

World No Tobacco Day: WHO urges governments to grow food, not tobacco

Language English



WHO

The harm caused by tobacco reaches much further than what many of us think - besides causing over 8 million deaths from noncommunicable diseases, it's a major driver of global hunger. This year's World No Tobacco Day is urging governments to address this and stop subsidizing tobacco farming.

There are [1.13 billion smokers](#) [1] around the world, and half of them will die from a tobacco-related disease. \$1.4 trillion are lost to healthcare spending and reduced worker productivity. Most of the deaths and years lost to disability attributable to tobacco are due to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), with one in six deaths by NCDs related to tobacco.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

In 2023, a record 349 million people across 79 countries are facing acute food insecurity, including over 30 countries on the African continent. Climate change and poverty are sources of this hunger - so is tobacco. More than three million hectares of land across more than 120 countries are being used to grow deadly tobacco, even in countries where people are starving.

This year on [World No Tobacco Day](#) [2], taking place annually on 31 May, the World Health Organization (WHO) urges governments to stop subsidizing tobacco farming and support food crops that could nourish millions, under the campaign "Grow food, not tobacco". The campaign is accompanied by the launch of a new WHO report which is titled the same.

"Tobacco is responsible for 8 million deaths a year, yet governments across the world spend millions supporting tobacco farms," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "By choosing to grow food instead of tobacco, we prioritize health, preserve ecosystems, and strengthen food security for all."

The ['Grow Food, Not Tobacco' report](#) [3] highlights the ills of tobacco growing and the benefits of switching to more

sustainable food crops for farmers, communities, economies, the environment, and the world at large. It also shows that tobacco is driving hunger in more ways than one - besides occupying valuable arable land, an estimated 1.3 million children globally participate in tobacco farming practices. This causes many children - especially from poor households - to miss school to support their families' tobacco farming. Besides exposing children to harmful pesticides and nicotine, this perpetuates poverty by preventing kids from getting an education. And although the tobacco industry "greenwashes" its farming practices to present them as ecologically sustainable, tobacco growing accounts for about 5% of global deforestation, making it a major contributor to climate change.

"Tobacco is not only a massive threat to food insecurity, but health overall, including the health of tobacco farmers. Farmers are exposed to chemical pesticides, tobacco smoke and as much nicotine as found in 50 cigarettes – leading to illnesses like chronic lung conditions and nicotine poisoning," said Dr Ruediger Krech, Director of Health Promotion at WHO.

The powerful tobacco industry ensures that tobacco keeps on growing by exaggerating its economic benefits. Despite the fact that tobacco production is not an important driver for economic growth, a large number of Parties and signatories to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) continue to provide direct or indirect subsidies for tobacco growing. 182 Parties to the FCTC have committed to ["...promote economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers and growers"](#) [4]. A crucial way that countries can fulfill this obligation is by ending subsidies for tobacco growing and supporting healthier crops.

The Grow Food, Not Tobacco campaign encourages governments to end tobacco growing subsidies and use the savings to support farmers to switch to more sustainable crops that improve food security and nutrition. More specifically, it aims to:

1. Mobilize governments to end subsidies on tobacco growing and use of savings for crop substitution programmes that support farmers to switch and improve food security and nutrition.
2. Raise awareness in tobacco farming communities about the benefits of moving away from tobacco and growing sustainable crops;
3. Support efforts to combat desertification and environmental degradation by decreasing tobacco farming;
4. Expose industry efforts to obstruct sustainable livelihoods work.

WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme support the Tobacco Free Farms initiative that will provide help to more than 5,000 farmers in Kenya and Zambia to grow sustainable food crops instead of tobacco.

By choosing to grow food instead of tobacco, we prioritize health, preserve ecosystems, and increase food security. [Find out more](#) [5] about the harm caused to people and planet by the tobacco growing industry.

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- [2] <https://worldhealthorganizationcreatesend1.com/t/d-l-vltujkl-juqjttill-r/>
- [3] <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240073937>
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