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# Partnership building as an approach to addressing corporate social responsibility in the agriculture sector in Malawi

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Pages 281-287 | Published online: 16 Aug 2006

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350600707629>

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# 1. Introduction

Malawi is one of the least developed countries in the world and, despite its relative political stability, poverty levels have continued to increase over recent years. In 2003 the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was estimated at US\$195, having fallen below the 1992 estimate of US\$200. Estimates show that 54 per cent of the population of Malawi lives below the national poverty line (UNDP & Republic of Malawi, [2003](#)).

Agriculture is the largest sector in Malawi's economy and is also vital for the country's manufacturing industry, providing essential inputs for a range of agro-processing activities. It contributes about 38 per cent of the GDP and 87 per cent of the total employment and supplies more than 65 per cent of the manufacturing sector's raw material. It also contributes more than 90 per cent of the foreign exchange earnings. It provides 64 per cent of the total income of the rural population and is the main livelihood of the vast majority of rural people, who account for more than 85 per cent of the national population of 12 million. Tobacco is the main export crop, accounting for 60 per cent of total export earnings, followed by tea and sugar, which contribute nearly 10 per cent each (Inc Media, [2004](#)). Despite the size and importance of the agricultural

sector, it is not sufficient to diversify its economy through tourism and transport. Inadequate drainage, irrigation, weak skills and a lack of viable commercial agriculture in Malawi have led to a decline in the sector's contribution to growth and employment. It is postulated that to manage the country's livelihood risks, key risks and resulting



significantly increasing the number of small-scale commercial farmers, developing a broader agricultural skills base among various groups, including women and youth, and improving access to finance and access to markets for small-scale farmers.

## 1.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Malawi

CSR in Malawi has traditionally tended to be philanthropic in nature, responding to perceived individual community needs in the location where a company tends to operate rather than setting up targeted strategic interventions to improve overall sustainable livelihoods at a country level. Where a more coordinated approach has been developed, it has been in response to specific issues. Some of those that business has tried to address collectively include child labour, HIV and AIDS in the workplace and provision of basic healthcare and food security in times of need.

Recently, several companies have begun to move beyond seeing CSR as simply a way of enhancing their licence to operate to seeing it, rather, as a real business tool that can be used to build a sustainable and viable economic base for the country. A number of agriculture sector companies have initiated more comprehensive CSR programmes. This is partly to mitigate perceived social and environmental risks but also in part to dispel the growing sense of expectation among local inhabitants that comes from being one of the only businesses visibly operating in a given region. (If a business is the only

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Figure 1: Growing dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Source: Sean de Cleene/AICC



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The development of these partnerships for the promotion of CSR objectives in the agriculture sector in Malawi has matched the development of CSR itself: a shift from

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- It is normally for a fixed or limited term.
- Service is delivered by one or both of the partners, depending on their relevant in-house expertise.
- Programmes are implemented within their geographical area of operation.
- It is easy to identify mutual areas of interests since only two organisations are involved.

The relationship that Satemwa Tea Estate has with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) illustrates this type of partnership. Satemwa, located in Thyolo District in southern Malawi, is a family-owned tea estate, in operation since 1922. It is one of the smaller estates in Malawi's main tea growing district, with a total land area of approximately 1 880 hectares.

Through a stakeholder mapping and situational analysis conducted by a consulting company (BCA, [2003](#)) it became clear that a key concern was HIV and AIDS, which was having a growing impact on the Satemwa staff and on the wider small-scale farming community that provides outgrower services for the estate. Satemwa realised that simply relying on the in-house clinical services that had traditionally been available on the estate would not be sufficient when dealing with the growing impact of the

pandemic. The estate's limited long-term business capacity to deal with this

A partnership with MSF, which has seen the Satemwa staff and the estate's existing (VCT) centre. The presence of a fully functional VCT centre in the region is a key future base for the region as a whole, given its function in the provision of drugs and services.

For Satemwa, this partnership allows the company to provide more informed



HIV and AIDS. For MSF, the partnership has been beneficial as it provides them with an established clinic, a platform for subsequent regional outreach and a level of support services that otherwise would not be available outside the already stretched government institutions, which otherwise they would have had to create such a base from scratch.

### 3. Case study 2: Collective, issue-specific partnership

This type of partnership develops when a group of companies and NGOs come together to deal with an issue that affects each of them to a differing extent and where the solution is often beyond the scope of one company. In other words, the problem requires a collective approach. The following factors characterise this type of partnership:

- It normally involves a range of companies from the private sector.
  - Service delivery is normally managed by one organisation but often involves several service providers.
  - The CSR programmes that the companies are engaged in are often not directly linked to the issue that the partnership is trying to deal with.
  - The programme is normally managed by one organisation but often involves several service providers.
  - Here is an example of a collective, issue-specific partnership. The partnership involves both companies and NGOs. The partnership is managed by one organisation but often involves several service providers.
  - Internally, the partnership is managed by one organisation but often involves several service providers.
- If proper planning and coordination are in place, collective, issue-specific partnerships can be more far-reaching and effective than individual CSR programmes. Companies pooling resources and expertise can often achieve more than they could on their own. There is also



partnership often allows companies to outsource the skills needed to deal with the problem at hand. However, this type of partnership is more complicated to broker and maintain over time, because of the companies' varying degrees of interest or concern. An example of how this type of partnership works is Together Ensuring Children's Security (TECS), a partnership between 19 companies and a number of civil society organisations that include Total Land Care, Creccom, Nkhoma Synod and various national and local government departments, working predominantly in the agriculture sector to help eliminate child labour.

TECS approaches the problem of child labour from the perspective that child labour is driven by poverty and the root causes are multiple. Thus its strategy is to engage with the communities in improving localised food security, providing safe water and making access to firewood easier, thus improving the chance that children will receive an education. The rationale is that if food security is achieved then parents, who in many cases are small-scale growers subcontracted to large estates, will release their children from working in the fields to attend school. Similarly, if water resources are easily available, children will not often be asked to fetch water for the fields, and if woodlots are developed in strategic nearby locations, for example near schools, then similarly there is more likelihood that children will be freed from working in the fields.

In terms of the partnership operation, TECS acts as the central project coordinator, brokering and coordinating the various activities of the partners to achieve the agreed outcomes.

The partnership operates with a single input from the companies, which is considered to be more efficient and more effective. The role of the companies is to pool their resources and also allow them to become more effective.



## 4. Case study 3: Collective, sustainability-focused partnership

In the third case study, there is a shift from the type of partnership approach that is developed in response to having to deal with a perceived risk to business to one that addresses the underlying framework for doing business itself and promotes competitive advantage and innovation in companies' core business strategies. This development in partnership building, although in its infancy in Malawi, is potentially the next generation of partnership development.

An example of this approach is the Malawi Growing Sustainable Agri-business campaign. In this case, collective and individual business action is being mobilised across the agricultural sector to develop an economically robust agriculture sector in Malawi while at the same time improving sustainable livelihoods in the country.

The campaign has two objectives:

- In line with the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living on less than \$1 per day, the Growing Sustainable Agri-business campaign aims to improve sustainable livelihoods and increase smallholder farmers' profitability by fostering good agricultural practices, thereby moving these farmers away from subsistence farming towards small-scale agri-business farming.

- It aims to facilitate both commercial and social enablers

This approach helps to understand the individual company's competitive advantage and more vibrant small-scale farmers

Because of the business's vested interest in a whole.

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coordinated by a group of organisations made up of the AICC's Africa Corporate Sustainability Forum, the Malawi UN Global Compact and TECS.

Companies supporting the Growing Sustainable Agri-business campaign need to demonstrate a commitment to working collectively, in line with the following five components:

(1) Action undertaken, through a collective approach or individual action promoted collectively, to bring about sustainable agri-business development across the sector as a whole with a focus on developing small-scale farming.

(2) Impact of actions taken under Growing Sustainable Agri-business campaign. These might include skills development, the showcasing of appropriate technologies, the development of alternative financing mechanisms for small-scale farmers, and support for small-scale rural enterprise development.

(3) Promotion of existing initiatives - awareness-raising and knowledge-sharing of innovative solutions and good business practice to promote Malawi's potential leadership in the area of sustainable agriculture.

(4) Advocacy - collective and targeted private sector engagement with the government, donors and broader civil society on policy initiatives to promote the sustain

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mutual respect for the various partners involved was key to the success of the partnership. Other essentials of a strong partnership include regular communication and equity among the partners. Failing to explore and articulate the value proposition of each partner in the early stages of activity tends to lead to inertia as the partnership evolves. This is because the partners have no clear understanding of the benefits and risks involved.

CSR partnerships in Malawi today are at a crossroads between the traditional approach of dealing with a business's specific material concerns and the new approach that sees partnerships as catalysts for re-engineering the core business strategy itself. This transformation means that capacity in brokering and building partnerships will have to be developed.

## Additional information

### Notes on contributors

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