

Water Stewardship Malawi: Implementing the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard with the Sukambizi Association Trust (SAT)



This report documents the lessons generated in supporting the Sukambizi Association Trust (SAT), a smallholder cooperative of tea farmers in Southern Malawi, to tackle their water and climate risks and to manage water more sustainably through implementation of the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) Standard. The trust implemented the AWS Standard with support from Water Witness International (WW) and Water Witness Malawi (WW Malawi) as part of the Water Stewardship Malawi initiative, under the Climate Justice Fund of the Scottish Government. The objectives of the exercise were:

1. To improve water security, livelihood security and climate resilience for more than 5,600 people by securing cost-effective and long-term management of water risks for SAT at the site and catchment level through supported implementation of the AWS Standard.
2. To understand the economic, environmental, social and institutional costs and benefits of implementing the AWS Standard as well as the barriers to engagement for a smallholder agricultural cooperative and catchment stakeholders in Malawi to inform practice in Africa and globally.
3. To explore the value to water security of smallholder farmers in implementing several standards used in agricultural settings simultaneously (the Fairtrade Standard for Tea for Small Producer Organizations [SPO Standard], the Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Agriculture Standard and the AWS Standard).

This case study presents the results, costs, benefits and challenges of implementing the AWS Standard by the smallholder tea cooperative, SAT, and recommendations for improving the AWS system and water stewardship practice for smallholders.

1. Background and methodology

The site

The Sukambizi Association Trust (SAT) has a membership of over 11,000 smallholder tea farmers, located in Mulanje and Thyolo districts in Southern Malawi. Of the 17,000 smallholder tea growers in Malawi, SAT represents the biggest group of smallholder tea farmers being responsible for over 60% of Malawi smallholder tea production. 70% of cooperative members are women and most land is owned by women as land tenure in the area is through matrilineal inheritance.

Farming south of Mulanje Mountain and in Thyolo Central, where annual rainfall is 2000 to 2400 mm¹, all of the tea grown is rainfed. Recognising the importance of water to their livelihoods and the challenges they are already experiencing as a result of climate change, SAT farmers are highly motivated to engage in water stewardship.

The annual yield of 13 million kilograms of green tea is purchased by Lujeri Tea Estate to be processed and sold at local auction and to international markets. Lujeri Tea Estate, owned by London PGI Ltd, purchases 30% of all the green leaf tea sourced in Malawi from SAT.

Tea bushes in Mulanje District turned brown and shrivelled as a result of a heatwave in October 2019 where, according to the Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services, the Mimosa weather station, Mulanje District, recorded temperatures exceeding 35°C, and as high as 40°C, during a 10-day period. Climate projections show that this occurrence will become more common in the future.

<https://southsouthnorth.org/malawi-heatwaves-threaten-tea-yields-and-livelihoods/>

What is the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard?

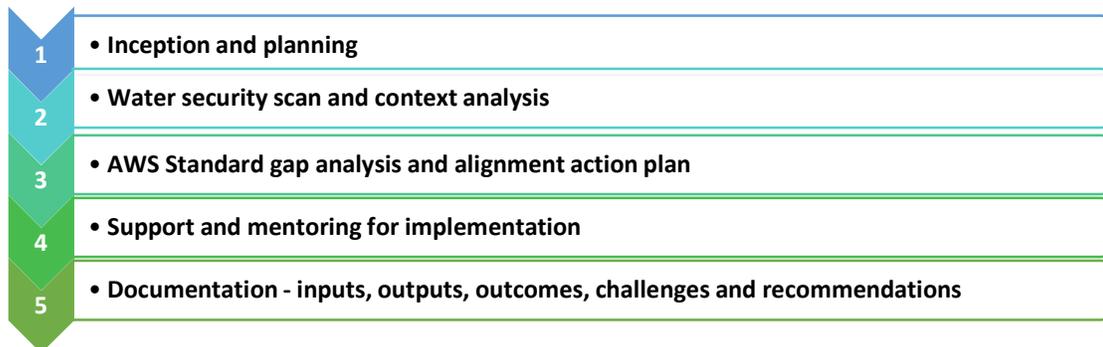
The AWS Standard offers a credible, globally applicable framework for major water users to understand their own water use and impacts, and to work collaboratively and transparently with others for sustainable water management within the wider water catchment context. Implementers follow the steps and guidance in the AWS Standard to achieve good water stewardship practices that improve site water performance and contribute to wider sustainability goals.



The AWS Standard is built around five steps, which each contain a series of criteria and indicators. Following the steps and criteria will lead to improved performance in five areas: water balance, water quality, healthy status of important water-related areas, good water governance and safe water, sanitation and hygiene for all. Sites making claims to good water stewardship are audited and certified by credible, third party auditors.

¹ Water Witness (2019) *Gap Analysis Report against the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard (AWS standard)*, prepared for the Sukambizi Association Trust. Edinburgh: Water Witness

Implementation methodology



WW conducted an initial desk-based review of the site and catchment water security context for SAT to identify likely water risks and opportunities. This was coupled with a participatory baseline survey targeting groups of SAT farmers in Mulanje and Thyolo districts to assess water stewardship risks and opportunities. Through site visits and a documentation review, WW Malawi then conducted a gap analysis with the site to assess the extent to which current water stewardship practice met the criteria of the AWS Standard. This identified priority areas to address which formed the basis of SAT's action plan to address their key water stewardship needs and begin demonstrating compliance against the criteria of the Standard. The WW Malawi team provided training, guidance and support to SAT management and lead farmers throughout the implementation process in the form of regular site visits, calls, and reviews of materials and plans.

The partnership with SAT was originally planned to run for two years with much of the second year focusing on implementing their water stewardship action plans. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, programme implementation had to be adapted and reoriented, prioritising WASH related stewardship actions and diffusing reliable and accessible information on COVID-19 to SAT members and their communities in early 2020. The action plan now continues to be implemented, respecting hygiene and social distancing protocols to ensure protection of all concerned.

In November 2020, SAT hosted a lesson learning site visit in Thyolo district and workshop in Mulanje District, inviting Phata Sugarcane Outgrowers Cooperative (Phata), a smallholder cooperative of sugarcane farmers in Chikwawa District, local government representatives and CSO representatives. Both cooperatives appreciated the practical benefits of both field-based and classroom-based learning and sharing their experience of implementing the AWS Standard. Insights from this workshop are integrated into this case study and are also available separately upon request.

2. Water security context

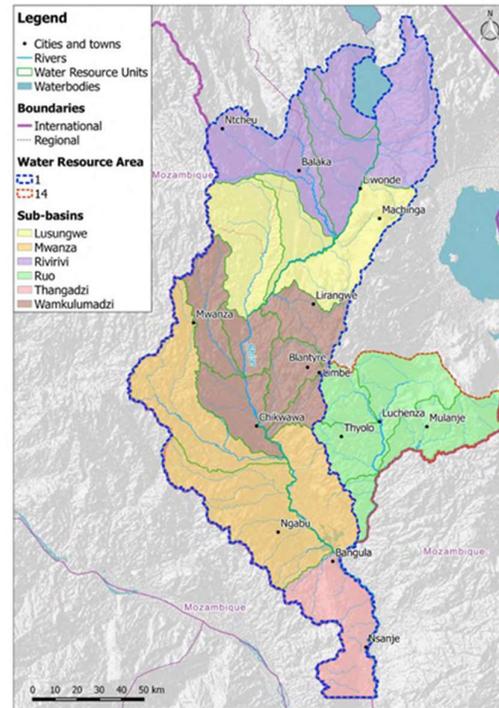
Site and catchment context

Sukambizi Association Trust (SAT) farmers are located within the Ruo sub-basin of the Shire River Basin in Southern Malawi. The most prominent feature of the sub-basin is the Mulanje Massif with a maximum elevation of 3,002m at its highest point. The structure and altitude of the mountain have led to the development of a unique climate for the area, which is characterised by high rainfall from November to April. The high rainfall, deep ravine and dense vegetation have favoured the birth of many rivers which supply reliable clean water to thousands of households in the surrounding plains.

With the highest population density in the Shire River Basin, there are pressures on basic service provision of water supply, sanitation, health care and education in the Ruo sub-basin. The area has also experienced massive destruction of forests. In general, water resources in the Shire River Basin have sufficient capacity to supply public water and irrigation demands at present in the dry season. However, this is expected to deteriorate in the near future as the region is highly vulnerable to adverse effects of climate change. Despite recognising this, SAT farmers do not have effective strategies for dealing with periods of drought or water scarcity.

SAT members are entirely reliant on rainfall for tea cultivation, and thus are especially vulnerable to water security impacts due to climate change. A Water Security Scan² of the site identified the following priority water risks:

- Degraded quality of water
- Water scarcity for domestic use
- Erratic rainfall
- Limited knowledge on Water Resource Management (WRM) water and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) related laws and regulations
- Perception of stakeholders, including communities and investors that the site contributes to water contamination through fertiliser application.
- Loss of future revenue from production constraints and/or increased costs due to limited water availability – predicted to worsen with climate change.



Map 1: Sub-basins of the Shire River Basin (NIRAS et al, 2017)

² Water Witness (2019) *Catchment Analysis for Sukambizi Association Trust, Mulanje Malawi*. Edinburgh: Water Witness

3. Implementing the AWS Standard in parallel with other standards

The Sukambizi smallholder cooperative was established in 2000, registered in 2003 and the Trust formed in 2006 as a result of Fairtrade engagement. In 2008, SAT was certified against the Fairtrade SPO Standard for tea and started receiving its first Fairtrade premiums for development projects. With the incentives of additional marketing advantages for their tea and increased support, e.g. training, SAT was then certified against the Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Agriculture Standard in 2011. While there is no marketing advantage per se, in engaging with the AWS Standard, farmers were motivated to take it up to improve water stewardship in recognising climate change effects on their rainfed crop.

The Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and AWS standards are all members of ISEAL, a global membership organisation for voluntary sustainability standards, committing them to a set of core values for effective sustainability standards and to the ISEAL codes of good practice. Smallholder organisations seeking to be compliant with more than one ISEAL standard, recognise certain requirements common to these standard systems illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Requirements common to ISEAL standard systems:

- Stakeholder inclusion, openness and transparency;
- A regular standard system review process, which integrates lessons from implementation from a wide group of stakeholders;
- The Standard system should be based on voluntary actions;
- Compliance with standard system criteria is assessed through a (typically third-party) auditor. How smallholder farmers should present evidence or proof of compliance varies with different standard systems.

SAT has been able to use the lessons learned and capacity gained through implementing the Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance Standards at their site in implementing the AWS Standard.

A benchmarking exercise³ highlights where the same action can meet compliance criteria across AWS Standard and the Fairtrade SPO Standard for tea and Rainforest Alliance Standards. For example, all three standards require smallholders to set-up or strengthen their organisational structure to facilitate inclusive decision-making and to understand and comply with the regulatory requirements regarding water abstraction and pollution control that apply to their site.

All three Standards also include requirements for safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for all workers at the site and for sites to commit to higher standards on environmental management and conservation. In cases where smallholders invest their Fairtrade premiums in WASH services in communities, such investments demonstrate compliance with advanced criteria on WASH in the AWS Standard. Advanced criteria or phased compliance criteria are common features of all three standard systems, which allow smallholders to progressively improve beyond a set of core requirements as their capabilities grow in implementing each standard system.

³ Water Witness (2020) *Water Stewardship Malawi: Benchmarking Exercise (draft)*. Edinburgh: Water Witness

As a certified Fairtrade association, SAT has been able to channel premiums which they receive from the sale of their Fairtrade tea to finance implementation of water stewardship initiatives in line with the AWS Standard. This advantage has allowed them to achieve greater progress than would otherwise be possible in water stewardship, to work with other government and CSO stakeholders in the catchment enabling them to access to additional training opportunities and resources.

4. Changes driven by AWS Standard implementation

Recognising that they have a thirsty crop in an area vulnerable to climate change, Sukambizi Association Trust (SAT) management and members have made impressive progress in addressing priority challenges set out in their water stewardship action plan. Despite some difficulty in understand the technical nature and complexity of the AWS Standard and how to apply it in their context, they have shown enthusiastic commitment to implementing it.

SAT's success lies partly in the nature of their association. The smallholder farmers retain strong familial land tenure rights, live locally, cultivate and harvest the tea themselves and have formed a united association with strong and democratic leadership. During harvest periods, each farmer transports their tea to designated buying sheds, from which it is purchased by Lujeri Tea Estate. In turn, Lujeri Tea Estate pays each farmer monthly in proportion to the amount of tea delivered to the buying sheds. Through pooling their Fairtrade premiums, SAT farmers have been able to reap collective economic, environmental and social benefits through ambitious community projects to improve their water security such as drilling boreholes and installing a piped water supply. In this setting, farmers are united in their shared incentive to care for land and water resources as well as to address shared challenges at the community level across the catchment.



SAT invested in a new borehole and handpump in Waluma Village. Agnes Maginito now no longer has an arduous walk to fetch water (Credit: WW/James Chavula, 2020).



Delli Nesi, a proud member of SAT's water stewardship committee (Credit: WW/James Chavula, 2020).

Safe drinking water in communities

Improving access to safe drinking water was identified as a priority action by both SAT members and community stakeholders at the outset of their engagement with the AWS Standard. Impressive strides have been made in expanding safe drinking water access to communities through installing a new 35 km piped network to communities where expanding groundwater access is difficult or unfeasible. In addition, 11 new boreholes have been successfully drilled and fitted with Afridev handpumps for underserved communities where their members reside, with five more currently in progress.

SAT had planned to train water management committees prior to installing each new handpump, but all face-to-face training was postponed due to safety restrictions imposed due to coronavirus. Carefully, SAT pushed ahead installing handpumps throughout the pandemic due to the fundamental public health benefits afforded to communities through access to clean water for good hygiene practices. As each borehole was drilled, water quality samples were tested in a government certified laboratory, where all samples met the WHO safe drinking water standards. Borehole management committees were trained when this was feasible, sensitised on good hygiene practices and they established borehole bylaws to prevent groundwater contamination from solid and human waste. In these communities, a system for the collection of a small monthly water user fee has been established to ensure community members use the groundwater efficiently and maintenance costs of handpumps are covered.

“The project was good because it was our first time to have access to clean water. We were used to unclean water from untreated wells. I got involved because of a desire to have clean water”.

Agness Mikwamba – Community member,
Sodza Village



Community members putting the finishing touches on a cement apron slab, which protects the groundwater below the waterpoint (Credit: WW/Walter Chinangwa, 2020)

This initiative has helped with knowledge on water resource management and pushed management to invest in the provision of water points”.

Delli Nesi, water stewardship committee member

Agroforestry and sustainable land management

In response to the challenges of topsoil erosion, siltation, water quality and in the face of predicted changing rainfall patterns, SAT embarked on tree planting as a strategic intervention and has committed to planting 250,000 indigenous trees every year. Membership bylaws have been agreed which stipulate that farmer members must plant a minimum of 20 trees each year in their tea fields, of which 30% should be indigenous varieties. By September 2020, 200,000 trees were planted across the Ruo sub-basin. In partnership with local environmental conservation NGOs and associations, WeForest and the Mulanje Mountain Conversation Trust, SAT has received 15,000 and 6,000 tree saplings, respectively, which have largely been transplanted in two main woodlots located in Zimbiri Block in Mulanje. Many farmers have also opted to plant hedges close to their homes and vetiver grass around their fields as erosion control measures, while others have planted trees in their fields and around their homes.



SAT farmers tend to a nursery of around 70,000 tree seedlings which will be ready for transplanting in 2021 (Credit: WW/James Chavula, 2020).



The water stewardship committee which is spearheading implementation of the AWS Standard at SAT (Credit: WW/Walter Chinangwa, 2020)

5. Benefits of AWS Standard Implementation

Strategic focus on water stewardship

While recognising its need for continued technical and mentoring support, SAT is keen to achieve AWS Standard certification to strategically address their water risks and better prioritise investments. This is reflected in their commitment and actions, as well as their assigning of budget lines to all actions outlined in their water stewardship action plan to be implemented in the next budget year. For example, as part of their commitment to investing in WASH in communities driven by the AWS Standard, SAT will fund drinking water quality tests on all pre-existing water points in farmer communities.

While SAT had invested in some water-related initiatives to improve sustainable farming practices through their engagement with other standard systems, through the AWS Standard, they have started to address shared water challenges affecting widely dispersed communities across the Ruo sub-basin. With a rainfed cash crop, optimising sustainable farming practices at field level and strengthening water resources management through a catchment-based approach is essential to climate change mitigation. When their members are good water stewards, they see benefits accrue to farmers, communities and the wider catchment.

Farmers and community members have expressed an understanding of water stewardship not only as a means to improve productivity and farm sustainably in the face of climate change, but also to safeguard water for future generations in an area where land is passed down through the generations.

Public health benefits: COVID-19 response

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the fundamental importance of access to improved WASH services to public health. In the villages where SAT farmers and their families reside, access to clean, safe drinking water has been a challenge in the past, with many relying on surface water or unprotected sources of water, often far from home. SAT's management believe that their investment in clean drinking water access and water testing in communities has been vital to supporting good hygiene practices to protect against COVID-19, with no incidence of the disease and no deaths due to the virus noted from within their more than 11,000 members from March 2020⁴.

“Looking at COVID-19, good hygiene practices are mandatory but you can't practice good hygiene without good quality and safe water. WASH was highlighted as a component of the project. Hence it has helped in realizing a better response to COVID-19.”

Edson Luwani, SAT Growers

Safe access to clean water close to home coupled with existing good hygiene and sanitation practices, reinforced in communities through SAT and government WASH programmes, mean that SAT farmer communities are more resilient to future shocks and are less likely to be held back from productive activities due to poor health.

Improved skills and knowledge of water management

Farmers are increasingly aware of the risks posed by water scarcity to tea production, to their livelihoods and to their communities. Skills and knowledge on water resource management and environmental management at the scale of the catchment has increased as a result of the training and mentorship from the Water Witness team and SAT's strong leadership and commitment to implementing the AWS Standard. This is complemented by environmental management training offered through the Rainforest Alliance.

“Additional training on water governance, balance, quality and WASH was done by WWI, but we also had training on environmental management by Rainforest Alliance, which has helped in improving farmer knowledge on water resources management”.

Fredrick Mkwapatira SAT Chairperson

As a result of their involvement in multiple standard systems, SAT member farmers benefit from regular training through two models: farmer field schools and lead farmers training other farmers. These are supported through established structures for direct farmer engagement through committees and lower-level tea clubs. Utilising these structures has been instrumental in making progress on implementing the AWS Standard. For example, when SAT decided to invest in new

⁴ Note: Mulanje (transmission risk category 2 of 3) and Thyolo (transmission risk category 3 of 3) districts were not included in the list of districts considered at highest risk of transmission of the novel coronavirus, as described in the Republic of Malawi's official National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan.

community boreholes in response to community requests, lead farmers were given training in water stewardship and water point management. They then engaged communities and their local leaders in identifying shared water challenges as well as setting up water point management committees. As these communication routes rely largely on face-to-face interaction, there were some delays in early 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. These clear channels were essential in protecting communities in the global pandemic by rapidly conveying advice and hygiene promotion materials, developed by the Government of Malawi and UNICEF and translated by the Scotland Malawi Partnership, to farmers and communities.

Stakeholder engagement

A key feature of the AWS Standard which SAT farmer members highlighted as having less experience with, despite working with Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance Standards, is the requirement for much broader stakeholder engagement beyond their own association. Involving community members regardless of their affiliation to the association, CSOs and Government departments in identifying priority water challenges in the catchment, has underpinned much of the progress made in implementing the AWS Standard, especially in implementing AWS Standard requirements that address challenges at the scale of the catchment. Importantly, communities and their local leaders were not merely consulted, but were actively engaged in identifying and prioritising target areas for improved drinking water. Subsequently, through the construction of boreholes, installation of handpumps and training of water point management committees, communities feel that they have not only benefited from SAT's investment, but have also had a voice in the decision-making.

“[The project has] helped farmers to become good water stewards not only to benefit of SAT, but the surrounding communities also”.

Fredrick Mkwapatira SAT Chairperson

Strategically, engagement of stakeholders at catchment level has presented a platform for partnerships to be formed which aim to solve and help with shared catchment level challenges. Noticeably, through the stakeholder engagement process, SAT has built strong partnerships with CSOs such as Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) and WeForest who are active in environmental conservation within SAT's catchment. Both organisations contributed to SAT tree planting initiative, and have committed to supporting SAT's efforts in catchment conservation and restoration.

Reinforcement of regulatory compliance

In implementing the AWS Standard, SAT has worked closely with local authorities from the Department of Forestry and the District Water Development Office (DWDO), which has been of benefit to all parties. These authorities are increasingly aware as to why SAT is undertaking water stewardship initiatives, of the scope of work supporting AWS Standard implementation and how this work complements other policy areas as well as where local authorities can facilitate or reinforce good practice.

“Because our desire was to have clean safe water, SAT has installed a borehole to solve water scarcity problems. We feel we were included in the decision making”.

Agness Suliwa, Mulanje. Borehole management committee

SAT now attends and participates in the monthly district coordination team meeting, which allows them to have access to a pivotal institutional platform where key governance decisions are made and challenges resolved in the district.

Furthermore, SAT have engaged local authorities to build their farmers' skills and knowledge. For example, the local office of the Department of Forestry has provided training on tree planting, while District Water Development Office (DWDO) plans to inform farmers of water-related laws and regulations to reinforce good practices in pollution prevention, catchment and borehole management. Through SAT's engagement with the DWDO, both parties are in regular discussion to identify where and when the DWDO can play a supportive role in helping SAT to be fully compliant with WRM and WASH legal and regulatory requirements.

Streamlining implementation to achieve compliance with ISEAL standard systems.

Benchmarking between common standard systems used in agricultural settings is beneficial to smallholder farmers in streamlining implementation to achieve compliance. SAT's experience has demonstrated that implementing other standard systems has supported and reinforced compliance with different aspects of the AWS Standard.

6. Challenges of AWS Standard Implementation

The applicability of the AWS Standard to smallholder farmers

The AWS Standard is a globally applicable standard intentionally designed to be valuable to all sectors and in all catchment contexts. For smallholder partners in sub-Saharan Africa such as SAT, sufficient technical expertise to fully grasp the complexity of the AWS Standard is not immediately available within their association, making external training and mentoring support essential. The AWS Standard implementation guidance and support tools require tailoring for smallholders according to their different cooperative profiles and capabilities.

The AWS Standard Guidance would benefit from guidance as to possible approaches to cost-sharing for investment in water stewardship for smallholder producers. The lack of specificity in some technical and resource requirements in the Standard make it difficult for farmers to envision what compliance would look like in practice in their given context.

Costs & cost-sharing of AWS Standard implementation

Key to SAT's success had been its ability to mobilise considerable resources towards achieving its water stewardship goals. Not all smallholder farmers will have access to these income streams or will have the foresight to prioritise their use to benefit both themselves and future generations as SAT has done. If they have not yet experienced the effects of climate change on their water resources directly, this may not be identified as key to the sustainability of their livelihoods.

To date, SAT has invested 250 million MWK⁵ in implementing water stewardship priorities in compliance with the AWS Standard. This has been used primarily for borehole construction, handpumps installation, construction costs of a new piped water network and tree planting. It does

⁵ Over GBP 257,000 or USD 332,000 at the time of reporting.

not include the costs of per diems and travel expenses for engaging local authorities and establishing partnerships or the cost of farmers' time. To achieve this farmers and community members engaged in hours of consultation through SAT's democratic structures and a committee of 12 farmers supervised implementation. In addition, community members contributed what they could in construction materials for the borehole drilling and handpump installation.

To address financial challenges and comply with the requirements of the AWS Standard, SAT has benefited from a partnership approach to share costs. Through their established trading relationship with Lujeri Tea Estate, Lujeri has supported their stewardship efforts through providing tree saplings. SAT have also received tree saplings from WeForest and Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust.

Premiums received through the sale of their FairTrade tea offers an income stream to finance initiatives that are prioritised in their water stewardship action plan. An established partnership with Sainsbury's under Sainsbury's Fairly Traded initiative also resulted in additional financial support, which SAT has channelled towards the second phase of construction of the piped water network.

To ensure sustainability, they have looked to generate additional revenue where they can. The established borehole management bylaws allow for the collection of water user fees to cover water point maintenance and upkeep.

SAT management and farmers conclude that their investments have been money well spent, with their collaborative approach and establishment of supportive partnerships helping SAT to progress on their water stewardship journey.

Government engagement constraints

Successful implementation of the AWS Standard relies on effective engagement with Government to ensure that water stewardship strategies are aligned with catchment plans and priorities, and support policy and regulatory capacity. In Malawi, the Department of Water Resources and the National Water Resources Authority (NWRA) have primary responsibility for water development and management, however they appear to face severe capacity and resource constraints. While local government officers from the Department of Forestry and the District Water Development Office (DWDO) have engaged with SAT on water stewardship, they require financial contributions from the site to cover the costs of their involvement to cover, for example, fuel costs. This imposes an additional cost burden on the site and introduces potential integrity risks of partial stakeholder engagement, including policy and regulatory capture.

Woodlot management and promoting tree survival to support good water quality and protection of important water-related areas

Despite making significant progress in tree planting in priority areas where top-soil erosion and siltation are issues, SAT recognise that they need more training on woodlot management to ensure that young trees survive and grow strong roots. Their continued collaborative relationship with the Department of Forestry will help them access required training. It is currently too early to gauge the success of SAT's tree planting initiative in having a positive impact on soil erosion and siltation.

Expanding safe drinking water access in communities during COVID-19

While the benefits of prioritising the drilling of new boreholes and installation of handpumps over the course of the worst of the pandemic outweighed the drawbacks, new challenges have arisen that are gradually being addressed as public health restrictions are slowly lifted.

Ideally, lead farmers would have conducted training sessions with communities and the borehole management committees prior to the drilling of the boreholes. While borehole management committees were established in priority communities, most planned training sessions were delayed due to public health restrictions on social gatherings.

“As much as there was engagement, not enough information was shared about the AWS Standard to farmers. To them, it’s just a water provision project and good WASH practice”.

Luciano Mikeyesa, Sodza
Village, Community stakeholder

A loosening of travel restrictions as of September 2020 has allowed for the Water Witness team to conduct refresher trainings on water stewardship and borehole management with small groups of lead farmers at SAT. The farmer-to-farmer training model will be re-initiated and the borehole management committees trained. More widely, the farmer-to-farmer training model will cascade refresher training on water stewardship and the AWS Standard down through SAT’s membership, which will help reinforce continued progress and shift gears from a focus on COVID-19 response back to a focus on tackling broader climate and water-related risks both at site and catchment level.

Quality of work in providing clean water

In one community where a new borehole was drilled, there are currently concerns that the borehole, drilled during the early response to COVID-19, is not deep enough. Due to the rigorous public restrictions on social distancing, communities were not as involved in the borehole drilling and handpump installation process as they would have been under normal circumstances. In response to the concerns raised, SAT has requested the drilling records and construction report from the drilling contractors in order to demonstrate that the work complies with the quality parameters stipulated in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development’s Technical Manual on Water Wells and Groundwater Monitoring Systems.

The contractors responded by providing a works completed report, which ultimately provides the detail, such as borehole depth and construction materials used, to demonstrate that the borehole meets the national guidelines. The next step will be for SAT to engage communities and share the findings of the works completed report to resolve their concerns about the depth of the borehole and for the DWDO to conduct a monitoring visit to verify the quality of the works.

In facing this challenge, SAT have demonstrated their confidence and ability to contact the required bodies to follow up and deal with the complaints, at the same time ensuring that the works carried out are compliant with the law.

7. Conclusions

Sukambizi Association Trust's implementation of the AWS Standard highlights the strength of the Standard as a systematic means of monitoring water use, ensuring compliance with legislation and international best practice, and demonstrating responsible water use to catchment stakeholders. It has served as an effective driver in improving water stewardship, contributing to increased water security, livelihood security and climate resilience for more than 5.600 smallholder farmers in the Sukambizi Association Trust.

SAT's experience implementing the AWS Standard highlights the practical considerations for smallholder farmers in terms of finances and water stewardship skills and knowledge, and the limitations of existing AWS guidance for WASH provision. It is important to note that in September 2020 Water Witness was able to bring in learning from smallholder application of WASH in Malawi to the first draft of AWS WASH guidance which has been refined and adopted by AWS and WASH4Work to inform practice globally and is in the process of being published.

The global coronavirus pandemic has slowed implementation, but has not disrupted the project immeasurably. Prioritisation of investing in WASH in communities could not have been more timely in these circumstances.

While SAT has encountered some operational challenges, for example, in woodlot management and the quality of borehole drilling, they have shown remarkable ingenuity in calling service deliverers to account using their newfound knowledge of their legal rights.

The experience of SAT demonstrates the added value to water security of smallholder farmers in implementing the AWS Standard in parallel with other standards used in agricultural settings. Building on lessons learned and capacity gained through implementing the Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance Standards, SAT has made impressive progress and has, through building strategic partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders in the catchment, made promising inroads for institutionalising support for water stewardship in Malawi.

Their continued progress and drive for AWS Standard certification is a reflection of SAT's perseverance and commitment. This serves as a strong signal to other smallholders of the importance of water stewardship and the value of the AWS Standard system in the face of climate change.

8. Recommendations

- 1. Ensure guidance to support implementation of the AWS Standard is applicable in smallholder settings.** With the pending publication of both WASH and agricultural guidance for the AWS Standard, there is a need to ensure these support implementation of the AWS Standard in smallholder settings where needs, capacity, organisational structure and management differ significantly from large commercial agricultural enterprises.
- 2. Engage authorities to ensure regulatory compliance and strengthen accountable water resource management.** Effective engagement with government is key to the integrity and effectiveness of water stewardship initiatives. The AWS Standard framework offers a mechanism to bring authorities, regulators and smallholders together on the farm to constructively discuss compliance efforts and share best practice. Strategic engagement with water authorities, such as the Department of Water Resources and the National Water Resources Authority (NWRA), is essential to strengthening accountable water resource management ensuring regulatory compliance.
- 3. Alleviate the financial and administrative burden for smallholders through closer alignment between Standards:** There is strategic complementarity between the AWS Standard and other standards used in agricultural settings, such as the Fairtrade Standard for Small Producer Organisations (SPO Standard) and the Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Agriculture Standard. Highlighting to smallholders where the same action can meet compliance criteria across several standards, integrating aspects of water stewardship into existing smallholder standards, or developing an AWS add-on, represents a significant opportunity to mitigate the financial and administrative burden of implementing the AWS Standard for smallholders. This would strengthen complementarity on water resources management components without compromising the integrity of each standard system.
- 4. Collaborate and cost-share to manage water resources effectively:** To accrue the benefits of managing water resources to maintain agricultural livelihoods for smallholders requires significant investment of resources. A study of budget allocation to and within the water sector is needed to highlight shortfalls for the Department of Water Resources and the National Water Resources Authority (NWRA), who have primary responsibility for water development and management. SAT's experience demonstrates how opportunities for cost-sharing investments on shared water challenges can be identified and capitalised on.