

CONVERSATIONS IN TRANSFORMATION: STAKEHOLDERS COME TOGETHER TO DISCUSS CHANGE

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At the Foundation, we are committed to ending the use of smoking in this generation. We are keenly attuned to the potential effect that this transformation – the elimination of smoking – may have on vulnerable populations such as smallholder tobacco farmers. We thus find the need to ensure that these populations have sustainable and alternative livelihoods to be imperative.

To that end, we recently launched the Agricultural Transformation Initiative (ATI). The ATI is focused on understanding the challenges and opportunities for creating a robust and diversified economy in countries that are otherwise dependent on a single cash crop such as tobacco. Throughout the first half of this year, the ATI partnered with the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship to host a series of stakeholder meetings in Malawi to facilitate exchange and engagement around the creation of more robust and diversified economy for the country.

The participants reflected the full gamut of stakeholders, including individuals and experts from academia, agriculture, finance, government, industry, and nonprofit organizations in Malawi. The resulting conversations were multifaceted and multilayered. While the perspectives of various stakeholders occasionally diverged, frequently recurring themes included:

- No single, simple alternative – Multiple stakeholders agreed that diversifying an economy dependent on a single cash crop is complex. It is unlikely to be as simple as substituting one crop, such as maize or soya, for another. Instead, an array of alternative, sustainable, and investment-friendly livelihoods will be needed. The success of these livelihoods will be predicated on addressing the many deeply-entrenched structural obstacles currently facing the economy in general and agricultural sector in specific, including limited access to inputs, barriers to reliable financing, deficits in infrastructure, and gaps in knowledge, policy, and institutional capacity. In doing so, a market environment replete with pull- as well as push-factors away from a single cash crop will develop.

- Change will likely be incremental – Given the wide-ranging and far-reaching nature of these structural obstacles, change is likely to be gradual and incremental. Progress will be iterative as existing gaps in knowledge, policy, and institutional capacity are filled. The emphasis on gradual change was most vocal among those with stake in the stability of the existing economy and value chain.
- Change is possible but must be data-driven – Multiple stakeholders reinforced the belief that large-scale change is viable, with several underscoring that it is not only desirable but necessary given current trends. They emphasized previous, small-scale initiatives whose success appeared limited by a paucity of data to guide effective programming. The need for accurate, reliable, and robust data to develop a granular understanding of the challenges and opportunities at hand was clear.

In addition to these recurring themes, the attached report elaborates on the proceedings and stakeholder views in greater detail. In doing so, it reveals areas of emerging consensus as well as likely fault lines of divergence between the plethora of stakeholders likely to be affected by this transformation. Understanding this dynamic helps contour our early understanding in what is most needed and how to best achieve it.

Although these exchanges only represent the first of many such conversations, we found them insightful and invigorating. We encourage you to take a closer look. We look forward to advancing and coupling it to action in the months and years ahead.