Despite cigarette consumption dropping globally, their manufacture is still one of the world’s most profitable industries. For many farmers, tobacco cultivation is a vital source of income. One big problem – much of the labour is carried out by children.

Text by Mark Rowe   Cartography by Benjamin Hennig
Child Labour

The International Labour Organization (ILO) states that ‘not all work done by children should be classified as child labour that is to be targeted for elimination Children’s or adolescents’ participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling, is generally regarded as being something positive’. Negative forms of child labour therefore occur ‘when they are either too young to work or are involved in hazardous activities that may compromise their physical, mental, social or educational development’, as UNICEF states in its assessment of the issue. This cartogram uses UNESCO data to highlight where the phenomenon is most widespread, and how it relates to the number of children in each country. The map is proportional to the number of children aged 5 to 17 years in each country, while the colours indicate the prevalence of child labour in each country.

The majority of child labour takes place in agriculture (58.6 per cent of child labour according to ILO estimates. The cartogram also demonstrates that in absolute numbers, Asia and the Pacific play an equally prominent role. And while there is a lack of data for the wealthiest parts of the world, including China, child labour is still an issue in upper- and middle-income countries with the ILO estimating 12 out of 168 million child workers being in these countries.

The tobacco industry is estimated to be worth $23.8bn to Indonesia in 2019. Two cigarette manufacturing businesses are among the top ten largest Indonesian companies, in all there are up to 300 cigarette producers. Production, which was 336bn cigarettes in 2015, is projected by the Industry Ministry to rise to 502bn by 2020. Despite these high figures, those at the bottom of the chain, the tobacco growers, endure with very little income. Accordingly, to make any kind of profit – or simply to eke out what is effectively a subsistence existence – they have little choice but to turn to their children to pick the tobacco leaf.

YOUTH WORKERS

Child labour is an unpleasant concept, yet in Indonesia (along with more than 100 other countries) it is combined with one of the world’s most reviled industries. Indonesia, the fifth-largest tobacco producer globally, has more than half a million tobacco farms. Most are small, family-run plots, where children often work alongside their parents and neighbours, harvesting and carrying tobacco leaves and preparing them for curing.

Agriculture, including tobacco growing, is the sector with the most child labour according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The inescapable fact, says Human Rights Watch (HRW), is that many of the world’s most popular brands of cigarettes contain tobacco collected by vulnerable child workers.

Tobacco farming is known for its widespread use of child labour, says Jenny Haraldsson Molin, a spokesperson for Swedwatch, a Swedish organisation that monitors the social and business impacts of companies in developing nations. Over the past five years, Swedwatch and other human rights groups have documented children working on tobacco farms in countries such as Bangladesh, Brazil and Zimbabwe, India and Indonesia. In its report Smokescreens in the tobacco supply chain, which focuses on Bangladesh, Swedwatch identified children as young as ten spraying pesticides, watering plants and harvesting leaves.

The precise number of children involved in the tobacco industry is unknown but is thought to be in the tens of millions. More than 152m children are engaged in labour, 71 per cent of them in agriculture, ranging from tobacco to the cotton and sugar cane sectors. ‘In countries where tobacco growing is important, child labour is a significant problem,’ says Benjamin Smith, senior specialist on child labour for the ILO.

You would be mistaken to think that this a problem confined to developing nations. HRW says that in the United States, the world’s fourth-largest tobacco
May 2019

SMOKING TRENDS

One of the lines of attack when it comes to addressing child labour in the tobacco industry is to reduce consumer demand. According to a 2018 WHO report on global smoking trends, more than half of the world’s nations are succeeding in reducing tobacco demand and thereby reducing tobacco-related diseases and deaths.

The prevalence of tobacco smoking appears to be decreasing in almost all regions, except the Eastern Mediterranean where the prevalence is projected to increase from 33.1 per cent in 2010 to 36.2 per cent in 2025.

Despite a steady reduction in smoking globally, tobacco still kills more than seven million people each year. The WHO estimates that 20.2 per cent of the world’s population aged ≥15 years were current smokers in 2015, indicating that smoking rates have decreased by 6.7 per cent globally since 2000.

Particular to the tobacco sector is Green Tobacco Sickness, caused by handling tobacco leaf. Children are especially vulnerable to nicotine poisoning because of their size, and because they are less likely than adults to have developed a tolerance to the stimulant. ‘This affects children more than adults because they have more skin relative to body weight,’ explains Smith. Handling dried tobacco has been linked to respiratory symptoms such as coughing, sneezing, difficulty breathing and tightness in the chest. The long-term effects of nicotine absorption through the skin have not been studied, but public health research on smoking suggests that nicotine exposure during childhood and adolescence may have lasting consequences on brain development.

THE ROOT CAUSES

Reprehensible as child labour is, addressing its use on tobacco farms requires the need to unpick the underlying social and economic problems faced by countries in which it happens. ‘Child labour does not simply occur randomly but is a direct result of poor working conditions,’ says Mischa Terzyk, a spokesperson for the Framework Convention Alliance (FCA), an umbrella group of NGOs engaged in the World Health Organization’s overarching tobacco control programme.

‘You get paid what the big producers want to pay you,’ he adds. ‘Often, farmers are struggling financially or are so desperate to meet quotas that they fall back on the labour of children. But every parent would prefer to send their child to school rather than send them to the fields and expose them to the dangers of tobacco farming. What we need is for people to be paid a living wage and to transition to alternatives.’

At the hub of this approach is a recognition that, given the importance of any kind of income to poor communities, banning child labour overnight won’t solve anything. ‘The issue is not child labour per se,’ says Marta Otañez, cultural anthropologist and assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Denver. ‘We need to shift the landscape and look at how tobacco companies create the pressure that makes families feel they have no choice but to take their kids out of school and into the field.’ Otañez speaks from first-hand experience.

Although human rights treaties stipulate that children under the age of 15 should be protected from working conditions that are likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Yet, according to the NGO Swedwatch’s investigations, interviewees testified that children were engaged in hazardous tasks exposing them to green tobacco sickness, tobacco dust and smoke from kiln drying. They were also said to be working excessive hours including working at nights. Teachers stated that children of poor farmers were often absent from school during tobacco harvesting and processing periods and that when these children did attend, they were tired and far behind with their studies.

‘I can assure you the work they do is proper,’ says Professor Drope of the American Cancer Society. ‘I’ve seen it first-hand. I’ve had mothers tell me their kids are good at tying the bundles of leaf together because they have small hands – but that puts them in direct contact with it.’

Brazil, the world’s second-largest tobacco producer, barred children under 18 from any work with tobacco in 2008 and established penalties for child labour violations – not just for farmers, but for the companies purchasing their leaf. Human Rights Watch says that law enforcement authorities are underfunded so compliance is variable.

On the other hand, British American Tobacco, on its website, says: ‘In the case of tobacco farming, the reality of rural agricultural life in many parts of the world means certain kinds of work can play a formative, cultural, social and familial role for children. Where local law permits, we consider it acceptable for children of between 13 and 15 years of age to help on their families’ farms provided it is light work, and does not hinder their education or vocational training.’

producer, weak labour laws and regulations allow the hiring of children as young as 13 to work unlimited hours on farms of any size – including in tobacco fields – as long as they don’t miss school. As such, US children can be working 12-hour days in extreme heat, topping or harvesting tobacco plants.

‘Child labour is absolutely, unequivocally, a major issue in the tobacco industry,’ says Professor Jeffrey Drope, scientific vice president for economic and health policy research at the American Cancer Society. ‘The industry is structured to perpetuate poverty and that drives the child labour. It’s not nuanced – they are poor working conditions,’ says Mischa Terzyk, a local human rights advocacy group.

‘In the case of tobacco farming, the reality of rural agricultural life in many parts of the world means certain kinds of work can play a formative, cultural, social and familial role for children. Where local law permits, we consider it acceptable for children of between 13 and 15 years of age to help on their families’ farms provided it is light work, and does not hinder their education or vocational training.’
experience: he has studied tobacco industry exploitative practices at the farm-level in Malawi and other tobacco growing countries. Much of his work has been published in the form of digital storytelling, involving striking three-minute autobiographical videos of tobacco farmers and their families.

The risk of intervention is that if tobacco cultivation stops children may simply migrate to cities, where they will almost certainly enter into other forms of poverty. ‘The goal is to make rural communities interesting and attractive places to live,’ says Smith. ‘The risk is that young people growing up on a farm see what life has in store for them and say “no thanks”’. They move into cities and that threatens the long-term sustainability of the community.’

Across the world, 60m people work in the tobacco industry, 40m of them in leaf cultivation and processing. ‘If you demand people stop using child labour immediately that will just worsen household poverty,’ says Smith. ‘So the conversation needs to be focused on education for the child and decent work for adults. No country has ever developed off the back of child labour.’

Smith cites the example of Malawi where, in tobacco-growing districts, more than 60 per cent of children work on farms. ‘Child labour puts the development and health of the next generation at risk. Children are not able to have a normal childhood and develop as they should, it has a serious and negative impact on their education. They are more prone to drop out of schooling before they have even completed primary education. Tobacco child labour perpetuates poverty. When they grow up they will be poorly paid and work in the informal economy. The productivity gap that grows from that is huge.’

But, says Smith, the issue is more nuanced than explaining away the issue by blaming it on poverty. ‘You have to ask why it is that tobacco farmers have inadequate incomes that leads to them using children? They are generally smallholders who are not able to generate enough income to pay adults. The economics don’t add up!’

One of the problems is that, like palm oil, tobacco is mostly grown as a monoculture on hard soil, says the FCA’s Mischa Terzyk. ‘With the use of water and pesticides, farmers get locked into a cycle. It’s a problem throughout the whole sector. It’s not just about working below a living wage, it’s about living below a minimum wage.’

Terzyk feels that international regulations such as the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control are great tools, but that implementation on the ground is lagging behind. ‘You need to continue developing policies in tobacco control and help farmers with upfront investment. These farmers are farmers first of all, not only tobacco farmers – they are doing it to make a living.’

**CULTURAL NORMS**

Other compounding factors make the use of child labour a logical economic action. ‘You can have an inadequate education system, poor quality education, long distances between schools, those can all prompt families to push their children into labour’, says Smith. ‘They face a lack of social services – the basic protections that would otherwise enable you to do without child labour just aren’t in place.’

Solutions need to be flexible and range from funding to improve the education systems, running skills training for older children and boosting household incomes. ‘Policies that have proved critical are inclusive education and social protection and cash transfers, so that if a crop fails there is a safety net,’ says Smith. ‘Informal education, such as distance learning and teaching via radio, is also important, as is a flexibility in approach. ’If you have a 12-year-old who has hardly ever been in school, putting him into his grade class is not going to be a success,’ Smith adds. ‘You need to have a flexible approach that allows him to catch up.’

Resistance to these approaches is not uncommon. ‘You have to engage in these discussions head-on,’ says Smith. ‘But you don’t get anywhere if you just walk into a community waving an ILO convention on child labour in the air.’

‘Communities do say “this is the way things have always been and the way they shall always be”, there is resistance to pulling children out of work. We have to base our response on evidence. For every $1 invested in education, you get $9 back in terms of a productive workforce, as well as savings in health and from other social costs involved in child labour.’

Such an approach requires intensive work at the grassroots level, whereby traditional village leaders are informed about the issues; and, says Otáñez, ‘at the district level you need personnel to go out and check that laws are being enforced’. Professor Drope sees merit in this approach. ‘I hate to say it but we have just got to slog it out. We have to go into these countries, have these conversations and explain that they could do better with other economic endeavours.’

Fieldwork conducted by Drope and colleagues shows that farmers who have switched from tobacco to other crops see incomes rise by 25 per cent. ‘Tobacco farming is so labour intensive that when they move away from it, they free up household time for other economic opportunities,’ he says. ‘The farmers know they don’t want their kids on the farm.’
**IMPORRTANCE OF TOBACCO**

- According to Human Rights Watch, tobacco is Zimbabwe’s most valuable export commodity, generating $933.7m in 2016. Tens of thousands of small-scale farmers, and thousands of hired workers rely on tobacco cultivation for their livelihoods. Yet, HRW says the government of Zimbabwe is failing to meet obligations to protect children’s rights. In a 2018 report, anthropologist HRW interviewed 125 small-scale tobacco farmers and hired workers, including children or former child workers. Most said they had experienced at least one symptom consistent with acute nicotine poisoning – nausea, vomiting, headaches, or dizziness. Almost no one had ever heard of nicotine poisoning or received information about how to protect themselves. HRW has called on companies sourcing tobacco from Zimbabwe to ensure they were not buying a crop produced by child labour.

Several companies have adopted new policies or strengthened existing ones to prohibit suppliers from allowing children to do dangerous tasks on farms. Nearly all major global tobacco companies say they have detailed human rights due diligence policies in place. HRW says that most tobacco companies contact new suppliers to ensure children are protected from performing most tasks in which they have direct contact with green tobacco, something that it describes as a significant step toward preventing children from health hazards such as nicotine poisoning. However, HRW says it has found cases where children are not protected from all contact with tobacco, including handling dried tobacco. ‘The companies do make nominal efforts – they do plant trees and build schools and bus shelters. But they do not address the pressures they create,’ say UoC’s Otarte. More perniciously, he argues, they have established a status quo that suits them perfectly. ‘The tobacco companies influence discussions on legislation. Many of these companies have had an in-country presence for more than 100 years, they have well-oiled machines that allow them to access low-cost tobacco’.

**PUBLIC POSITIONING**

What about the tobacco companies? In contrast to other malignated industries, such as nuclear power and GM technology, they pursue a media profile on the issue, positioning themselves as commendably candied, acknowledging that child labour exists and – above all – being eager to highlight what they are doing about it. Their public relations strategies are polished and slick; many have detailed documents freely available online that will tell you how they are addressing child labour. They have improved their tobacco labour practices in our supply chain because we believe it is the right thing to do,’ says Japan Tobacco International, meanwhile British American Tobacco points out that, in 2017, it developed a new operational standard on child labour prevention. ‘We have developed a comprehensive approach to addressing child labour wherever we operate,’ says Philip Morris International. Simultaneously, they emphasise the benefits from tobacco farming and state that the vast majority of findings by NGOs are not representative of reality.

Some of what ECLT says could equally come from the mouths of those in NGOs and anti-cancer charities. But there is one difference: ECLT is entirely funded by the tobacco industry, something which the majority of campaigners says invalidates their views. Jambulatov’s perspective is different: ‘we have this unique role, with one leg in the public sector and one in the private sector.’ She indicates that tobacco is far from the only farming sector that has a problem with child labour. ‘In some areas the tobacco industry is the only one taking action. We are trying to be as transparent as possible.’

The FCA, however, is dismissive of ECLT’s approach. Terry says that tobacco companies, via their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, ‘do just enough to have a fig leaf. CSR activities by tobacco companies may create a little bit of goodwill but, he says, as far as it usually goes, CSR is played up for PR purposes. This behaviour obviously raises the question of why this PR money is not invested into higher wages. The efforts that are made to verify that the chain is child labour-free are inefficient and insufficient.’

The ILO, too, has been criticised for taking money from tobacco companies, consumers – can do more. ‘The acceptance that child labour is something normal for children is changing. ‘The acceptance that child labour is something normal for children is changing. To achieve meaningful change, some blunt truths are going to have to hit home, warns Otañez. ‘Globally we have to recognise the system is flawed – you can’t have industries where the “captains” are swimming around in vast profits while men, women and children wake up hungry, with no rights to a decent bed, hungry.’

**SLOW CHANGE**

Despite the negativity surrounding the issue, Smith is cautiously optimistic. ‘Greater pressures is the only way that the industry is going to take action. We increasingly know what works, we don’t need to start from scratch but it is a matter of political will.’ Like many observers, Smith doubts that the industry will meet the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating child labour by 2025. Others express exasperation at how slowly the wheel seems to turn. ‘It has been like this for years and tolerated and taken advantage of by the industry,’ says Terry. ‘What you are producing in the end is absolutely useless, this is a product that causes cancer. We need to transition to crops that actually benefit people rather than harm them. They [tobacco companies] are as profitable as ever. The leaf price is incredibly cheap. If companies wanted to give farmers a higher price, they could.’