



# Sowing *the* Status Quo

How Crop Diversification  
Is Failing Tobacco Farmers  
in Malawi



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## **Executive Summary**

**Malawi, one of the top 10 global tobacco producers, is the fourth-poorest country in the world, according to World Bank estimates.<sup>1</sup> Tobacco is the nation's No. 1 export, but 95% of tobacco growers are smallholder farmers. Many struggle to make a decent living. As tobacco use declines globally, the government has recognized the need to reduce the country's reliance on the crop. However, tobacco has had a disproportionate influence on the agricultural sector since at least the 1980s, and industry interference is believed to be a key barrier to progress in diversifying crops. While the government has largely allowed the industry to be centrally involved in diversification efforts, skepticism exists regarding the tobacco industry's true motives.**

**Sustainable Development Initiative (SDI), in collaboration with STOP, a global tobacco industry watchdog, investigated the industry's role in hindering farmers' transition away from tobacco. As part of the investigation, SDI reviewed publicly available documents and previously published research, and gathered first-hand perspectives from 160 farmers and 14 key informants with connections to tobacco cultivation in Malawi.**

## Key Findings

The tobacco industry's claims of supporting crop diversification in Malawi are contradicted by evidence suggesting its efforts are largely superficial and counterproductive. SDI found:



### 1. Programs are ineffective

The tobacco industry's diversification initiatives often involve investing in programs that fail to address farmers' real needs. For example, they provide inputs for crops that do not have a reliable market compared to tobacco, or farmers may lack the technology and support to successfully cultivate them.



### 2. Efforts keep farmers dependent

The tobacco industry's involvement in diversification creates financial strains on farmers, who take out high-interest loans to grow tobacco—as well as loans for alternative crops with no reliable markets. By promoting a model where tobacco cultivation continues alongside other crops, the industry keeps farmers entrenched in tobacco farming. The strategy ensures farmers remain financially tied to the industry, often in debt, and do not fully transition to potentially more beneficial crops.



### 3. Tactics place burdens on the government

Malawi's economic reliance on tobacco makes it challenging for the government to pursue comprehensive diversification strategies. Efforts to reduce tobacco's overall significance to the economy risk upsetting tobacco companies, which have the wealth and resources to establish supply lines in other countries, creating a situation where Malawi needs the industry more than the industry needs Malawi. By offering minimal support for genuine diversification and maintaining the status quo, the industry perpetuates this dependence on tobacco and transnational leaf-buying companies.



### 4. Genuine commitment to diversification is questionable

Tobacco companies have been criticized for directly and indirectly influencing farmers to prioritize tobacco over food crops, even in countries experiencing high levels of hunger and malnutrition. The industry's reluctance to reduce global tobacco demand and production, along with its focus on policy and research rather than pragmatic interventions in Malawi, illustrates a lack of genuine commitment to diversification.



### 5. Diversification appears to be a corporate social responsibility (CSR) effort

Even though significant funding from tobacco leaf-buying companies and an industry front group has produced few tangible results, tobacco companies promote their diversification initiatives to investors, stakeholders and media. This helps craft a favorable image for an industry known to sell products that draw customers into addiction and harm their health.

## Recommendations



Despite its claimed interest in diversification, the tobacco industry has not provided obvious, practical solutions that would help farmers grow more beneficial crops. According to farmers, the government is not providing markets and infrastructure for crops that might alleviate food insecurity. The government appears to have largely deferred diversification to the industry. Meanwhile, contract farming can indebt farmers, leaving them beholden to an industry that is exploiting them, yet support for such arrangements appears to extend to high levels of the government.

If the government is truly interested in helping tobacco farmers, which comprise a considerable percentage of Malawi's population, there are several actions leaders can pursue:

- Take responsibility for diversification efforts and limit tobacco industry involvement in the process, as outlined in the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC).<sup>2</sup>
- Clarify government ministries' roles and hold them accountable for providing farmers better options.
- Once a blueprint for sustainably transitioning to alternative crops is established, the government should direct money into viable markets for the new crops and end special treatment for wealthy tobacco companies.
- Invest in extension services, education and outfitting farmers to grow new crops, as the government does with other supply chains. In line with the WHO FCTC, gradually remove the tobacco industry from extension services once the new infrastructure is established.
- Explore successful models in other countries, such as Kenya, where an internationally led program helps farmers transition to growing food crops that help other Kenyans.

## Introduction

Smallholder farmers account for 95% of Malawi's tobacco production. Tobacco accounted for almost half of Malawi's exports in 2022 and about 4% of its gross domestic product.<sup>3</sup> As the film "Tobacco Slave" illustrates, there is a power imbalance between farmers relying on tobacco for income and wealthy transnational tobacco corporations—and leaf-buying companies acting as their proxies—which profit mightily from farmers' crops.<sup>4</sup> To supply these companies with tobacco leaf, farmers may be locked into a contract system tilted heavily in the industry's favor. In those scenarios, leaf-buying companies provide loans and inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, with the agreement that farmers will allocate a portion of their land to tobacco cultivation and that leaf-buying companies will purchase their crops at harvest so farmers can cover the loans and the costs of the inputs.

The process—from preparing the seedlings to planting and working the fields to harvesting, curing, grading and processing—can take all year.<sup>5</sup> The leaf-buying companies set the price, and many farmers report the companies are often not inclined to buy more leaf than what is necessary to repay the loans, leaving the growers struggling to make a living. The bulk of the profits land in the United States and Europe, where the tobacco and leaf-buying companies are headquartered. The process unfolds with government approval, as tobacco companies have historically been entrenched in Malawi's government and have essentially been permitted to assume the role of managing the supply chain, farmers and key informants tell SDI.

## Malawi's History of Tobacco Cultivation and its Efforts to Diversify

In Malawi, agriculture is essential to the economy, responsible for around 35% of its GDP and 80% of employment.<sup>6</sup> Malawi has approximately 3.7 million smallholder farmers<sup>7</sup> cultivating 4.5 million hectares of land. First grown during the colonial period,<sup>8</sup> tobacco is now Malawi's largest export.

There are numerous state and nongovernmental efforts aimed at diversifying crops and rural livelihood in Malawi. These include market liberalization, trade agreements, input subsidies, donor-funded intervention and state interest in commercialization. None is aimed at directly moving the country out of the tobacco sector. The government has signed agreements to improve exports in pigeon peas, soybeans and corn, and has provided some assistance to farmers, aimed primarily at alleviating poverty rather than facilitating crop transition.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2008, global cigarettes sales outside of China have been on a steady and marked decline<sup>10</sup> thanks in large part to the WHO FCTC, a global treaty signed by more than 180 countries. The FCTC placed decades of industry harm and deception in a spotlight, and the ensuing decline in smoking added pressure on tobacco companies to increase profits. In response, tobacco leaf production, which peaked in 1992-1993,<sup>11</sup> began to shift from wealthy nations to low- and middle-income countries like Malawi.<sup>12</sup>

For Malawi, transitioning away from tobacco became an economic imperative, but tobacco companies needed to keep producing tobacco in cheap markets, usually in low-income nations. For leaf-buying companies, providing farmers with alternative crops like maize, soya and groundnuts provided another stream of revenue, including through the input loans. Yet few farmers have fully transitioned away from tobacco, they told SDI. Malawi's government has permitted the industry to control almost all terms of the transition, including logistics and infrastructure, farmers and key informants interviewed for this investigation said. With profits on the line, the industry has sparse motivation to help farmers walk away from the lucrative crop.

Malawi became a Party to the FCTC in 2023. If the country were to implement the treaty's provisions, farmers could benefit immensely. Article 17 of the treaty says countries shall work together and with competent organizations to "promote, as appropriate, economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers." Article 5.3 demands countries protect their policies from "commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry."<sup>13</sup>

## Tobacco's 'Big Four' and Their Claims to Help Farmers

There are four companies dominating tobacco markets outside of China. Here are some of their claims regarding diversification:

### British American Tobacco (BAT)

A company report claims its farmers in Bangladesh, Brazil and Kenya are “highly diversified” and boasts of their food security and resilience to crop losses and market fluctuations.<sup>14</sup> All farmers, it claims, can provide enough food for their households for at least three months, with the majority able to provide for up to a year.

While acknowledging that Kenya and Bangladesh experience “serious levels of hunger,” the report says BAT's tobacco farmers are immune. In Brazil, it says, the crops are so profitable farmers can buy ample food. There is no evidence of “debt bondage,” the report concludes—conversely noting that no Bangladeshi farmers were even aware of any grievance mechanisms. The report does not mention Malawi, but a lawsuit filed on behalf of 7,000 Malawian tobacco growers alleges BAT exposed farmers and their children to grueling and dangerous conditions, often without a payoff come harvest time.<sup>15</sup> BAT denies the allegations.

### Imperial Brands

The company is also named in the Malawi farmer lawsuit. It, too, denies accusations of exploiting farmers. In a 2019 company case study, Imperial said it worked with leaf suppliers to educate tobacco farmers on the importance of growing alternative crops. Citing a main supplier's groundnut program, the company said it sought to enhance livelihoods by providing a second stream of income or food sources. One of the objectives, it said, was to “guarantee a secure and sustainable market.”<sup>16</sup> The promotion of alternative crops is of growing importance, Imperial says, noting extreme weather is impacting crop cycles. Five years later, SDI's investigation found, many farmers say such a market remains elusive.

The case study outlines the contract system, boasting its leaf supplier-provided seeds and training to farmers, while purchasing crops following harvest. Malawian farmers interviewed for SDI's investigation described a different experience, likening the system to “debt bondage.”

### Japan Tobacco International (JTI)

In 2018, JTI issued a response to a British newspaper inquiring about its practices. In it, the company said it encourages “crop diversification together with tobacco,” meaning it was not encouraging farmers to give up tobacco altogether. It went on to describe how its Malawi affiliate “made available” maize seed and fertilizer to farmers, though the company did not outline the conditions of providing these inputs. Tobacco farming, JTI said, was a means of safeguarding the livelihoods of “vulnerable social groups,” acknowledging that smallholder farmers like those in Malawi predominate.<sup>17</sup>

There are few substitutes for tobacco and few employment alternatives for children old enough to work, JTI's letter claimed, adding it was one of Malawi's largest tobacco buyers, with more than 11,000 contracted farmers. In 1999, JTI took over leaf-buying operations from Africa Leaf Malawi Ltd. (now JTI Leaf Malawi), cutting out the middleman. It now has hundreds of employees and 10 regional offices in Malawi and has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in tobacco-growing operations, it says.<sup>18</sup>

### Philip Morris International (PMI)

The company claims to support crop diversification in Brazil, Colombia, Mozambique, Pakistan and the Philippines,<sup>19</sup> and it claims numerous initiatives help Malawi's farmers. Through its front group, Global Action to End Smoking (GAES)—formerly the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW)—it has spent millions on programs purported to help Malawi's farmers.<sup>20</sup> GAES funding, however, mainly goes to universities and other large organizations rather than direct investment in farmers or their infrastructure (see page 8).

## No Benefit to Farmers from PMI-Funded Front Group

Millions of dollars in grants from GAES over many years have not yielded many direct benefits for tobacco farmers, the growers told SDI. As farmers seek to diversify their production, increase their incomes and improve their livelihoods—all of which could be accomplished via direct investment in the farmers themselves—GAES grant money goes to universities and organizations upstream.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than practical solutions such as directly investing in farmers and infrastructure for alternative crops, the group's investments tend to focus more on research, technology, incubation and policy analysis through partnerships with these institutions. Many farmers and government extension workers in tobacco-growing regions are unaware of GAES interventions, they say. This is despite GAES and FSFW issuing press releases and videos heralding these grants around the globe in an attempt to repair the industry's image and attract investors.

In 2017, PMI, the world's largest transnational cigarette company, established the nonprofit FSFW, a front group that has been rejected by WHO, many academic and research institutions and much of the global public health community.<sup>22</sup> The foundation, which changed its name to Global Action to End Smoking in May 2024, established its Agricultural Transformation Initiative (ATI) in 2018.

The ATI was listed as one of FSFW's "core pillars" in its 2018 annual report. It claimed that because demand for tobacco was declining the ATI would partner with farmer groups, the private sector, governments and financial stakeholders to support tobacco growers' transition to alternative crops.<sup>23</sup> It would do so by enhancing productivity through

science and technology, creating new markets and strengthening policy via "nonpartisan" analyses. GAES further notes the government "appears receptive to reducing its overreliance on tobacco," and for ATI's projects to succeed, the benefits must "trickle down to the individual farmer, so that individuals' incomes, assets, and consumption are positively affected."<sup>24</sup>

According to ATI, the initiative also offers scholarships, funds the MwAPATA Institute and has collaborated with Opportunity International to establish the Centre for Agricultural Transformation (CAT). CAT concedes it has converted fewer than 4,000 hectares for "alternative value chains" and claims 61,000 "adopters" have "applied improved innovations."<sup>25</sup> Considering there are hundreds of thousands of tobacco farmers (not counting other workers employed in the supply chain) operating on tens of thousands of hectares of land,<sup>26</sup> PMI's millions in funding over the years have helped only a fraction of smallholder farmers and converted a relatively small percentage of Malawi's farmland.

By working with research institutions and policy organizations rather than directly with farmers, GAES potentially bolsters the industry's standing among stakeholders. This suggests the initiatives are more designed to burnish the organization's and tobacco industry's reputation. Consequently, the diversification activities promoted by GAES appear to serve more as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, rather than genuine efforts to shift farmers away from tobacco.

## Malawian Tobacco Leaf-Buying Companies and Their Diversification Programs

The four American- and European-based multinational companies dominating the tobacco industry depend on other multinational corporations to source raw tobacco. There are traditionally two dominant leaf-buying companies in Malawi, along with other smaller buyers.

The first big company, Universal Corp., has a majority stake in Limbe Leaf Tobacco Co., which has operated in Malawi for decades. The second, Alliance One International, began its Malawi operations in 2005 and is today the leaf-buying subsidiary of Pyxus International. Universal and Pyxus are U.S.-based.

Another company is JTI Leaf Malawi, a subsidiary of JTI, owned in part by the Japanese government. JTI purchases tobacco directly from farmers. Premium Tobacco Group (PTG), another leaf buyer, is privately owned and has an equity partnership with TAMA.



	<b>Limbe Leaf</b>	<b>Alliance One</b>	<b>JTI Leaf Malawi</b>
<b>Diversification Activities</b>	Includes soya and groundnuts in contracts <sup>27</sup>	Provides groundnut seeds and inputs, <sup>28</sup> along with corn seeds <sup>29</sup>	Includes groundnuts in contracts and supports legume production <sup>30</sup>
<b>Key Government Connections</b>	Labor minister has issued praise for company after it donated motorcycles to inspect tobacco farms <sup>31</sup>	Memorandum of understanding to ensure labor law compliance in the tobacco sector <sup>32</sup>	Ministry of Labour, Youth, Sports and Manpower Development has commended JTI Leaf Malawi for tackling child labor issues <sup>33,34</sup>
<b>CSR and Other Influence Activities</b>	Sustainability program purports to “encourage” companies to address climate change, human rights, natural habitats, farmer livelihood, soil health and water resources. <sup>35</sup> Also claims to build wells and reservoirs and donates to education and “tree management.” <sup>36</sup>	Claims it has programs to minimize deforestation, provide growers with tree seedlings and improve farmers’ access to water. <sup>37</sup> Also funds education initiatives, including building classrooms in President Chakwera’s home village. <sup>38,39</sup>	Claims it converts wastepaper to briquets for cooking. <sup>40</sup> Also operates a program it says assists farmers with low-interest financing, extension services, food security, reforestation and child labor prevention (among other child labor initiatives). <sup>41,42,43</sup> Has also contributed to disaster relief in joint effort with Alliance One, Limbe Leaf and PTG. <sup>44</sup>

### Universal Corp.

Universal Corp.’s involvement in diversification largely revolves around food insecurity, nutrition and gender equity. The company committed to supporting the production of maize and soybeans as a member of the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, an effort by G8 nations that fell short<sup>45</sup> in its mission to lift 50 million Africans out of poverty.<sup>46</sup> Universal Corp has been facilitating farmers’ involvement in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) as a strategy to promote agricultural diversification. Through initiatives like VSLAs, Universal Corp. aims to bridge the gap between diversification efforts and tobacco-dependent communities, supporting farmers in transitioning to more resilient and sustainable agricultural practices.<sup>47</sup>

### Pyxus International

Pyxus International has been involved in promoting new agricultural products, particularly groundnuts, sunflowers and beans.<sup>48</sup> These efforts include mobilizing farmers to produce these crops and targeting those with key livelihood assets, such as land, skills, experience, financial resources and, perhaps most importantly to the leaf-buying companies, the potential to repay loans. While efforts have not resulted in the significant adoption of new crops or the full transition away from tobacco, such initiatives have attracted donor support further bolstering the tobacco companies’ agenda.<sup>49</sup>

### JTI Leaf Malawi

The leaf buyer’s parent company, cigarette conglomerate JTI, has supported NGOs like Total LandCare, which claims to work with the government to address land degradation, in part, through its diversification programs.<sup>50,51</sup> The company has said it is “good practice to rotate crops, notably with food crops, and that growers sell these alternative crops for subsistence or complementary income.” The company adds, “Where farmers don’t cultivate a second crop, we always aim to coach them on how to implement this. We also encourage diversification by providing seed and fertilizer for the second crop to be grown. For example, JTI Zambia and Malawi make available maize seed and fertilizer to contracted growers.”<sup>52</sup>

### PTG

PTG and the Tobacco Association of Malawi (TAMA) partnered to negotiate contracts with nontobacco companies to help members grow soybeans and groundnuts alongside tobacco. In diversifying along with tobacco, TAMA has developed 49 farmer cooperatives since 2005 with funding from the Finance Ministry and The African Capacity Building Foundation. It was formally renamed TAMA Farmers Trust in 2019 to reflect its diversification initiatives, removing the word “tobacco” to allow members to focus on other commodities.<sup>53</sup>

## Transnational Tobacco Companies Sourcing Tobacco Leaf from Malawi

Company (headquarters)	Countries where cigarettes are sold	Sticks sold (2023)	Revenue (2023)	Top brands
Philip Morris International (New York City, USA)	180+	613 billion	\$84.6 billion	Marlboro, L&M, Chesterfield
British American Tobacco (London, U.K.)	180+	555 billion	\$34.8 billion	Dunhill, Kent, Lucky Strike, Pall Mall
Japan Tobacco International (Geneva, Switzerland)	130+	531 billion	\$17.6 billion	Camel, Mevius, LD, Winston (non-U.S.)
Imperial Brands (Bristol, U.K.)	120	198 billion	\$41.4 billion	Davidoff, West, Winston (U.S.)

Diversification is defined by the WHO FCTC, which explains the importance of discouraging tobacco production while promoting the transition to viable alternative crops. Malawi’s slow pace of diversification is likely compounded by the tobacco industry being allowed to play a central role, representing an irreconcilable conflict of interest: Real transition away from tobacco would be detrimental to industry profits.

Research suggests industry influence on policy can be more problematic in countries where tobacco is grown.<sup>54</sup> In Malawi, industry influence reaches the highest levels of government. President Lazarus Chakwera has stated his support for partnering with tobacco companies, even as he acknowledges demand for tobacco is waning:

**“While tobacco remains Malawi’s primary export and a key form of income for many Malawians, the crop is unlikely to provide a sustainable source of income in the longer term given a decline in global demand.** By working with tobacco companies, we can help blend other crop types into the farmers’ mix over time. Diversification efforts such as this can contribute significantly to household food security while supporting the establishment of a more resilient agricultural system. This is especially important given the resources, expertise and strong domestic and international networks which tobacco companies can offer.”

*State of the Nation address, September 4, 2020*

## Why the Tobacco Industry Is so Interested in Diversification and CSR



Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a key tenet of Big Tobacco's marketing, and not just in Malawi. Globally, tobacco companies fund tree plantings to distract consumers from the widespread deforestation the industry causes; hand out scholarships to distract from their attempts to hook young people on their products; donate to health or environmental initiatives to distract from the devastating toll their products take on people and the Earth.

Tobacco companies have launched efforts purported to address malnutrition and crop diversification in Malawi. Though these areas are not part of their corporate mission, the companies are aware of the criticism they face for promoting tobacco cultivation in a nation where more than a quarter of the population faces food insecurity<sup>55</sup> and 37% of children under 5 see their growth stunted from chronic undernutrition.<sup>56</sup> Spending millions on "alternative crops" for Malawi's farmers provides a façade behind which to say they're helping, when they're not actually providing viable markets or infrastructure. So, these crops are harvested, but they don't reach the millions in need of nutritious foods.

Their efforts to combat child labor are similar. A human rights law firm representing about 7,300 Malawian farmers, more than 3,000 of them children, is suing British American Tobacco and Imperial Brands over what it calls "systemic exploitation of poor and illiterate workers."<sup>57</sup> The lawsuit alleges workers are trafficked, earn paltry wages, subsist on small portions of food and live in terrible conditions on remote farms where they work up to 18 hours a day. The tobacco companies deny this. The industry knows poor pay leaves farmers with no choice but to employ their own children, some as young as 3, the suit states.<sup>58</sup>

When it comes to the industry's CSR efforts regarding child labor, research shows the initiatives "represent more of a public relations strategy" and "enhance corporate reputations and distract public attention from how they profit from low wages and cheap tobacco."<sup>59</sup>



## **An Investigation into Tobacco Industry-Led Diversification**

**SDI, with support from STOP, investigated industry tactics aimed at keeping farmers hooked on tobacco while claiming their objective is to steer farmers away from the crop. SDI reviewed public documents and research and gathered first-hand perspectives from 14 key informants from organizations receiving tobacco industry funding, including:**

- Tobacco leaf-buying companies
- The National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi
- Malawi's Tobacco Commission (responsible for tobacco production, markets and research)
- The Tobacco Association of Malawi (TAMA)
- The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, Water and Development
- The Mwapata Institute, an agricultural policy think tank

SDI also held five focus groups with a collective 160 small-scale farmers to explore their attitudes, perceptions and experiences. The farmers were from the districts of Lilongwe, Ntchisi, Mchinji and Dowa, all targeted by tobacco industry diversification efforts.

## Tobacco Companies' Influence on Crop Choices and Diversification

The tobacco industry in Malawi claims to support agricultural diversification, yet its actions often create barriers to moving away from tobacco.

"Well-stable farmers like me who started diversifying from tobacco to other crops have become poorer than before. [It is better] growing tobacco because the crops that we were loaned to grow, such as groundnuts and soybeans, have no sustained or continuous reliable market. **These companies force us to grow these crops under contract but are not able to provide the market.**"

*Tobacco farmer from Mchinji*

When leaf-buying companies provide seeds and resources for other crops, such as legumes and maize—typically to be grown alongside tobacco—inputs for the crops are often provided through loans, which sometimes deepen farmers' debt. The CEO of Malawi's Tobacco Commission has expressed dissatisfaction over tobacco companies including irrelevant items in their contracts, yet such inputs continue to be included.<sup>60</sup>

"If the government and other stakeholders find us alternative crops with [a] reliable market, then it will be well with us, but right now, we have to buy inputs and [are] told to grow crops without any market to sell them. **I am not able to pay off the loans that I'm required to take under the diversification program.**"

*Farmer from Lilongwe*

Another significant barrier is the contract system driven by the industry and essentially rubber-stamped by the government, leaving targeted farmers without the resources to switch to alternative crops. Leaf-buying companies prioritize contract farmers so companies can recover their loans, which also creates challenges for independent producers, farmers tell SDI.

"Tobacco is capital-intensive, but prices are low. Growing tobacco requires a license from [the Tobacco Commission], for which we also pay money. One needs to be under contract with the tobacco buyers to produce. **Otherwise, if you are an independent producer, you experience a lot of challenges selling the leaf because priority is given to contract farmers so that the companies can recover their loans.**"

*Farmer from Ntchisi*

Furthermore, the lack of sustainable markets for the crops that the industry promotes creates a barrier to diversification, leaving farmers with harvests they cannot sell. This helps fuel the notion the tobacco industry is not interested in other crops but is responding to pressure from various stakeholders.

**"[Tobacco leaf-buying companies] do not provide market and other extension services as they do in tobacco.** This is despite the fact that most farmers have very limited land and resources to allocate to those crops."

*Key informant, an extension officer from the Agriculture Ministry*

### Malawi Stands at the Beginning of a Long, Complex Global Supply Chain of Harm

At every waypoint along the supply chain, tobacco hurts people and the environment. This is magnified in countries like Malawi, which have finite resources and whose leaders have limited interest or capacity to challenge the industry.

To begin with, tobacco cultivation leads to deforestation and saps water resources.<sup>61</sup> In Malawi, this is devastating because 1 out of 3 households lacks access to drinking water, while 37% of households spend at least 30 minutes a day fetching potable water.<sup>62</sup> Agriculture, particularly tobacco growing, is a top cause of deforestation in the country, which loses roughly 330 square kilometers of forest a year (roughly the area of the island of Malta) as 69% of households depend on wood to cure tobacco.<sup>63</sup> Tobacco farming also pumps chemicals into the ground.

The film "Tobacco Slave" details how many Malawian farmers can't afford protective gear, let alone personnel. They take their own children out of school to work the fields, where they're exposed to pesticides, other chemicals and "green tobacco sickness," a poisoning caused by touching uncured leaves.<sup>64</sup>

Then, the packaging and distribution processes release greenhouse gases. The final product, of course, contains filters or butts, a leading source of toxic, single-use plastic pollution and the most littered item on Earth.<sup>65</sup>

## Diversification or Diversion?

According to farmers interviewed for SDI's investigation, the tobacco industry's diversification initiatives are just a means of defending itself against accusations that it is influencing farmers to produce tobacco crops instead of food, while profiting from the loans. When farmers are pushed to diversify and there is no market for alternative crops, it pushes them back to tobacco, which enjoys widespread support.

"Even when the farmer has all the inputs, we are forced to take the inputs on loan from the [tobacco leaf-buying company]. **They are supposed to give us a choice to take the loan or not, but it is mandatory, and this gets us into unwanted debts.**"

*Farmer from Mchinji*

The industry's approach to diversification seems more beneficial for tobacco companies seeking to enhance their public image than for farmers pursuing better livelihoods. The industry's relentless commitment to maximize global tobacco production and profits combined with its superficial diversification efforts in Malawi hinder the development of a sustainable agricultural sector.

"We have not been able to know programs that help us move out of tobacco. What we only know is that tobacco companies also encourage us to grow other crops alongside tobacco. However, this approach often lacks the necessary support for market access and resources, leaving us uncertain about how to effectively transition. **Without concrete guidance and viable options, we feel stuck in our reliance on tobacco as a primary source of income.**"

*Farmer from Ntchisi*

News reports show the industry ensures government officials are present when it announces donations and projects,<sup>66</sup> painting an image of effective collaboration with the state. This helps the companies' reputations and improves access to policymakers. The companies also work to establish themselves as government partners in education,<sup>67,68</sup> nutrition,<sup>69</sup> health,<sup>70</sup> water and sanitation,<sup>71,72</sup> the environment<sup>73</sup> and combatting child labor.<sup>74</sup> In some cases, the conflicts of interest seem glaring, such as when Limbe Leaf donated motorcycles to help inspect tobacco farms, earning high praise from Malawi's labor minister.<sup>75</sup>



"Their actions are primarily driven by the need for cooperation and [corporate] social responsibility, aiming to maintain a positive image and align themselves with NGOs and government programs. **While they participate in these initiatives, there is often little evidence of long-term commitment or genuine impact.**"

*Key informant who formerly worked for a tobacco company*

The industry appears more motivated by declining tobacco demand and negative public image. Companies like Pyxus International's expansion into other crops seems aimed at supplementing income. This highlights the industry's focus on profits over farmer welfare.

## The Burden of Industry Diversification on Farmers and Government

The tobacco industry's involvement in diversification efforts has created challenges for farmers and the government, arising from:

- **Loan obligations**

The high interest rates on input loans increase the financial strain on farmers, many of whom are already struggling to make ends meet.

- **Market demand**

The lack of sustainable markets for alternative crops leaves farmers with unsold goods, compounding their financial difficulties.

- **Reliance on tobacco**

The perceived reliability of the tobacco market leads farmers to prioritize tobacco over other crops.

**"It is challenging to grow crops that lack a sustainable market.** Tobacco, however, is the only crop we are certain has a reliable and consistent demand. This market assurance makes it a more attractive option for farmers, despite potential drawbacks, as it guarantees a source of income compared to other crops that may face fluctuating or uncertain market conditions."

*Farmer in Ntchisi*

- **Government dependency on tobacco**

Diversification efforts are just one example of tobacco companies taking advantage of the structural importance of tobacco in Malawi. As the tobacco companies' only true concern appears to be the global demand for tobacco, the country's reliance on tobacco allows the industry to influence policy and undermine efforts to reduce production. This has historical roots, as Malawi's first president after independence in 1964, Hastings Banda, concentrated the production and export of tobacco among wealthy estate owners, including himself.<sup>76</sup> His party sold estates, with government loans and publicly funded management, to political allies. Banda resigned in 1994 and state enterprises were privatized, but elite influence over the sector persists.<sup>77</sup>

- **Lack of policy coherence across government**

The industry's dual promotion of tobacco and diversification has led to contradictions in policy and a lack of genuine support for alternative crops. At the same time, government designs on diversification are not aimed at doing away with tobacco, but rather, at sustaining the economy and finding alternatives if global tobacco demand plummets. This seems to have created conflicts: President Chakwera, like those that have come before him,<sup>78,79,80</sup> has publicly encouraged tobacco production to boost the economy, while other government ministries have made commitments to reducing Malawi's reliance on tobacco for economic reasons.

While the tobacco industry's diversification efforts are framed as beneficial, they have predominantly served to reinforce tobacco dependency. The financial strain on farmers and the tobacco industry's political influence reveal a significant disconnect between the industry's public image and the actual outcomes of its strategies.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Tobacco companies have outsized influence over the tobacco sector and notable roles in diversification efforts in Malawi.

Despite the industry contributing millions of dollars to grants and programs over the last several years, smallholder farmers report little or no progress from diversification efforts. Some initiatives focus mainly on policy and research with no money going directly to farmers. Other programs obligate farmers to grow additional crops, which can sometimes deepen farmers' debt. Neither the industry nor government offer a viable market for alternative crops, and contract farming arrangements deepen tobacco dependence. Companies provide loans for tobacco and expect growers to allocate a large portion of their land to tobacco to participate in contract farming.

A move away from tobacco farming is not possible overnight, but steps can be taken to begin a systemic transition to more profitable, sustainable crops:

### 1. Shift responsibility away from the tobacco industry

Farmers point to a fundamental conflict of interest between diversification and industry profits that prevents progress. Government can reassert itself as a primary driver of such efforts, limit industry involvement and use a multisectoral approach to create policy supportive of diversification. A first step might be to redefine the roles of various stakeholders, streamline processes and facilitate coordination among agricultural entities. A structured environment would allow the government to better ensure effective resources and support for farmers transitioning to alternative crops.

### 2. Redirect tobacco efforts to help create viable markets

Government-led programs such as the Farm Input Subsidy Program are primarily aimed at maize cultivation, while tobacco historically has received full institutional support. However, there is a need to address nutrition shortfalls and secure revenue for the government by creating markets, infrastructure and incentives for businesses to invest in alternative products.

### 3. Transition to government-led extension services

Extension services provide farmers with the knowledge, skills and resources to adopt new techniques. This includes training on soil management, pest control, crop rotation and other essential practices. Enhanced extension services help farmers improve productivity and profitability, making diversification more attractive and feasible. Eventually, the tobacco industry should be excluded from extension services, in line with the WHO FCTC.

### 4. Fully implement Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC

This key provision of the global treaty requires parties such as Malawi to exclude the tobacco industry from policymaking, limit interactions with the industry and make any necessary industry interactions fully transparent.

### 5. Explore successful models from other countries

Initiatives such as Tobacco-Free Farms in Kenya help create systems to transition farmers away from tobacco. The program is administered by the World Health Organization, World Food Programme and the United Nations. More than 2,000 Kenyan farmers have successfully transitioned from tobacco to high-iron beans.<sup>81</sup>



## Acknowledgments

Original research conducted by the Sustainable Development Initiative (SDI) and used in this report was produced with the help of a grant from Vital Strategies. Editorial and design support was provided by STOP.

Founded in 2006 and registered with the Government of Malawi and NGORA, SDI is a local non-governmental organization dedicated to addressing poverty, disasters, environmental degradation and social injustices impacting Malawi's most vulnerable populations. Working collaboratively with communities, SDI prioritizes the development of sustainable and enduring solutions.

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry tactics that undermine public health. Comprised of a network of academic and public health organizations, STOP researches and monitors the tobacco industry, shares intelligence to counter its tactics and exposes its misdeeds to a global audience. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies as part of the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use. For more information, visit [exposetobacco.org](http://exposetobacco.org).

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