

Stellenbosch University's agriculture initiative to aid Malawi farming community

Malawi is considered one of the most tobacco-dependent countries in the world. By this observation, the Faculty of AgriSciences at Stellenbosch University (SU) has partnered with institutions in the US and Malawi to help the Malawian economy become less dependent on tobacco farming. SU agricultural economist will help gather and map information about Malawian agricultural sector, which will be useful in identifying and prioritising alternative produce and crops that benefit the economy.



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Despite being only the thirteenth global producer of tobacco by weight in 2016, Malawian tobacco exports account for 59% of the country's total export value during that year; around 32% of the population works in the tobacco industry.

The Faculty, and its Department of Agricultural Economics, in particular, is a partner in the Centre for Agricultural Transformation in Malawi (M-CAT). Other partners include the University of Minnesota in the USA, the Malawi University of Science and Technology and Land O'Lakes International Development, the non-profit arm of the Forbes 200 commercial agricultural company Land O'Lakes.

Funding for the multi-million dollar five-year project was secured from the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World in December 2018. The first planning session between the partners takes place at Stellenbosch University in May 2019.

There are many changes worldwide in the consumption of tobacco products, which could in the long run significantly influence the Malawian economy which is so specifically tied to tobacco.

Reducing tobacco overreliance

According to the M-CAT partners, the current global trends in tobacco markets, health issues, and environmental concerns have exerted significant pressure on the Malawian industry. This has prompted the government to diversify the economy and to try to reduce the country's overreliance on tobacco as the largest foreign exchange earner. New agricultural avenues and markets must, therefore, be identified.

"Growing tobacco has never lifted smallholder farmers out of poverty. High-quality data and rigorous analysis can shape and inform effective, evidence-based policy creation and resource deployment to diversify economies and lessen country dependence on tobacco—better preparing farmers for the future while strengthening their countries' economies," says the partner institutions.

"The M-CAT project is a pre-emptive effort between a strong network of partners to help Malawian farmers identify lucrative alternatives that can still be exported and earn the country much-needed foreign earnings," explains Prof Danie Brink, dean of the Faculty of AgriSciences.

Malawi is not new to the partners. The University of Minnesota has for instance conducted tobacco-related research in recent years in the country, while a number of Malawian postgraduate students have graduated from SU in recent years. Land O Lakes International development has worked in Malawi for the past twenty years. It recently partnered with a Malawian tobacco company through the MSIKA project to provide extension services to support three thousand smallholder farmers in their move towards other high-value horticulture produce.



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Julia Smith 4 Jun 2018



As part of the new initiative, Stellenbosch University will provide support to the scientific and technology legs of the endeavour. A technology hub to analyse relevant agricultural, meteorological and geological data from Malawi will be set up within the Department of Agricultural Economics. In this SU will receive support from the University of Minnesota.

The Innovation Launch Lab of the Faculty of AgriSciences will help with the know-how around technology transfer in the Malawian agricultural sector, and the stimulating and supporting of new ideas through various development initiatives.

According to Brink, the initiative will also see more Malawian postgraduate students come to Stellenbosch, initially to do research on Malawian agriculture economics and related fields. The programme will be extended once specific crops and products have been identified as being suitable to support Malawi's economy.

"Students will also have the opportunity to experience a few months of study at our partner institution, the University of Minnesota," concludes Brink.