

## Playing with Children's Lives: Big Tobacco in Malawi

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Sickly and malnourished, Kirana Kapito began his working life on a large commercial **tobacco** estate in Malawi's northern region. The farms sell their produce on the country's auction floors directly to international corporations including Limbe Leaf Tobacco, majority owned by the Swiss-registered Continental Tobacco Company and U.S.-based Alliance One Tobacco.

Kirana is one of 250 million children across the world involved in work that is damaging to their mental, physical and emotional development. Some 57 million of these endangered children live in Sub-Saharan Africa. And with an estimated 1.4 million child laborers, the small, southern African nation of Malawi has the highest incidence of child labor in southern Africa, according to the Oslo, Norway-based, FAFO Institute for Applied Social Science.

Kirana was eight years old when he first went to work in the fields. Estate owners transported him and his parents from their home village, Mulanje, along with 45 other families. The truck journey covered more than 1,000 kilometers and ended in the **tobacco** fields in Rumphu in northern Malawi.

Kirana's mother, Jane Kapito, 45, says the family left home seeking a better life. "Four years later, my whole family is still struggling with poverty. My son has to work as hard as everyone else if we have to afford the basic necessities. The money that my husband and I receive from the **tobacco** estate is not enough," she says.

Now 12, Kirana has never been to school. For the past six months, his health has been failing and he can no longer work as hard as he used to. His mother says her little boy is malnourished and therefore contracts different infections easily. The family often goes without a proper meal for up to three days.

"Just in the past two months, Kirana has been afflicted by malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia," Jane Kapito said. "He's my only child and I am so scared of losing him."

This family's struggle is repeated throughout Malawi's **tobacco** industry, where poverty ensures that every member must contribute to the workload.

### Virginia Import Now Main Malawi Export

Malawi's sprawling **tobacco** estates are not only a source of national economic pride, but of lovely pastoral vistas as well. Up close though, the sight of child laborers in the hot fields exposes the ugliness at their core.

Commercial production of **tobacco** in Malawi goes back as far as 1889, when settlers from the U.S. state of Virginia introduced the crop. In those days "foreign masters" forced the native people and their children to work in the farms for little or no pay. Over a century later, this exploitation continues -- with no end in sight.

Increasingly, critics are demanding that the **tobacco** companies take responsibility for ending the abuses. Given their key role in Malawi's economy, they wield significant clout. Malawi derives up to 70 percent of its foreign exchange earnings from agricultural crops, and the **tobacco** industry makes up 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Malawi's exports account for five percent of the world's total **tobacco** exports and two percent of the world's total production.

But the wealth generated by this resource is not spread evenly across the country. The Malawi Tobacco Control Commission (TCC), a local government watchdog for the **tobacco** market, estimates that it takes \$1 for farm workers to produce a kilogram of **tobacco**, which they usually sell at \$.70 for a loss of \$.30 per kilo. Hardworking farmers who cannot make a living turn to child labor. TCC's 2008 campaign is demanding that farmers get a profit at least 15 percent above production costs.

Despite the TCC campaign, farmers and their families are still at risk of losing money on their crops. And this year the farmers' plight may be further exacerbated by heavy rains that are predicted to cut the country's **tobacco** production by about 3 percent.

### Tenant Farmers' Dilemma

Up to two million Malawians, mostly poor, depend on **tobacco** and related industries for their income. Virtually all of the up to 900,000 adult growers are "smallholder farmers, **tobacco** tenants and casual farm workers," according to a 2006 research paper by the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education (CTCRE), an independent center based at the University of California, San Francisco.

Tenant farmers are allocated a plot of land by the estate owner and required to produce a specific yield. The owners loan the tenants inputs including seed and fertilizer and deduct the debt from future profits -- if any.

The owners are also supposed to supply food rations, but when monthly allocations run out, workers and their children go hungry. Many also lack such basic necessities as medication, proper housing and safe drinking water. Not surprisingly, workers on **tobacco** estates and their dependants are among the poorest and most oppressed people in Malawi, according to a survey released last December by the Center for Social Concern, a Catholic organization that monitors the welfare of the people.

A minimum of "78,000 children are working on a full- or part-time basis in the **tobacco** fields, according to the CTCRE study. "Forty-five percent of the child workers are 10-14 years old and 55 percent are 7-9 years old," the study found. Meanwhile, the **tobacco** companies have received nearly US\$40 million in revenues over four years through the use of unpaid child labor in Malawi.

In 1995, the Malawi government, through the Ministry of Labor in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, started drafting a Tobacco Tenancy Labor Bill to regulate the relations and transactions between the tenant farmers and the landlords.

The bill has been taken through a number of revisions but it has not yet been taken to Parliament.

### Supporting Children or Exploiting Them?

Multinational **tobacco** companies are aware of the public relations implications of profiting not only from **tobacco** itself, but doing it through the cycle of poverty and child labor. Tobacco companies in Malawi including Alliance One, Africa Leaf (Malawi) Limited, Premium and British American Tobacco (Malawi) are sponsoring the Eliminating Child Labor in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT). The project, which includes other agricultural industries, is run by Together Ensuring Children Security (TECS), a registered trust set up in 2001 by **tobacco** exporting corporations operating in Malawi: Africa Leaf, Dimon, Limbe Leaf and Stancom Tobacco.



Cartoon by Khalil Bendib

In 2001, ECLT budgeted US\$2 million for a four-year effort to combat child labor. Six years later, in October 2007, the 20 companies within the supply chain of the **tobacco** industry had ponied up somewhat less than \$100,000 of that amount, according to TECS'S corporate newsletter.

The University of California researchers are skeptical of the inherent conflict of interest in having **tobacco** companies influence social policy. They concluded that in Malawi, transnational **tobacco** companies are using child labor projects to enhance their corporate reputations and distract public attention away from how they profit from low wages and cheaply produced **tobacco** .

Others argue that even when useful, the TECS program is a drop in an ocean of poverty. Up to 45 percent of the population is poor, according to the 2007 Malawi Millennium Development Goal (MDG) report. Registered as a Trust under the Trustees Act of Malawi, TECS projects have taken what it calls "a poverty reduction strategy approach" to improve food security, water safety and HIV/AIDS intervention and education.

The trust has built schools, planted trees and constructed shallow wells to address the use of child labor in **tobacco** farming, according to TECS Programs Director Limbani Kakhome.

While not directly undermining child labor, these programs will eventually bear fruit in better social conditions that will diminish the problem, Kakhome said.

"We are also addressing health issues to ensure that the children don't skip school because of illnesses," says Kakhome. Once they stay home because they are ill, they are easily taken up by child labor." It is difficult, he said, to supply the market for child labor once the children are absorbed into the school system, have safe water and are financially secure.

### **Too Little, Too Late?**

It is too late for children like 15-year-old Martha Kalima who dropped out of school at 12 years old to work in the **tobacco** fields. Pregnant at 14, she continued working in the fields until she gave birth. The father was the 16-year-old son of another tenant farmer.

"There is nothing like maternity leave for **tobacco** workers," Kalima said. "No one is entitled to sick leave nor is there transport to hospital. I gave birth at home because it was too late for me to get to hospital."

Martha is back in the **tobacco** fields carrying the baby on her back. Chances are slim that she will return to school.

Some 15 percent of girls and 12 percent of boys drop out of school, according to Malawi government statistics. Around 22 percent of primary school age girls never attend school at all, while 60 percent of those enrolled do not attend regularly.

The TECS corporate newsletter confirms that children with few options are pulled from school. Some are "coaxed from the poverty-stricken homes to work in order to keep body and soul together. They are exposed to hazardous environments where they work long hours and do jobs not befitting their ages and they are often beaten and abused."

That was the fate of 16-year-old Ekari Maliwasa, says she has just returned to her village in the south of Malawi after working for five years in the **tobacco** estates in the northern part of the country.

"My parents took me with them to work in the **tobacco** estates in the north [when I was 11] and I only escaped back to my village two months ago after realizing that I was being abused. I am now staying with my elderly grandmother," says Maliwasa. She says the estate manager beat her whenever he found her resting from the hard work in the **tobacco** fields. Ekari also went without food or drink for long hours, she said, and was not allowed take a break until she had worked for five hours.

### **Enforcement of Labor Standards Difficult**

Maliwasa's treatment, like that endured by many of Malawi's child laborers, violated not only international standards but also legally binding treaties. Malawi is a signatory to a number of conventions against child labor including the 1973 International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 138 which sets a minimum working age of 18, and the 1999 ILO Convention 182 which outlaws child labor.

The country also ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (ILO has set 2016 as the deadline for countries around the world to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.)

Child labor cannot be ended overnight says TECS Executive Director Bobby Maynard. "You can manage the supply chain to a certain degree but you can't control it fully," he says. "The problem is that over 80 percent of **tobacco** is grown with no contracts from the **tobacco** companies -- as such it is difficult to intervene directly."

Tobacco companies note that they are involved in policing child labor violations at estates where they have direct control, and that they subscribe to Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), whose first principle is "no child labor." But their results in curbing the practice have not been impressive.

Relying on British American Tobacco's own internal documents, the University of California study found that, "rather than actively and responsibly working to solve the problem of child labor in growing **tobacco** , the company acted to co-opt the issue to present themselves over as a 'socially responsible corporation' by releasing a policy statement claiming the company's commitment to end harmful child labor practices, holding a global child labor conference with trade unions and other key stakeholders, and contributing nominal sums of money for development projects largely unrelated to efforts to end child labor."

International agencies are also involved. Kusali Kubwalo, communications officer for UNICEF Malawi, said the United Nations has joined Malawi's government and several non-governmental organizations to fight the problem from several fronts.

A national "Stop Child Abuse Campaign" aims to break the silence shrouding all forms of child abuse, including child labor.

"The campaign aims to mobilize leadership and a commitment at all levels to prevent and respond to all forms of abuse," says Kubwalo. "Violations of children's rights take place every day in Malawi and are extensive, under-recognized and underreported."

She insists that Malawi, as a signatory to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is obligated to respect, protect, facilitate and promote the fulfillment of the rights it guarantees.

"This instrument must therefore be translated into concrete legislation, interventions and development programs," says Kubwalo. "Ratification alone is not enough."

*EDITOR'S NOTE:* Since publishing this article, Project Manager and Acting Director of ECLT Foundation, Mr. Alain Berthoud, issued a **response**.