
Report on the public hearing on agricultural diversification and alternative crops to tobacco for the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control 26 February 2007, Brasilia

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. On 26 February 2007, WHO, acting as the interim secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (pursuant to Article 24.2 and in accordance with decision FCTC/COP1(10)), held a one-day public hearing on agricultural diversification and crop alternatives to tobacco in Brasilia. This hearing took place one day before the first meeting of the ad hoc study group on alternative crops, following decision FCTC/COP1(17) taken by the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention in accordance with Article 17 of the Convention. Since the meeting of the study group was open only to experts from Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the public hearing was planned in order to ensure that all viewpoints were represented at the event.

2. Participants from around the world, including representatives of public and private-sector organizations and institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and tobacco farmers and workers associations, as well as the tobacco industry,¹ were invited to transmit written submissions and to deliver oral testimonies presenting their views for discussion during the one-day hearing.

3. The interim secretariat received 39 submissions before the deadline of 20 February 2007, and the submissions were immediately made accessible for public scrutiny on WHO's web site.² Another two statements submitted by participants from Brazil were added to the interventions made during the hearing.

4. The public hearing was opened by a representative from the WHO Brazil Office, Dr Fernando Rocabado; the President of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Ambassador Juan Martabit; the Coordinator of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control Office, Tobacco Free Initiative, WHO, Dr Douglas Bettcher; the Acting Regional

¹ Article 1(e) of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control: "'tobacco industry' means tobacco manufacturers, wholesale distributors and importers of tobacco products".

² All submissions are accessible on WHO's web site, at:
http://www.who.int/tobacco/framework/cop/events/public_hearings_brazil/en/index.html.

Adviser for Tobacco Control in the WHO Region of the Americas, Dr Vera da Costa e Silva; and Dr Tania Cavalcante, Coordinator of the Executive Secretariat of the National Commission on FCTC Implementation/Instituto Nacional de Câncer (INCA), Ministry of Health, Brazil. In addition to those listed above, the panel comprised officials from the Government of Brazil and WHO officials from headquarters. Dr Bettcher chaired the meeting.

5. Altogether, 19 speakers took the floor, including representatives of tobacco growers and their associations, tobacco control organizations, governmental departments, academic and research bodies and antismoking organizations, as well as organizations representing consumer protection issues, public health issues, gender and women's issues, children's issues and socio-environmental issues. Résumés were presented by a member of the interim secretariat in the case of submissions for which a speaker had not been identified or following the request of submission authors not able to attend the hearing.

6. The public health community provided 20 submissions. In addition, 11 submissions came from growers' associations, three from governments, five from the tobacco industry and two from joint government/grower initiatives, as well as seven from international organizations/institutions. In total, the submissions represented 14 countries.

7. The hearing was broadcasted live on the web site of the Ministry of Health of Brazil and three questions from the public were sent by e-mail and responded to by the panel.

SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSIONS

8. The present section makes a summary of the different submissions and discussions made during the hearing.

9. Among the options put forward by tobacco growers, some supported diversifying crops while maintaining some tobacco output, and some indicated that future crop diversification, for example, in the field of biofuels, may produce desirable outcomes. Although some tobacco growers claimed that past attempts at crop diversification had failed, others noted success with food and income crops, while acknowledging that alternative crops and agriculture required extensive investment to accomplish the various transitions. It was noted that programmes for crop diversification should incorporate the knowledge of local communities. Tobacco growers also indicated that incentives for crop diversification would be more successful than crop limitation mandates.

10. Many tobacco growers cautioned against sudden shifts to alternative crops, arguing that millions of people are employed in tobacco cultivation and sudden shifts would lead to increased unemployment and poverty.

11. A major concern for tobacco growers was the replacement of tobacco with an equally lucrative crop because of the high return on tobacco crops, the ability to grow tobacco in otherwise agriculturally inhospitable soils and climates and the lack of assured markets for alternative crops.

12. Given that their livelihood was at stake, growers highlighted that their presence in the discussions of the study group would be very important. Growers' associations stressed the importance of involving growers in all discussions at the national level for policies that would have an impact on their occupation. Some growers' associations complained that they had been left out of the negotiations of the WHO Framework Convention and that only public health officers were involved in the pre-negotiation and negotiation of the Convention. WHO and officials from the Brazilian

Government noted that in fact multisectoral participation in the negotiations, at the intergovernmental, regional and national meetings, was strongly encouraged and very well implemented in the case of many countries.

13. Some nongovernmental organizations argued against providing subsidies to discontinue tobacco growing or compensating farmers for losses sustained because of dropping tobacco. Others indicated that compensation for the voluntary discontinuation of tobacco growing would have a more positive outcome.

14. Several nongovernmental organizations expressed concern regarding tobacco monoculture, claiming that such agricultural practice is financially unstable over time and that it is also environmentally unsound. The concern regarding good agricultural practices and tobacco monoculture was echoed by several groups representing tobacco growers. Some tobacco growers' groups noted that they have been very active in looking for new alternatives to tobacco and in encouraging diversification among tobacco growers.

15. The tobacco industry presentation contended that tobacco provides a high-profit cash crop for growers and creates a stable economy for impoverished regions. Certain groups representing tobacco farmers in developed countries indicated that tobacco farming has increasingly been moved to developing regions and suggested that plans for alternative crops would have a positive influence on their future economic stability.

16. Public health advocates, nongovernmental organizations and some tobacco growers drew attention to the poverty cycle created by debt bondage contracts, as well as health-related risks of tobacco growing. The need to look at food crops as an alternative to tobacco, which also ensures food security, was highlighted by the public health groups. That tobacco is not proving beneficial to small farmers has been echoed by both public health and small farmers associations. Sustainable development needs to be a criteria when looking at alternative crops.

17. There was a difference of opinion regarding the economic benefits of tobacco cultivation, particularly for labourers. As with many growers, the tobacco industry representatives argued that tobacco is a desirable crop because it is highly disease resistant and employs millions of people. Public health officials contended that the price of tobacco is falling and the cost of inputs is increasing, and that workers involved in tobacco cultivation are often very poorly paid, a concern echoed by a number of tobacco growers' groups.

18. Public health advocates emphasized the exploitation of women and child labourers in the farming of tobacco. This problem was reiterated by several growers' groups, and nongovernmental organizations expressed the position that policies relating to tobacco cultivation and crop alternatives must be sensitive to gender issues. Tobacco industry groups claimed that the industry does considerable work to provide guidelines on child labour, crop safety, crop management and pesticides. Several nongovernmental organizations however contended that tobacco companies do not engage in socially responsible corporate practices, leaving farmers without adequate assurances regarding income and employment.

19. Environmental damage caused by tobacco cultivation, including deforestation and the use of pesticides was emphasized by nongovernmental organizations, but was questioned by the tobacco industry as an issue not relevant to or unique to tobacco.

20. Public health advocates argued that policy cohesion was needed within governments, as was greater international cooperation and the prioritization of Article 17 of the WHO Framework Convention.

21. There was a general speech from tobacco industry representatives expressing good will to collaborate in the diversification process. Some of the representatives presented experiences that support diversification and the protection of the environment. In this context, a representative of a public health group raised the contradiction between these sentiments and the attitude of the International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA), in so far as while ITGA claims to support the work of the WHO Framework Convention, as well as diversification in tobacco growing, it expresses different attitudes and statements related to tobacco control and the WHO Framework Convention on its web page¹.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

22. A high degree of interaction from the audience supplemented the issues raised by the different interventions. Questions were raised by the public for each submission and the views of all participants were more extensively expressed. The main issues raised and discussed during the hearing can be summarized as a conclusion in the points below.

23. Extensive research and evidence is still missing about the costs of tobacco growing and the impact on the livelihoods of farmers, as well as the environmental and health impacts. This research needs to be done in comparison with other crops. Also, the arguments of the growers and the tobacco industry that tobacco is the best profitable crop are still not based on strong scientific research. Most importantly, research on possible viable alternatives to tobacco growing needs to be expanded and stimulated by governments, funding agencies and intergovernmental organizations.

24. An important issue clarified to all participants was that the WHO Framework Convention does not aim to phase out tobacco growing. Alternatives to tobacco crops are only explored in preparation of an eventual decrease in demand caused by tobacco control. This will only happen in the long term because, as shown in recent studies and projections, demand for tobacco will still increase in the next 15 years, an increase driven mainly by an increase in population numbers. It is important to note that other market forces – as is the case of northeastern Brazil (which has experienced a decrease in demand for black tobacco) – may lead to a decrease in demand in the shorter term. The apocalyptic scenario of thousands of farmers losing their jobs overnight is therefore not credible. However, the work of the study group aims to help farmers avoid hardship in the future.

25. The work of the study group will be lengthy because the issues of growing, diversification and substitution cannot be resolved in a short period of time. Indeed, it will involve an extensive process of work, research and consultations with different stakeholders and experts in order to reach viable solutions on the issue of farming that coincide with the larger scope of the work of the Conference of the Parties, which is to promote public health.

= = =

¹ From ITGA's web page: "ITGA members benefit from a range of activities undertaken by the association. These include... (s)atisfaction gained from contribution to tobacco growing issues and working with the industry to defend its interests against the global anti-tobacco drive..." Membership Benefits, International Tobacco Growers' Association, 2007 (<http://www.tobaccoleaf.org/membership/index.asp?op=2>, accessed 29 May 2007).