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Back from the brink

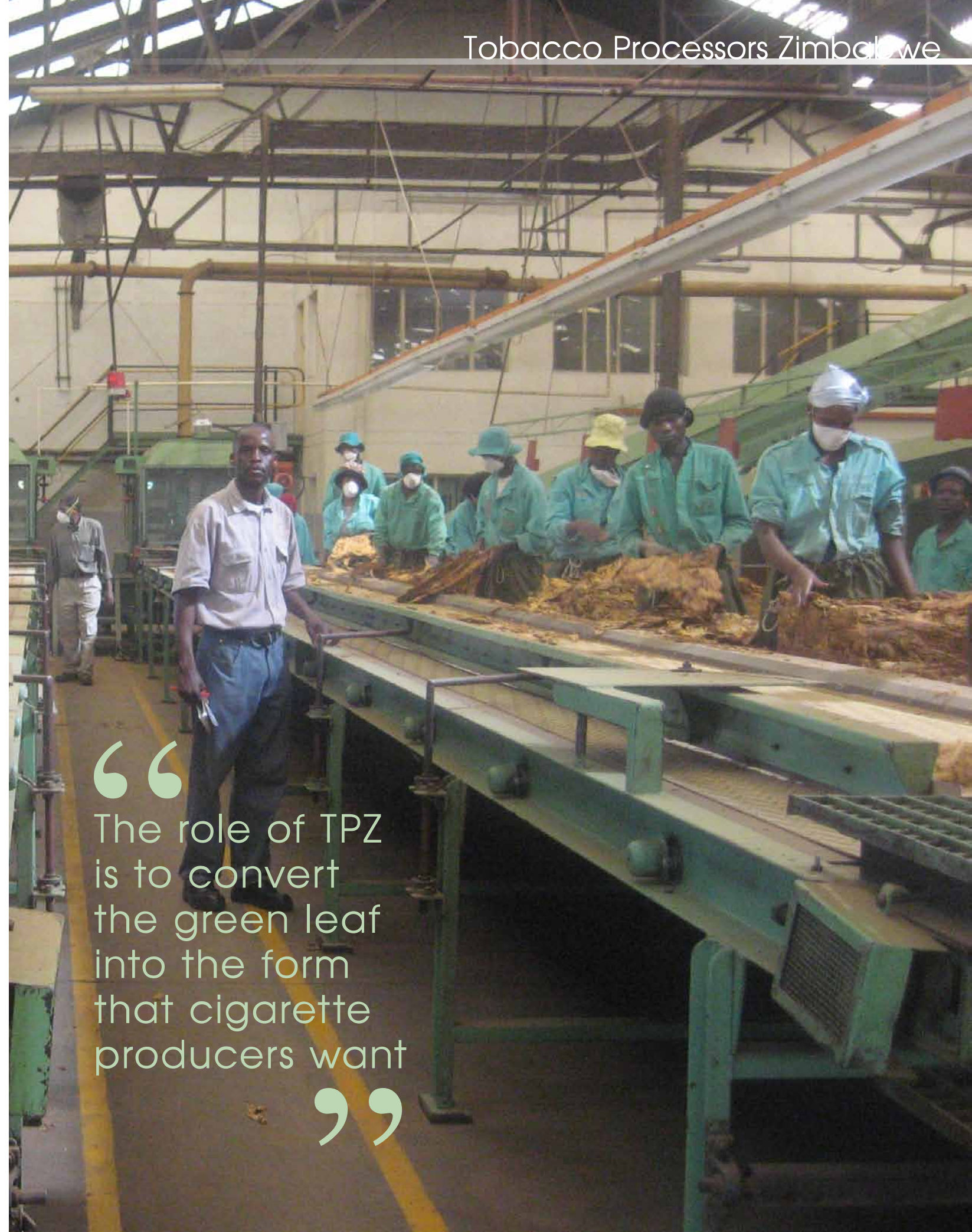
Jeff Daniels looks at one of Zimbabwe's most successful companies operating in one of the country's most important sectors



Whatever your opinion on the rights and wrongs of smoking, there is no doubt that certain countries would be in real trouble if the tobacco industry disappeared completely. Zimbabwe is a case in point. Reliable and regular statistics have become hard to find since the 1990s but at the time, depending on who you believed, this southern African country was the largest or fourth largest exporter of tobacco in the world.

What isn't in doubt is the contribution that tobacco makes to the country's economy. Historically, half of all agricultural exports came from tobacco and thereby accounted for nearly 10 per cent of GDP. At its peak, sales of nearly 250 million kilograms of tobacco brought almost US\$600 million into the country and found employment for 170,000 farm workers, each supporting over 10 dependants.

Since then, due to changes in the agrarian policies ushered in in 2000, output has plummeted, bottoming in 2007 with just 48 million kilograms produced. However last year's harvest saw sales bounce back, with the Zimbabwe Tobacco Industry and Marketing Board announcing sales of 120 million kilograms at the end of the tobacco-selling season in September. What's more, tobacco seed sales suggest enough land will be planted this year to take the harvest back up to 200 million kilograms, should growing conditions be favourable.



“The role of TPZ is to convert the green leaf into the form that cigarette producers want”

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All of which will be good news for Tobacco Processors Zimbabwe (TPZ)—the country's largest processor of green tobacco leaf, accounting for just under 60 per cent of all production. At the height of the season as many as 1,000 individuals could be working on the Harare factory floor.

Next year, TPZ will celebrate its silver anniversary. It was created in 1987 by a group of three tobacco merchants: Export Leaf Tobacco (BAT), Inter-Continental Leaf Tobacco Company, and Standard Commercial (now part of Alliance One International). The company is now wholly owned by three local companies: Northern Tobacco, Inter-Continental Leaf Tobacco and Tribac. While primarily there for its owners, TPZ can, and does, carry out processing for non-shareholder merchants, in order to maximize economies of scale and scope. The company's structure is essentially that of a non-profit making organisation whose role is to enhance the competitiveness of its



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customers through quality and cost.

The role of TPZ is to convert the green leaf into the form that cigarette producers want. In the most simplistic terms, this means stripping away the non-desirable parts of the leaf and then drying, grading and distributing what’s left.

Tobacco leaves have a rigid stem running the length of the leaf which creates headaches for end users, as it is so stiff that it would punch holes in a cigarette’s paper casing if it remained in the blend. At the tip of the leaf there is little or no stem, so this is removed immediately, leaving the rest of the leaf to go through several threshing stages in order to remove the stem. A modern plant such as TPZ’s can remove up to 99 per cent of the stem from the leaf and in so doing, 30 per cent of the leaf’s weight.

At each stage of threshing there is a complex process of conditioning the tobacco by means of heat and moisture, both supplied by saturated steam from industrial boilers, to encourage the product to become soft and pliable—necessary in order to reduce breakage of the leaves to a minimum. The threshers use a system of fixed and rotating knife blades (teeth) to separate the stem from the leaf. Air blowers, known as classifiers, are used to separate the ‘lights’ or the stem-free tobacco from the ‘heavies’, where the stem is still attached.


It can take as many as five passes through the thresher before all the stem is removed, so the skill derives from the process of achieving this with as little damage and stress to the tobacco as possible. Once threshing is completed, all the retained leaf material passes through a dryer where heat from above and below the conveying apron extracts excess moisture from the leaf until the precise specification is reached.

The factory is designed to process 500 tonnes per day and is made up of two 10-tonnes-per-hour threshing lines, plus a separate loose leaf/bundle line. The lines have sophisticated PLC controls to govern the speed and TPZ is currently installing new visual impurity

checking equipment to be included in the line.

Although the TPZ factory is one of the most modern in the country, it will probably come as no surprise to learn that the work is still highly labour-intensive. For example, tobacco arrives from the plantations in bundles which have to be carefully opened and sorted—work that can only be done by hand. With so many of the workers being casual seasonal staff, surrounded by complex and often dangerous machinery, there is considerable risk of accidents. As such, TPZ and the various strata of managers have safety as their highest priority. TPZ has been recognised by the government body that oversees safety aspects to be one of the foremost companies in promoting a safe and healthy workplace. At one stage, TPZ also won an award from BAT for completing five million accident-free hours of operation.

By the same token, conservation of the physical environment is also high on the agenda. To this day, TPZ has put measures in place to ensure that the environmental impact of its operations is kept to a minimum. In line with this, the company has implemented an integrated management system which combines quality issues with environmental considerations. As long ago as 2002, TPZ received certification for both ISO 9001:2000 and ISO14001:2004 after being audited by SAZ (the Standards Association of Zimbabwe).

Like many companies operating in the tobacco industry, TPZ is working on a number of social responsibility projects. TPZ itself is cooperating with BAT in encouraging its growers to adopt environmentally friendly farming practices. It is also taking part in BAT’s re-forestation and conservation programmes in Zimbabwe and is providing gardening services to a local hospital as part of its own contribution to the community. www.tpz.co.za 

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