

US Project Aims to Revolutionise Malawi's Agricultural Market

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A project based at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is helping to transform the agricultural landscape of Malawi, with a particular focus on establishing the country as a major player in the global soybean market.

The **Soybean Innovation Lab (SIL)**, part of the university's College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, has been instrumental in a 14-year initiative to develop the soybean value chain in the region.

A New Era for the Lower Shire Valley

The project, which is part of the broader **Shire Valley Transformation Program (SVTP)**, is currently working to turn 42,500 hectares of land in Malawi's Lower Shire Valley into irrigated farmland. This infrastructure will allow almost 50,000 smallholder farmers to cultivate two to three crops annually, potentially tripling their profits and building generational wealth.

The SVTP is backed by key international organisations, including the World Bank, the African Development Fund, and the Global Environment Facility. While the program supports various high-value crops, SIL Director and Professor, Peter Goldsmith, highlights the unique potential of soybeans. As one of the world's most valuable agricultural commodities, soybean offers a more immediate opportunity for prosperity for both individuals and the region.

Empowering Local Farmers and Businesses

For 12 years, SIL has provided "evidence-based guidance on breeding, agronomic practices,

mechanisation, processing, and marketing” to help African nations develop their soybean sectors. The lab’s mission is to empower local “strong nodes”—organisations on the ground that can sustain local capacity without relying on external support.

This approach was recently demonstrated during the first-ever “Soy Tour” in late August, where dozens of decision-makers were shown processing plants and soybean fields in the Lower Shire Valley. Attendees learned everything from **“plant spacing and disease management in the field to milling and oil refining in processing plants.”**

The tour was a major success. “It’s go time,” said Peter Goldsmith. “They’re all in. That’s partly because they know they’ll be supported by what SIL brings to the table — locally adapted seed and input recommendations, disease surveillance networks, research-backed agronomic practices, appropriate seed and fertiliser, mechanisation innovation, processor capacity building, market development, and more.”

Goldsmith also noted that the project is sparking a new industry in Malawi. “Currently, in Malawi, feeds are not soy-based. The food oil is not soy oil. So, they’re not importing beans,” he explained. **“But that’s changing. We’ve got processors with more than enough capacity who are now learning how to process soy, and they want more.”**

Securing the Future of the Project

SIL’s partnerships with Palladium and other local organisations have been crucial in providing training and equipment to grower cooperatives. However, the project’s funding was recently at risk when USAID, a major donor, ceased operations and halted all funding for international development in February.

Fortunately, the work in the Lower Shire Valley was able to continue thanks to a generous £800,000 (\$1 million) donation. Michelle da Fonseca Santos, Associate Director of SIL, emphasised the ongoing need for investment to build on the progress already made. **“While gift funds are appreciated and keep things moving forward, more formal and strategically placed investments in the past allowed SIL to succeed in its mission to establish the foundations of the soybean market in Sub-Saharan Africa,”** she said. “We hope either private investors, the commercial sector, or another large donor will jump in with funding so SIL can continue transforming the largest and fastest-growing new market for soy in the world.”