The role of tobacco in Malawi’s economy will continue to diminish. Smallholder tobacco farmers, who are already switching to other crops, including sunflower and soybean, need to be supported to address their production and marketing challenges. There is an urgent need to develop the supply chains of crops that have high potential to provide alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers, such as soybean. These crops have the genuine potential to support the livelihoods of thousands of farmers who presently depend on tobacco as their livelihood.

In particular, alternative livelihoods that ensure that all dimensions of sustainability – economic, ecological and social – are fully supported should be strongly supported. Therefore, the development of sunflower will be challenging. Other oilseeds, notably soybean, have the potential to be a sustainable alternative, given they are grown for the local market.

The search for alternatives to tobacco in Malawi has, so far, shown that simply substituting tobacco for another commodity will fail. Instead, the focus should be to develop a range of alternative crops that can offer sustainable income sources for smallholder farmers, even in leading tobacco-producing districts of Malawi.

The economy of Malawi is heavily agro-based with the agricultural sector accounting for over 85% of its foreign exchange earnings and supporting over 90% of the population.1 It has become the world’s most tobacco-dependent economy, as the commodity accounted for approximately 82.5% of its foreign exchange earnings and supporting over 90% of the population.

Since 2009, tobacco production is declining: the area under tobacco production decreased from 183,000 hectares to 123,000 hectares (2014), while the volumes of unmanufactured tobacco produced fell from 208,000 tonnes to 128,000 tonnes (2014). This decline is attributed to low prices that farmers receive at the tobacco auction floors in Malawi and tobacco growing continues to shape the politics of tobacco control in the country.4 Policy makers often weigh the health benefits of tobacco control against the political economic losses that may be brought about through tobacco control in a country that is heavily dependent on tobacco.

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Sunflower (Helianthus annuus) is also a potential viable alternative for tobacco farmers. Since the Tobacco Control Act of 2009, sunflower has been commercialized as a major export crop. Sunflower growing continues to shape the politics of tobacco control in the country. Policy makers often weigh the health benefits of tobacco control against the political economic losses that may be brought about through tobacco control in a country that is heavily dependent on tobacco.

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Legumes and soybean have the potential to provide alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers. In some districts where tobacco is also widely grown, such as Kasungu, Mchinji and Rumphi, tobacco growing continues to shape the politics of tobacco control in the country. Policy makers often weigh the health benefits of tobacco control against the political economic losses that may be brought about through tobacco control in a country that is heavily dependent on tobacco.

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The economy of Malawi is highly agro-based with the agricultural sector accounting for over 85% of its foreign exchange earnings and supporting over 90% of the population.1 In the agricultural sector, 84.5% of the total labour force is employed, with the majority, i.e. 95% of the total labour force, engaged in primary agriculture.

Alternatives to tobacco – a closer look

Legumes and Sunflower in Malawi

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A number of initiatives in Malawi are implemented to promote sunflower and other oilseed com-
modities. For example, the German development agency GIZ is promoting sunflower, ground-
nuts and soybean as alternatives to tobacco cultivation in its Green Innovation Centres for the
agricultural Research and Extension Trust (ARET) with close relations to the tobacco industry.11

GIZ is working with the Mwimba College of Agriculture which until recently has served
as the volumen of sunflower seed has grown from 8,000 tonnes to 19,500 hectares as the supply.
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The GIAE programme in Malawi started in November 2014, will run until September 2021 and aims at increasing the income, production, and productivity of smallholder farmers, especially women and youth, and at improving food supply. The programme supports four value chains: soybean, groundnut, sunflower and cash-

Sunflower cultivation, on the other hand, involves the use of inorganic fertilizers and pesti-
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GIZ aims to support Mwimba College to reorient its curriculum more towards oilseed promo-
tion in Malawi. The programme includes capacity development to Mwimba College to upgrade
the skills of teachers in the oilseed sector and to improve the quality of education. Thus, the
vocational training is more oriented towards practical skills acquisition in the oilseed sector and has been improving the quality of education. Thus, the vocational training is more oriented towards practical skills acquisition in the oilseed sector and property supports for smallholder sunflower farmers in Malawi.

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In contrast, sunflower or legumes are used to promote nutrition for people liv-
ing with HIV and AIDS. Similarly, groundnut is an important component of both rural and urban
diet through its provision of valuable protein, edible oil, minerals, and vitamins.23

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ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Studies have demonstrated that some alternative crops are economically viable and highly
profitable for smallholder farmers.12 The results show that e.g. soybean is more profitable than
tobacco grown by independent farmers. While the profitability of tobacco under contract with
leaf companies is high, soybean remains very competitive and offers excellent opportuni-
ties as an alternative. Soybean is already widely grown in the major tobacco growing districts
Lilongwe, Kasungu, Mchinji, Ntchisi, Dowa, and Rumphi.14

In livestock-farming communities, grain legumes are used as livestock feed. Groundnut, for
instance, increases livestock productivity as the groundnut husk and seed cake are rich in
digestible crude protein content.14 Soybean is also used for livestock feed, particularly in the
poorly developed poultry industry in Malawi.15 Future demand for soybean in Malawi will be driven by the animal feed industry and is projected to reach around 71,000 tonnes of soybean annually used for animal feed by 2020.16

Additionally, sunflowers are an important source of income, contributing between 5 to 10% to
annual household income.4 The promotion of sunflower is increasing socioeconomic access to
cooking oil and margarine. With financial support from UNDP’s Malawi Innovation Challenge
Fund, the local manufacturing company Sunseed Oil started to produce long-life fridge free
margarine made from sunflower that is supplied by smallholder farmers. The product, which
promotes placements and internships in the oilseed companies of Malawi.

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smallholder sunflower farmers in Malawi.

Additionally, sunflowers are an important crop, which could significantly contribute towards
foreign exchange earnings, once the sector is well developed. In 2013, Malawi exported sun-
flower seed valued USD 639,000.

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