

VET Toolbox II in Malawi

Lessons Learnt

VET Toolbox was designed to enhance the delivery of demand-driven skills to cater for investment needs in 11 selected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The main objective of the project was to support human capital development to enhance investment in supply chains in these selected countries, through the implementation of targeted skills development and by strengthening VET delivery systems for employment opportunities, especially for youth.

VET Toolbox aimed to improve the effectiveness of VET systems by making them more opportunity-driven to drive inclusive economic growth, social development and the creation of decent jobs, across three key areas:

Enhanced Public-Private Dialogue

Facilitating interaction between the public and the private sector and the development of public-private partnerships.

Targeted Skills Development

Supporting VET institutions to deliver training in line with investment needs.

VET Reform

Stimulating VET reform through capturing lessons learnt and promoting good practice models.

The implementation of VET Toolbox was a partnership of leading European Development agencies; the British Council, Enabel, Expertise France, GIZ and LuxDev and co-funded by the European Union and by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

In Malawi the Enhancing Commercial Farming in the Shire Valley project aimed to promote opportunity-driven skills in the agricultural sector, by partnering with the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP), a 14-year national flagship project aimed at commercialising agriculture in the southern region of Malawi. VET Toolbox piloted a public-private dialogue mechanism that brought together employers, training institutions, government and the private sector to facilitate opportunity-driven TVET. Through this dialogue mechanism, a specific demand for skilled labour was identified in the operation and management of farm machinery and irrigation equipment for commercial farms, aligning with Pillar 1 of Malawi's Vision 2063, which focuses on sustainable agriculture and economic growth. Two training curricula in Operating Irrigation Systems and Farm Tractor Operations, embedded with a work-experience learning component, were developed and rolled-out through a consortium of three vocational training institutions: Magomero Community Development College, Stephanos Foundation and DAPP Mikolongwe, giving youth from the local communities where SVTP is operating the opportunity to gain the skills and experience needed for future employment by the farms linked to this initiative.

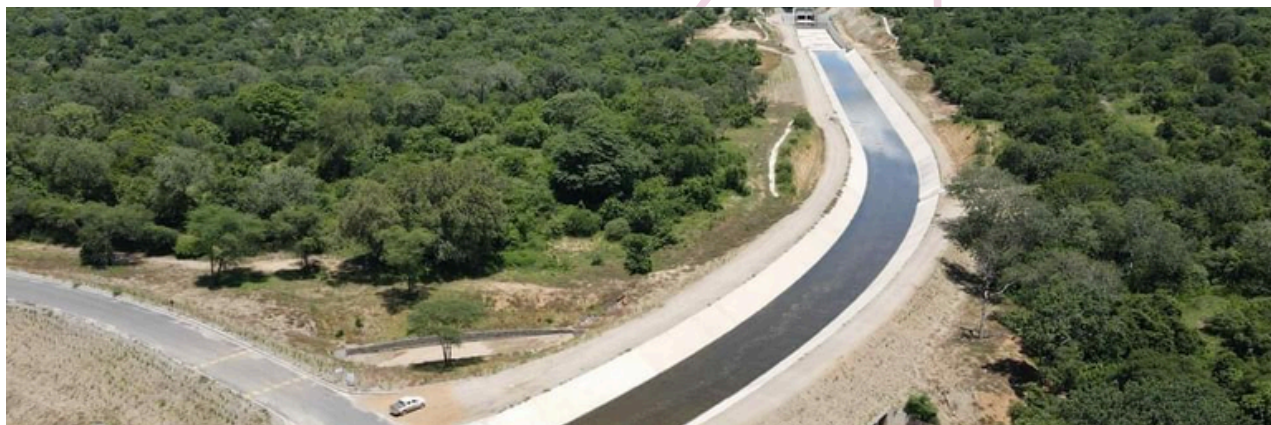


Image: First phase of Shire Valley Transformation Programme s
Source: <https://www.pppc.mw/news/shire-valley-transformation-programme-progress-update>

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Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

A closing workshop was held from January 20 to 24, 2025, bringing together key stakeholders, including government representatives, vocational training institutions, private sector partners, and trainees. The workshop provided an opportunity for stakeholders to share feedback and reflect on insights gained during implementation of the VET Toolbox project. The collected feedback and suggestions were then consolidated into five key themes below.

Stakeholder Engagement

What we learnt

Sufficient time needs to be dedicated to stakeholder engagement within any project, with a tailored communication and engagement strategy for each stakeholder. The project required a substantial amount of time and resources to identify the right investment opportunity and to map relevant stakeholders during the opportunity mapping, opportunity exploration and implementation stages of the project. This brought to light some significant challenges which the project would have to navigate, including the absence of a defined dialogue forum for skills development in the country (e.g. Sector Skills Councils) and highlighted the need to secure stakeholder buy-in to pilot a local dialogue mechanism.

What we recommend

Conduct extensive stakeholder mapping and analysis: Significant time and resources should be dedicated to preliminary engagement with both private and public sector actors at all levels to both increase awareness and secure buy-in for the project. This contributes considerably to overcoming any bottlenecks that may arise.

Align stakeholder interests from the onset: Ensuring the alignment of stakeholder interests from the beginning allows for focused discourse on project objectives and unified participation towards achievement of both identified stakeholder needs and project outcomes. This is particularly important for demand-side stakeholders, who play a pivotal role in effective dialogue on skills development and skills training. Such alignment empowers them to actively contribute to skills development, quality assurance, and the provision of training opportunities, including work-based learning experiences.

Develop and implement comprehensive stakeholder engagement plans: It is important to develop and follow a stakeholder engagement plan that clearly defines the roles of identified stakeholders and their involvement in the project. Clear communication is especially important for local level stakeholders who might not be experienced at working alongside donor-funded projects.



Image: A crop farmer in Malawi inspects wheat.
Source: Unesco

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Public-Private Dialogue

What we learnt

Both demand and opportunity-driven skills development require effective dialogue between key stakeholders from both the public and private sector, whereby both sides have a vested interest and defined roles and responsibilities. Whilst public-private partnerships do exist at a national level, sectoral and local approaches have proved to be more agile and responsive to local investments, with local government structures serving as the ideal host institution to anchor local-level public-private dialogue with a view towards sustainability, inclusion and sharing of best practices. Standard guidelines for the formation of public-private partnerships and for effective dialogue would facilitate consultation and consensus building, balanced discourse, sustainable dialogue and mutual benefit for all parties involved. Fortunately, both employers and training institutions recognise the significance of public-private partnerships in the development and delivery of TVET.

What we recommend

Establish formal and localised public-private dialogue fora for skills development: Localised opportunities for public-private dialogue with clear guidelines on roles of stakeholders and operational procedures should bring together local employers and TVET providers to share labour market insights and promote inclusive, responsive TVET programmes that address current and emerging skills needs.

Ensure the centrality of employers in public-private dialogue: Employers and industry players should be at the core of public-private dialogue initiatives, as they are both the primary source of labour demand and key to providing work experience learning opportunities.

Provide the tools to support opportunity-driven VET through public-private partnerships: Effective guidelines and frameworks help stakeholders across the VET landscape to work together to deliver high quality training offers that are linked to opportunities as they arise. These include formal agreements such as memoranda of understanding between government stakeholders, employers and training providers, which should be standardised and promoted to allow for more effective development of TVET curricula, training delivery and work placements. These should be paired with regular capacity building to ensure that all stakeholders are clear on their roles and responsibilities, creating efficient systems which promote and streamline collaboration between employers and training providers.



Image: increase agricultural productivity of women in Malawi
Source: <https://www.iita.org/news-item/researchers-support-efforts-to-increase-agricultural-productivity-of-women-in-malawi/>

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Curriculum Development

What we learnt

During project implementation, the project learnt that the development of effective TVET curricula hinges on a balance of reliable data, stakeholder involvement and agile validation processes. Up-to-date labour market information is essential for ensuring that TVET curricula remain relevant and aligned with industry needs. Active engagement of employers throughout the development process is crucial to embedding practical, industry-specific modules that enhance the applicability of training programmes. Furthermore, robust quality assurance mechanisms, coupled with effective regulation, assessment and certification systems, are vital to maintaining high standards and enabling flexible progression pathways for learners. These elements collectively contribute to the development of a responsive and sustainable TVET system that meets both current and future labour demands. During the project, a major challenge in developing an effective TVET curriculum was the lack of detailed and accessible labour market data at both the national and local levels. This data is essential for accurately identifying training needs and aligning them with market demands.

Furthermore, project experiences indicate that whilst the centralised approach to development and validation processes for TVET curricula ensure national relevance and quality, they can be inflexible in addressing local skills needs and opportunities, which is particularly problematic for dynamic sectors like agriculture. Alternative approaches, such as engaging third parties, must navigate complex institutional procedures and incur additional costs at various stages, including during the approval process. Key industry players with sector expertise should work alongside experts familiar with the curriculum development process, to develop curricula which are in line with the required standards, whilst being based on the latest industry requirements and developments.

These challenges are further compounded by the lack of approved occupational standards in agricultural TVET that align with Malawi's Agriculture Commercial Pillar for national development. This would create a responsive TVET system that grants employers quick access to tailored training programmes that meet their skills needs, while ensuring that the acquired skills are relevant to the country's critical industries. Addressing these areas not only reduces costs and delays but also ensures that the training meets real industry demands, ultimately contributing to a more responsive and robust curriculum and training development system.

What we recommend

Invest in reliable labour market data: The absence of consistent, sector-specific labour market information hinders demand justification for curriculum development. Reliable national and local data are essential for timely decision-making. Establishing robust and accessible labour market information systems can help reduce the lengthy and costly process of independently gathering this information when needed.

Enhance stakeholder involvement: Actively engage relevant stakeholders, especially key industry players, in the design, piloting, and validation of training programmes. Their participation ensures that the training is aligned with current industry needs, making curricula more relevant. Direct input from employers also boosts their support in training delivery (including support for work placements), which is critical for programme success.

Streamline curriculum approval processes: Institutional processes must be more responsive to labour market needs tied to investment opportunities. Delays in the approval of curriculum standards can force employers into developing alternative courses, which is not cost effective. Reviewing and streamlining these approval processes can mitigate the risk of disruptions to skills needs and ensure that new courses are delivered on schedule.

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Promote the development of Agricultural TVET standards: Through appropriate bodies such as TEVETA and the Ministry of Labour, efforts should be made to develop standards for unlocking the potential of commercial farming across the entire agricultural value chain. This can be a phased approach, building on enhanced stakeholder involvement, streamlined curriculum development processes, and building the capacity of training providers.

Training And Work Experience Learning

What we learnt

Agricultural TVET courses that are aligned with seasonal farming activities optimise learning outcomes and employer participation, as well as maximise training effectiveness. For instance, work experience learning during the rainy season is ineffective as farms reliant on irrigation are not operational and therefore students are not able to experience firsthand the entire cycle of activities.

Furthermore, involving trainers in the development of training materials significantly enhanced programme delivery. Their active participation in the process increased their familiarity with the content, which in turn improved planning and instructional effectiveness, whilst reinforcing the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Early, proactive and continuous engagement between vocational training institutions and employers, as well as the critical role of public-private partnerships, are key to ensuring successful work experience learning placements. Where memoranda of understanding were in place, students experienced fewer placement issues and employers were more engaged with the project.

What we recommend

Align agricultural training courses to farming cycles: ATVET courses should be strategically scheduled to coincide with farming cycles to optimise work experience learning placements. Positive outcomes were observed when students were placed at farms that were within their growing cycle with sufficient facilities and equipment on-site. This ensures that trainees have sufficient time to engage in hands-on learning, apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings and gain relevant and practical skills.

Involve training institutions systematically in the development of training materials: Their involvement in producing training manuals in collaboration with TEVETA enhances the familiarity of trainers with the content, which improves planning, delivery, and the effective linkage of theoretical knowledge to practical application.

Engage work experience learning providers from the onset of training design: Structured and proactive engagement with employers and farms from the initial stages of curriculum design is essential. Early involvement ensures these providers are well-informed about project objectives, facilitating effective curriculum contributions and student monitoring.



Image: A traffic bridge over the canal
Source: <https://svtp.gov.mw/>

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UK-Malawi Mentoring Partnership

What we learnt

International collaboration and peer exchange is an effective model of capacity building and institutional strengthening in TVET delivery, allowing for international benchmarking, exchange and innovation. The project facilitated a mentoring partnership between Gower College Swansea in the UK and the vocational training institutions involved in VET Toolbox II, assisting local partners in strategy development, enhancing the pedagogical elements of the two courses offered and guiding the integration of work-based learning.

The initiative strengthened institutional capacity by equipping trainers and administrators with advanced skills for effective training delivery and introduced local partners to international agencies like Lantra, the UK's sector skills council for land-based industries, to ensure that training materials were aligned with international best practices and project needs, thereby enhancing the credibility of training. The partnership showcased the potential of long-term, international collaboration in fostering sustainable and impactful skills development.

What we recommend

Strengthen TVET delivery through international partnerships: The project demonstrated that such partnerships effectively facilitate the sharing of best practices and access to essential resources, improving the quality of training delivery, monitoring, and reporting. Moreover, they provide an opportunity to collaborate, share experiences, and develop robust TVET delivery strategies.

Enhance impact of mentorship programmes through multi-level stakeholder engagement: Future mentorship initiatives should encourage wider participation of relevant stakeholders, including regulatory agencies, to ensure that recommendations are aligned with local mandates and to increase the chances of upscaling international insights, as well as to help address specific challenges faced by vocational training institutions. Leveraging technology can further broaden participation and maximise the impact of the programme.

Invest in in-person interactions and capacity-building initiatives: Prioritise face-to-face engagements to foster deeper knowledge sharing and stronger mentor-mentee relationships. In-person interactions enable immediate feedback, hands-on demonstrations, and collaborative problem-solving. By investing in these initiatives, mentorship programmes can achieve greater impact and sustained capacity development.



Image: Female Farmers in Malawi
Source: [Foodtank](#)