

Lack of transparency, intimidation and pressure marked the WHO FCTC COP10

The tenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) was an inflection point for many issues that the International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA) has been voicing serious concerns for quite some time.

ITGA paid special attention to Brazil's position through its official delegation to COP10. To begin with, there is a lack of coherence in the country's stance. Brazil is the second biggest tobacco producer and the international leader in tobacco exports. As a result, [the socio-economic impact of tobacco](#), especially in the regions where it is grown in the country, has to be taken into account, and only then the complete argument can be fully understood. Unfortunately, the Brazilian official delegation chose to ignore these facts and transmitted a one-sided position during COP10 (*exclusion of important data and facts*).

More concerning to the main tobacco producing and exporting countries is to understand that Brazil's official delegation to COP10 is pushing for the implementation of WHO FCTC guidelines that target cultivation directly, while at the same time completely neglecting the scientific data that proves the inefficiency of such measures and consequently their counterproductive impact.

We are yet to understand the scope of the proposal forwarded by Brazil that was inserted into the official COP10 agenda in the last minute (*lack of transparency in the procedures*). Regardless of the attempts made by the Brazilian Committee which included Brazilian State and Regional deputies requesting full transparency on this specific item, the document was never shared (*lack of transparency in information sharing*). Nevertheless, it was discussed during the debriefing sessions hosted by the head of the Brazilian delegation and Brazil's Ambassador in Panama, Carlos Henrique Moojen de Abreu e Silva. Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, former head of the FCTC Secretariat, who seemed to be leading the conversation inside and outside of COP10, explained in simple words that the goal is not to directly interfere with cultivation but rather advance the environmental conversation within COP10.

This extra item to the meeting's agenda was carefully timed. We need to keep in mind the historical efforts to link the treaty to other United Nations (UN) initiatives with strong private and public push. Ten years ago, the treaty started the approach of relating the arguments with those of the UN Sustainable Development Goals by positioning tobacco production as its main enemy, or at least trying to do so. This time, the agenda goes in line with the negotiations behind the UN plastics treaty which will be finalized by December 2024. This is how the WHO FCTC Secretariat and the thousands of anti-tobacco NGO's around the world work to remain relevant in the global context.

Avoiding Article 17 is also a strategic move. Last October, a toolkit for Article 17 was launched. ITGA studied the document in-depth and found some very valuable insights. After more than fifteen years of this working group's creation, finally some balance in the argumentation

applied can be felt. However, the toolkit goes somehow against the aggressive line celebrated during the World No Tobacco Day. The economically viable alternatives to tobacco growing remain the widest gap in the treaty, simply because none have been identified after all these years. Therefore, this can be considered a failure. Ultimately, it brings no funding due to the high cost of pilot projects which is the only way of proving, in this particular case, the theory behind. So, more years will pass, and we could expect no changes in finding economically viable alternatives to tobacco growing. This means tobacco growers are again left to their own devices with no support from governments, companies and only the theory coming from WHO FCTC.

When it comes to discussions unrelated to health and the environmental impact of tobacco consumption the conversation remains circular. This is due to the exclusion not only of farming expertise but also of the studies that could shed a light into the efforts being put on diversification. This irresponsible approach to deliberately omit extremely relevant information is justified by Article 5.3.

ITGA agrees with the approaches made by countries and regional blocks towards the implementation of WHO FCTC guidelines when it comes to reducing the negative impact of tobacco consumption to public health which is, in fact, a worldwide issue. What is difficult to comprehend is when this goes beyond and attempts to tackle tobacco farming as a way of reducing this impact. Such an approach has proven to be counterproductive.

When discussing such measures, tobacco growing countries should have the opportunity to stand up and defend the important socio-economic contribution that tobacco growing provides to their countries. But the level of pressure and intimidation within the context of COP meetings and discussions is such that it raises to the point of labelling government country delegations to COP with the so-called 'dirty ashtray' awards. More amusing is to learn that there are not public voices denouncing these abusive behaviours.

ITGA, as the global tobacco growers' representatives, observes with concern the impunity applied to using arguments against tobacco farming without providing reliable data. A fresh example is the WHO FCTC claim that 200,000 hectares of land are being cleared every year to grow tobacco when in fact [the harvested area of tobacco has consistently declined in the last decade](#). Such false claims are presented to most of the countries part of the discussions at COP meetings without further details. In addition, this happens in a context of a big disparity in the expertise related to tobacco cultivation as the three leading tobacco producing markets account for [approximately two-thirds of the global tobacco production](#) of all 183 signatories.

Looking at the amount of funding dedicated to run this anti-tobacco endeavour, together with the serious efforts made by countries to send delegations to COP, against the conclusions filtered by the end of the week, it must be very disappointing for countries that spend millions of US\$ in funding an organization that awards them with a 'dirty ashtray'. Unless these concerns are being adequately addressed, we at the ITGA, cannot envision how the important tasks that FCTC has initially sought to achieve can be realistically accomplished.