



Press Release

Centre for Social Concern

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The Recent Press Reports On A Study On Child Labour

Since the early nineties the Missionaries of Africa through the committee for Justice and Peace of the Parish of Nkhotakota have been actively supporting the cause for improvement of working and living conditions of the tenants and other workers on the tobacco farms and estates. This involvement led to the creation of the 'Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers Union in Malawi' (TOTAWUM) with an office in Nkhotakota and now also in Kasungu. . When the Centre For Social Concern (CFSC) was started in 2002 it continued to work for this cause and did a survey of tobacco estates and farms in the areas of Mchinji, Mpherembe and Lilongwe. More than 700 respondents were interviewed, focus groups meetings were held. In 2004 it published and presented a report with its findings. These findings confirmed what other studies had already established that the conditions of the said workers were appalling, that there was wide use of child labour and that there was sexual harassment.

In subsequent years, realising that the problem is structural, the CFSC started advocating for the passing of the 'Tenancy Labour Bill', which was first drafted in 1995 and had its last draft in 2005 and is now known as the "The Tenancy Labour Bill 2005". In spite of repeated and continued advocacy, nothing moved. According to some sources in the Ministry of Labour, things even became worse. In the lead up to the elections in 2009, the CFSC stepped up its advocacy for the passing of the said bill. In all these efforts the CFSC attempted to involve all stakeholders including the estate owners represented by TAMA, TCC, government through the Ministries of Labour, Agriculture and Justice and the tenants represented through their union TOTAWUM.

It comes as no surprise to the CFSC that the recently published report by PLAN has come to similar conclusions as many other studies did before. While it is true that some efforts were made and a school was constructed in the Nkhotakota District, T.A. Mwansambo, Thandwe area, in the midst of farms, this seems to be too little to have real impact. While it may be true that there are some flaws and inaccuracies in the PLAN study, why is it that studies by M. Otanez, Liv Torres, M.A.R. Phiri, Tsoka, Kafundu and others keep repeating that there is child labour more especially on tobacco farms.

The main reason, why there is child labour and the labour of spouses, is that the apportioned pieces of land under production given to one person are too large to be cultivated without the help of others, mostly being members of the family. Digging deeper for some of the roots of this problem one finds the whole system of trade. As exemplified by the value chain where tobacco may fetch as little as a couple of dollars a kilo, whereas the finished product for that same kilo may bring in 200 dollars or more in finished products.

Therefore the CFSC repeats what it has said on previous occasions: we need a two-pronged approach. On one hand we need to assure that abuses now existing in the tobacco estates and farms are tackled by among other things the tabling, debating and passing of the Labour Tenancy Bill 2005 and other pieces of relevant legislation and on the other hand to continue to lobby the industry, especially the multinational tobacco companies and the governments that tax tobacco products very heavily and those who buy and sell the raw product to give just prices for the products bought.

A visionary government with an eye on the future will also step up its efforts and do all it can to diversify the economy and wean Malawi off the dependence to tobacco as its main source of foreign exchange.

We hope that the study by PLAN will be a wake up call and finally do away with Malawi's shame: more than 500,000 workers on tobacco farms and estates live a life that is not commensurate with their dignity as human beings and children of God.

Fr. Jos Kuppens
Director, Centre for Social Concern