



173 Court Lane,  
London SE21 7EE  
[www.GrassrootsMalawi.org](http://www.GrassrootsMalawi.org)  
[info@GrassrootsMalawi.org](mailto:info@GrassrootsMalawi.org)

# THE GRASSROOTS MALAWI FORUM

## THE FAILURE OF FOREIGN NGOs IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

### BACKGROUND

Malawi is the poorest English-speaking country in sub-Saharan Africa, with a population of close to 21 million at the end of 2023. According to the World Bank, there has been some improvement in its GDP in the last few years, likely because of a limited increase in the export of burley tobacco leaves; Malawi is the largest exporter in the world of this deadly product.

I first visited Malawi as far back as 1969, but started to become seriously involved with the country in 2007 as adviser to a UK based investment fund planning to develop agricultural projects in the country. By the time that fund collapsed in the financial crisis of 2007-8, I was ever more convinced that the way to tackle the continuing poverty of Malawi was to try to improve agriculture at the very grassroots. I launched GRASSROOTSMALAWI, a project focussed to link different small voluntary organisations working in agriculture in the Northern Province. I have come across dozens of such bodies and eventually had a list of 40 different organisations from different parts of the world; I suspect this is just scratching the surface. None of these groups appear to be actively working with any of the others, although most of them know of the others. Since most perform work that is complementary to the work of others, it would make sense that one that works on drilling waterholes should connect with another that helps villagers digging irrigations trenches and with another that helps them develop seed nurseries. To encourage them to join forces, I distributed small sums of money (including donations given by generous friends and supporters) totalling some £4,000 over the last 5 years to different projects that were doing good work on their own and seemed keen to join with others. I achieved little success in these efforts.

With some friends and colleagues in Malawi and the UK, we then changed approach and created a discussion forum to try to understand better the wider challenges and reasons for the unwillingness to join forces. The results of these discussions and recommendations are given below.

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Over the last five years around 50 people, mostly Malawians but all with connections with Malawi, have been discussing how aid from voluntary sources could improve the lives of ordinary people, particularly in rural areas of the country. Our group has had the honour of being headed as Honorary Co-Presidents by Madam Justice Esme Chombo, former President of the Criminal Court of Malawi and

now Ambassador to the United States, and Ms. Es Devlin, the distinguished UK artist and generous donor to Malawi.

Some participants in our group are working in the field in various parts of the country, others are actively raising funds for projects they sponsor or help with, yet others are regularly in touch with groups in rural areas. Our group included staff of different small and large Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs), both foreign and local, civil servants, active and retired academics, teachers in secondary schools, experts in different fields relating to agricultural and rural development, and a number of ordinary interested individuals.

In order to encourage open discussions, we promised that names would not be published, identities would not be revealed, and that comments or contributions would remain completely anonymous. This is, unfortunately, by itself indicative of one of the many problems that exist in trying to formulate a coherent aid and development policy across Malawi. People are not encouraged to debate or privately to express views because some of these might challenge the policies of their organisations and their senior colleagues. Able and competent people are worried that their own jobs and futures will be at stake if they speak openly. We have someone as senior as a principal in the civil service expressing views which would, if made public, lead to their suspension.

We have found that in many NGOs, staff seriously question their role and or the public stance of their organisations. There is no medium or forum to share doubts or suggest alternative approaches. This anonymity has made it difficult to produce tables or surveys that could prove common points but, had we not respected this commitment, some documents would probably not have been conveyed to us. However, we feel that some of the many comments that have been passed to us deserve reproduction; we have therefore incorporated some of these in this summary.

The aim of our discussion group has been to find some common ground that would enable us to outline a future strategy. We aimed to understand better the challenges and potential solutions and to share them with others similarly engaged with Malawi and its people. Across the entire range of the discussants, we have found remarkable agreement on the following four points.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The main need of the poorest, food, is not being addressed. The poorest anywhere in the world need more food. Food donations will be occasionally desperately necessary, such as in emergencies. The world produces enough food to feed everyone but it could not be delivered everywhere, year after year. Local people need to be able to grow food to meet their own needs and create some surplus to exchange for other food to meet their own basic nutritional needs. We have not seen any substantial evidence that this top challenge has been addressed in Malawi, that local people grow more food, that there are more agricultural advisers on the ground, that more storage facilities, more rural roads or bridges, more irrigation canals or water ponds, have been built. We also are aware that many attempts at introducing chemically produced seeds and fertilisers is resulting in entrapment of many farmers in a cycle of debt.
2. There are too many aid donors to Malawi. There are over 900 NGOs registered as charitable bodies in Britain alone working in Malawi (*from NGO Explorer*). There must be several hundred more from the

USA, Ireland, and Germany. There is even a mission from Iceland in Lilongwe to help with fisheries in the lake. The result is a lack of coordination and indeed often government officials are overwhelmed by the wide range of causes and groups. Malawi receives just over US \$1 billion per year in aid according to the World Bank. Most of this aid is Official Development Aid (ODA). We know that Governments and international bodies lend or give money to other governments to improve their management capacity. But NGOs raise funds from individual members of the public and it should be part of both their DNA and modus operandi to work and sustain individuals at the receiving end.

3. For rural people in Malawi the situation is getting worse. Malawi has suffered a number of serious climatic disasters: in the last few years there has been serious flooding in the south when the banks of the river Shire collapsed, followed by drought in the north then the opposite again, flooding in the north and drought in the south. Then it was hit twice by cyclone Freddy and then by cholera. Across the country as a whole the soil is becoming more depleted of nutrients, partly because of increasing aridity due to increasing heat, partly because of a decrease in regular patterns of rainfall and disastrous downpours. All have been compounded by deforestation. Because of these disasters short-term relief and aid has been needed. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their homes and have had to be offered temporary accommodation. They have not been able to attend to their fields and have become dependent on the international community. Considerable amount of aid has been given, but we have seen little evidence of what we would call development. We have not seen or heard of any long-term plans that would enable rural inhabitants to become better able of resisting the next raining season or the next hurricane.
4. Aid is being consumed by aid donors. It is impossible to gauge how much of the 'aid' is actually being consumed in the process of being delivered. However, we feel that too much is consumed in providing airconditioned offices in the capital, sophisticated systems of accounting, record keeping, metrics, training, that ignore local priorities and local needs. We have come across gross abuses. One large organisation pays for four children's education of its CEO at the most expensive local school. Each organisation appears to need expensive 24/7 security cover for all their staff. We have been told that insurance companies request security cover but this adds enormously to foreign and local staff costs. By not co-operating with one another, these intermediaries are re-inventing the wheel, over and over again, milking the system in full daylight. But they also prevent the spread of some form of institutional capacity among their Malawians staff and others.

*Our discussion group has come to one major conclusion: in Malawi foreign aid has not led to development but has become a growing invasive cancer that excuses both international donors and the government from confronting their responsibilities.*

Development is quite different from aid. Development is the process that enables communities to become self-reliant. To us this means training and educating people to become better able to look after themselves. It includes an effective agricultural extension service to provide constant advice to farmers, encouraging farmers to build their own schools and backing those farmers' initiatives, drill their own water wells and look after their own irrigation pumps, dig irrigation canals, grow local seeds for their own requirements, build their own roads, bridges, water ponds, and their own tree plots. The lack of any comprehensive approach or even setting the target to reduce hunger has been almost an open invitation to outsiders to offer to fill individual gaps with no holistic approach.

Why has development not taken root in Malawi? There are many reasons. The main ones have been listed below.

## FINDINGS

1. Too many international NGOs have come into the country carrying out missions determined at their headquarters in Washington, New York, London, Dublin, Bonn and elsewhere that do not reflect the very particular needs of different Malawian communities. They do not have the flexibility required to deal with different local customs, religious traditions, societal organisations, soils, specific crops, physical isolation.

2. There are NGOs so large they do not feel they have to work in collaboration with the relevant official authorities at regional or district level. They work independently, organise their own projects, select their own partners and have as little dealing with officials as possible. We accept this is inevitable when a large NGO, better resourced than a government department could ever be, feels it must get on with the job with the least bureaucracy possible. By so doing, they create a bureaucracy of their own. They recruit their own staff, often from other countries, train them, develop their own administrative systems that chime in with home and international standards, rent their own offices in the capital or the major cities, purchase their own vehicles and are set priorities by the managements of their own organisations. They ignore the priorities of the state or, more importantly, of the communities in which they work.

3. Many small NGOs on the other hand are the result of an initiative by some well-meaning and kind-hearted person in the UK or elsewhere who has some connection with Malawi, perhaps because they know someone from Malawi or have worked there for a period or been a volunteer. On returning home they want to maintain this link and raise funds for a particular school, or project, or village. Few of these projects last very long and have a serious negative repercussion: they lead local people into believing that someone else somewhere might come to their rescue.

4. Many projects of foreign NGOs have no solid local foundation because they are the result of outside intervention; few have any solid local partners. We are aware that there are many highly local small initiatives that operate on their own in villages, such as Voluntary Loans and Saving Association (VLSA), often led by women. There is no link between them and NGOs that could support their development. We are aware that, in the constant jockeying for power between powerful traditional authorities and weak local government, NGOs have not been able to find the right balance. Often, this conflict has actually suited them.

5. We found that the field of aid is rife with dishonesty. Some European organisations clearly do not perform the work they claim to be performing and are begging money for projects that do not exist. We have also found that there are many people in Malawi who seem to profit from being able to milk kind people in the North to obtain money for their own use. Legal difficulties in naming names prevent exposure of these abuses, we can only point these out by word of mouth. For example, we know of a small organisation based in Switzerland that started three different projects, one each in Malawi, Nicaragua, and India. The organisation may well be doing good in the three different projects, yet it must be difficult to justify the expenses of travelling and administering such diversity. We have come across a much larger organisation based in the UK that claims to have projects in 51 different countries. Instead of concentrating on one country and one specific region then committing to make a profound

generational change in that specific region, inevitably they will be spending far more on travelling and administration.

6. Many Christian denominations - Baptist, Anglican, Adventist, Salvation Army, Catholic, Episcopalian, and others - all seem scared to work with one another; you have to belong to that community to be a beneficiary. We have come across just a few projects that are open to people from the whole community, but these are all non-denominational. Very often other problems arise: the sect or denomination will want to train their own clergy or improve the church buildings with funds that have been given to them. This has been described to us as a serious diversion of funds. Each is highly protective of their congregations and will not give details of what they try to achieve; therefore, no lessons can be learnt.

7. We are aware that often the donor imposes restrictions on the body that has to deliver the aid, either a small or even a large NGO. The result is that they need to produce results that can be measured in numbers. We know that many basic improvements, such as increasing knowledge of farming among farmers, willingness to collaborate in their work, equality of opportunities, reduction in child mortality or better nutrition, cannot easily be measured. In an environment of ever greater needs, the general population needs to become more aware of what they can do themselves to tackle their needs, not through the provision of hoped-for assistance.

8. We found that enterprising individuals in some small NGOs or on their own tend to widen too rapidly their range of activities, moving from one at which they are competent – say drilling boreholes or windmills – into others, such as agriculture, in which they might have limited experience. They manage well one very specific task, but are unable to plan with others. Lack of planning reflect also lack of community involvement that will lead to longer term ‘ownership’ of the project by the community. Lack of community engagement and involvement at the most basic level of potential change appears to us to be one of the gravest brakes on development. We have not found a single project in which, for example, local people have been encouraged to build local roads or villages that might lead to a local school being better connected or a market easier to reach for local farmers. But we came across a local community that was prevented from building their school unless it followed the required national standards, meaning local communities can never build their own schools. One of our respondents stated that the spirit of self-help started to disappear in the 1980s with the arrival of so many NGOs in the country. It morphed into self-service.

9. Lack of employment opportunities in Malawi means that NGOs have become the main source of employment outside government. Government welcomes new donors since they bring foreign currency and jobs. Foreign NGOs are decent employers, they usually pay regularly and on time and refund expenses. This is not the case with many other employers. Long delays in payment of government salaries seems to be a common complaint. Many foreign NGOs are also willing to promote able personnel through the ranks and employ them in other countries, with therefore higher salaries and perks. The NGOs have created a class of very able and well-educated young people who are inevitably the children of elites, the only people who could afford to pay for a good education. We discovered that projects and NGOs are constantly trying to steal one another’s staff.

10. We found that too often communities are happy to receive funds – and too many donors to give funds – to projects that turn out to be unviable or untenable. For example, we found local clinics that would never be maintained by the local community because there is no qualified person to maintain

them. But we know of only one NGO encouraging the growth of herbal or medicinal plants that reflect the traditional demands of local people. This is against all the evidence that there are many herbal medicines that work and are used even in our own societies in the North.

11. We found many existing projects have been abandoned because no money has been offered to maintain existing projects, but to replace them. This has led to a mentality in which it is easier to ask for funds for a new school or a new irrigation pump than to repair an existing one, certainly to build their own. One respondent told us they were regularly asked to suggest a volunteer to be a good 'application writer' to apply to Embassies and other donors. Another participant referred us to Paul Theroux's Black Star Safari, where the famous author finds the school in which he had taught to now be derelict because a new school had been built.

12. We found many NGOs were unwilling to share what they do in any detail. We have been referred to their websites, annual reports, and statements. We have been denied access to talk to individuals (even through their own chains of command) who might be responsible for a particular task that the NGO claims to undertake. One particular denominational group welcomed the hint of a potentially large donation, but refused to provide details of how it would be spent. They have to be accountable to their own managements and not open to others. There is no way to independently check their claims. We have not found a single project that might have been reviewed independently by an outsider unless it had been hired by them. Failure, therefore, is never an option and lessons are not being learnt.

13. There is profound in-built jealousy between NGOs. Good ideas and experiences are not shared, individuals and NGOs who have ideas will not work with others because they are scared their ideas will be lifted or they will lose out if they share them. It makes it very difficult to mentor anyone from within the country.

14. There is a basic unwillingness of larger NGOs to seriously engage in rural areas. This does not help to build long-term cooperation with the poorest farmers. By not improving local conditions they are discouraging local people from remaining in their local area. Farmers are simply too completely overwhelmed by their day-to-day needs, by the fear of being disrespectful to their chiefs and their elders, to take any initiative and rock the boat. Those with any spirit of enterprise will simply try to leave a hopeless environment. NGO personnel could help break this deadlock by organising the local community to do what they really need, for example, building a path with stones, a rural bridge, or a common water pond using locally made brick.

15. There are no genuine impartial intermediaries between the foreign NGOs and local communities. We accept that language can be the first obstacle in conversations between the local community and outsiders, but we believe that genuine partnerships can be created if the right intermediaries are chosen. We know that teachers in local secondary schools or students from local universities could be used to build links. The key people in the development process are those who are able to change the world at their local level but do not have the support necessary to do it.

16. We have not found a single NGO that trains its own agricultural extension workers or helps the Government to train more. They all seem to add to the work of the extension workers or recruit some of the ablest to work for their own organisations. We feel that this is a sad gap when the key challenge of the country is to feed its own people through greater agricultural productivity. There are too many



seminars and training days for top people in the community, often held at good quality hotels with simple gifts such as a bottle of sugary water or a pen or note book. These are the real attractions to the participants, not the process of learning something new. Seminars are an alien means of imparting information. The real farmers are out in the fields; they have no time to spare to attend on away days.

17. Projects run by most foreign NGOs have been set up and aimed at helping men because men are the better educated and more powerful members of communities. Projects are run by men, involve men, and ignore the needs of the most important agents of change, women. Women are less mobile than men; they stay where they are based, look after children and older people, educate the next generation, and are the cooks, the nurses, and also the farmers.

18. NGOs need flexibility to do what local people want. If NGOs listened to the intended beneficiaries, they would come to understand that local people have a deep knowledge of local soil, micro climates, and suitable varieties of seeds, they know they need better roads and bridges, that they would like to have mixed farming, including small animal husbandry, that women would prefer to have fewer children, more rights to education and more freedom of agency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. First, the NGOs must be reined in by the Government of Malawi, or their own governments, or by their own coordinating bodies (such as BOND in the UK). They are there to serve the peoples of Malawi, particularly the poorest, on behalf of whom they are present in the country and appeal for funds from their own supporters. Many people across Malawi have told us that, if the NGOs left, the Government would be forced to do more for its own people. At present, these bodies do too much to absolve the government of its own responsibility. If we in the West believe in the sovereignty of governments and the structures of the modern nation state, NGOs should not undermine the government of Malawi as they do at present. Government should support other governments through bilateral or multinational agreements. Outside donors should also check carefully the process of delivery of the promised reforms. Civil Society both local and from outside should help communities and individuals.

2. NGOs that work in agriculture must be reminded of the key target; improve productivity of the farmers and the land. That means a complex of activities that need a commitment of time, many skills, different inputs, good planning. It also needs being able to think out of the box. FAO used to organise Food-for-work projects; these should be repeated. Young men and women from universities and secondary schools should be encouraged to work for set periods and be paid an appropriate allowance for their work. Most African countries (including Malawi) had 'national service corps' and these could be reprised. Cash vouchers to enable the poorest to survive in the most trying circumstances could be extended as they are in refugee camps or in some countries, this would help to generate a local economy.

3. We suggest that the very large NGOs should each be allocated to an existing specific District Agricultural Development Office (DADO) and be accountable to a specific Agricultural Development Division (ADD). The very large ones could then work in more than one DADO). They should guarantee to the Government of Malawi through a legal document to remain engaged in the project area for at least ten years. They should offer to act as coordinating bodies in those Districts for interventions by

specialised smaller NGOs in cooperation with the local authorities. They must commit themselves to use sustainable structures and reduce dependence on imported items to the best of their ability. They should form alliances with local government structures, not to burden them but to facilitate the difficult territory between weak state structures and powerful Traditional Authorities.

4. These larger NGOs should each commit themselves to ensure that the areas in which operate and to which they have committed to work, form community Land Trusts in partnership with the local communities and the Traditional Authorities. The Land Trusts should then transfer that ownership in its totality to the local communities in total at the end of the 10-year period and registered with the National Land Registry. They should build their offices and training facilities by creating 'development hubs' to host a range of different activities, each carried out by different smaller NGOs in partnership with the main organiser. All NGOs based in a particular District should work towards achieving the target needs. These would include establishing and supporting the development of primary schools and accommodation for teachers; setting up energy sources such as hydroelectric and wind energy that do not need imported parts; agricultural demonstration plots; training of local people in different skills at the appropriate level, teaching basic business skills, helping to set up micro local labour-intensive businesses (e.g. sanitary towels, bags for storing grain, briquettes, irrigation canals, solar drying boxes to preserve fruit or vegetables, seed nurseries, making good tools, repair bicycles, etc). Even at a minuscule scale this would help generate a local economy.

5. These development hubs should work with different non-denominational university departments to build the contacts with the local people. Each ADD should develop its own regional plan working in consultation with the local community with the overarching programme of developing food security for each District. Students from different disciplines - agriculture, water, engineering, sociology, anthropology - should spend some of their field work in identifying the priorities of the communities and act as the bridge between local aspirations and foreign generosity. The result of this cooperation would be to develop a framework of activities to benefit the local community and set up a timeframe.

6. Students who spend time on such activities should be offered a small reward, in addition to food and travel expenses (sponsored by an NGO). Government should offer to give priority in employment to people who have served a minimum period of time in such activities.

7. We suggest that a potential hub should also comprise a primary school in which children and staff are trained in farming improvements and growing their own food. The key NGO should encourage the development of irrigation schemes, water ponds and facilities for training farmers and other worker. Many of these activities and others, such as growing medicinal herbs or tree nurseries, training in small-animal husbandry, should be carried out by NGOs already existing and working in Malawi if they have specialised in such activities and already trained local people to become the trainers. They should all be built on land that, as suggested above, should be acquired at nominal rates by the large agency that becomes the trustee, together with the T.A. and the local Government, until title of the land can be transferred to a local community body. This is all allowed by the Constitution of Malawi.

8. Local consultants, from local Universities and staff from other NGOs already in the country, should be employed and paid at local rates of pay. Foreign volunteers, such as the US Peace Corps or the UK VSO, should be encouraged to take part and become involved in local activities, from teaching to



agriculture to building their own facilities. Over a set time of ten years, as suggested above, the community should be able to fill most of the posts needed to improve agriculture.

9. NGO personnel and their colleagues in the local communities should be encouraged to discuss issues of common concern, in an open and democratic way. The role of women is greatly underestimated by both local and foreign Civil Society Organisations and their role in decision-making must be acknowledged. NGOs will not engage in any behaviour that might lead to suspicion of corruption and will support all efforts at total transparency.

10. Embassies of the many donors in the country should be encouraged by the Government of Malawi not to halt projects which they would like to support, but to cooperate and coordinate their approaches. They, and the Government of Malawi, must see that this aid is currently simply not changing the existing profile of a desperately poor society.

## PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

In my view the NGOs should be challenging the approaches of donors and not follow the same approaches that are fundamentally weakening the agency of the intended beneficiaries. For example, this would mean not to pursue the policy of delivering more chemically produced seeds and associated fertilisers and pesticides that are pushed by foreign companies under the WTO rules. One of the facts on the ground is that the government does not have the tools to check, for example, the quality of the seeds or fertilisers that are sold on the market. Yet, it has been pointed out by many studies that there is rampant marketing of false products.

The chaotic way in which NGOs behave, without a clear understanding of the ultimate aims and goals required to change the structures within which they work, but to follow their own internal priorities, means that as far as the recipients are concerned, they are irrelevant. I feel that this is not a healthy situation for a poor country, where the priorities of the government have been in substantial part defined by the interests of organisations that are not working in unison with the government.

I would further argue that not challenging the International Financial Institutions that are demanding the government to produce more tobacco for export to meet its foreign currency debt, is to damage local people. It means that money raised from the public in rich countries forces Malawi rely on the donation of foreign currency to repay the debts incurred with the World Bank and the IMF.

*But the crucial decision, in my view, should be that of the Government of Malawi. It should take its own decisions regarding food security for its people. This means putting agriculture at the centre of its policy-making, forcing all foreign players to tow its line.*

Benny Dembitzer

Director, GRASSROOTSMALAWI

Hon Professor of Global Economics, China Centre, University College London

Member of the team awarded the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize