[Tobacco control, a 'major component' of environmental protection efforts – UN health official](#)

From deforestation to soil degradation and pollution, tobacco production and its use by consumers, is "tremendously destructive" for the environment, although control measures can help curb its negative environmental effects, including the damaging impact of climate change, the head of the UN tobacco control treaty watchdog – formally known as the [Secretariat](#) of the WHO FCTC – has told UN News.

The [World Health Organization](#) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), which is celebrating the 15th anniversary of it being adopted this year – is a global health treaty that advocates for the control of tobacco production, sale and use, as a way of reducing tobacco-related illnesses, deaths, environmental degradation and poverty across the world.

"People often immediately think of the health impact that tobacco has, but there is not enough awareness of how tremendously destructive it is for the environment too, on land, under water and in the air," said [Dr. Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva](#), the Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat.

According to a [report](#) by the Secretariat and the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)), the noxious effects of tobacco on the environment begin with the pre-production process, as a particularly high amount of deforestation occurs not only to create space for tobacco farming, but also because a lot of timber is required for the drying process of tobacco leaves after they are harvested. Estimates show that tobacco farming causes up to five per cent of global deforestation, with 200,000 hectares of natural wood biomass loss each year.

"Studies indicate that tobacco growing could be up to 10 times more aggressive than all other deforestation factors," Dr. da Costa e Silva noted.

> Governments need to understand that tobacco control is a major component of any effective and holistic environmental protection effort – Dr. Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, *WHO FCTC Secretariat chief*

In addition, the report states that tobacco crop production leads to accelerated soil degradation, as it strips the earth of nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium faster and more extensively, than other major food and cash crops.

"Importantly, tobacco production and use are major sources of pollution," stressed the FCTC Secretariat chief.

The joint Secretariat-UNDP report notes that cigarette butts have become the most discarded waste item worldwide, with some 4.5 trillion thrown away each year, representing 1.69 billion pounds of toxic trash annually. Various studies indicate that this was compounded and accelerated as bans on indoor smoking took effect in many of the world's cities and countries over the past two decades.

However, environmental pollution from tobacco starts well before cigarettes are discarded, during the production phase, as tobacco crops require large amounts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and growth regulators that pollute the ground, nearby waterways and aquifers. The process presents serious health hazards for farmers and their families.

"Among the pesticides used to grow tobacco are some highly toxic products that affect animals and humans alike, many of which are banned or being phased out in several countries," explained Dr. da Costa e Silva, who added that the manufacturing of cigarettes also contributes to high greenhouse emissions responsible for global climate change.

In line with Article 17 and 18 of the Convention on Provision of Viable Alternative Activities and Protection of the Environment, the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC is calling on governments to better regulate tobacco agriculture and to work on helping tobacco farmers worldwide, switch to environmentally-friendly alternative crop production. This is being encouraged through the use of incentives such as access to credit, and by providing training on environmentally-friendly practices, among other measures.

The UN tobacco control watchdog also recommends that Parties to the treaty urgently adopt regulations that make the industry responsible for the impact that it has on the planet.

"Tobacco giants have been lobbying worldwide for policies that exonerate them from any environmental responsibility," said Dr. da Costa e Silva. "But ultimately, tobacco producers should be responsible for liability, economic costs and provision of information on the environmental impacts of their activities," she added, explaining that "governments need to understand that tobacco control is a major component of any effective and holistic environmental protection effort they want to undertake".

In October, a High-Level Segment on Tobacco Control and Global Climate Action will take place in the Swiss city of Geneva, as part of the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP8) to the WHO FCTC, to discuss the effect of tobacco cultivation, production and consumption on the environment and the contribution of Article 18 of the WHO FCTC implementation, to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the 17 global goals, or SDGs.

[UN agencies respond as heavy fighting continues in Tripoli, urge an end to violence before it gets worse](#)

In the midst of reports that scores of civilians have been killed and hundreds injured across residential areas of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, United Nations agencies have stepped up their response, expressing concern that the situation could deteriorate as heavy fighting between rival armed groups continues.

The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Tuesday that civilians must be allowed to move to safer areas, as aid efforts are being hampered by the ongoing violence.

UNHCR spokesperson, Charlie Yaxley, told reporters in Geneva on Tuesday that the use of heavy weapons and shelling in civilian neighbourhoods had "[caused death, destruction and displacement](#), and is of great concern."

According to the UN human rights office (OHCHR), a humanitarian worker — trying to evacuate civilians trapped in a neighbourhood — was reportedly shot at, while one of the armed groups involved is alleged to have confiscated three ambulances.

OHCHR spokesperson, Liz Throssell, underscored the need on all sides to [ensure that relief workers are not targeted](#).

"We call on all parties to the conflict to facilitate immediate, unimpeded and safe access of humanitarian aid and aid-workers to civilians in need," she said.

"We urge the warring parties to respect and protect personnel engaged in humanitarian relief, and to cease all attacks on medical transport and units, as well as to facilitate the safe and voluntary movement of civilians wishing to leave areas of active hostilities."

► **SEE ALSO: [UN chief urges calm as violence erupts in Libyan capital](#)**

UN agencies, such as the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and UNHCR, have stepped up their response, with WHO delivering trauma medicines for 200 critical cases, keeping another 2,000 more units on standby and deploying 10 mobile emergency trauma teams to areas where fighting is ongoing. Similarly, UNHCR is dispatching emergency items to families seeking shelter at a local school.

Doctors and other health staff be allowed to move freely so that

they can save lives without delay, and without risk to their own personal safety — *Syed Jaffar Hussain, head of WHO in Libya*

However, with the situation remaining volatile, there are fears that the casualties could rise in the coming days.

Syed Jaffar Hussain, the head of WHO operations in Libya, said the agency was "working with national health authorities and partners on the ground to respond to increasing health needs, [but roadblocks remain a major challenge to the delivery of health care](#), especially ambulances that are unable to reach the injured."

"With greater numbers of injured civilians expected, it is imperative that doctors and other health staff be allowed to move freely so that they can save lives without delay, and without risk to their own personal safety," he added.

Vulnerable migrants and refugees at heightened risk

With fighting continuing unabated and reports that a migrant detention facility has also been hit, the safety of migrants and refugees is another growing concern.

"We are closely monitoring the situation and coordinating with the Libyan Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration and UN agencies, and advocating for all refugees and migrants to be relocated to a safer place," said UNHCR's Mr. Yaxley.

According to UN reports, there are about 8,000 arbitrarily detained migrants trapped in detention centres in areas where fighting has been taking place, without access to food or medical treatment. Furthermore, there are reports that some migrants, released from detention, have subsequently been captured by armed groups and forced to work for them.

[With AI, jobs are changing but no mass unemployment expected — UN labour experts](#)

The rise of frontier technologies like Artificial Intelligence has caused fears of robots taking over blue-collar jobs, but a United Nations expert says humans still have the upper hand given their creativity and ability to form relationships.

Ekkehard Ernst, Chief of Macro-economic policies and job unit at the UN [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO), says the manufacturing sector does not stand to profit most from AI, at least not in developed countries, and will not suffer the forecasted demise. The jobs more likely to be impacted are in service sectors such as construction, health care, and business.

"It is not so much about losing jobs but about how jobs are being transformed and employees in these sectors will add new tasks to their profile while being supported by computers and robots in others," Mr. Ernst said.

The type of tasks that are being replaced by AI algorithms are routine, repetitive tasks that take a lot of time and can be more easily and more effectively performed by machines and by robots – leaving people to focus on interpersonal, social, emotional skills.

A bank teller, for example, is an example of a job changed but not cut due to AI. A typical teller focuses less time on transactions like giving money, and more time on helping clients with their overall financial needs and client loyalty.

In developing countries, the area which most stands to benefit is agriculture, Mr. Ernst said. AI is already helping farmers figure out the weather or get the latest market prices. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, a mobile app created in part with the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) can identify crop pests such as the [Fall Armyworm](#).

"What we need today is for people to get used to engaging with digital technology so they have no barriers to interacting with machines, that they speak to them, that they use them as a normal tool, as someone uses a car or an axe," said Mr. Ernst.

Technological progress depends on whether consumers and firms ask for products and serves made possible by new technologies, Mr. Ernst said. That means in part on whether workers have the right skills to implement the changes, and whether consumers want them.

One example of a changing consumer taste is online buying. Mr. Ernst predicts that while there might be fewer brick and mortar stores, they will reinvent themselves, adding services to improve the customer experience – and not disappear.

Historically, technological advances have created new products and markets. At the turn of the 20th century automobiles put horse transport out of work, but created many more jobs for manufacturing and servicing of cars. More recently, mobile phone app developers became an actual job, with the creation of the smart phone which did not even exist before the 1990s.

The [latest study](#) on AI from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) anticipates the technology to have "profound impact" on labour markets and inequalities, but the path is not pre-ordained and can be shaped by policies at the local, national, and global levels.

He noted that humans may well be more productive and cheaper than machines.

In addition to cheap human labour, the report also pointed to a lack of required skills, poor energy infrastructure and broadband, and transport network, as to why automation is not used on a global scale.

There are also legal and regulatory issues. For AI to be deployed on a large scale in healthcare, for example, it must be decided whether the doctor or the AI will be responsible for claims of medical malpractice.

The lead authors conclude that the current technological breakthroughs will not only impact labour markets and income inequality, but also broader societal change. The scale of which, they said, remains unknown.

They urge Governments and the UN to proactively influence processes – expand social protections when possible and adopt appropriate and flexible regulatory and legal policies and promote national capacities to innovate.

"Technological progress should not be used as an excuse for policy inaction, but rather as an incentive to find better solutions," they concluded.

[Iraq milestone: Some four million people return home, displacement drops to four-year low](#)

For the first time in nearly four years, the number of displaced Iraqis has fallen below two million, according to a new report released on Tuesday by the United Nations migration agency.

Four years of data collected by the [International Organization for Migration](#) ([IOM](#)) for its [Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) report](#), concludes that 1,931,868 people currently remain displaced – the lowest figure since November 2014 – and that nearly four million people have managed to return home overall.

"IOM DTM data has documented the phases of the [crisis](#) and it has been critical for planning humanitarian assistance," said Marta Ruedas, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq.

Since January 2014, Iraq's war against the terrorist group ISIL, otherwise known as Da'esh, has displaced six million Iraqis, comprising about 15 per cent of the country's population. Last December, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared an end to the campaign to defeat the group.

Across Iraq, internally-displaced people (IDPs) continue to return home at a steady pace, but slower than in 2017, says the report. The greatest number of

returnees – some 1.49 million – have made their way back to Ninewa, with 1.27 million returning to Anbar province; and nearly 553,000 to Salah al-Din Governorate. Some 77,000 have returned to homes in Baghdad.

While overall, 97 per cent have returned to their own residences, two per cent have gone to homes other than their own; while one per cent, or 19,000 vulnerable individuals, have sought shelter in religious buildings, schools and abandoned buildings.

The remaining IDPs are concentrated in: Ninewa (602,000), Dahuk (349,000), Erbil (217,000), Salah al-Din (169,000), Sulaymaniyah (151,000) and Kirkuk (124,000). Of the displaced, 1.2 million are in private residences, 574,000 in camps, and 176,000 in critical shelters.

"Data on returns is also essential for this next phase of our support for recovery and reintegration." Ms. Ruedas explained.

> Both displaced and returnee populations are often vulnerable – *IOM IraqMission Chief*

According to latest DTM data, people cited the improved security situation, more readily-available housing, encouragement from community leaders and support from friends and relatives, as factors influencing their decision to go back home.

Obstacles that confronted displaced families include damage or destruction of housing and public infrastructure; a lack of financial means and job opportunities, and a lack of safety and security.

"DTM makes an important contribution to humanitarian efforts in Iraq by informing the direction of resources to displaced and returnee populations," said IOM's Chief of Mission in Iraq, Gerard Waite.

"Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families continue to be displaced and face significant obstacles to return," he continued. "Both displaced and returnee populations are often vulnerable and need humanitarian assistance to regain their livelihoods and support their families."

The DTM is IOM's information management system to track and monitor population displacement during crises. Since early 2014 IOM Iraq has been producing data sets, monthly reports and thematic reports, including on the Mosul crisis, when the city was occupied by ISIL terrorists; obstacles to return, location assessments and emergency tracking. This information is shared publicly to aid humanitarian efforts.

[UNHCR calls for action against xenophobic attacks in South Africa](#)

Authorities in South Africa are being urged by the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), to act in the wake of recent violence against foreigners in the country, some of which has been deadly.

Last week, angry protestors in the Soweto area of Johannesburg killed four people, allegedly for stealing local jobs, according to media reports.

Many others, including refugees and asylum-seekers, have been affected by earlier rounds of violence, while, tension has also been observed in KwaZulu Natal and Western Cape provinces.

"UNHCR is calling on the authorities to ensure that those responsible for acts of violence and violations of human rights are brought to account. We urge all possible efforts to avert future attacks, including incitement or attempts to block peaceful solutions. If unchecked, such xenophobic attacks could lead to further damage and destruction," agency spokesperson Charlie Yaxley [told](#) journalists in Geneva on Tuesday.

UNHCR is supporting government efforts to assist people who have been displaced or who were affected by displacement.

Mr. Yaxley reported that staff have visited refugees and asylum-seekers affected by the recent violence in Soweto to assess their situation and needs.

"Many foreign shop owners have been affected by the violence and their small shops – often their only means of livelihoods – have been looted and destroyed," he added.

Just over 280,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are currently living in South Africa, according to UNHCR data.

The UN agency has welcomed public expressions of support from many citizens there who have been calling for peaceful coexistence and harmony with foreign nationals in the country.