tobacco is very important to the economy of Tanzania. That is why there is always a dilemma in banning tobacco. While tobacco contributes to the national income, it is obviously harmful to the health of tobacco consumers. The following passage extracted from IPP Media (2012) explains this:

Ministries there concur that it would be suicidal to ban the tobacco crop and instead more time is needed to assess the impact of tobacco farming and gradually engage in cultivation of alternative crops. Also tobacco contribution to national economy is huge (enormous), leading earner of foreign exchange among all traditional cash crops, collecting over US Dollar two hundred million (200) per year, employs hundreds of thousands of people directly and indirectly. Chunya member of parliament (MP) Victor Mwambalaswa said the only reliable source of income in the district is tobacco, adding that it supports the employment of around twenty thousands (20,000) people so no one would do any effort to sabotage it. In 2006, ninety (90) billion Tsh paid by Tanzania Cigarette Company (TCC) to Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA) and the TRA
declared that Tanzania Cigarette Company as the best tax payer in the country for 2006.

Showing how this crops means to Tanzania government there is Tobacco Industry Act 2001 (Act no.24 of 2001) to establish the Tanzania Tobacco Board to provide the regulations, improvement and development of the tobacco industry and the matters related thereto.

The above shows the contribution of tobacco to the national economy. But the fact in issue is whether the tobacco is important or not important to Tanzania government and its citizens as far as social welfare is concerned. The decision will depend on the weighing of the tobacco effects against the tobacco profit to the lives of Tanzanians today and future generation.

Starting with the profit of tobacco crops, as stated before the Tanzania government is earning a lot of money from tobacco paid as a tax. In that sense, the government has been showing a unique appreciation to the crop and those who are dealing with it, including the Tanzania Cigarette Company (TCC) contributes nicely to economy of Tanzania.

Also we have seen how the tobacco cultivation contributes to the employment of Tanzanians from different places and positions as stated by the Member of Parliament (A. Mwambalaswa) from Chunya. He identified tobacco as the main source of income in the district and stressed that it would be sabotage to the people in the area if the crop is banned. Tobacco cultivation helps farmers financially as well as obtaining basic needs and welfare such as food, clothes, education to the children and development. The benefits do not end to the farmers. Also the agents buying the tobacco from the farmers increase the number of the people employed in the tobacco industry. Moreover, apart from farmers and agents, other people are employed by Tanzania Tobacco Board and Tanzania Cigarette Company. That is as far as direct employment is concerned. Other people are indirectly employed in the tobacco industry. These include wholesalers and retailers of cigarettes.

In general there are three things we, as a country, profit from tobacco: national income, employment and personal enjoyment for consumers.
However, there are negative effects of tobacco and its products and the corresponding habits.

Smoking of cigarettes by the teenagers has caused many conflicts in the families. When young boys/girls, start smoking their habits change as well. Most of them become rude, and sometimes thieves due to the lack of money for buying cigarettes. Stealing of domestic items by these teenagers drop family income and creates family conflicts and, to some extent, societal conflicts. The latter occurs when the teenagers start stealing from neighbours. This may also cause rejection of such teenagers by the family or society.

So tobacco spoils the behavior of teenagers and increases poverty and societal conflicts. It was estimated that most Tanzanians are living under (1) US dollar. In a minimum approximation, a normal smoker can smoke ten cigarettes for twenty four hours (one day). Ten cigarettes cost two thousands Tanzanian Shillings (Tshs 2000/=) which is equal to Tanzanian Shillings Seven Hundred, Twenty Thousand (Tsh 720,000/=) per year. This amount of money could be used for other important things in the family. Instead it has gone to something which is not necessary to human life but only a damaging substance.

According to estimates, tobacco smoking is the source of ten percent (10%) of all deaths. These figures include second hand smokers. The second hand smoke occurs when tobacco smoke leak into environment and inhaled by people within that area. The male and female smokers lose their life span on average of 13.2 and 14.2 years of life. It approximated that use of cigarette shorten the average of eleven (11) minutes.

Tobacco usage causes some forms of cancer (e.g. lung cancer). Signs and symptoms of lung cancer include coughing up blood, shortness of breath or breathlessness, fever, loss of weight, chest pain, difficulty swallowing, etc. So the main contributor to lung cancer is tobacco smoke. Kidney cancer or renal cancer whose signs and symptoms include blood in the urine, tiredness, high temperature, heavy sweating is also caused by tobacco smoke.

Head and neck cancer whose signs and symptoms are neck pain, bleeding from the mouth, bad breath, earache, painless lacerations in the mouth that never
healed, paralysis of the face muscles are also contributed by tobacco smoke (and alcohol). Bladder cancer causes blood in the urine, other symptoms and signs are pain during urine, frequent urine, feeling urine without be able to do so. Tobacco is said to be main cause of the bladder urinary cancer.

Stomach cancer develops from inside layer of the stomach. It has no specific symptoms in the early stage, but at advanced stage the symptoms are indigestion, loss of appetite, weakness, vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, bleeding and vomiting blood, and having blood in the stool. Tobacco smoking increases risks to stomach cancer.

Liver cancer is originated in the liver and its signs and symptoms are sweating, abdominal pain, weight loss, liver enlargement, back pain, fever, and the decrease of the amount of red blood cells. The risk of getting stomach cancer is higher among tobacco smokers compared to non smokers/ previous smokers.

Moreover, leakage of tobacco smoke into the environment causes several short responses within the heart and blood vessels. Within a minute, a heartbeat begins to rise. Tobacco smoke brings its negative effects by reducing the blood’s ability to carry oxygen and the conditions can become permanent with long term use of cigarettes.

Apart from health problems, tobacco can cause psychological problems. People use to smoke so as to calm their stress. Unfortunately they relax for a while and later on the stress comes over and over different to the expectation. Hence, instead of calming the stress, they become frequent smokers (chain smokers).

Tobacco smoking has negative effect to a pregnant woman as it may cause miscarriage. It has been reported that smoking tobacco for female has been a risk to the pregnancy since it has come to be huge reason behind miscarriage.

Tobacco can cause impotence. It is said that too much usage of tobacco for men causes impotence or sexual weakness. This may, in turn, bring conflicts in the marriage as female spouses may establish sexual relationship with other men to satisfy themselves. The situation of having a relation with other people
causes very big problem within the societies such as divorce. Breaking of marriages further causes improper care of children leading to street children.

Also having unprotected sexual relationship with different men causes sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea and HIV/AIDS. These diseases may cause deaths. Deaths leave children as orphans. We have seen how orphans suffer in Tanzania particularly due to abandonment by other relatives who might be appointed to take care of them. Once they miss parental care these children simply go to the streets and join other street children. In the worst case scenarios, these children become criminals.

Upon weighing the advantages and disadvantages of tobacco, one may come to the conclusion that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Worst still, the negative effects of tobacco touch not only primary consumers but also secondary “consumers”. To be affected by tobacco one need not necessarily smoke it. A non-smoker may still be affected by tobacco. This is because tobacco smokes are every place waiting for you to inhale them.

According to the details on the effects of tobacco smoking as explained above, I agree and support this World No Tobacco Day (WNTD) which is very important to our country in the sense of government and normal citizens.

I would like to discuss on what should be done by citizens and the government. People should consider the effects of tobacco smoking and avoid the usage of it. Also severe sanctions should be imposed against those who smoke in public, if it is restricted. The Government should strictly prohibit smoking in public.

I personally do not agree that “the ban of the tobacco crop would be suicidal”. This is because, tobacco is “genocidal”. The usage of tobacco will end up killing Tanzanians in great numbers. There cannot be a nation without people. The cultivation of tobacco is not accidental; it is something which is done deliberately and systematically. If that system end up killing huge number of our people and government is aware of that but accepts it, why would I not say that our government accepted the system of destruction of part of its own population.
If the government is really needs to protect its people, it must not consider much what is earned from the tobacco, instead it must prioritize human health. A nation can only be built by people who are physically and mentally fit. Therefore the government should promote the cultivation of an alternative crop instead of tobacco. If people persist in cultivating tobacco, the government should not subsidize them or assist them in supplying fertilizers and seeds etc. The government should also increase tax to tobacco products. This will rise up the price of cigarettes and related products. This may have the effect of inducing more people to drop the smoking habit.