

Tobacco growers appeal for inclusion in WHO meetings

HARARE

A BODY representing more than 3 million tobacco growers in the world on Wednesday urged a World Health Organization (WHO)-initiated treaty to engage growers when it develop policies that will have huge impact on their livelihood.

President of the International Tobacco Growers Association (ITGA) Francois van der Merwe said at the end of a two-day regional annual meeting in the Zimbabwean capital Harare that tobacco growers were concerned about their continued exclusion from meetings of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) where crucial decisions to regulate the industry are made.

"We don't know what they are going to propose. We are worried because we have not been involved," van der Merwe said, referring to the FCTC's upcoming conference of parties (CoP) meeting in Moscow this October.

According to the WHO, tobacco kills nearly six million people a year. Lung cancer, heart and respiratory diseases are among the top killers caused by smoking. The WHO warns that unless urgent action is taken, smoking-related death toll could rise to more than eight million a year by 2030.

CoP meetings of the FCTC, now with 168 signatories, are held every two years as countries deliberate and endorse detailed measures to finally stem tobacco consumption. Big Tobacco are usually barred from attending CoP meetings as FCTC signatories agree to stay away from any interference of the tobacco interests.

But tobacco is a tricky issue in countries where hundreds of thousands of peasants live on tobacco farming. They might struggle to survive if it were not tobacco as few other cash crops can be as profitable, experts say.

In Africa, it is estimated that there are more than 1.3 million tobacco farmers producing more than 750 million kg of tobacco valued at USD1.3bn. Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi are the major tobacco producing countries.

Van der Merwe said in essence, the FCTC proposals were meant to reduce tobacco consumption and he was concerned about tobacco being excluded from enjoying the benefits of free trade arrangements such as zero tariffs and free market access.

Among others, the FCTC had proposed at its last CoP meeting

in South Korea to ban tobacco promotion bodies, finance and technical assistance to farmers and to decide the time and quantity of tobacco to be grown by the farmers.

Van der Merwe said the ITGA had produced a seven-point declaration in which it calls for reasonable, sensible and evidence-based proposals by the FCTC to regulate the sector.

Eritrea, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe are the only non-FCTC signatories in Africa.

Van der Merwe said tobacco production in Africa was rising recent years due to increased production in Zimbabwe.

Tobacco is one of the biggest foreign currency earners in Zimbabwe. It accounted for 11 percent of the country's gross domestic product in 2013, 61 percent of all agricultural exports and 21 percent of total exports. The sector also employs over 300, 000 workers directly and is estimated to support half of Zimbabwe's 13 million population.

Tobacco output is expected to reach 210 million kilograms this year, the government's tobacco marketing agency said this week. The figure increased from 167 million kg in 2013 and is just slightly below the country's record of 236 million kg. Most of Zimbabwe's tobacco is exported, mainly to China, Belgium, South Africa, Russia, and Sudan.

Despite its importance in supporting the economy, tobacco's harmful nature not unknown to Zimbabweans. Many Zimbabweans shun smoking as a deviant form of behavior.

The irony could not be more exemplified than in a story published by state-controlled media Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation this week. It called on Zimbabweans to produce but not consume tobacco.

"It is very clear tobacco is a dangerous product, yes, we might benefit but let those in other countries smoke it, we can produce it, but not consume it because it will be costly at the end of the day," Deputy Minister of Health and Child Care Paul Chimedza was quoted as saying.

Health officials say the short-term benefits of tobacco are far outweighed by the long term economic drawback resulting from death of the working-age laborers and huge medical bills.

"There are other ways of raising money since the health cost of smoking to a country are very heavy," Health Adviser to the President and Cabinet Timothy Stamps said.