

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Eliminating child labour in Malawi: a British American Tobacco corporate responsibility project to sidestep tobacco labour exploitation

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**Objectives:** To examine British American Tobacco and other tobacco industry support of the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation.

**Design:** Analyses of internal tobacco industry documents and ethnographic data.

**Results:** British American Tobacco co-founded the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT) in October 2000 and launched its pilot project in Malawi. ECLT's initial projects were budgeted at US\$2.3 million over four years. Labour unions and leaf dealers, through ECLT funds, have undertaken modest efforts such as building schools, planting trees, and constructing shallow wells to address the use of child labour in tobacco farming. In stark contrast, the tobacco companies receive nearly US\$40 million over four years in economic benefit through the use of unpaid child labour in Malawi during the same time. BAT's efforts to combat child labour in Malawi through ECLT was developed to support the company's "corporate social responsibility agenda" rather than accepting responsibility for taking meaningful steps to eradicate child labour in the Malawi tobacco sector.

**Conclusion:** In Malawi, transnational tobacco companies are using child labour projects to enhance corporate reputations and distract public attention from how they profit from low wages and cheap tobacco.

Malawi has the highest incidence of child labour in southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> Malawi produces 6.6% of world burley tobacco exports,<sup>2</sup> accounting for over 70% of Malawi's foreign earnings.<sup>3</sup> Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco (BAT) purchase most of Malawi's tobacco from global leaf processing companies Universal Leaf Corporation and Alliance One International.<sup>4–7</sup> Universal and Alliance One, through their subsidiary companies, buy over 90% of Malawi's tobacco at three government-run auction floors (Lilongwe, Mzuzu, and Blantyre-Limbe).<sup>3–8</sup> Philip Morris (PM) is the top purchaser of Malawi's tobacco, with 20% of the company's burley tobacco coming from Malawi.<sup>6–9–10</sup> BAT is the second largest purchaser of Malawi's tobacco,<sup>6</sup> with Malawi producing most of the tobacco for Britain's cigarettes.<sup>11</sup>

In 1998, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) found that, even though the transnational tobacco companies (TTCs) may not be visible in the day-to-day farm operations, there is a clear connection between them and the Malawi tobacco growing sector through the leaf dealers who buy Malawi tobacco for the companies and provide pre-financed seeds and fertiliser for the farmers.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1998, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reported on the widespread use of child labour in the Malawi tobacco sector.<sup>13</sup> Replacing child labour with adults paid the minimum agricultural wage would increase the cost of production by about US\$10 million per year (39 018 tenants<sup>14</sup> × 5 children<sup>1</sup> × 40% children working<sup>15</sup> × US\$0.66 rural daily minimum wage<sup>16</sup> × 198 working days<sup>7</sup>).

Labour and human rights activists started highlighting the extensive use of child labour to grow tobacco in Malawi in 1989.<sup>7–17</sup> The use of sweatshop labour and child labour in Nike and Wal-Mart products was also widely reported during the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>18–20</sup> By 2004, 57% of US consumers said

they used a corporation's reputation as part of their buying decisions.<sup>21</sup> In response, manufacturers developed social labelling, "ethical" investment and sourcing, codes of conduct, and standards certified by independent groups.<sup>22</sup> In 2000, the major TTCs initiated their corporate social responsibility programmes focused on child labour, aimed to position each company as "socially responsible" via public relations campaigns.<sup>23</sup>

BAT co-founded the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT) in October 2000 with the nominal aim of protecting children from harmful agricultural work practices in tobacco growing through research and education.<sup>24</sup> Later, PM and other tobacco industry organisations joined ECLT (table 1), although PM did not play a central role in its development. BAT and PM issued child labour policy statements in 2000<sup>25</sup> and 2002,<sup>26</sup> respectively. These statements expressed a nominal commitment to the United Nations International Labour Organization (ILO) provisions on child labour, but failed to make any changes in the industry's monopolistic leaf buying practices that benefit from child labour.<sup>27–29</sup> Like "youth smoking prevention" programmes promoted by the tobacco industry,<sup>30</sup> ECLT was created to protect BAT's (and later, PM's) corporate image rather than to promote meaningful steps to end child labour.

**Abbreviations:** BAT, British American Tobacco; CECCM, Confederation of European Community Cigarette Manufacturers; CORA, Consumer and Regulatory Affairs; ECLT, Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation; ICFTU, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions; ILO, International Labour Organization; ITGA, International Tobacco Grower's Association; IUF, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations; MSF, Manufacturing, Science and Finance trade union; PM, Philip Morris; TAMA, Tobacco Association of Malawi; TTCs, transnational tobacco companies

**Table 1** Members of Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation, in 2005<sup>24 76</sup>

Type of group	Date joined	Member
Cigarette manufacturers	2001	British American Tobacco (founding member), Philip Morris International, Japan Tobacco International, Scandinavian Tobacco Company, Imperial Tobacco Group
Leaf buying companies	2002	Altadis, Gallaher Group, Philip Morris USA
	2001	Dimon, Standard Commercial Corporation, Universal Leaf Tobacco Corporation
Tobacco industry organisations	2002	Tribac Leaf Limited
	2001	International Tobacco Grower's Association (founding member)
International trade union	2001	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (founding member)
Global development group (advisory role)	2001	International Program to Eliminate Child Labour (a program of the International Labour Organization)

## METHODS

### Tobacco company documents

The creation and operating procedures of the two major tobacco industry document depositories have been previously described.<sup>31–35</sup> Unlike other tobacco document collections, the entire BAT document collection is not yet indexed or online. We used standard approaches to locating and screening documents.<sup>31 33 36</sup> In addition to searching those documents that were available online (at [www.bat.library.ucsf.edu](http://www.bat.library.ucsf.edu)) between November 2004 and December 2005, paper documents contained in 358 boxes totalling an estimated 860 000 pages (2400 pages/box) produced to the US Department of Justice were manually reviewed at a document depository located in Minnesota, USA from March 2003 to April 2005. American tobacco company documents available online (<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>) were searched between July 2004 and December 2005. Online searches of both collections began with the terms “child labor/labour,” “corporate responsibility,” and “Malawi”. Follow-up searches were done with the names of key individuals and organisations and adjacent pages (Bates) numbers.

### Qualitative data

One of the authors<sup>7</sup> (MO) conducted semi-structured interviews in accordance with a protocol approved by the University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board with over 100 tobacco workers, farm authorities, trade unionists, government officials, and corporate executives in Malawi during five visits to Malawi (totalling 16 months) from 1998 to 2003. Informants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the research, knowledge of Malawi's child labour projects and the tobacco sector generally, and their roles in influential organisations relevant to the local and global political economy of tobacco production in Malawi. Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research were used to verify ethnographic information. We triangulated the observations and findings from multiple sources with statements from industry officials, tobacco workers, and other research participants with similar statements from the same individuals and others over time as well as with findings in newspaper stories, published and unpublished reports, archival material, scholarly literature, and corporate literature like tobacco industry websites and international tobacco industry documents.

## RESULTS

### Child labour in Malawi

Virtually all of Malawi's tobacco is cultivated by smallholder farmers, tobacco tenants and casual farm workers, with estimates of the adult workforce ranging from 580 000 to 900 000.<sup>3 7 14</sup> Since we have identified a reliable number of tenants and the tenant category is the most stable job category, we use the tenant category to calculate the number of working children in Malawi. Malawi's tobacco is cultivated by 39 018 tenants.<sup>14</sup> Each tenant family has an average of five children<sup>1</sup> and 40%<sup>15</sup> (78,000) of these children are working on a full or part time basis.<sup>37</sup> Forty-five per cent of the child workers are 10–14 years old and 55% are 7–9 years old.<sup>1</sup> The actual number of children working in Malawi's tobacco sector is much higher because the number of child workers in all economies is underestimated.<sup>1 38</sup> Child labourers in Malawi perform a range of potentially hazardous tasks on tobacco farms, such as clearing fields, making nursery beds, and watering nurseries, uprooting, transporting and transplanting tobacco seedlings and weeding during the second phase; picking, transporting, tying the leaf, picking the dried tobacco and bundling during the last phase.<sup>39</sup>

The tobacco tenancy system in Malawi is partly responsible for child labour and poor working conditions in Malawi.<sup>40–43</sup> Under this system, a tenant farmer agrees to grow tobacco on land provided to him by a landlord and agrees to sell the tobacco to the landlord. A tenant farmer receives seeds, tools, and food supplies from a landlord, who deducts the expenses from the sale price of the tobacco. Landlords prefer to hire an entire household at the price of one farmer.<sup>43</sup> The tenancy system forces tenant farmers to use children in the fields to meet the terms of the labour contract. Interviews with tenants in Malawi by one of the authors (MO) revealed that some landlords prohibit children of tenants living on estates from sending their children to school during harvesting.<sup>7</sup> The lack of decent clothes, the absence of accessible schools near tobacco farms, and the shortage of teachers also prevent children from attending school and keep them in tobacco fields.<sup>1 7</sup> Each year, AIDS/HIV kills 40% of Malawi's teachers.<sup>44</sup>

Malawi's Employment Act of 2000 sets the minimum age of employment at 14 years and Malawi's Constitution protects children “from economic exploitation” that could interfere with their education or development,<sup>45</sup> but the government lacks implementation measures and does not enforce this law.<sup>46</sup> Malawi is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO's Convention No. 182 that bans the “worst forms” of child labour, which includes child labour in growing tobacco.<sup>47</sup> There is no meaningful enforcement of any of these provisions, and child labour is increasing in Malawi.<sup>1 48</sup>

### Labour union pressures tobacco manufacturers to address the use of child labour through film footage of child labourers

In November 1998, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), sought “mutual cooperation” from the Confederation of European Community Cigarette Manufacturers (CECCM) to eradicate child labour practices in Malawi.<sup>49</sup> The IUF, established in 1920, has been a defender of tobacco workers' rights since 1958 when the tobacco workers' unions joined the IUF.<sup>50 51</sup> CECCM is the European cigarette manufacturers' lobbying organisation made up of TTCs, including BAT and PM.<sup>52</sup> CECCM initially denied the existence of child labour in tobacco farming.<sup>53</sup> The Tobacco Association of Malawi (TAMA), the primary tobacco growers' association in Malawi, also told IUF that there were no “child labour problems”.<sup>54</sup>

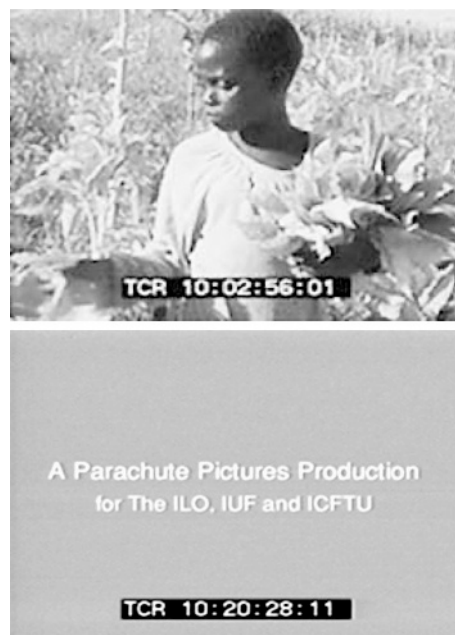
BAT's initial reaction to the "IUF/ILO agenda" on child labour use in the Malawi tobacco sector was to use the International Tobacco Grower's Association (ITGA) to "manage" the issue. ITGA is a front group for the tobacco industry's lobbying activities in the developing world, particularly with regard to alternative crop initiatives and the World Health Organization's tobacco control efforts.<sup>55-61</sup> According to ITGA's website, the ITGA was formed in 1984 as an "independent organization free from manufacturing influence" with the nominal aim of supporting tobacco farmers and representing their specific needs at an international level.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, Shabanji Opukah, international development affairs manager at BAT in the UK, wrote to Chris Proctor, head of science and regulation at BAT in March 1999:

You will notice that I am trying to ensure that we maximize the use of the ITGA in the management of various issues and leverage their global outreach and influence in the tobacco farming sector. This is how we get value for our cash and time contribution [to ITGA]. I would in particular very much like them to delve more into the child labour and WHO [World Health Organization] issues [i.e., the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)] and I am happy that thus far we are leading the debate here and they are co-operating. Otherwise what is the point of having the membership and paying the money?<sup>60</sup>

In an effort to document child labour use in Malawi, the ILO, IUF and ICFTU commissioned UK-based Parachute Pictures to film child labour during the spring 1999 tobacco harvest (fig 1). After IUF told CECCM in February 1999 that a film crew was being sent to Malawi to document child labour in the tobacco farms, CECCM shifted from denial to saying that they were "opposed to paid child labour as a matter of principle, but would want to evaluate very carefully, which actions if any would be appropriately taken by the Industry to effectively reduce the incidence of child labour in tobacco farming."<sup>57</sup> A month later, Opukah reported to BAT's Malawi subsidiary that, "because of the camera crew" CECCM believed that "worry is rightly being expressed by PMI [Philip Morris International] who see themselves as likely to be in the firing line given the volumes they purchase from Malawi."<sup>63</sup>

ITGA unsuccessfully attempted to stop the IUF from sending the camera crew to Malawi.<sup>64</sup> Hallmark PR, the public relations firm retained by BAT and ITGA to, among other things, "prepare rebuttal material" and advise BAT and ITGA on the child labour issue in Malawi,<sup>65</sup> reported to BAT in an April 1999 meeting between Hallmark and IUF General Secretary Ron Oswald. Hallmark reported that Oswald assured them that the film would not be "anti-tobacco", but that if the manufacturers continued to deny child labour in tobacco farming, the IUF would have very strong evidence of its existence despite CECCM's denials.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Oswald made clear that if the TTCs cooperated and acknowledge the child labour problem in Malawi, "the film would be consigned to the archives" and IUF would not "follow the confrontational path unless it feels it has no choice, as a result of denial that child labour in the tobacco industry is an issue".<sup>53</sup>

Oswald also told the UK Manufacturing, Science and Finance trade union (MSF) that, "In any final version of the video I would be willing to recognize their [TTCs] positive role if they indeed play one."<sup>66</sup> The MSF represents manufacturing, technical, and finance employees in public and private sectors and after recent mergers with other unions formed Britain's largest trade union Amicus with over



**Figure 1** The 1999 film prepared by Parachute Pictures for the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), included interviews with Tobacco Association of Malawi members, tenant farmers, Roman Catholic priests supportive of farm workers' issues, and Malawian government officials from the Agricultural and Labour Ministries. Most troubling for British American Tobacco (BAT) was its documentation of children as young as 5 years old cultivating tobacco in Malawi.<sup>1</sup> The film was never used by IUF in any campaign addressing child labour issues. The authors obtained a copy of the film from the filmmaker in 2001; it can be viewed at <http://homepage.mac.com/mgotanez/Malawi/iMovieTheater11.html> (Accessed 1 Feb 2006).

1.2 million members in 2005.<sup>67</sup> In the end, the film, which documented use of child labour and, according to an internal BAT email, was "reasonably balanced until the end when an unhappy tenant farmer provided a bitter summary of conditions",<sup>68</sup> was never part of any IUF education campaign on the use of child labour in tobacco.

#### June 1999 joint statement by the ITGA and the IUF

At one level, IUF's pressuring of CECCM appeared successful. In June 1999, just three months after the IUF filmed child labour in Malawi, IUF and ITGA signed a joint statement, witnessed by the ILO, agreeing in principle to end child labour in tobacco farming.<sup>69</sup> A memo from Hallmark's Tom Watson to BAT's Opukah reported, "In Geneva last Thursday, ITGA and the IUF union (which represents tobacco workers) reached an agreement over child labour policy issues. The document [joint 1999 statement] (attached) is largely the one that I drafted ... All specific references to Malawi, which had been strong in IUF's draft, were deleted."<sup>70</sup> By removing Malawi-specific issues, BAT sidestepped responsibility for its economic benefit from child labour exploitation in Malawi. The final agreement required that ITGA and IUF would "work closely with their members to develop a research programme that covers child labour and the general social and economic standards of tenant farmers and labourers."<sup>69</sup> The statement further called for the development of a best practice in agricultural production in tobacco farming, emphasised children's rights to an education, and pushed for the implementation of a minimum legal age. The fact that the ITGA, rather than BAT and the other TTCs, signed the

agreement with IUF further insulated the TTCs from responsibility for implementing its terms.

### Eliminate Child Labour conference: BAT's venue to launch "corporate social responsibility" plans

BAT, together with IUF and ITGA, hosted the conference "Eliminate Child Labour: Establishing Best Practices in Tobacco Farming" in Nairobi, Kenya in October 2000.<sup>71</sup> The 120 delegates and speakers represented industry organisations, universities, non-governmental organisations, trade unions, global leaf merchants, and other cigarette manufacturers from 14 countries.<sup>74</sup> BAT used the conference as an opportunity for its corporate image public relations goals in the UK.<sup>72</sup> A progress report from Opukah to BAT regional offices a month after the conference also revealed that:

Clearly, the successful launch of the [ECLT] has given us an excellent and rare opportunity to engage with our stakeholders on major platforms around what are today amongst some of the high profile and contentious global issues affecting reputation of international business i.e. human rights and labour standards. The UN, the OECD, the ILO and even the EU are all interested and concerned about these issues... NGOs and other stakeholders are pushing the agenda hard and seem to be winning – recall the recent Nike and Gap exposes on the BBC Panorama programme. *Our partnership with the IUF and ITGA gives us a good opportunity to move to the moral high ground on this particular issue and we would like to make use of it in line with the BAT CORA [Consumer and Regulatory Affairs] strategy for recognition as a responsible tobacco company. This strategy identifies corporate conduct and accountability as one of the six reputation management initiatives. Stakeholder engagement and communication is in this platform.*<sup>73</sup> [italic emphasis added]

BAT's CORA (Consumer and Regulatory Affairs) programme was established in September 1996 with the goal of making BAT "the preferred company to deal with on tobacco-related issues".<sup>74</sup> CORA was concerned with cultivating strong relations with governments and regulators throughout the world and so BAT could support consumers' "freedom of choice" (right to smoke) and ensure "favorable excise tax" regimes.

Opukah told BAT's regional CORA employees that, "Though it may not be on your CORA radar screen now, child labour and all CSR associated issues need to be managed."<sup>73</sup> A BAT presentation entitled "Child labour in the leaf-growing sector" circa 1999 noted that the child labour issue had "the potential to become an issue with sweeping repercussions in the national and international media" and included several highlighted consequences such as "exploitation by the anti-smoking movement".<sup>75</sup> BAT's efforts to "manage" child labour and other social responsibility issues show how the company seeks to control or evade problems of labour exploitation that can harm BAT's corporate reputation. BAT was pleased that it beat PM to the CSR punch:

[I]n their bid to join the partnership on child labour [ECLT Foundation] PM [Philip Morris] did confess to us that they did not even have a policy on child labour. We appear to have beaten them hands down on this one and we should seek to take and enjoy some competitive advantage here even though they will join us as participants [in ECLT].<sup>73</sup>

Beginning in 2002, ECLT launched a two-year project with the Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers' Union of Malawi and a four-year project with a group of global leaf buying firms in Malawi with a total budget of US\$2.3 million to build irrigation schemes, plant trees, and construct shallow wells.<sup>76</sup> Since 2001 the TTC's model of child labour projects developed in Malawi has been applied to programmes in Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, the Philippines, and Kyrgyzstan, and considered for development in Fiji, Indonesia, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>77-78</sup> In 2005 ECLT was developing additional programmes in Mozambique and Mexico.<sup>79</sup> These programmes are similar to the ECLT pilot programme in Malawi, involving school construction and rehabilitation projects, reforestation schemes, workshops and training to educate villagers and farmers on child labour, and clean water projects with shallow boreholes and treadle pumps. None of these ECLT initiatives address the problem of low earnings of adult tobacco workers, or genuinely implement ECLT's stated efforts to improve labour standards<sup>77</sup> and raise "working conditions of the plantation workers".<sup>80</sup>

### Undermining solutions to child labour

ECLT funded two different and competing child labour groups in Malawi. The ECLT funded the Association for the Elimination of Child Labor, and Together Ensuring Children's Security.<sup>79</sup> The Tobacco Association of Malawi created the Association for the Elimination of Child Labor in 2001.<sup>81</sup> Members of the Association for the Elimination of Child Labor included representatives from the Tobacco Association of Malawi, the tobacco farm workers' union, and the global leaf subsidiary companies Limbe Leaf and Stancom/Dimon (now called Alliance One International).<sup>82</sup> The Association for the Elimination of Child Labor received \$200 000 for child labour projects from the ECLT in 2002 for two years.<sup>83</sup>

In 2002, Limbe Leaf withdrew from the Association for the Elimination of Child Labor and, with other processing companies, created Together Ensuring Children's Security.<sup>7</sup> Together Ensuring Children's Security received \$2.1 million from the ECLT in 2002 for four years.<sup>84</sup> Officials with leaf processing companies that operated Together Ensuring Children's Security did not include representatives from the Tobacco Association of Malawi and the tobacco workers' union in the newly created group, and did not contact or consult with union leaders regarding its creation.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Rafael Sandramu, the general secretary of the tobacco workers' union in Malawi, reported that officials with Together Ensuring Children's Security were "bluffing" about their concern for reducing child labour, and they had "no constituency" at the farm level.<sup>7</sup> According to Sandramu, Together Ensuring Children's Security "really benefits the tobacco companies and is a tool to protect tobacco companies".<sup>7</sup>

While presenting itself as an advocate for children through ECLT in Malawi, the tobacco industry uses policies of fear and exaggeration to pressure the Malawian government from breaking its economic dependency on tobacco growing. John Kapito, a tobacco control advocate in the Malawian Human Rights Commission, observed that the power of tobacco companies in Malawi is based on their assertion that Malawi can only grow tobacco.

It starts from every child. A small little baby, you ask a small child – 'Where does the economy of Malawi survive on?' Tobacco. Tobacco is our gold. Now that has gone in your head for too long. And who is running tobacco – it is not government. It is the tobacco industry. So you worship them. They decide where we should go. They tell us what

we should do. Malawi can still survive, irrespective of whether it grows tobacco or it does not.<sup>48</sup>

Kapito said that tobacco companies through the ECLT distract people from examining industry tobacco buying or cigarette advertising practices in Malawi, and that tobacco companies “should not be doing child labor projects in the first place”.<sup>7</sup>

While promoting industry child labour projects in Malawi in 2003, BAT ran cigarette advertisements on local radio programmes. In a radio advertisement for Embassy cigarettes, one of BAT’s brands in Malawi, BAT used the phrase, “When you smoke Embassy cigarettes your heart feels good”.<sup>7</sup> BAT also placed the ad for Embassy cigarettes on large billboards near schools and hospitals in such places as Lilongwe, the nation’s capital (fig 2) when BAT’s ECLT was making claims about its success to reduce child labour in Malawi in 2003.<sup>7 85</sup> According to John Kapito, “BAT Malawi has encouraged the sale of loose cigarettes from packs, business that is normally done by children ranging from 6–12 years old.”<sup>86</sup> The few thousand children affected by ECLT in Malawi represents a small fraction of the 78 000 child labourers there. Child labour has worsened since the beginning of BAT’s ECLT activities in Malawi.<sup>39</sup> Children as young as 5 years old pick and string tobacco, and orphans remain vulnerable to child traffickers who force them to work on tobacco farms.<sup>7 14 87 88</sup>

## DISCUSSION

BAT’s internal documents highlight that, rather than actively and responsibly working to solve the problem of child labour in growing tobacco, the company acted to co-opt the issue to present themselves over as a “socially responsible corporation” by releasing a policy statement claiming the company’s commitment to end harmful child labour practices, holding a global child labour conference with trade unions and other key stakeholders, and contributing nominal sums of money for development projects largely unrelated to efforts to end child labour.



**Figure 2** Mixed messages. “your heart is contented” (“Kumtima kuti myaa...”), and “Smoking may be harmful to your health” (“Kusuta kukhoza kuononga moyo”): British American Tobacco (BAT) advertisement for Embassy cigarettes, Lilongwe, Malawi, 2003. BAT used this ad as part of a larger marketing campaign to recruit new smokers during the same year that the company through the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT) claimed some success at reducing child labour in Malawi.<sup>7 85</sup> BAT aggressively markets cigarettes to women and children in Malawi to maintain and increase its market share (91%) of the local cigarette market.<sup>97</sup> Photograph by Marty G Otañez.

## What this paper adds

British American Tobacco launched “corporate social responsibility” public relations initiatives to enhance its corporate identity. Transnational tobacco companies financially benefit from tobacco produced by children as young as 5 years of age in Malawi and other tobacco growing societies.

In response to public pressure on the child labour issue, British American Tobacco (later joined by Philip Morris and other members of the tobacco industry) created a foundation to fund projects whose nominal purpose was to fight child labour as a way to deflect attention from tobacco industry practices in a way that did not threaten the economic benefit to the tobacco industry of child labour. If the transnational tobacco companies were serious about eliminating child labour in Malawi (and elsewhere), they could simply establish and enforce a policy of not purchasing any tobacco grown using child labour.

Just as the industry has used “youth smoking prevention” programmes<sup>30 89</sup> as a strategy to displace meaningful tobacco control efforts and shift the responsibility for increased youth smoking on to parents and “peer pressure” and away from the industry’s advertising and marketing practices, the industry has successfully sidestepped the child labour issue by funding modest efforts to rehabilitate schools, build wells, train villages in bookkeeping, and build community awareness on child labour issues. While the ECLT and related projects did benefit several hundred, perhaps several thousand children, they have had a negligible overall impact on the overall problem of child labour and the number of child labourers in Malawi.

BAT’s cooperation with groups such as the IUF helped BAT legitimise its child labour activities. BAT was selective in its choice of the IUF as a partner because Ron Oswald, IUF’s General Secretary, took a reasonable approach to the tobacco industry. In the section called “The Film” in an internal document from BAT called “Report of a meeting with International Union of Food” in April 1999, it was reported that during the making of the film on child labour in Malawi, Oswald “is not suggesting that the tobacco industry takes responsibility for a socio-economic problem, but that it acknowledges it exists and that it supports efforts to eradicate it”.<sup>90</sup> By deciding to cooperate with BAT in the ECLT and refrain from publicising the practices of the transnational tobacco companies in Malawi, the IUF may have gained a place in a corporate partnership but it lost an opportunity to hold the companies accountable for its child labour abuses.

If BAT and other major TTCs were genuinely committed to improving the socioeconomic conditions of child and adult tobacco farm workers, they should rectify harmful business practices by establishing and enforcing a policy that they would not purchase any tobacco grown using child labour. They should also conform with the core conventions of the ILO that cover not just child labour but the whole range of labour rights concerns (for example, right to organise), adopt a monitoring programme that ensures that third party monitors will visit the tobacco fields periodically to perform audits, and commit to public reporting of results of the monitoring and to revealing the names of workplaces where BAT and Philip Morris purchase tobacco as Nike did in April 2005.<sup>91</sup>

The actual cost of these policies, which could substantially end or potentially eradicate child labour, would be about US\$10 million/year, the cost of replacing child labourers with

adults paid at minimum rural wage in Malawi. While modest compared to the \$400 billion in revenues the tobacco industry generates annually,<sup>58</sup> this amount is more than the US\$575 000/year (\$2.3 million over four years to pay for activities such as constructing schools and conducting village-level child labour workshops<sup>84-92</sup>) the industry spends on "child labour projects" in Malawi. Based on past and current behaviour, it is unlikely that the TTCs will take and enforce these actions.

Government intervention is required to improve adult wages and address child labour problems. In Malawi such action is unlikely because the tobacco industry dominates government.<sup>93</sup> Tobacco accounts for the majority of the country's foreign earnings, providing government officials and businessmen involved in tobacco with over US\$3000 of foreign earnings every minute during the selling of tobacco at auction between April and September.<sup>94</sup> Compounding problems, the government oversees a tobacco economy characterised by inadequate rules, weak enforcement of existing rules, a cartel of global leaf processors, lack of coordination among key economic organisations, conflict of interests among government and industry representatives, and pervasive corruption.<sup>28, 95-96</sup> These challenges are daunting, but we have little doubt that both children and adults would be far better off than they are under the current situation were payment of better wages to occur.

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