

TOBACCO TAXES THE ENVIRONMENT

While the health damage caused by smoking is well known, the environmental costs of tobacco-growing are rarely considered. Deforestation, erosion and decimation of endangered plant species are part of the price Uganda is paying.

Worried by plummeting coffee earnings, Uganda's cash-strapped government has embraced tobacco exports as source of jobs and tax revenue. But the industry is already responsible for a host of environmental problems in the East African nation.

Unlike many other producing countries, Uganda uses wood rather than coal or oil to fire the furnaces that cure the crop, a practice which has led to widespread deforestation.

The most striking effect of tobacco growing is the near depletion of both natural and planted forests, according to a recent study commissioned by the panos Institute which focuses on the West Nile district, where 70% of Uganda tobacco is grown.

Planted forests, which covered 7,225 hectares in the early 1970s, have been reduced to 3,000 hectares as replanting fails to keep up with felling for wood fuel. Some valleys have been left with only relics of their former forests.

Endangered tree species are threatened by the indiscriminate clearing. Among these are the *Butyrospermum afzaria*, the khaya (known locally as "tido") and the shea butter tree, whose seeds produce cooking oil used throughout northern Uganda. Termorinds trees have also been felled, depriving local people of pods and beans that formed a part of their diet.

Ugandan law does not permit such trees to be cut down without written permission from the country's top forest conservation official. But the Department of Forestry - hampered by corruption, poor pay, low morale and obstruction by local authorities — has been unable to enforce the rule.

In fact, severe deforestation in West Nile led the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to classify the district a "wood deficit zone". The worst affected area

is Maracha county, which former district administrator Francis Wanyina describes as an environmental disaster. "If nothing is done in the next five years," he warns, "Maracha will be a desert."

The report says deforestation has caused wells and streams to dry up, forcing women and children to walk farther in search of water for agricultural and domestic use. Deprived of plant cover, fertile topsoil has been washed away in the central and northern parts of the district, leaving an unproductive, sunbaked hard pan wasteland. Consequently, farmers complain of falling soil fertility and reduced crop yields.

Attempts to reforest the region have been feeble; most get bogged down in paperwork. In 1990, the tobacco industry planted less than half of a targeted 600 hectares of eucalyptus trees.

Deforestation seems bound to continue. As John Atibuni, secretary-manager of the West Nile Tobacco Union, explains:

"There are no immediate substitutes for wood fuel in curing tobacco because, unlike Zimbabwe, Uganda lacks the technology to use coal or oil for the process."

The government of President Yoweri Museveni seems keen to expand the tobacco industry as a source of government revenue, export earnings and employment, despite the environmental costs.

Says Wanyina, government representative in the district until last May: Even if the World Health Organization and environmentalists were to convince me of the health and environmental hazard, I would still be reluctant to recommend a demotion of tobacco. At least they must convince me that money to the people and the treasury'

Crispus Kiyonga, finance minister until earlier this year, also argued that revenue from tobacco and alcoholic beverages was essential to recapitalise other sectors of the economy and to provide employment.