

‘Fake seeds cost us money’: Learning from Traction’s adaptive approach to changing the stakes for farmers in Malawi

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Key messages

Through facilitating and brokering a multi-stakeholder coalition, the UK FCDO’s Traction initiative played an important role in accelerating the introduction to Malawi of a digital anti-counterfeiting technology with the potential to significantly improve farmers’ livelihoods.

The programme was organised via a series of ‘Test-Learn-Adapt Sprint Cycles’ that encouraged it to learn about the issue, the context, and about how to run an adaptive programme in Malawi.

The initiative appears to have been very good value for money.

The experience shows that a type of Issue-Based Programme (IBP), with similar ingredients to successful programmes in Tanzania and Nigeria, can also work in Malawi.

Although relatively straightforward on paper, the programme had to overcome some potentially disruptive vested interests, which it did in part by taking advantage of a window of opportunity caused by a change of government.

It remains to be seen whether the coalition Traction catalysed can build the momentum required to realise the full potential of the technology or tackle some of the more deep-seated problems in Malawi's seed supply industry. As such, there may be a case for programmes like Traction to work on issues like this over a longer time-frame.

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The problem

Improved seed has the potential to boost crop yields and improve livelihoods for millions of small farmers in Malawi. Yet many small farmers are not using it. The reasons are numerous, but one of the most important is the prevalence of fake seed in the marketplace. Improved seed is more expensive to produce and sells for a much higher price than normal seed and grain, providing an incentive for unscrupulous traders to cheat farmers, using various tricks such as filling improved seed packets with normal grain or stocking shops with authentic seed, while delivering fake seed from warehouses. Such practices weaken confidence in the improved seed market, holding back agricultural development and poverty reduction.

FCDO's Traction, a politically smart, issue-based, adaptive development programme, set out to solve this problem using scratch cards – a technical solution that helped farmers verify the authenticity of the seed they were purchasing. After approximately two years of working on the programme, scratch cards on seed packaging have become mandatory for the pivotal crops of maize and legumes.

This briefing, based on programme documentation and nine interviews with Traction staff and stakeholders, tells the story of how this breakthrough was achieved, focusing on the novel methodology Traction employed, some of the programme's twists and turns, and what the experience tells us about issue-based programming in places like Malawi.

The programme approach

Traction is an issue-based, adaptive development programme, based around a methodology of 'Test, Learn, Adapt' (TLA). Issue-based programmes are thought to be a particularly useful developmental approach in contexts where the political settlement is not very conducive to effective state-led approaches (Levy, 2014; Kelsall et al., 2022; Williams, 2021).

The purpose of a TLA cycle is to help navigate 'the way from here to there' in situations that are complex and therefore do not lend themselves to pre-defined pathways of change. The actors involved in the design and implementation of a given project start with imprecisely defined solutions to the problem in view. What works and does not work are not known with precision from the 'here', and hence the best a programme can do is to commit to repetitions of hypotheses or best guesses of what might work, articulating the evidence-based assumptions for these constructions, and then testing them out in real-life situations (Traction, 2021).

This often means Testing, Learning and Adapting around several potential solutions, each characterised by small and rapidly implemented high-quality investments in order to increase the chances of one of them actually working, while others fail fast and hence reduce the risks of going too far at high cost in a wrong direction. These interlinking repeated cycles of TLA reviews are called 'sprint cycles'.

The Seed Certification or scratch card programme was based on nine sprint cycles, in each of which the programme learned new things and adapted accordingly.

How the programme unfolded

The team behind Traction identified seed supply as a high-potential issue in its bid documentation, and after winning the contract from FCDO, set about scoping the issue more intensively. It commissioned a deep-dive problem analysis of the seed sector and, on the advice of the Seed Traders' Association of Malawi (STAM), a key industry stakeholder, convened a group of seed companies to brainstorm solutions. Some of these companies had already been on a study tour of Kenya, where they had been impressed by the success of mPedigree, a social enterprise company that specialises in mobile and web technologies that combat faking and counterfeiting. They decided that one of these technologies – scratch cards – might be easy to implement and could bring rapid improvements in the seed industry in Malawi.¹

The basic idea behind the scratch card programme is that, when farmers buy a packet of seed, it comes with a scratch card. The farmer scratches the card to reveal a code. The farmer then sends this to a central control room via SMS and immediately receives a response verifying whether or not the seed has been certified as authentic. Via this route, farmers' confidence in high-value seed is improved, and fake seed driven out of the market.

Based on its experience in Kenya and working together with Traction, mPedigree developed a six-point action plan which formed the initial building blocks for the seed programme's test, learn and adapt sprint cycles, a simplified account of which follows.

In Sprint Cycle 1 (February to March 2020), Traction tested support for the scratch card solution. It established that four seed companies and the Seed Services Unit (SSU) (the key government agency responsible for certifying seed) were supportive, but that the commitment of other key actors could not be guaranteed.

In Sprint Cycle 2 (March to May 2020), Traction tested its ability to build a larger coalition and to develop an MOU among the major players.

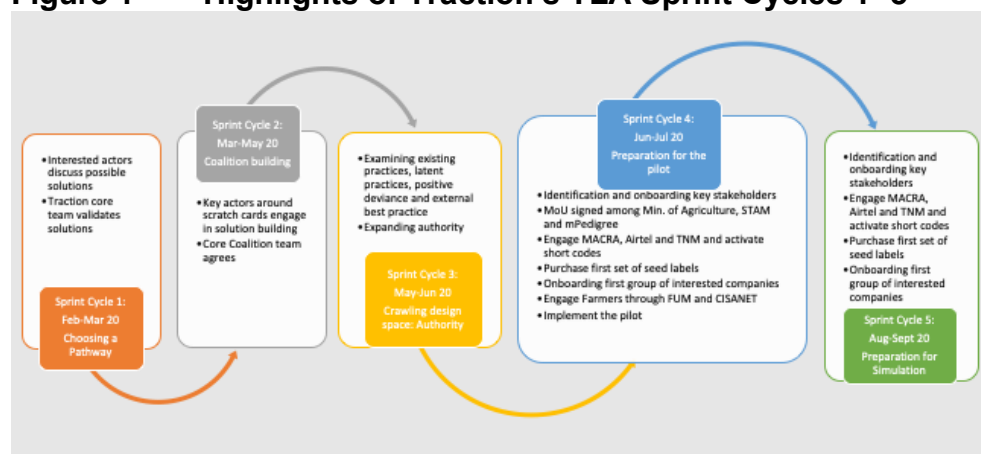
¹ The other proposed solutions were seed insurance and measures to balance demand and supply in the market, both of which were deemed more demanding.

In Sprint Cycle 3 (May to June 2020), Traction was still testing its ability to build political support for the solution. Although there were delays with the MOU, momentum grew. In June 2020, further impetus was provided by a change of government. Traction expanded its lobbying efforts, hoping that it would be able to link the scratch card programme to an expanded Agricultural Inputs Programme (AIP), a policy commitment of the new government.

In Sprint Cycle 4 (June to July 2020), Traction attempted to test the feasibility of the scratch card technology on a selection of winter crops. However, because mPedigree had not yet been registered by the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), this proved impossible. Adapting, the programme secured permission to conduct a scaled-back simulation of the technology. Here, scratch cards would be sent out to rural areas, scratched and verified via SMS, without actually being attached to bags of seed.

Sprint Cycle 5 (August to September 2020) was about preparing for the simulation. Training was organised but uptake was patchy

Figure 1 Highlights of Traction’s TLA Sprint Cycles 1–5



Source: Traction, 2020

In Sprint Cycle 6 (October to November 2020), the simulation and stakeholder response were finally tested. Despite some difficulties getting the agreement of mobile phone companies on using their SMS services, stakeholders were encouraged by the results.

Sprint Cycle 7 (December 2020 to June 2021) was to involve a full pilot. While the coalition was able to put some of the pieces in place, negotiations with phone companies over provision of a toll-free call centre – a prerequisite for the rollout – remained difficult. Meanwhile STAM, previously a key coalition member, temporarily withdrew its cooperation due to disagreement over its role in the programme. The winter pilot did not go ahead.

Sprint Cycle 8 (July to October 2021) was about testing the ability of the coalition to implement a full roll-out. Lobbying the Ministry of Agriculture paid off and the Minister issued a decree making the use of scratch cards mandatory for all maize and legume seed packaging in the country. This provided the momentum for SSU to take leadership, and it became very active in ensuring that all coalition members were on board. Noting that the political environment was conducive, mPedigree reached an agreement with mobile phone company TNM to secure a toll-free number. It also registered a local company and recruited local staff. mPedigree, in conjunction with SSU, organised training for 24 seed companies. By the end of September 2021, seed companies had ordered over 4 million scratch cards.

In Sprint Cycle 9 (November 2021 to April 2022), Traction monitored the ongoing roll-out. It became apparent that the success of the project would require strengthening the governance system around the scratch card. This involved a series of lobbying activities to ensure the passage of a Seed Bill into law, in which coalition members were joined by the MwAPATA Institute, an agricultural policy think tank. The Bill provides for the creation of the Malawi Seed Regulatory Authority, and a framework for penalising sellers of fake seed.

In the knowledge that the programme had largely achieved what it set out to do, Traction closed out the programme with a Transition Plan to help stakeholders continue to monitor implementation of the scratch card technology.

What has Traction achieved?

Traction's achievement can be assessed in terms of the contribution it made to introducing the scratch card technology, and the magnitude of the impact this has had on farmer livelihoods.

On the first point, most informants were of the view that, even without Traction's intervention, scratch card technology would eventually have made it to Malawi. mPedigree already had plans to move into the market, and some stakeholders were already aware of the technology's potential. However, most were also of the view that Traction was extremely helpful in building and supporting the coalition around the issue: 'They really played a major role ... they brought awareness of the system that was already working in Kenya and other countries'.² 'Traction put together all the key stakeholders, facilitated all our meetings, and helped our communications to the policymakers, which helped us get into the scratch card very fast'.³ 'The value add of Traction has been the convening aspect. Getting different stakeholders into one platform. And doing the political economy analysis of the seed systems was very useful'.⁴ According to one very well-placed source:

It would take forever for the country to have this system if Traction was not involved. Traction played a significant role in negotiating with the government, the technology company and all other stakeholders in the seed industry. This was almost impossible without their involvement because of the bureaucracy in government.⁵

Generalising, *a very conservative estimate would be that Traction's intervention accelerated the introduction of scratch cards to Malawi by at least 12 months.*⁶

Next, we need to consider the magnitude of the change. Under the AIP, farmers were provided with vouchers to exchange for farm

² Kii2.

³ Kii3.

⁴ Kii7.

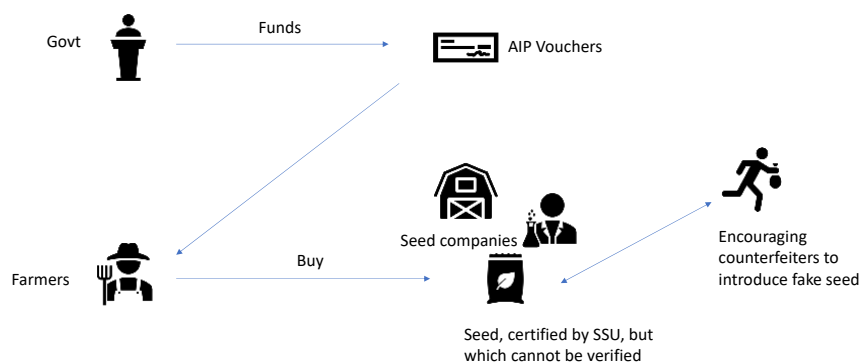
⁵ Kii9.

⁶ Kii6.

inputs, including improved seeds. Without the ability to verify via the scratch card that seed was certified improved seed, some of these seeds would likely have been counterfeited. Moreover, the mere presence of counterfeit seeds in the supply chain would likely have deterred many farmers from using their vouchers on seed. With the intervention, all seed purchased using AIP vouchers came with a scratch card, deterring counterfeiters from entering the supply chain and boosting confidence in improved seeds.

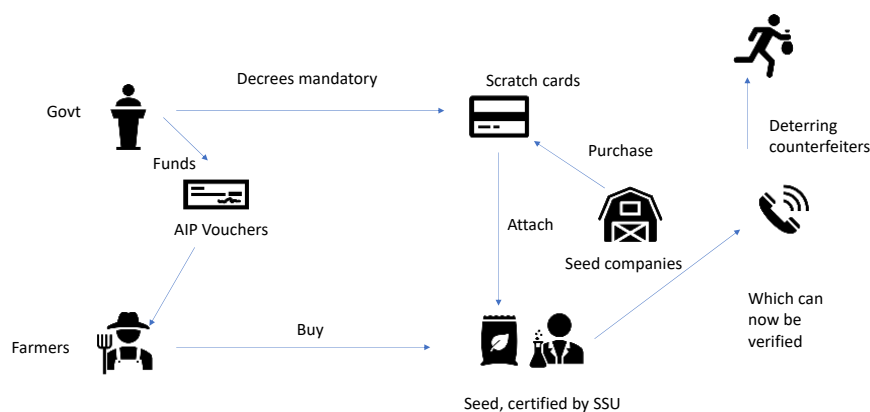
The causal mechanisms at work are shown in Figures 2 and 3. In Figure 2, the absence of a means of verification for certified seed encourages counterfeiters. In Figure 3, the presence of the scratch card deters them.

Figure 2 Hypothetical AIP without scratch card



Source: Authors

Figure 3 AIP with scratch card



Source: Authors

Given the prevalence of fake seed in the market previously, Traction estimates that improved seed reached at least an additional 500,000 farm households in this way. It also estimates, conservatively, that using improved seed would boost average household income by around £14 a year,⁷ implying an income gain of £7.2 million. Given that the cost of the IBP to FCDO was under £200,000, the programme yielded £36 value for every £1 spent.

That figure does not take into account the possibility that, without Traction's intervention, the scratch card may have taken many more years to arrive, or not arrived at all. Nor does it take into account the wider systemic changes the programme could yet catalyse, including, in the words of one stakeholder, 'A sustainable digital platform that can be a catalyst for transformational behavioural change'.⁸

Box 1 Value for money?

- Traction estimates that the scratch card IBP delivered at least £36 of value for each £1 of taxpayers' money spent.

These estimates and the assumptions behind them need to be scrutinised, but on the face of things they seem to represent excellent value for money.

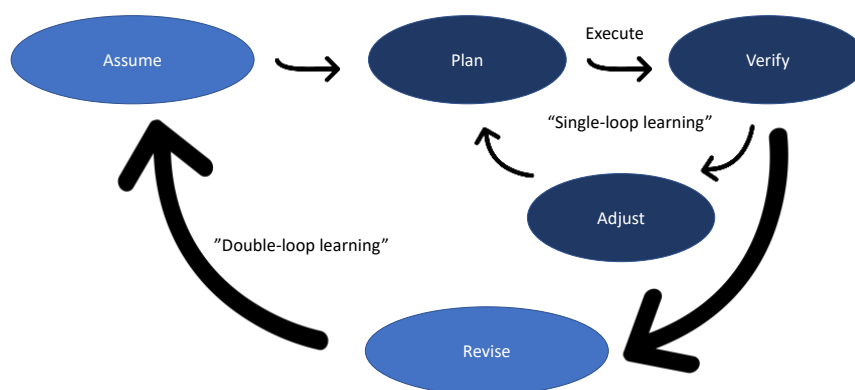
⁷ The estimate is based on data in Holden (2013).

⁸ Kii6.

What has Traction learned?

Throughout the programme, Traction employed what it calls a ‘double-loop’ learning approach. This combines ‘single-loop’ learning, focused on what is going to plan and how it can be executed better, with ‘double-loop’ learning, which continually questions the assumptions behind the plan. Initially, this took place informally, with the TLA approach only explicitly driving decision-making later on.

Figure 4 Single loop and double loop learning framework



Source: Adapted from Brock, K., Shutt, C and Ashlin, A. (2016)

In each sprint cycle, observations and lessons were sought across five areas: ‘Progress towards outcomes/Process’, ‘Actor willingness to engage’, ‘Alignment of incentives’, ‘Technical and political feasibility’ and ‘Adaptation’. Being explicit about these helped the programme assess whether or not it was on track.

Accordingly, across the nine sprint cycles, there are numerous examples of small adjustments – perhaps best characterised as ‘single-loop learning’ – to emerging circumstances and issues. For example, at the end of Sprint Cycle 1 the programme was beginning to realise that not enough was known about the interests of key stakeholders, and that better analysis might be useful. By the end of Sprint Cycle 3, coalition members had realised that it was not necessary to wait for an MOU. During Sprint Cycle 4, the coalition decided to extend the scratch card solution from legume crops to

maize, so as to ride the political wave of the government's AIP programme. It also changed its lobbying tactics, from emphasising the loss caused by counterfeit seeds to individual farmers to the loss of counterfeit seeds in AIP would cause to the government. In Sprint Cycle 5, when it appeared that, for a combination of technical and political reasons, they would not be included in that season's AIP, they gravitated back to legumes. During the same sprint cycle, the coalition abandoned plans for a pilot in favour of a more limited 'simulation'. Plans for a pilot were abandoned again in Sprint Cycle 7.

There are also some examples of deeper, 'double-loop' learning that touch on some fundamental assumptions, and which have been transferred to subsequent Traction IBPs.

At various points, Traction asked whether its initial assumptions about stakeholder motivations were justified, and it has introduced constant monitoring and reassessment of power maps for its subsequent IBPs. Partly as a result, it closed down its Malawi Bureau of Standards IBP when it became clear that stakeholder interests were not sufficiently aligned behind programme objectives.

It has also absorbed the lesson that the importance and enthusiasm of different coalition members will wax and wane as a programme enters different phases, with what it calls a 'core', 'margins', and 'ins and outs'.

To give another example of questioning basic assumptions, when the programme became bogged down at various junctures, staff asked whether it might have been better to have pursued several angles simultaneously, so that, when one got stuck, another could be pursued. In response, one subsequent programme has employed a 'four core strands' approach to the issue at hand.

The team also discussed the pros and cons of aligning with political priority issues like the AIP, which might open doors, but at the expense of some of the Programme's key objectives. Subsequent IBPs also appear to be taking advantage of context-specific concentrations of political energy, but staff are remaining 'vigilant to variations in the political winds of change' (Traction, 2020: 50).

In another example, the programme initially focused solely on the scratch card solution, but it later came to realise that passage of the Seed Act with its associated penalties was needed to undergird the technology. It therefore invested energies in lobbying around that, potentially providing an entry point to more far-reaching systemic change.

This brings us to a larger point. Sprint cycles were initially organised around mPedigree's technical requirements, rather than the political factors that would enable the technical solution to be implemented. In retrospect, that may have been a mistake. After all, the *technical* aspects of the solution were known and fairly predictable; it was the

political and governance pathway to implementing it that was less so. As such, it would have been more consistent with the intellectual foundations of the TLA approach to make the political steps in the process the explicit basis for the sprint cycles.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the programme lasted around twice as long as originally envisaged. Whether some of the lags in the programme could have been avoided with a more explicit focus on politics and governance is difficult to say. But whatever the programme's imperfections, its 'strategic patience' with the original solution seems ultimately to have paid off.

Box 2 Key lessons

- Sprint cycles should be organised around 'political unknowns'.
- A good understanding of stakeholder motivations is key.
- Coalitions should be thought of as fluid, not fixed, entities.
- Several different solutions to a problem can be trialled simultaneously.
- Aligning with politically urgent issues brings risks as well as opportunities.

What have we learned about IBPs more generally?

Looking at the broader picture, in their Qualitative Comparative Analysis of FCDO's Institutions for Inclusive Development in Tanzania, Kelsall and Laws (2021) found that a 'recipe' for successful programming was the following: 1) Assemble a team enlisting locally based staff with strong local networks or membership in a relevant national organisation, while adding a team member with a track record of successfully delivering an adaptive programme; 2) Identify a problem that is already receiving high-level political attention, and then use a combination of light-touch PEA and systems analysis to deepen understanding and plot possible solutions, formulating a loose theory or set of hypotheses about how change might happen; 3) Design the intervention, leveraging positive deviance or external best practice, and have a credible plan for taking interventions to scale; 4) Test, learn and adapt, enlisting non-state and/or political actors, and review progress using political analysis in either a light-touch or more rigorous way; 5) Be prepared to use funds in a strategic way, funding pilots, small-scale infrastructure or even core funding, and be prepared to build capacity for innovation.

Discussing whether this recipe is directly transferrable to other contexts, they conclude that 'There is little reason to think that a programme with these core ingredients would not work in contexts with wider political space [than Tanzania]', and that 'A programme with these core ingredients *might* also work in contexts with significantly less [state] capacity' (p. 40). Traction's seed certification IBP, which, with one or two nuances, involved all these elements, would seem to support this. The IBP also corroborates many of the lessons Williams, Derbyshire and Kulutuye (2021) draw from their study of IBPs in Nigeria.

Going deeper, an interesting question, thrown into sharp relief by the scratch card programme, concerns the types of development problem that IBPs are able to solve. Facilitation and brokering, the 'go to' methodology for IBPs, seem best suited to solving relatively simple coordination problems, in which the incentives of stakeholders are sufficiently aligned to secure cooperation once communication has been facilitated, trust has been built and minor differences have been ironed out. Essentially these are 'positive sum games' in which all players stand to gain. Arguably, the scratch card was chosen for something like this reason.

Facilitation and brokering may be less effective, however, when the incentives of key stakeholders are not well-aligned, for example where one set of stakeholders has a vested interest in maintaining an inefficient or unjust status quo. Such problems often involve a great deal of conflict: they are zero-sum or mixed-sum games.

Interestingly, the scratch card issue, on closer inspection, turns out to be just such a mixed sum game. There were two main conflicts of interest. First, the gains of certified seed suppliers would come partly at the expense of fake suppliers, who had an incentive to block the programme. Second, some of the key beneficiaries of the scratch card programme, especially STAM, mPedigree and the SSU, had a potential conflict of interest over how the gains from it were distributed.

The first obstacle was cleared thanks to the investiture of a new political regime with a determination to show to voters that it could do things differently. In this context, open opposition to the scratch card system was rendered impossible and covert opposition also unlikely to succeed. 'The government was very strong on securing the quality of AIP, so it could not tolerate anyone, even politicians, trying to derail this programme'.⁹ Another explained that '[T]here was suspicion from the small companies. They thought it would be an added cost. Some were involved in fake seed. But the moment the minister announced publicly about AIP, it was a game changer'.¹⁰

With strong government backing, the SSU was also able to overcome the second obstacle, essentially dictating terms to STAM.

The conclusion we might draw is that IBPs can solve problems on more conflictual issues provided that the political stars are favourably aligned. This accords with some of the literature already in circulation, such as Levy's argument that multistakeholder coalitions are able to bring improvements in service provision provided they are not 'trumped' by hostile political actors (Levy, 2014: chapter 8).

But we should not ignore Traction's role in creating the conditions for its own success. Traction was not merely reactive: its convening, brokering and lobbying activities were arguably instrumental in persuading the Ministry of Agriculture of the value of scratch cards, and in moving parliament to pass the Seed Act. According to one informant: 'One thing they really did differently was to bring in the coalition to advocate for the Seed Bill. It was innovative and pretty unique'.¹¹ Put differently, Traction helped nudge the political stars into position so that the scratch card solution could succeed.

⁹ Kii3.

¹⁰ Kii5.

¹¹ Kii 2.

A sustainable solution?

We do not know, however, whether the gains will be maintained and the scratch card programme will achieve its full potential. Numerous stakeholders have an interest in the system succeeding, including farmers, their representative organisations, producers and sellers of quality seed, mPedigree, the regulatory authority and ultimately the government, which wants to show that it is delivering for farmers. But that does not ensure that the regulatory authority and the courts will get the resources they need to do their jobs, especially at a time when the demands on both the public purse and donor funds are numerous.¹²

One imagines that fake seed sellers are waiting in the wings, ready to exploit loopholes in the system, while STAM has said that 'Right now not all the stakeholders are happy and when that is the case, the system can fail'.¹³ Although one informant felt that the scratch card was a political 'ace' that the government would not squander, there is a history in Malawi of politicians making easy money through rent-seeking and corruption in agriculture (Dercon, 2022). The Tonse Alliance, which came to power with strong anti-corruption credentials, is undergoing various internal convulsions and looking a little tarnished.¹⁴ Stakeholders will need to be vigilant against the possibility that the AIP is misused.

A similar logic applies to other frailties in the seed supply chain. It is worth remembering that the scratch card is aimed at a very particular problem: farmers' inability to know whether they are buying authentic improved seeds or not. However, even authentic seeds in Malawi yield well below the regional average, a condition caused by numerous problems, including difficulties in getting new seed varieties registered, insufficient capacity within the seed inspection service, a weak extension service, a lack of working capital for seed companies, and damage to seeds in storage and transportation. Whether the coalition that formed around the scratch card will have the momentum to go on and tackle these other issues remains to be seen. Some informants were optimistic, arguing that the Seed Act would be the springboard for that. Others were less certain. Indeed, after the passage of the Seed Act and Traction's exit from the programme, it seems some of the energy around the coalition has

¹² Kii 5.

¹³ Kii 8.

¹⁴ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-08/malawi-land-broken-promises>

dissipated. As one informant said, 'It is up to us to make the coalition sustainable. Traction is no more'.¹⁵

Box 3 Implications for thinking about IBPs

- In some circumstances, IBPs can go beyond solving simple coordination problems to tackling deeper vested interests.
- IBPs can themselves play a role in creating the political conditions in which this is possible.
- There may be a rationale for funding IBPs over a longer time-frame than is typical, to protect and expand initial gains.

¹⁵ Kii3.

Conclusion

The story of the Seed Certification IBP is the story of a largely local team getting to grips with a new way of working on an issue of real concern to Malawian-based stakeholders. It is the story of them achieving a breakthrough that, however modest, has more than repaid FCDO's initial investment, and which, by catalysing enhanced forms of multistakeholder cooperation in agriculture, may yield much higher dividends in future. However, these gains are uncertain, and there is a lack of evidence as to whether IBPs are sufficiently well-equipped to help local actors build on incremental gains and tackle the bigger problems of development, including multiple frailties in the seed supply system and a political settlement in which government elites are not consistently motivated or able to respond effectively to the needs of their citizens (Chinsinga et al., 2022; Dercon, 2022).¹⁶ It is to be hoped that development partners will heed these lessons and fund IBPs to a more ambitious degree over a longer time-frame, especially in challenging contexts such as Malawi.¹⁷

¹⁶ It goes without saying that in-country IBPs like this are not designed and are ill-equipped to deal with larger development problems such as global inequality and historical injustice.

¹⁷ This resonates with a point made by Laws and Rinnert in their study of a similar programme in Kyrgyzstan, that IBPs are sometimes accused of spreading themselves too thinly across a range of disconnected issues (Laws and Rinnert, 2022).

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