

Growers the big winners in Malawi's tobacco industry

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Tobacco growers are the big winners, while the environment and people who have lost land to tobacco estates are the major losers in Malawi's expanding tobacco industry. This is according to Alois Mandondo of the Centre for Agrarian and Environmental Studies in Zimbabwe. Mandondo, as leader of a study published in Springer's journal *Human Ecology*, believes that concerted and coordinated efforts are needed to solve the related dilemmas faced by this African country.

Malawi has been the leader in tobacco production in southern Africa dating back to the 1890s, and the industry is still the cornerstone of the country's economy. To assess the social, economic and environmental impacts and trade-offs of investing in Malawi's [tobacco industry](#), Mandondo and his team focused on two prime tobacco growing districts in the Miombo woodlands. They found that the net benefits of the industry are reduced by high government subsidies, and the limited in-country value ultimately translates into loss of jobs and revenue.

The socio-economic impacts of the expansion of tobacco growing in Malawi are highly variable, depending on the stakeholder group or business model in question. Tobacco growers benefit most from the industry's expansion, with those losing land to large-scale tobacco estates on the losing end of the equation. Efforts to recuperate livelihoods are generally less than adequate to offset the costs of land loss. Growers sponsored by large estates show significantly higher returns than independent growers or smallholder farms, which are typically run by single families.

The high rate of tobacco-induced deforestation is also a major environmental concern. Deforestation is caused by continued plantation expansion and the subsequent, unsustainable wood-sourcing practices in an effort to provide low-cost fuel to dry and cure tobacco. While estates are mandated by law to maintain tree plantations on at least 10 percent of their own land, this law is rarely enforced, justified by the national strategic importance of the tobacco industry. The subsequent depletion of natural forests by smallholder wood suppliers and others, combined with the increased global demand for tobacco, have caused [tobacco](#) farming to spill over into neighboring Zambia and Mozambique. This in turn ratchets up the potential for rapid deforestation there, as well.

"The major lesson appears to be that there is no single solution to any of the problems: each, if not all, will require sets of solutions pursued in tandem in a coordinated manner," Mandondo writes. "While highlighting areas of improved governance that are needed to enhance the transition to a more sustainable and socially just industry, we also acknowledge the technical and political challenges involved in such a transition."

More information: Mandondo, A. et al (2013). Assessing Societal Benefits and Trade-offs of Tobacco in the Miombo Woodlands of Malawi, *Human Ecology*. [DOI: 10.1007/s10745-013-9620-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-013-9620-x)

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