

State's war against illicit goods timely, but let's do more

Beverley Spencer



It won't have escaped most people's attention in recent months that there has been a concerted effort by government to stamp out all manner of illicit goods. Headlines like "Kenya intensifies war on counterfeit goods", "Rising fears over fake products" and "Fake goods destroyed as suspects are held"

have become commonplace. It is well known that the sale of illicit products, including cigarettes, is a problem. It places consumers at risk of buying deficient goods, deprives the government of important revenues and provides additional funds to criminals as well as, potentially, terrorists. It is also harmful to those legitimate businesses that conduct themselves within the law and who always aim to act responsibly.

Because of the threat posed by this illegal market, the government has been absolutely right to bolster the efforts of its regulatory agencies to crack down on all players involved.

The multi-agency taskforce, along with all other government departments involved, deserve credit for their efforts in beginning to address the problem. This should be welcomed by everyone who wants to see Kenya and Kenyans prosper.

Regain confidence

However, the terms 'fake' or 'counterfeit', so often used in the media, can sometimes overlook the wider and more general issue of illicit products. In terms of cigarettes, while counterfeits may exist in the market they are only one part of the problem – albeit a problem that the government estimates to account for half of the market in some counties.

More problematic is the apparent prevalence of the sale of illegal products in the form of tax-evaded cigarettes – that is, cigarettes with fake tax stamps, cigarettes for export sold in Kenya and not their destination market, and cigarettes smuggled into Kenya. It is these products, often difficult to detect upon first glance, that pose the most serious problems for government and consumers alike.

If the government is to recoup the billions of shillings in tax revenue currently lost to this illegal trade and if consumers are to regain confidence in the goods they are buying, tackling the issue of illicit products in all their forms is essential. This is as true for cigarettes as it is for other consumer goods.

Even more aggressive enforcement measures are therefore required by government and its agencies to shut down any manufacturers, dealers or traders who are facilitating these activities. This is in addition to more stability and predictability in the taxation environment as sudden, large tax increases, like the one seen in 2015, can mean consumers gamble on buying much cheaper, illicit products.

The robustness of our own processes means that we are confident in the integrity of our supply chain and the quality of BAT brands Kenyans see in the market. We have long been committed to this and always seek to remedy any potential issues that we are alerted to both efficiently and transparently with the relevant authorities.

The illegal market for cigarettes benefits no one but criminals. Continued and increased government action to stop the trade in them is vital for Kenya's future success, as well as supporting the realisation of President Uhuru Kenyatta's Big Four agenda on manufacturing.

-The writer is Managing Director at BAT Kenya plc

Irungu Houghton



It's been a while since we had a serious national dialogue about adolescent and adult sexuality. Teenage pregnancies among our KCPE candidates, the arrest of unlicensed doctor and alleged serial rapist Mugo and the ban on Marie Stopes Kenya just tipped our private thoughts into the public.

Let's be honest, sexuality discussions make most of us uneasy. Add adolescence to this and many of us just become very uncomfortable. Our discomfort may suggest the subject is obscure and most Kenyans don't have much experience in it. The facts speak very differently.

Hundreds of candidates sat their KCPE exams while pregnant this year. There is probably no better excuse than the one used by twenty girls to say they cannot sit exam because they needed to safely deliv-

Sex education will stem teen pregnancies

er their baby. Tragically, comprehensive sex education was neither on their curriculum nor an examination paper before them.

Every day on average, over 1,000 girls between the age of 10 and 19 have unprotected sex and fall pregnant, 35 drop out of school and one dies in pregnancy related complications. A total of 1,200 abortions are performed on women and girls each day of the year. About a third of them take place to save the lives of mothers. Forty five per cent of these abortions will occur in the lives of girls between the age of 10 and 19.

Regardless of what we think about abortion, we must first recognise what is happening in our nation. Denial that there is an absence of comprehensive sex education and a demand for safe abortion services in the face of such statistics is a form of simulated insanity. Not yet convinced?

Look beyond the horror of investigative stories about the unlicensed clinic of James Mugo Ndichu alias Mugo wa Wairimu to the admission by the County Government of Nairobi. Nearly one third of Nairobi's 2,400 clinics are unlicensed, according to them. Many of them I suspect,

provide unsafe abortions by unqualified or unlicensed doctors.

Which brings me to the ban imposed on Marie Stopes International Kenya. Following complaints by the Kenya Film Classification Board and GoCitizen, the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board issued seven orders against our largest and oldest sexual, reproductive health and family planning organisation. The November 11 orders instruct them to shut down all public sex information and abortion-related services. The Health Ministry Director of Medical Services has subsequently warned Marie Stopes that must comply or have all their programs shut down. GoCitizen are now seeking the prosecution of Marie Stopes directors.

Patently illegal

The order to cease all abortion services is patently illegal. The Medical Board's ruling does not overturn the constitutional right of women to abortion where the pregnancy poses a danger to their lives, mental and social well-being or results from rape, defilement or incest. Their orders could also lead to legal suits against doctors who

are now too intimidated to provide lawful emergency abortion services. Given the reality facing most girls and women, the cost of letting this ruling go is simply too high. It will I hope, be challenged in court.

This year, Amnesty invited 280 students to write essays on irresponsible sexual behavior. National Human Rights Essay Competition winner Scholastica Justine Ajode, 17, put it best: "The government, parents and teachers must end irresponsible sexual behavior. The government should introduce compulsory life skills and sex education. Parents should talk about irresponsible sexual behavior. Our choices are our responsibility and it is not too late to change our mind-set."

We must rally behind Justine's vision and not hide under the sheets on this one. The real danger facing our nation will not go away. Comprehensive sex education and the right to safe abortion services are the only way to bring down unwanted pregnancies, school drop-outs and involuntary motherhood.

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BLUE ECONOMY

Conservation of forest ecosystems and water sources is essential for country to register growth

Let's harness our rich seas and oceans to grow wealth

Toshitsugu Uesawa



One of the most thrilling moments of my time in Kenya was when I climbed Mount Kenya and looked at the beauty of this country from that great height. Mt Kenya is surrounded by a belt of verdant forest. The soil and leaves in the forests are rich in nutrients. When the rain comes, it washes those nutrients along with other minerals from the rich soil out into the streams which eventually feed into the Indian Ocean. In this way, we find that conservation of forest ecosystems, far away from the sea, is nonetheless essential for the Blue Economy.

Forests and rivers bring us bountiful blessings. Land robed in rich nature brings us rich blue ocean resources. The Japanese government has supported Kenyan people for a long time in strengthening the management of the forestry sector which contributes to the Kenya Vision 2030. The government of Kenya aims to increase forest cover to

10 per cent by that year. Along with protecting forests around Mt Kenya, we also support the Blue Economy: there is a direct link between the rich nature giving nutrients to these rivers flowing down from the mountain, and rich fisheries of the Kenya coast.

Speaking of such fisheries products, one of my favorite seafood is known in Japanese as Konbu. In English it is known as Kelp. It is a form of seaweed which contains numerous important ingredients such as vitamins and minerals. It forms an important part of Japanese traditional cuisine. Indeed, various seafoods such as fish, seaweed and shellfish are essential ingredients for "Washoku": traditional Japanese cuisine, which is recognised by Unesco as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature that is closely related the sustainable use of natural resources.

Japan is a maritime nation that prides itself on a sea area which is the sixth-largest in the world, approximately 12 times the size of our land area. The sea has since ancient times provided us with an abundance of food while

"The sea has provided us with an abundance of food while serving as the medium for goods and people"

serving as the medium for goods and people to come and go and a place for children both to play and to learn. Japan attained its modernisation by making use of the sea as it built up its industries. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sea has shaped Japan as a nation. Further, Japan may well be the only nation anywhere in the world with a fishing village roughly every 5 kilometres all along its shorelines.

Marine transport

There is more to this than just a traditional attachment to fishing villages or fishery resources in general. More than 99 per cent of Japan's imports and export freight and approximately 40 per cent of Japan's domestic transport of goods relies on marine transport. The sea is so familiar to Japanese that we cannot even imagine living our lives without it. When you consider all these factors then, it is no surprise that Japan is co-hosting with Kenya the Sustainable Blue Economy Conference being held here in Nairobi.

As Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared at the TICAD 6 conference held in Kenya in August 2016, Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and

making it prosperous. A free and open Indo-Pacific region is the diplomatic vision through which Japan aims to foster the blue economy. Japan's mission is to share our information and experience with like-minded people connected to us by sea, for the peace and prosperity of the entire international community. We all have a common interest in maintaining the sea as a "public good" governed by the rule of law, which is indispensable for the peace and prosperity of the international community.

Japan is determined to demonstrate leadership in securing free and peaceful seas, transitioning from "a country protected by the sea" to "a country that protects the sea." We must hand these magnificent seas down to the next generation. The seas are all interconnected. And in light of this, it is important for us to go beyond our own countries and forge cooperative relationships and foster a shared awareness of the need to approach the benefits of the seas and oceans in a sustainable manner.

The Sustainable Blue Economy Conference will come up with ways in which our two countries – and indeed the international community as a whole – can work together to bring about greater peace and prosperity for all.

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