

Impact Case Study: True Origin, NASFAM, and KASFA

17 Years of Partnership: Trading Fairly, Growing Together



Figure 1

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1. Acknowledgements

This report was developed through a synthesis of existing documentation, historical records, and previously collected materials. It acknowledges the valuable support of colleagues and partners who provided clarifications, contextual insights, and access to internal resources throughout the process.

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2. Abbreviations

AGCOM	Agricultural Commercialisation
KASFA	Kaporo Smallholder Farmers Association
MACs	Marketing Action Clubs
NASFAM	National Smallholder Farmers Association of Malawi
NASCOMEX	NASFAM Commodity Marketing Exchange
SEC	Scottish Exhibition Centre Ltd
SRI	System of Rice Intensification
SFT	Scottish Fair Trade Forum (now Scottish Fair Trade)
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USADF	United States African Development Foundation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFTO	World Fair Trade Organisation

3. Executive Summary

This case study explores the long-term partnership between True Origin (formerly Just Trading Scotland), True Origin Partnerships (formerly The Balmore Trust), and the Kaporo Smallholder Farmers Association (KASFA) in Karonga, Malawi. Since 2009, this collaboration has enabled smallholder rice farmers, in collaboration with the National Smallholder Farmers Association of Malawi (NASFAM), to access the UK market while building climate resilience, food security, gender equity, and education access within their communities. Rather than a conventional trading relationship, the partnership combines fair and transparent trade with targeted development investment, strengthening local capacity and supporting community-led initiatives. Though the direct scale of rice exports is modest, the partnership has supported around 5,000 smallholder farmers, many cultivating one or two hectares, and created ripple effects that have strengthened farmers' agency and inspired community-led initiatives.

The collaboration has focused on improving rice quality and production through high-quality seed distribution, training programmes, and adoption of improved agricultural practices, including the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). Infrastructure investments, such as ploughs, ox carts, irrigation pumps, wells, and workshops have enhanced productivity, reduced labour burdens, and strengthened resilience to climate variability. Initiatives like the Women-Led Briquette Project seek to address both social and environmental challenges by reducing firewood dependence, decreasing deforestation, and creating alternative income streams for women farmers.

KASFA's organisational development has been a critical aspect of the partnership. Democratic governance structures, community workshops, and training programmes have empowered farmers, particularly women, to participate actively in decision-making, leadership, and enterprise development. Achievements such as World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) membership and certified seed production status demonstrate the maturity, credibility, and sustainability of the association. These milestones were made possible through strong partnerships with both local and international actors, including NASFAM, True Origin and True Origin Partnerships, underlining the importance of collaboration in driving long-term impact.

Importantly, there have also been learnings along the way. Not every initiative was successful; some projects, such as early attempts at mechanisation, proved too heavy or impractical in local contexts. Many of the most impactful ideas came directly from KASFA members themselves, showing the strength of bottom-up innovation. These experiences highlight the importance of adaptive partnerships that respond to farmer-identified priorities and support locally driven solutions.

While only a small proportion of rice is sold directly to True Origin, and therefore not every farmer has experienced meaningful change from this market link alone, the partnership has nonetheless contributed to broader positive developments within KASFA and its communities. Increased organisational capacity, access to training, and investment in tools and infrastructure have created ripple effects that reach beyond individual sales. For many farmers, this has translated into greater income security, greater individual capability, opportunities for education, and enhanced resilience to climate challenges.

Overall, the evidence points to steady and meaningful progress, driven by long-term commitment, fair-trade principles, and community-led development. This progress has been supported by True Origin Partnerships, which provided funding for practical tools and other project support, as well as by local and international partners. These include the Scottish Government, the Government of Malawi through the AGCOM (Agricultural Commercialisation) project, and other donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States African Development Foundation (USADF), all of whom have supported initiatives benefiting KASFA and NASFAM. Together, these contributions demonstrate the importance of shared investment and collaboration in achieving sustainable and long-term impact.

4. Methodology

This report was compiled as a synthesis of past work and documentation, rather than through new field visits or primary interviews. It draws on multiple sources, including reports by external consultants, True Origin reports, notes from board member visits in previous years, past interviews, blogs, articles, university research, WFTO publications, news articles, videos, and other publicly available material. The stories, case studies, and personal accounts included here are drawn from these historical records and earlier project documentation.

No new field visits or interviews were conducted for this report. Instead, the focus has been on systematically collating, verifying, and contextualising information from existing materials to provide a comprehensive overview of Kilombero rice production, trade, and community impacts.

The approach prioritised clarity and detail along the supply chain, from rice cultivation through processing and export to end markets, highlighting the operational, financial, and social dimensions of the system. While care has been taken to ensure accuracy, it should be noted that this report represents a secondary compilation of information. Some statements rely on historical accounts and records, which may not perfectly reflect current practice or on-the-ground conditions.

This methodology provides a practical means to capture the breadth of actions, partnerships, and impacts related to Kilombero rice. Future updates could benefit from direct fieldwork, including observation and interviews, to further validate and enrich the findings presented here, but the current compilation allows for a clear understanding of the historical development, challenges, and successes of the supply chain.

5. Background

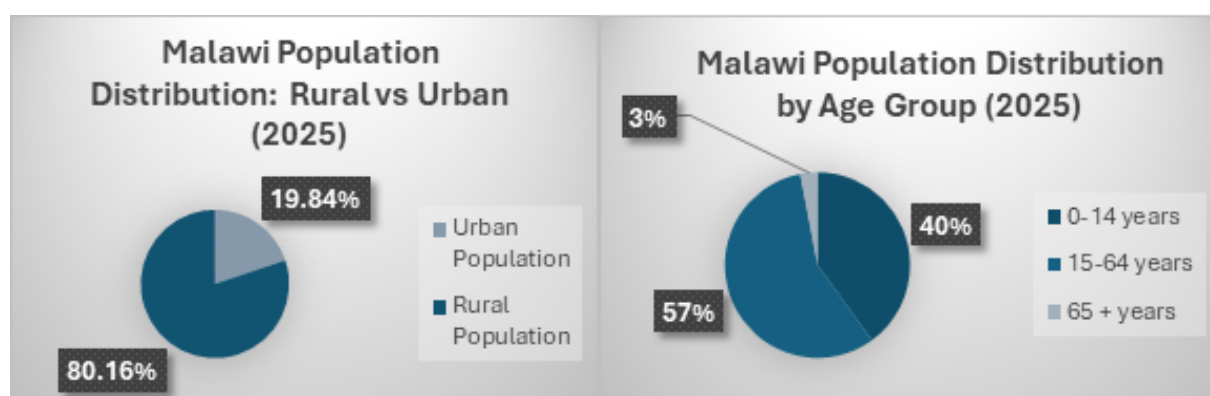
MALAWI: National Context

Malawi is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, bordered by Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia.

As of 2025, its population is estimated at 22.2 million, with only 19.84% living in urban areas and the vast majority (~80%) residing in rural communities where livelihoods depend heavily on agriculture (Worldometers, 2025). Malawi has a very young population, with 40% of its population aged 0–14 and 57% between 15 and 64 years. Combined with a life expectancy of around 67 years, this demographic profile places sustained pressure on education systems, employment opportunities, and social services (UNFPA, 2025).



Figure 2 - Source (Malawi Maps & Facts - World Atlas)



Agriculture forms the backbone of Malawi's economy, employing more than 80% of the workforce and contributing significantly to GDP and

export earnings (World Bank, 2025). Maize is the main food crop and a key focus of national policy, while tobacco remains the dominant cash crop, representing over 40% of annual export earnings. Other cash crops include dried legumes, sugar, tea, cotton, and nuts (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024).

What is a Cash Crop?

A **cash crop** (also called a profit crop) is an agricultural crop grown mainly to be sold for profit, rather than eaten by the farmer's family.



Coffee



Cocoa



Rice

This contrasts with a food crop, which is grown to feed the farmer's household.



In Malawi, most families grow maize as their main food crop. Kilombero is a cash crop in Karonga and Nkothakhota regions.

This income is used for:

-  Paying school and university fees
-  Covering health and medical costs
-  Buying household goods and farming inputs
-  Improving housing and sanitation
-  Improving housing and sanitation

Most of the agricultural production comes from smallholder farmers cultivating one to two hectares on average. Agricultural productivity remains constrained by reliance on rain-fed systems, limited mechanisation, and restricted access to inputs such as fertiliser and improved seed, leaving farmers highly vulnerable to climatic variability and extreme weather events (World Food Programme, 2025). Access to water and irrigation remains a critical challenge.

Malawi experiences recurrent food insecurity largely driven by climate-related shocks. In February 2024, an extended dry period linked to El Niño damaged 44% of the maize crop, leaving 5.7 million people acutely food insecure. This drought followed other natural disasters, including Tropical Storm Ana in 2022 and Tropical Cyclone Freddy in 2023. These shocks interact with structural challenges: slow economic growth, high national debt, low primary school completion rates, widespread stunting, and a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, to deepen household vulnerability and limit recovery capacity. Many families are still struggling to recover, often resorting to harmful coping strategies such as withdrawing children from school to work or selling essential household assets (World Food Programme, 2025).



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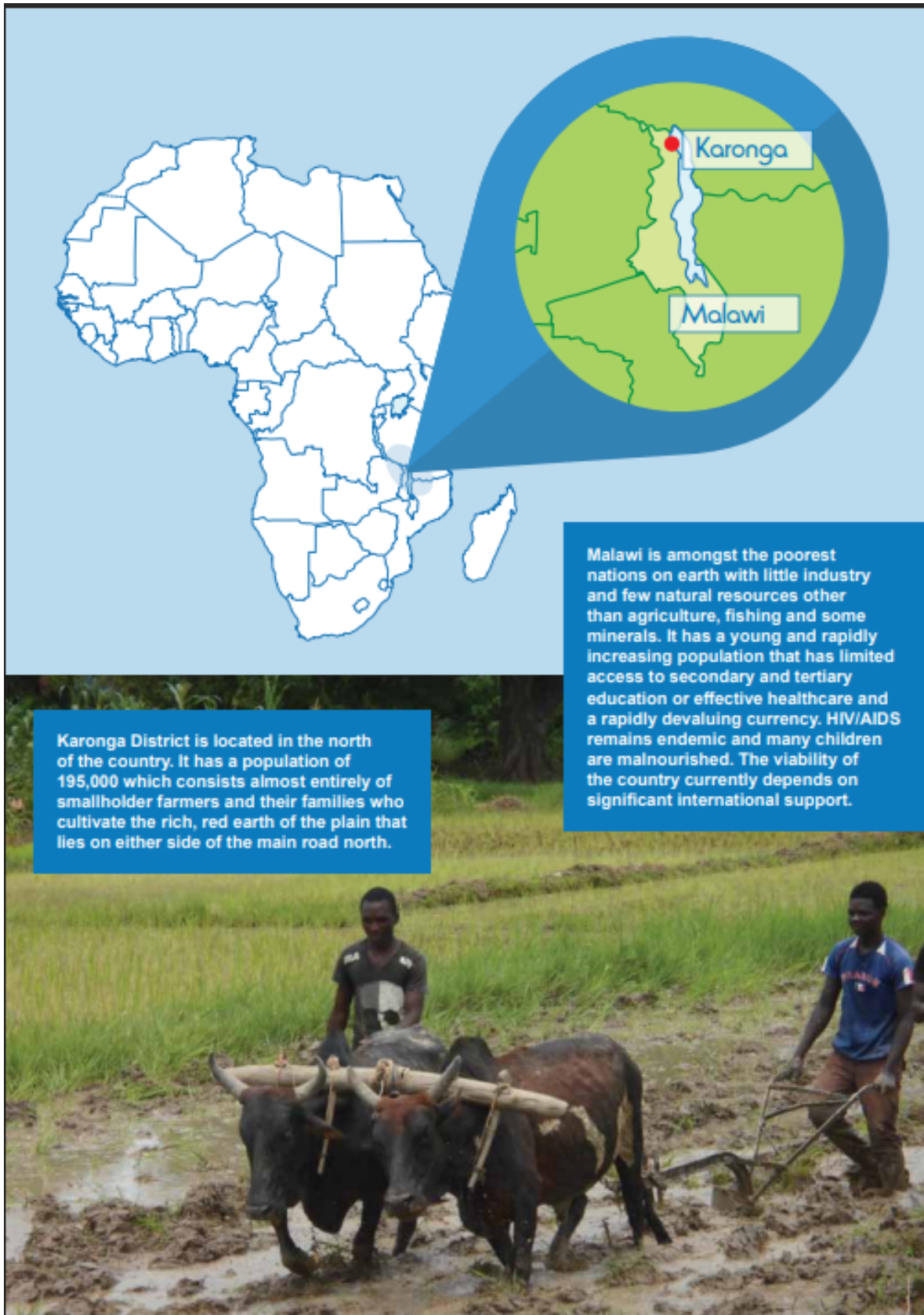


Figure 3 - Source Just Rice Report

NASFAM (National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi)

The National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi (NASFAM) originated from a USAID-funded project in the mid-1990s aimed at organising smallholder tobacco farmers. Since 1995, its focus has diversified to include a wider range of cash and food crops, reflecting the need for resilience and market opportunities beyond tobacco. Formally registered under the Trustees Incorporation Act in 1998, NASFAM is now the largest independent farmer-owned organisation in Malawi, representing more than 100,000 farmers nationwide.

NASFAM's governance model is democratic and bottom-up. Farmers are organised into clubs of around ten members, which form Marketing Action Clubs (MACs). MACs serve as marketing hubs and often host collection centres for harvested products. Ten to twenty clubs form an association, which has a formal board including a chairperson, treasurer, and other members. Members serve two terms of two years before stepping down, though they may return after a period of absence. (Brett, 2020, p.5-6). This tiered structure enables farmers to progress from club-level participation to representation at MAC, association, union, and national levels, creating opportunities for leadership development and strengthening accountability across the organisation.

NASFAM provides a range of services, including input supply, training, financial management, and collective marketing. Its commercial subsidiary, NASCOMEX (NASFAM Commodity Marketing Exchange), manages processing, quality control, and export coordination, ensuring that farmers' produce meets international standards (Brett, 2020, p. 14).

NASFAM also plays a critical role in logistics. Rising global shipping costs, fuel shortages, and poor transport infrastructure have disrupted exports, and NASFAM helps associations navigate these challenges by coordinating freight, covering some transport costs, and providing cash advances to bridge long payment delays. These logistical interventions are essential in a context where transport bottlenecks and long export routes can significantly delay payments to farmers and undermine market confidence.

KASFA (Kaporo Smallholder Farmers Association)



Figure 4 - Source True Origin (<https://www.trueorigin.org.uk/kasfa-new-wfto-member>)

The Kaporo Smallholder Farmers Association (KASFA) began in 2001 as a small group of rice farmers growing Kilombero rice in Karonga, Northern Malawi. It was formally registered as a limited company in 2003. By 2008, membership was around 1,230 farmers; by 2009, when the partnership with True Origin (then known under JTS) began, KASFA membership had grown to around 2,500 members. Since then, the number of members has more than doubled, at one point exceeding 5,000, which proved unmanageable within the existing organisational setup. Membership has since stabilised at around 5,000, reflecting efforts to balance growth with organisational capacity.

KASFA's organisational structure mirrors NASFAM's bottom-up model: individual farmers join clubs, which form MACs, which form associations, which together form the union. Four associations collectively form KASFA (Kaporo North, Kaporo South, Mpata, and Ntchowo). Each association is

managed by a field officer reporting to a business manager, with governance provided by a board of directors. The chairperson and secretary of each association board sit on the union board, which works with the union manager to oversee projects across the associations. As a NASFAM affiliate, KASFA also benefits from representation at the national level. Each association sends two representatives from their board to KASFA's board, with additional members added to balance skills and gender. This board is the executive body controlling KASFA's operations, with decisions conducted by KASFA staff. NASFAM fully provides the union manager position, while NASFAM subsidises the salaries of Field Officers and Data Entry Officers. Field Officers are employed by the individual associations through their respective boards and Business Manager, and deliver regular training, technical guidance, and capacity-building support to strengthen KASFA's operations and farmer skills.

While KASFA focuses on farmer mobilisation, seed distribution, and training, NASFAM oversees the technical and financial aspects of marketing. Within Malawi, Kilombero rice is also one of NASCOMEX's principal sources of income, sold across major supermarkets nationwide. Although KASFA could in principle trade directly, farmer associations in Malawi face both legal restrictions and capital barriers. In practice, KASFA sells its rice exclusively through NASCOMEX as its formal market channel. NASFAM supports this process by providing working capital for upfront rice payments to farmers, contributions toward staff salaries (including part of the driver and field-officers' wages), and assistance with business expenses such as transport, enabling KASFA farmers to participate in larger markets (Brett, 2020; Brett, 2021).

True Origin

True Origin is made up of two intricately linked parts, both committed to fair trade and building sustainable livelihoods:

- **True Origin Partnerships** – the charitable arm, originally established as *The Balmore Trust* in 1980. The charity opened *The Coach House* shop in 1980, with profits and other income used to support community projects in the UK and overseas. Over time, its work shifted towards fair trade, reflecting the growing recognition that

sustainable trading relationships can deliver long-term impact and dignity to producers.

- **True Origin** – the trading and importing arm, established in 2009 as *Just Trading Scotland (JTS)*. Created as the practical importing wing of the Balmore Trust, it grew out of the existing trading wing of *The Coach House* and collaborates directly with smallholder producer groups like KASFA, ensuring fair prices and reliable market access.

Together, these two parts form a single mission-driven organisation: building strong partnerships with producers and their communities and collaborating with them to support sustainable livelihoods.

Kilombero Rice: A Distinctive Malawian Crop



Figure 5 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Kilombero rice is grown on slightly less than 2% of land in Malawi, with production concentrated in the Karonga district along the lakeshore plains of northern Malawi (Brett, 2020, pp. 3–4). Kilombero rice is highly valued for its aroma, flavour, and cooking qualities; it is often described as softer, tastier, and easier to digest than other local varieties. These attributes allow

Kilombero rice to position itself as a premium product in both Malawian and international markets (Brett, 2020, p. 6).

KASFA farmers are smallholders cultivating on average between one and two hectares. Alongside Kilombero rice, they also grow other crops for local markets and household consumption, including short-grain rice, cassava, seasonal vegetables, and mangoes, which provide important supplementary income and contribute to household food security.

Kilombero rice is adapted to Malawi's rain-fed conditions and requires less water than many imported Asian varieties, making it better suited to areas facing growing pressure from climate change and water scarcity (Brett, 2020, p. 3). However, this reliance on rainfall results in significant year-to-year variation in yields. Using less water also results in lower methane emissions, further reducing its environmental footprint. This enhances its sustainability credentials and strengthens its appeal in markets where consumers are increasingly attentive to environmental impacts, provided its agronomic limitations are recognised and managed through appropriate farming practices and market positioning.

However, Kilombero rice is photoperiod-sensitive, meaning flowering is triggered by day length. This limits off-season production and makes it unsuitable for winter cropping, reducing flexibility in production cycles. In addition, Kilombero produces lower yields compared to some shorter-duration, high-yielding rice varieties. One year in three is affected by adverse weather events, such as floods or droughts, both of which have strongly negative impacts on output and are becoming more frequent with climate change (Brett, 2020, p. 3).



Figure 6 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Production relies on traditional smallholder methods that demand close attention throughout the year. Fields are prepared at the start of the rainy season in November and December, often using hand tools or ploughs to clear and level the land. Seedlings are transplanted by hand, with water managed primarily through rainfall, supplemented in some cases by small-scale diesel or solar pumps drawing from rivers or shallow wells. Weeding, fertilising, and pest control are undertaken manually, reflecting the labour-intensive character of cultivation.



Figure 7 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Harvesting typically occurs between late May and July, after which the rice is dried and milled, often at KASFA's own mill, before entering local markets or being exported through partnerships such as that with True Origin. As Kilombero rice is a single annual crop with a growing cycle of around six months, farmers alternate it with other subsistence and market crops during the remainder of the year. This seasonality compresses both production and purchasing into a short harvest window, requiring KASFA to buy a full year's supply of rice within a few weeks while income from sales is realised gradually over the following twelve months (Brett, 2020, p.2).



Figure 8 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Post-harvest processing remains underdeveloped, with Kilombero rice traditionally dried in open environments, exposing it to contamination risks and damage from rain (Brett, 2020, p. 4). KASFA also re-dries rice that is inadequately dried, causing small losses due to shrinkage, with rice spread on concrete areas around the factory to dry in the sun. Farmers store harvested paddy rice (rice grains that still have their outer husk and require drying and milling before consumption) at KASFA collection centres, and KASFA operates its own collection vehicles.

Farmers are paid in cash for their crop, but limited working capital can make it difficult for KASFA to purchase all Kilombero rice at harvest, sometimes leading members to sell to outside buyers with ready cash. These financial constraints create a recurring tension between maintaining farmer loyalty and ensuring that KASFA has sufficient liquidity to act as a reliable buyer during peak harvest periods.

Milling at KASFA previously used an older, basic mill, removing around 30% of paddy as husk. Through a USADF grant, KASFA acquired a new Chinese rice mill, which also provided several hundred thousand dollars in working capital; although COVID-19 delayed installation, the mill became operational in 2021, significantly strengthening KASFA's post-harvest processing capacity. The upgraded mill has improved efficiency and quality control, reducing losses and enabling KASFA to meet higher standards required for both domestic and export markets.

Processed rice is transported by road to Lilongwe, where NASCOMEX fumigates, de-stones, re-mills, polishes, colour-sorts, and packs rice for export, while also selling substantial volumes on the Malawian market. KASFA Kilombero rice constitutes about 80% of NASCOMEX's Kilombero

rice purchases, with the remaining 20% sourced from other associations. Foreign bodies such as glass or metal are occasionally found in imported rice, but sieving ensures quality standards are maintained, and KASFA rice continues to meet market requirements. In 2020, exports represented 15% of KASFA's total production, with the remainder sold on local markets, via NASFAM and KASFA outlets (Brett, 2020, p.4-5).

Exported Kilombero rice follows the route: Lilongwe → Beira port in Mozambique → South African port → UK, where Granta Processors conducts UK-standard fumigation, milling, sieving, colour sorting, bulk packaging, and moisture adjustment as needed. Packaging for True Origin is conducted in the UK. Logistics remain a critical constraint: rice exports depend on long sea freight routes, with containers trucked from Karonga to Lilongwe and then to Beira port. Rising global shipping costs, fuel shortages in Malawi, and poorly maintained transport infrastructure have all disrupted exports. These logistical challenges increase both the cost and risk of exporting, making long-term planning difficult for all partners involved in the supply chain.

System of Rice Intensification (SRI)

What is SRI?

SRI is a climate-smart rice cultivation method that improves yields while reducing water use. It focusses on optimising plant, soil, water, and nutrient management rather than relying on external inputs.

Core Principles

- ✓ Transplant young seedlings (8–12 days old)
- ✓ Plant single seedlings rather than clumps
- ✓ Wider spacing to reduce competition
- ✓ Keep soil moist, not flooded
- ✓ Use organic matter to improve soil health
- ✓ Regular weeding to aerate the soil

Benefits

 Higher yields

 Lower water use

 Stronger root systems

 Greater resilience to climate variability

 Reduced methane emissions

Why It Matters for KASFA

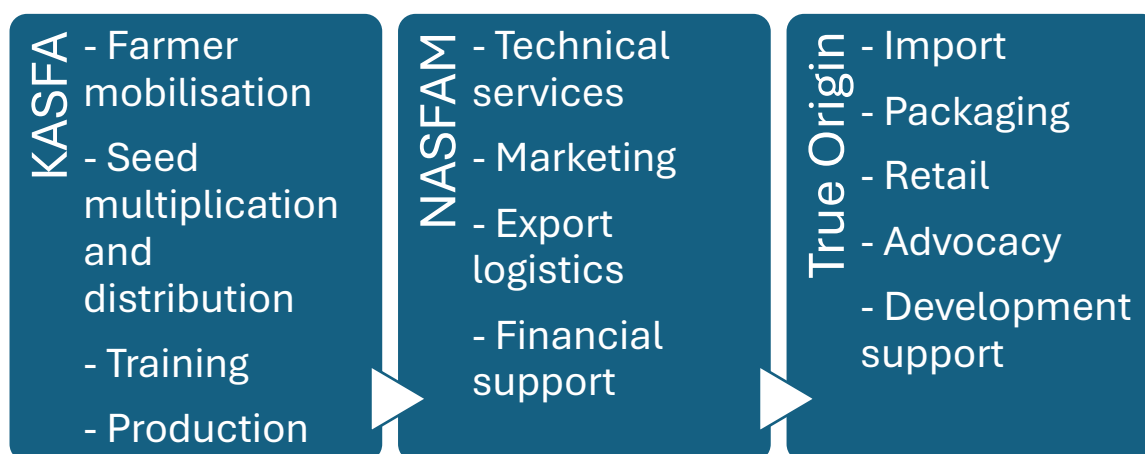
- Helps farmers increase productivity on small plots
- Reduces vulnerability to drought and erratic rainfall.
- Supports climate-smart agriculture goals
- Aligns with True Origin's sustainability commitments

While rooted in traditional methods, farming practices are gradually being strengthened through innovation and training. Farmers are adopting the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and gaining access to climate-smart implements such as improved ploughs and ox carts, which increase efficiency and reduce vulnerability to climate variability. Although some improved seed is used, it accounts for only around 10% of crops, despite evidence that improved seed can increase yields by up to 30% (Brett, 2020, p. 4).

Despite these improvements, yields remain modest by global standards: Malawian smallholders harvest around one tonne of paddy Kilombero rice per acre, compared to 3.7 tonnes in India and 6.7 tonnes in China (Brett, 2020, p. 8). This means Malawian farmers produce less than 20% of the output achieved by major competitors, pointing to significant potential for productivity gains per acre (Brett, 2020, p. 4). With most farmers cultivating only one or two hectares without mechanised irrigation, production remains highly dependent on rainfall and vulnerable to prolonged dry spells and flooding.

Because Kilombero rice is marketed as a premium product, careful handling during packaging and shipping is essential. Exposure to moisture during transit can compromise quality, while long shipping routes increase the importance of secure, airtight packaging to preserve aroma, taste, and grain integrity. Rice shipments from tropical regions are particularly vulnerable to moisture damage due to condensation caused by temperature and humidity fluctuations during transport, with international standards now recommending the use of moisture-absorbent units within containers (Brett, 2020, p. 5). Maintaining quality across such an extended supply chain demands ongoing investment in packaging, monitoring and careful handling, adding cost pressures to an already tight-margin product. When combined with high UK processing, packaging and distribution costs, these structural constraints mean that even premium-quality rice ultimately generates relatively low margins.

Tripartite partnership



KASFA's flagship product, Kilombero rice, has become a central part of True Origin's ethical food offering in the UK. True Origin purchases the rice through NASFAM, sourcing from KASFA smallholder farmers within Malawi's cooperative marketing system. This long-standing tripartite structure—farmer association (KASFA), national platform (NASFAM), and trading partner (True Origin)—links farmer ownership with international market access and helps ensure that value is shared across the supply chain.

The relationship between the three organisations has developed over many years of trading and collaboration. True Origin is a trusted customer of NASFAM, and the rice it imports is grown by KASFA members and supplied to NASFAM for processing, marketing, and export. As each organisation has grown and adapted, its roles and interactions have evolved into a coordinated system that spans farmer mobilisation, production, technical support, export coordination, and retail.

6. The Beginning: Introducing Malawian Products to the UK



In early 2008, an unexpected encounter at a trade fair at the Scottish Exhibition Centre Ltd (SEC) in Glasgow marked the beginning of a partnership that would go on to impact lives across two continents. At that time, John Riches was representing the Balmore Coach House, a fair trade

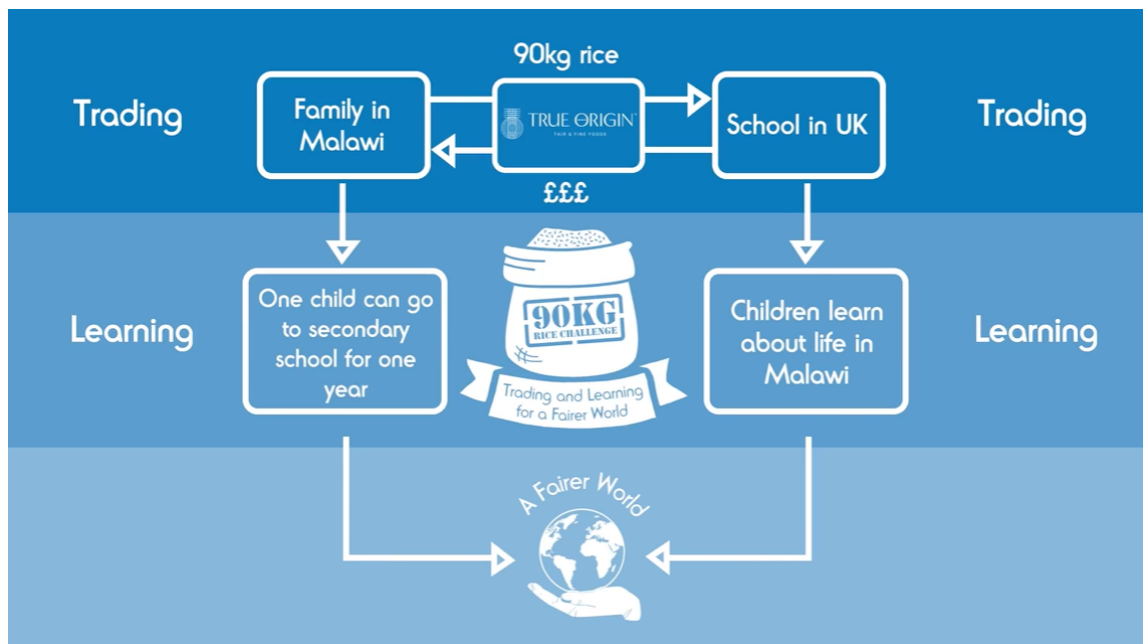
shop owned by the Balmore Trust, the charitable organisation that would later become True Origin Partnerships. It was at the SEC that John met Simon Hess (now Counsellor for the World Trade Organisation) and was introduced to a range of producers from Malawi. Among them was KASFA. This initial meeting established the first link between Scottish fair trade advocates and Malawian smallholder farmers, forming the basis for a long-term trading relationship.

Backed by initial funding from the Scottish Government, True Origin (then known as JTS) aimed to import ten Malawian products. From handmade lip balm and cards to macadamia nuts and rice, the ambition was to create a trading bridge. But Kilombero rice quickly emerged as the standout product, both scalable and impactful.

Despite having no experience selling rice, True Origin and KASFA took a leap. The first shipment of Kilombero rice arrived in time for Fairtrade Fortnight 2009, with KASFA agreeing to supply the container on consignment, an arrangement that demonstrated significant trust and reduced financial risk for the new importer. This enabled True Origin to bring in the first shipment without capital investment, laying the groundwork for what would become one of its most recognisable and impactful fair trade campaigns in the UK.

The 90kg Rice Challenge, introduced by True Origin board member Liz Cotton in 2010, became a turning point. It was based on a simple but powerful idea: selling 90kg of Kilombero rice would pay for a year of secondary education for one child in Malawi. The campaign resonated with schools, churches, and communities across the UK. An educational pack was developed alongside the challenge, helping participants understand rice farming and the impact of fair trade.

From the start, people enjoyed the aromatic Kilombero rice, prized for its ability to absorb flavours from other foods. Demand grew quickly, and a second container was imported by the end of the year. Kilombero rice was no longer just a niche fair trade product; it had a story, a purpose, and growing visibility.



The 90kg Rice Challenge has now been used in hundreds of schools and churches across the UK, raising awareness of global trade justice while providing real-world support to rural children in Karonga. Since February 2009, a total of 1,974 challenges has been sold.

7. Growing Partnership: 2009 to Today



Figure 9 - Source Ethical Consumer

Early Market Development (2009–2012)

Since the initial shipments of Kilombero rice in 2009, the early years were exploratory, focused on finding a sustainable market for Malawian rice while building consumer awareness in the UK. The journey of getting rice from Karonga to UK consumers has not been without obstacles. The launch of the 90kg Rice Challenge in 2010 was a turning point, creating a simple but powerful way to connect schools and churches with Malawian farmers.

By the end of 2012, True Origin had imported around 115 metric tons of Kilombero rice, sourced through NASFAM from its members. During this period, NASFAM purchased significantly larger volumes of rice from KASFA farmers overall, with only a proportion entering the export market linked to True Origin. Although exports represented a relatively small share of total production, they provided a stable and fairly priced outlet for participating farmers and generated valuable foreign exchange for Malawi.

Strengthening Production and Quality (2013–2016)

The partnership deepened significantly between 2013 and 2016 through a £276,000 Scottish Government Malawi Development Programme grant, enabling True Origin, NASFAM, and KASFA to collaborate on improving Kilombero rice production and developing UK export markets.

Through this grant, True Origin and True Origin Partnerships invested in a range of development projects aimed at improving the quality, consistency, and resilience of Kilombero rice production. Early challenges with recycled seed, which had begun to affect flavour and uniformity, were addressed through the production and distribution of certified Kilombero seed to 5,000 farmers, supported by a comprehensive farmer training programme.

Other key initiatives included the supply of 300 tarpaulins to protect rice during drying, replacing the previous practice of drying on tarmac roads, and the provision of inputs to reduce labour intensity. Fifty ox carts were purchased and sold to farmers on a hire-purchase basis, with repayments reinvested to acquire additional equipment. In Scotland, a dedicated marketing officer was employed to support market development and awareness-raising for the rice. Together, these initiatives improved yields, enhanced grain quality, and strengthened efficiency across the production cycle (Guenther, 2014).



Figure 10 – Mary Popple's visit 2016

In Scotland, the Scotland Malawi Partnership (SMP) also played an important role in strengthening collaboration between Malawi and Scotland and in raising the profile of Kilombero rice. SMP supported the launch of Kilombero rice in Scotland, helped build connections with retailers and supporters, and hosted a reception at the City Chambers during True Origin's rebrand. Their ongoing advocacy for fair-trade partnerships and Malawian products contributed to increased visibility and public engagement, reinforcing the wider ecosystem of support around the rice.

A solar-powered threshing machine, based on a 19th-century Orcadian model, was also trialled. Despite its ingenuity, the project failed due to the difficulty of transporting machinery across rice fields lacking proper access paths, highlighting persistent challenges around infrastructure and land ownership that continue to pose serious obstacles to long-term mechanisation and development.

Because KASFA lacked the capital to purchase rice directly from farmers, agreements with NASFAM's commercial arm enabled KASFA to sell rice to NASFAM, which then supplied True Origin at a fair price. Under this arrangement, KASFA focused on production and farmer mobilisation, while NASFAM managed purchasing and export logistics. This model enabled farmers to access grants, technical assistance and capacity-

building support that would otherwise have been inaccessible, contributing to more reliable incomes and improved long-term opportunities for farming households.

During this period, KASFA grew its membership to 5,000 farmers, and the association began providing more predictable income streams, which proved especially transformative for women, particularly single heads of household, who used this stability to plan household spending, invest in their farms, and support their children's education.

Regular exchange visits between farmers, association leaders, and True Origin staff, including the 2017 Meet the People tour that brought UK fair-trade supporters to KASFA, reinforced trust, strengthened mutual understanding, and supported ongoing development and educational initiatives in both Malawi and the UK. These exchanges, which have not resumed since the COVID-19 period, remain a valued part of the partnership's history.

Farmer-Led Innovation: The Workshop Initiative (2016–present)

In 2016, a farmer-led initiative spearheaded by Howard Msukwa, a long-standing KASFA member, sought to establish a local workshop to produce and repair essential community tools and equipment. True Origin Partnerships (then the Balmore Trust) played a limited bridging role, connecting Howard with supporters in Scotland who provided funding, training, and technical assistance.



Figure 11 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Following one of Howard's visits to Scotland, an individual supporter in Dumfries and the Stirling Fairtrade Group became involved. With this support, farmers began building their own ox carts, welding metal frames, and adding wooden panels, wheels, and toolbars. These carts are versatile, designed to be pulled by oxen or, where roads permit, by motorbikes. The workshop reduced costs, created local employment, and strengthened community self-reliance.

True Origin Partnerships has continued to support this initiative as it has grown. In 2024, funds were provided to build six ox carts, but the workshop team successfully produced eight, demonstrating both increasing technical skill and operational efficiency. Beyond carts, the workshop also constructs desks and shelving for local schools, reinforcing its role as a broader community asset.



Figure 12 - Source True Origin Partnerships

More recently, the initiative has evolved into a Skills Development Centre, training young people in carpentry, welding, tailoring, and mechanics, aiming to develop a sustainable skills development hub in the area. Plans are underway to formally register the workshop and Skills Development Centre as a Foundation in Malawi, with True Origin Partnerships supporting registration fees and mobilising additional backing from partners in Scotland, including a grant from the Scottish Episcopal Church to cover the transport of materials and equipment from Scotland.

This initiative exemplifies farmer-led innovation, community ownership, and the lasting impact that can emerge when trusted trading relationships enable individuals like Howard to build meaningful partnerships beyond the market.

Improving Water Management and Irrigation (2017–2020)

From 2017 to 2020, True Origin Partnerships and the Scottish Government supported a project titled Developing Improved Management of Water Sources in Karonga, aimed at strengthening irrigation and reducing dependence on erratic rainfall.

The project included the construction of shallow wells, the provision of a mix of diesel and solar-powered pumps, and training for farmers on effective water-resource management. Although the wells were shallow, around 20 feet deep, they were substantial structures, lined with pre-formed circular concrete rings approximately 6 feet across and 2 feet tall, stacked to form each well. These wells were expensive to produce and transport, meaning funding reached only a limited number of farmers and highlighting the importance of transparent allocation and repayment mechanisms to establish a revolving fund.



Figure 13 - Source True Origin

The solar pumps supplied were affordable and sustainable to operate but lacked the power to deliver sufficient water for larger plots. By contrast, the diesel pumps were more effective in irrigating land but were expensive to run, limiting their long-term viability. These interventions were designed to reduce dependence on unpredictable rainfall and strengthen resilience to increasingly erratic weather patterns. The project was run in conjunction with the Centre for Water and Sanitation at Mzuzu University.

Despite these constraints, the project strengthened local knowledge of water resource management, increased access to supplementary irrigation, and laid the groundwork for future investments in more robust and scalable water infrastructure. KASFA staff reported that the initiative had led to substantial productivity gains for farmers who successfully adopted the technology, and there was strong interest in extending the program, though doing so would require additional organisational capacity (Brett, 2020, p.7).

The project also emphasised accountability and sustainability: funds were allocated to farmer clubs rather than individuals, formal written agreements were established, and repayment commitments were

encouraged, reflecting the philosophy that development funds should, as far as possible, operate as revolving loans rather than one-off grants (Mangandale, 2025). Farmers now have a stronger foundation of technical skills and experience in managing irrigation systems, which continues to support adaptive responses to climate variability.

Market Recognition and Awards (2018)

In the UK, Kilombero rice has gained significant recognition for both its quality and its ethical credentials. It has been awarded the Ethical Consumer Best Buy label (2018) and has received multiple Great Taste Awards, reflecting its aromatic flavour, premium quality, and the integrity of the supply chain behind it. These accolades have strengthened its reputation as a product with taste, transparency, and a compelling sustainability story, helping it stand out in a crowded and highly competitive rice market.

Expanding Processing Capacity: The KASFA Mill Upgrade (2020–2021)

Around 2020, KASFA secured a substantial grant from the USADF to install a new rice mill and provide working capital. The existing mill at the time could process around 5 tonnes of rice in a 12-hour shift, whereas the new mill increased capacity to 20–30 tonnes in an 8-hour shift, significantly improving efficiency. It also polished the rice and included grading and sieving functions to remove broken grains, producing higher-quality rice suitable for direct sale to consumers (Brett, 2020, p.7).

This update represented a major step in local value addition and processing capacity. KASFA also applied for a larger Malawi Government grant to further modernise milling and packing equipment, introduce a colour sorter, and expand farmer training and marketing capacity.

Women's Economic Empowerment: The Briquette Project (2021–present)

In 2021, Grace Mwanguti, a rice farmer in Karonga, launched a project to support two women's groups in producing fuel briquettes from waste rice husks. The initiative aims to address multiple challenges: reducing the need for women to walk long distances to collect firewood; decreasing unsustainable deforestation, which, combined with heavy rain, contributes to soil erosion and land loss; repurposing rice husks that would otherwise be left to rot, providing an alternative source of fuel, and potentially

creating a source of income for women farmers.

Since its inception, the project has made considerable progress. The women have constructed two brick buildings to house the briquette-making machinery and established preliminary production units. True Origin Partnerships has provided funding for the buildings, equipment, and the training necessary to support the women's groups in registering as cooperatives separate from KASFA. These steps aim to help the women manage their enterprise more effectively, produce clean cooking fuel for local households, and gain confidence and leadership skills in a context where women's economic opportunities are traditionally limited.



Figure 14 - Source True Origin Partnerships

While still at an early stage, the project is already generating social and environmental benefits. By repurposing rice husks, it could reduce waste and contribute to climate action. It may also ease the physical burden on women farmers, who previously spent hours collecting firewood, provide a much-needed alternative source of cooking fuel, and create a potentially sustainable source of income. The buildings have also become important communal spaces, providing a focal point for women to meet regularly. They are used for weekly Village Savings and Loan (VS&L) meetings, where members make mandatory savings contributions and can access small loans, strengthening financial inclusion and collective resilience within the groups.

The next phase of the project focuses on scaling up production through

the purchase of a larger briquette machine and moving towards financial viability. The groups are currently seeking financing within Malawi to support this expansion.

This initiative illustrates how long-term, trust-based partnerships rooted in fair trade principles can support women-led innovation, address environmental challenges, and contribute to broader community development. It also demonstrates how targeted support can enable women's groups to develop independent income streams and strengthen their role within local economies.



Figure 15 - Source True Origin Partnerships

Achieving WFTO Membership (2021)

In November 2021, following two and a half years of preparation and auditing, KASFA became a Guaranteed Member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). This achievement came during the global pandemic, in a national context with no prior WFTO presence. To meet membership requirements, KASFA implemented a comprehensive Improvement Plan, which included upgrading warehouse infrastructure, introducing new policies and procedures, and rolling out governance and fair-trade training across its membership base. By the end of the process, members had received training on fair trade practices, democratic participation, and organisational accountability, with women representing 62% of participants.

This process was supported and financed through the Scottish Government small grant project “Strengthening Consumer Confidence in Kilombero Rice by Achieving WFTO Certification” (2018–2021). Central to this work was the role of Thrive, a Scottish not-for-profit, which managed the grant and project on behalf of True Origin Partnerships (then the Balmore Trust) and KASFA. Thrive provided close accompaniment, coordinating compliance timetables, consulting with WFTO in Nairobi, organising a peer-learning visit to Kahawa Coffee in Tanzania, and ensuring progress continued despite the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratcliff, 2021).

Additional partners also played crucial roles. The Scottish Fair Trade Forum (SFTF) (now Scottish Fair Trade) advised on WFTO structures and supported KASFA in developing a Local Living Wage Ladder, while the USADF provided working capital and funded a new rice mill. NASFAM supported policy development and functioned as KASFA’s main buyer, exporting rice onwards to True Origin. Together, these organisations contributed to strengthening KASFA’s business professionalism, governance capacity, and external credibility.

KASFA’s democratic structure, combined with ongoing support from local and international partners, provided a solid foundation for achieving membership. The WFTO recognition not only formalises KASFA’s commitment to fair trade principles but also elevates its credibility in global markets, giving its members greater visibility and reinforcing their identity as producers within an internationally recognised movement.

💡 Did you know?

The **Local Living Wage Ladder** is a tool that helps businesses and organisations understand how wages paid to workers compare with the living costs in their local area. Rather than relying on national minimum wages, it considers actual household expenses, including food, housing, healthcare, education, and transportation. By using this ladder, companies can work towards paying a fair, sustainable wage that truly supports workers and their families.

Seed Certification and System Strengthening (2021–present)

In 2021 KASFA achieved certification as an official seed producer, enabling the association to sell high-quality Kilombero rice seed to other farmers

and organisations. This certification built on an earlier seed-multiplication initiative that addressed the progressive deterioration and contamination of locally saved seed, significantly improving seed quality and reliability. The project also established a financial foundation for ongoing seed improvement by creating a revolving seed fund, supported by farmers collectively returning an agreed quantity of seed after harvest.

Beyond its technical outcomes, the initiative demonstrated KASFA's capacity to deliver a complex agricultural improvement programme, grounded in strong local leadership, transparent decision-making, and shared risk among participating farmers. Together, these developments have strengthened KASFA's role in improving rice quality across northern Malawi, while creating additional income streams and reinforcing the long-term sustainability of local production.

Navigating Trade Disruptions (2020–2023)



Figure 16 - Source True Origin

Due to the impacts of COVID-19, the quantity of rice imported declined slightly toward the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. In 2022–23, a combination of global and local factors created severe delays across the supply chain. Exchange-rate volatility, higher fuel prices linked to the Ukraine war, and energy shortages in Malawi drove up costs and slowed transport and processing.

Trucks carrying rice from Karonga to Lilongwe were stranded for weeks without diesel, and once the rice finally reached the mills, frequent power cuts caused further delays. Shipments that should have arrived in the UK in October only reached port in December, with final processing completed several months later.

For True Origin, these delays meant that capital was tied up for almost nine months, since farmers receive part of their payment at the time of order. While this created financial strain, it also reinforced a central

principle of the partnership: farmers cannot wait for payment without risking their livelihoods. Ensuring timely payment remained non-negotiable, even when it required True Origin to absorb greater financial risk in the UK.

These challenges underscored both the vulnerability of smallholder supply chains and the importance of a resilient, trust-based partnership. Rather than withdrawing, True Origin and KASFA continued to adapt together, demonstrating the durability of a model built on fairness, shared risk, and long-term commitment.

Responding to Climate Stress: The 2023 Drought



Figure 17 - Source True Origin

During 2023, KASFA faced severe threats to its Kilombero rice harvest due to extreme and contrasting weather patterns linked to climate change. Earlier in the year, southern Malawi suffered flooding caused by Cyclone Freddy, while Karonga, where KASFA's Kilombero rice is produced, experienced prolonged dry spells that significantly reduced crop yields. The government declared Karonga a disaster area and provided emergency maize supplies to support local communities, including KASFA members and their families.

Kilombero rice is a critical cash crop for KASFA members, providing essential income for household needs such as education, farming equipment, and healthcare. Past investments in irrigation by True Origin Partnerships had equipped farmers with petrol-powered pumps, which allowed some to survive previous dry spells.



Figure 18 - Source <https://www.trueorigin.org.uk/supporting-rice-farmers-in-malawi-in-their-battle-against-climate-change>

In response to the 2023 drought, KASFA requested additional pumps to irrigate their fields. A total of 16 petrol water pumps were purchased and distributed, enabling over 200 farmers to irrigate their land and grow short-cycle rice varieties and other food crops, improving food security in the region. Discussions have also begun to explore longer-term solutions, including the adoption of solar-powered pumps, to provide more sustainable irrigation.

This response highlights the resilience of the partnership between True Origin, True Origin Partnerships, KASFA, and NASFAM, demonstrating the importance of long-term support in helping farmers adapt to climate-related challenges while maintaining their livelihoods.

Renewed Partnership and Continued Growth (2024–present)

In 2024, True Origin Partnerships was delighted to welcome Howard Msukwa, rice farmer from Northern Malawi and long-standing KASFA board member, for a return visit to the UK. Prior to this, Howard and other farmers had visited on several occasions, gaining support for project developments, particularly the workshop initiative, and deepening farmers' understanding of the European market.

This visit provided an opportunity for Howard to share first-hand insights into the challenges faced by smallholder farmers and the impacts of climate change, while also meeting some of True Origin's trading partners,

including Central Co-op and their “Our Malawi Partnership” team. Howard has been a key figure in KASFA’s development since its establishment in 2001 and until 2025 continued to serve as an advisor to the board, acting as a vital link between the organisation and True Origin Partnerships.

The 2024 visit included public events across Scotland and England, where Howard engaged with schools, community groups, and partners to highlight fair trade initiatives and ongoing projects supported by True Origin—such as the women’s briquette-making enterprises and efforts to improve irrigation and infrastructure. The visit reinforced the long-standing partnership between True Origin and KASFA and helped raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing smallholder farmers in Malawi.

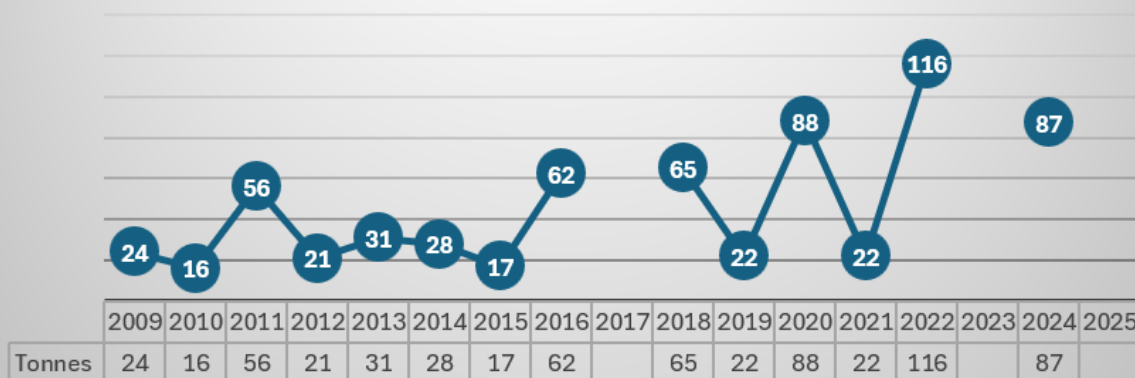
Efforts continue to expand the reach of Kilombero rice to wider markets, ensuring that both the quality of the rice and the work of these farmers are fully recognised. Its unique characteristics mean it commands a premium price, which presents challenges in competing with cheaper imports and the well-established Asian rice market.

To date, 656 metric tons of Kilombero rice have been imported since 2009.



Since 2009, True Origin has imported and sold approximately **656 metric tons** of Kilombero rice, providing a stable market for KASFA farmers and supporting livelihoods for thousands of smallholders.

Tonnes of Kilombero rice imported per year by True Origin from NASFAM (KASFA) (2009-2025)



8. Key Interventions and Timeline

Year	Milestone
2008	Partnership initiated via trade fair in Glasgow
2009	First rice container imported to Scotland (on consignment)
2010	90kg Rice Challenge launched
2013–2016	Scottish Government grant secured for seed certification, ox carts, and irrigation
2017–2020	Scottish Government small grant for water management
2018–2021	Scottish Government small grant: WFTO membership project
2021	Women-led briquette project launched; KASFA gains WFTO membership; KASFA becomes a certified seed producer
2022–2023	Significant trade disruptions due to global and domestic crises
2023	Summer drought threatens harvest; emergency irrigation support provided
2024–present	Briquette project expansion; Howard's visit; funding for ox carts; training and registration of women's groups as cooperatives; continued support for briquette production

9. Contributions to Farmers and Communities

Although only a small proportion of KASFA's rice is sold to True Origin through NASFAM, the wider partnership has contributed to meaningful changes in farmers' economic, educational, environmental, and social well-being. These outcomes cannot be attributed solely to True Origin or any single intervention; rather, they reflect the combined effects of KASFA membership, NASFAM support, and long-term engagement with external partners. Henry Kalomba, a NASFAM member, explained:

"NASFAM is committed to helping smallholder farmers increase productivity. We support association members by ensuring access to good-quality rice seed. The seed is provided on a loan basis — farmers receive what they need at planting and repay double the quantity at harvest. This system helps strengthen seed availability for the whole community."

Economic changes:

Before the partnership with True Origin, most KASFA farmers sold rice through informal local markets where prices were inconsistent and often exploitative. Since 2009, a smaller group of farmers—many cultivating less than a hectare—have gained access to a more transparent UK market while continuing to sell locally. This has helped stabilise income and improve farmers' ability to plan.

During a 2016 visit, Mary Popple observed how pricing decisions were made:

"The price set for their rice is agreed by a negotiator from NASFAM and thirty representatives of the farmers from the three KASFA regions, on the basis of farmers keeping a tally of all costs... they mentioned gross margin analysis and indicated they were well able to write all this up."

Predictable pricing has enabled farmers to invest in farm improvements, repay loans, and increase household savings. As one farmer explained:

"Now we know the price before we plant. We can plan our family's future."

Howard Msukwa



Figure 19 - Mary's visit 2016

Farmer cooperatives have begun to develop saving schemes, and tools such as ox carts and ploughs have increased productivity and reduced labour burdens. During a 2016 visit to KASFA, Mary Popple observed:

"The women were very clear that ploughs would make the biggest difference to their lives....When they get paid, they set aside money to pay off loans and to pay for a full year of schooling and school uniforms/resources and then look to what they can buy for the household."

Many farmers describe how improved market access and better farming advice have enabled them to increase their income and invest in essential household assets.

"I started growing rice in 2003, but the seeds I used back then never gave me any profit. When I joined the NASFAM club, they encouraged me to keep farming and gave me good advice. I always hoped to buy a plough and two cows to make my work easier, and I managed to achieve that dream.

The money we earn from rice farming pays for clothes, food, school fees, and even this house we live in. I also built a house for my mother next door. My next plans are to get electricity and, one day, buy a car."

Abul Phiri, farmer

A 2014 study by Guenther found that although True Origin purchased only around 3.5% of the rice marketed by NASFAM from KASFA farmers, KASFA members overall enjoyed higher expenditure, better food security, improved housing, ownership of durable goods, and greater investment in children's education compared to non-members (Guenther, 2014).

Education outcomes:

Access to education remains a critical challenge in Malawi, particularly for young women who may be expected to leave school early to take on domestic responsibilities. Although 88% of children are enrolled in primary school, only about one-third (33%) complete it, leaving a significant drop-off before lower secondary. Completion of upper secondary education is even rarer, with about 10% attending and 4% finishing it. Furthermore, just around 1 in 5 children aged 7 to 14 possess foundational reading skills. (UNICEF, 2022)

Against this backdrop, support provided through the Kilombero rice partnership has had disproportionate value. Income from Kilombero rice sales, however modest in scale, has helped cover tuition, uniforms, accommodation, school tools such as laptops, and transport, enabling hundreds of children to stay in school. Donations received from the 90 kg rice challenge have enabled KASFA to establish a separate fund to support orphans in education. In 2018, 35 bursars were in secondary schools, while 7 were at colleges or universities.



Figure 20- Source <https://www.trueorigin.org.uk/rice-farmer-to-visit-the-uk>

Howard Msukwa highlighted through the 90 kg Rice Challenge how vital education is in the face of climate pressure: *“In our community, education is viewed as an investment and an instrumental tool for our future, but because of poverty, heightened by climate change, it is being put down in priority. Yet thanks to the partnership, farming communities remain hopeful.”*

One compelling success story is Agrippa Mwafu Zimba, who grew up in a family of six raised by a single mother. Facing significant financial hardship, his siblings were forced to leave school early, but Agrippa excelled at Mwenitete Primary School and earned selection to Chaminade National Boarding Secondary School. Although his family could not afford the fees, support through True Origin, working with KASFA, enabled him to continue his education. *“At that critical moment, when uncertainty and confusion surrounded my future, True Origin, through KASFA, intervened,”* Agrippa recalls, describing this support as a turning point in his life.

Through the 90kg Rice Challenge run by True Origin and additional funding from True Origin Partnerships, Agrippa’s boarding and tuition fees were sponsored, enabling him to complete secondary school with 13 points and gain entry to Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) to study for a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics. Support continued for tuition, accommodation, and meals, allowing him to remain among the top students, tutor peers, and develop leadership skills.

“This belief in my abilities has motivated me to work extremely hard. Without your intervention, my academic aspirations would likely have remained a dream. Your investment has not only changed my life; it has created a future full of hope, purpose, and impact.”

Agrippa Mwafu Zimba

This example illustrates how improved income and targeted educational support can create long-term opportunities for young people within farming communities.

Climate and agricultural resilience:

Farmers have faced increasingly erratic weather, including droughts, floods, and high winds, every year. With support from NASFAM and international grants, KASFA members adopted certified seed varieties and SRI practices that emphasise wider spacing and water conservation.

“There is no single solution to climate change — it requires multiple interventions. We promote reforestation because trees help support rainfall. We also encourage conservation agriculture, focusing on soil and water conservation and improving soil fertility. Farmers are trained to make compost using crop residues and animal manure to create their own fertiliser.

We are also promoting water harvesting techniques, such as ‘peak planting,’ where farmers capture and use running water more effectively.”

Henry Kalomba

True Origin Partnerships has supported KASFA with irrigation pumps and hand-dug wells, enabling farmers to maintain production during dry spells and grow food crops such as tomatoes, cassava, maize, and peppers.

During dry spells, Howard Msukwa explained:

“The devastating consequences of the climate crisis are all too real in the lives of Malawians today. Farmers with pumps from True Origin Partnerships could maintain production and even prepare for winter cropping.”

Beyond farm-level interventions, KASFA and its partners are also supporting community-based responses to climate change that address pressure on natural resources. Rice husk briquettes have the potential to

reduce deforestation by providing an alternative to firewood, helping to preserve Karonga's threatened woodlands. Scaling up production will be essential for briquettes to become a viable and widely adopted alternative.

Gender inclusion:

Women make up approximately 62% of KASFA members, many of whom are widows and primary providers for their immediate and extended families. From the outset, KASFA has prioritised gender inclusivity, ensuring women have equitable access to resources, training, and leadership opportunities. In recognition of these efforts, KASFA received an award for women's empowerment at the NASFAM 2022 AGM.

During her visit in 2016, Mary Popple observed: *"The women were adamant that there are enough oxen to pull the ploughs and that women can do this job and thereby keep control of their own smallholding."*

Support for women farmers has been multifaceted. Women receive:

- loans for ploughs and irrigation pumps
- training in agricultural techniques and financial literacy
- opportunities to develop micro-businesses such as baking or crafts



Figure 21 - Source True Origin Partnerships

These initiatives enable women not only to farm their own land but also to provide services to others, generating secondary income streams and supplementing household income.

Infrastructure support has further reduced labour burdens traditionally borne by women. Ox carts enable rice and other goods to be transported over long distances without being carried on foot, while fuel briquettes reduce the time spent collecting firewood, a task that often falls on women and children.

Women are also actively involved in community decision-making through KASFA committees, local marketing boards, and cooperative leadership structures. They receive priority access to equipment loans, and programmes such as irrigation pump allocation, plough hire-purchase, and business management training directly strengthen their economic independence and influence. Over 100 women farmers now participate in the revolving plough scheme, which allows them to pay in instalments, demonstrating practical and sustained empowerment within the agricultural sector (Carlile, 2019).



Organisational growth:

Over time, KASFA has matured into a highly functional and resilient farmer association with layered representation and democratic governance. With continued support from NASFAM and international partners, the association has strengthened its transparency, accountability, and field outreach, enabling it to coordinate development initiatives effectively across its membership.

This trajectory is not unique to KASFA but reflects a broader cooperative tradition in Malawi, where collective action has enabled smallholder farmers to improve livelihoods and access markets. Speaking at a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development workshop in May 2016, Harrison Kalua, CEO of Mzuzu Coffee, a Fairtrade coffee producer organised as a farmer-owned cooperative, emphasised the importance of self-reliance and collective enterprise, stating: 'We have to do things for

ourselves, highlighting the power of co-operatives where smallholder farmers improve homes and schooling by selling high-quality Fairtrade products.”

Investment in core infrastructure, including wells, ox carts, ploughs, irrigation pumps, and milling equipment, has increased productivity, reduced labour burdens, and enhanced KASFA’s organisational credibility. These assets have strengthened the association’s ability to support members, improve post-harvest handling, and meet market requirements.

Membership remains based on self-selection: farmers form a club of at least ten like-minded individuals and pay an annual membership fee, giving them access to training, input support (e.g., rice seeds on loan), and guaranteed market access through NASFAM and True Origin (Guenther 2014). Between 2009 and 2025, KASFA’s membership showed considerable fluctuation, with periods of growth followed by later declines, reaching 3,295 members in 2025.

KASFA membership				
Year	Male Members	Female members	Total KASFA Members	
2010	1200	1020	2220	
2011	951	977	1928	
2012	1393	1552	2954	
2013	1560	2241	3801	
2014	1861	3012	4873	
2015	1729	1965	3694	
2016	1802	2001	3803	
2017	1682	1780	3462	
2018	2027	2361	4388	
2019	2049	2977	5026	
2020	2135	3685	5820	
2021	2068	3432	5500	
2022	1800	2800	4600	
2023	1980	2820	4800	
2024	1876	3125	5001	
2025	1280	2015	3295	

KASFA's institutional development is further reflected in its formal achievements. The association attained WFTO membership in 2021 and became a certified seed producer in the same year, demonstrating adherence to fair-trade principles, strengthened governance, and the capacity to sustain initiatives over time.

Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning have reinforced organisational resilience. Association field officers, employed by the individual associations and holding agricultural qualifications, provide training to farmers, run courses, and support lead farmers who cascade knowledge to their peers. This system of field officers and lead farmers ensures continuous capacity-building within the community, enabling KASFA to scale improved practices and maintain sustainability even in the face of climate shocks and market disruptions.

10. Challenges and Ongoing Needs

Over the years, the partnership between True Origin, NASFAM, and KASFA has demonstrated that long-term trade relationships can deliver deeper and more lasting impact than short-term grants alone. Regular visits, open communication, and trust have built credibility with farmers and communities, and the model has shown that trade can be a driver of gender transformation and climate justice. However, significant challenges remain. These are both structural and immediate, shaping the sustainability of the association and the livelihoods of its members.

1. Capital and cash flow

Access to finance remains a persistent challenge for many smallholder farmers in Malawi, including KASFA members. Farmers often have limited access to formal banking, and cash flow issues can affect timely input purchases, post-harvest processing, and payment for labour. Seasonal fluctuations in income create additional stress, requiring flexible financial products or short-term credit facilities.

The association itself often lacks the capital to purchase Kilombero rice from farmers upfront, which can delay payments and constrain farmers' ability to plan and invest in their crops. For True Origin, long lead times

and low margins on bulk rice sales make expansion and trade capital-intensive. While interest-free loans and supporter donations have provided temporary relief, sustainable financial solutions remain limited. Improving access to affordable working capital is critical to increasing flexibility, supporting growth, and enabling a timely response to market demand.

As a smallholder-owned association not founded with significant investment capital, KASFA has historically faced limitations in financial planning, budgeting, and multi-year investment management (Brett, 2020, p. 8). Managers reported day-to-day cash shortages, but the deeper issue was the lack of adequate capitalisation to plan and execute an entire annual operation, including purchasing rice, processing it, and selling it profitably. This structural constraint continues to limit KASFA's ability to operate as a fully commercial enterprise and respond effectively to market opportunities.

"NASFAM introduced me to rice cultivation and provided the seeds to begin. As a widow, I rely on farming to sustain my household, with support from my son Zaimat during school breaks. We hope to expand our production, but the lack of accessible credit prevents us from acquiring essential assets such as cows and a plough."

Tabia Mvula, from Chipamira Village, Karonga

2. Climate variability

Increasingly frequent droughts, floods, and storms pose serious risks to harvests in Malawi. Extreme weather not only impacts yields but also the timing and quality of harvests, with implications for export readiness and market contracts. Farmers may face crop damage that is difficult to quantify or insure against, creating uncertainty for both producers and buyers. Traditional farming methods remain the mainstay of smallholder agriculture, but they rely heavily on predictable rainfall. When rains are delayed, planting is postponed, shortening the growing season and reducing yields. Conversely, excessive rainfall or

flooding can damage crops, while drought during the maturation phase can threaten the harvest entirely.



Figure 22 - Source <https://www.trueorigin.org.uk/facing-the-crisis-photo-exhibition>

Limited irrigation infrastructure further increases vulnerability. Diesel-powered pumps and small-scale solar pumps have offered some protection, but these systems irrigate only limited areas and are insufficient to fully mitigate climate risks. Continued investment in irrigation, resilient seed varieties, soil-water retention methods, and community-based water management is essential.

Agricultural organisations relying on a single annual crop for export, such as KASFA's Kilombero rice, face heightened financial risk. Even one poor season can seriously harm operations; two consecutive poor seasons could threaten organisational survival. While NASFAM subsidies provide some support, self-sustaining enterprises typically mitigate this risk by cultivating crops harvested multiple times per year or supplementing their main crop with secondary products. KASFA's historic dependence on Kilombero rice leaves it particularly exposed to climate and market shocks (Brett, 2020, p. 9).

KASFA is now encouraging farmers to diversify and increase production of other crops, supported by small-scale irrigation.

3. Manual labour and human capital

Rice cultivation remains mostly manual at every stage, but considerable improvements have been made in recent years. The introduction of ploughs, oxcarts, and even a rotavator has significantly reduced the

labour required for land preparation and transport, marking a significant difference compared to traditional hoe-based farming. An additional benefit of these tools is that when rains come late, farmers can prepare their fields more quickly, helping to make up for a reduced growing period. However, many tasks, particularly weeding, continue to be highly labour-intensive. These challenges not only limit productivity but also place a disproportionate burden on women farmers and make it harder for younger generations to view farming as an attractive or sustainable livelihood.

KASFA farmers produce only around 20% of the output achieved by competitors in India and China. This gap highlights the critical importance of farmer training and capacity building, which would require substantial grant-funded projects to achieve meaningful improvements (Brett, 2020, p. 7).

In terms of human capital, research indicates that KASFA benefits from excellent local staff; however, due in part to limited capitalisation, there are significant skill gaps in areas such as quality management, marketing, and financial planning. If KASFA aims to expand direct exports and strengthen its commercial viability, additional trained staff will be required to support quality control, business development, and financial management (Brett, 2020, p. 8).

4. Logistics and transport

Access to roads and transportation remains a significant challenge for KASFA farmers. Seasonal flooding and poorly maintained rural roads increase the risk of delays, damage to rice bags, and exposure to moisture. Traditionally, rice was carried in 50 kg bags on farmers' heads for several miles to collection points, limiting the volume and efficiency of transport. The introduction of ox carts has eased this burden, enabled larger loads, and reduced physical strain, but poor road conditions continue to slow transport. The carts are also used to move other crops, animals, and people, highlighting the critical role of reliable transport in sustaining livelihoods.



Figure 23 - Source TOP Presentation

Post-harvest processing also affects transport efficiency and overall yield. One kilo of harvested paddy rice yields approximately 700 g of rough rice and 300 g of husk after initial milling, sieving, and de-stoning, with the husk having some value as fuel, particularly in wood-scarce regions. Semi-finished rice is then polished, sorted, and broken grains removed by NASCOMEX in Lilongwe, after the long journey from Karonga. NASFAM reports that around 25% of total weight is lost during processing, meaning that 1 kg of paddy produces around 0.5 kg of finished rice, below international norms of 55–65%, indicating opportunities to improve paddy quality at the farm level (Brett, 2020, p.2).

Processing rice at NASFAM, while necessary, added significant costs and limited direct control over quality. With KASFA's new mill now operational, the association can mill rice to a grade comparable to NASCOMEX's output. This enhances marketability, enables poor-quality grains to be traced back to individual farmers, and supports ongoing quality improvement. While this reduces reliance on NASFAM for processing, KASFA must still balance operational costs with the need to maintain competitive pricing and quality standards (Brett, 2020, p. 8).

Shipping has also been complex. KASFA rice traditionally travelled through a lengthy chain: assembled, milled, packed, transported to Lilongwe, exported via Beira in Mozambique, and often transiting South Africa before reaching the UK. Brett's 2021 research suggested that a more direct route via Dar es Salaam could reduce costs and risks, provided a reliable shipping partner is secured. Such a shift would require careful logistical planning and continued collaboration with NASFAM to maintain quality oversight.

5. Crop quality and export challenges

Maintaining consistent crop quality for export markets remains a challenge, especially with changing weather conditions and reliance on recycled seed. Efforts such as seed multiplication programmes have improved standards, but continued investment is essential.

Kilombero rice is sensitive to moisture and humidity, which can compromise aroma, taste, and grain integrity if not properly dried, stored, and packaged. Long-distance transport, from farm to warehouse, then port, and finally international shipment, requires secure, airtight packaging to prevent contamination, spoilage, or mould growth. Additionally, rice imported into the UK must meet strict food safety standards, necessitating cleaning, testing, and, in many cases, further processing or packaging to comply with regulations. Monitoring storage conditions, moisture levels, and packaging integrity is crucial to preserving the quality and reputation of Kilombero rice. These challenges add both cost and complexity to exporting a premium product and require careful coordination between farmers, processors, and shipping partners.

Over the years, quality issues identified during UK processing and inspection have also affected the viability of the supply chain. Instances of moisture damage, contamination, or inconsistencies in grain quality have resulted in significant financial losses for both NASFAM and True Origin, requiring additional cleaning, sorting, or disposal once the rice reached the UK. These challenges have long-term implications: at present, and for the foreseeable future, True Origin is unable to import brown rice due to the heightened quality risks associated with its storage and transport. Strengthening quality management across the

entire chain, from seed selection and drying to packaging and shipment, remains essential to ensuring that exports are commercially viable and meet UK regulatory and market expectations.

Locally, Malawi's growing middle class has increased demand for Kilombero rice over traditional staples like maize, and NASFAM and NASCOMEX have successfully marketed Kilombero as a premium product in domestic fair trade and retail channels. Most local rice is still processed in informal milling operations, often containing broken grains, stones, or other foreign matter, highlighting the importance of quality management for export (Brett, 2020, p.3)

Export pricing is also affected by logistical and economic factors. Kilombero rice is bulky, and freight costs to the UK add significantly to the final retail price. Fluctuations in the UK exchange rate since Brexit have further increased the cost of purchasing rice from Malawi in pounds, while Malawian government controls on international exchange rates create additional complexity and risk for international trade (Brett, 2020, p.3)

6. Gender and inclusion

While over 50% of KASFA's members are women, more work is needed to strengthen women's leadership, address inequalities in access to resources, and ensure fair representation at every level of decision-making. Barriers such as limited mobility, access to finance, and traditional gender roles may continue to restrict women's ability to fully benefit from programs. Although progress has been made, women farmers still face structural barriers to equal participation and benefit. Supporting women with training, tools, and leadership opportunities is crucial for wider impact.

According to UN Malawi, women have lower economic opportunities, including access to credit and ownership of enterprises, and are underrepresented in public decision-making despite some increases in political participation (UN Malawi, 2023). Research also shows that women in smallholder farming in Malawi face particularly high barriers when it comes to finance, technology, and tools needed to adopt climate-smart and productivity-enhancing practices (Gustafson, 2016).

Nevertheless, the WFTO requirements around gender equality have prompted KASFA to reflect on these challenges and consider what changes could be implemented to strengthen women's participation, leadership, and access to resources within its programs.

7. Market development

Expanding sales in the UK remains vital for sustainability, though current trends indicate challenges. Traditional markets such as churches, schools, and Fair Trade shops require significant effort, and post-pandemic, participation in initiatives like the 90kg Rice Challenge has slowed considerably, raising questions about its continued relevance as it often saw participation one or two times but rarely translated into sustained demand (Brett, 2021, p.11).

Sales through some channels have declined, and despite its quality and awards, it remains unknown in the mainstream, and sales volumes are modest. In addition, the rice market, within retail, has changed dramatically in recent years, with pouch rice now accounting for around 44% of rice sales. True Origin had anticipated being able to sell at least one container annually, but without substantial marketing investment and a large-scale publicity campaign, it remains difficult to compete against supermarket own-brand and global premium rice labels.

Marketing, branding, and consumer education about Kilombero rice's unique qualities are essential to command a premium price. The challenge is balancing niche appeal with sufficient volume to sustain farmers' incomes, while avoiding overreliance on a single market. Seasonal stockouts, container availability, and shipping delays can further limit market growth. Expanding into new markets is important, but it also raises questions about which partnerships align with fair trade values. Larger retail contracts may offer volume but often come with lower margins and a degree of uncertainty, making growth financially risky.

True Origin has valued support from the Our Malawi Partnership, an initiative of Central England Co-operative, which has expanded the reach of Malawian products into retail channels. A proportion of the sale

of these products in Central Coop's stores supports the initiative and strengthens trading capacity in Malawi. This initiative has broadened Kilombero's profile beyond traditional fair-trade markets, though mainstream distribution challenges persist.

Despite these hurdles, the resilience of KASFA's members and the long-term commitment of True Origin's partners provide a solid foundation. Future progress will depend on a combination of immediate support, such as working capital and irrigation tools, and longer-term investment in infrastructure, climate adaptation, and diversified markets.

11. Lessons Learned

Over the past 17 years, the partnership between KASFA, True Origin and True Origin Partnerships has revealed important lessons about how trade, trust, and community-led development can transform lives. These insights highlight not only what has worked well but also how future challenges might be addressed.

1. Long-term commitment builds trust and a deeper impact

What began as a consignment-based pilot has grown into a 17-year, trust-driven partnership. Repeated visits to Karonga, continued purchases, and open communication built a reputation that distinguished True Origin from international buyers who often left after a single transaction. Consistent engagement, including follow-up on previous projects, support during off-season periods, and maintaining communication during crises, has reinforced trust and enabled farmers to plan long-term investments.

"At first, we did not believe they would come back. But they did — again and again."

KASFA farmer, Karonga, (2015)

2. Trade as a development tool works only when it is fair and supported

Market access alone is not enough. Farmers also needed infrastructure (mills, pumps), knowledge (planting methods), and confidence in the relationship. Pairing trade with investment and community development turned commerce into a vehicle for wider impact, including gender equality and climate resilience.

Even small trade volumes can generate meaningful change when paired with strategic support. Access to finance, farm equipment, and post-harvest storage has enabled farmers to better plan.

3. Embedding projects locally ensures sustainability

The success of seed multiplication, irrigation, and briquette initiatives came from being rooted in existing community structures. Training lead farmers, empowering women, and working through trusted field officers fostered local ownership and lasting change.

The WFTO process reinforced this lesson. Farmers needed to understand and embrace standards for them to be meaningful. Training sessions, open discussions, and regular refresher workshops helped maintain compliance and allowed farmers to raise practical challenges such as packaging, drying methods, and transport risks.



Figure 24 - Source KASFA Facebook page

4. Technology and infrastructure must match local context

Some interventions, such as the introduction of new threshing machines, were less successful than anticipated. The machines were too heavy, lacked ready access, and could not be used where they were

most needed. This highlighted the importance of designing solutions that fit local conditions and the realities of smallholder farming.

5. Transparency builds trust

Early misunderstandings between KASFA, NASFAM, and True Origin demonstrated the importance of clear communication. Sharing packaged rice samples in Malawi, involving farmer boards in price discussions, and keeping members informed strengthened confidence and credibility.

The WFTO journey also showed that adopting written policies and record-keeping improved governance and transparency beyond the certification process itself.

6. Empowering women multiplies impact

When women accessed tools and training, the benefits extended beyond individual households. Their confidence and independence grew, and they took on leadership roles in their communities. As one of KASFA's women farmers put it: "Now I plough for others, not just myself."

7. Climate adaptation must be farmer-led

Droughts, floods, and unpredictable seasons are now regular challenges. Farmers who adopted irrigation, improved seed, and SRI techniques earlier were better prepared. Uptake was strongest when driven by peer learning and local trainers rather than external direction.

8. Small investments unlock momentous change

Modest grants for ox carts, irrigation pumps, or seed certification created ripple effects: higher yields, more income, reduced labour, and greater resilience. When paired with fair trade markets, even small injections of capital delivered significant long-term benefits.

12. Looking Ahead

As the partnership enters its next phase, True Origin's role becomes increasingly centred on strengthening the conditions that allow smallholder farmers in Karonga to thrive. The future is not only about responding to immediate challenges but also about consolidating the foundations for long-term sustainability in production, trade, and community development. While KASFA will determine its own priorities, True Origin will continue to focus on the areas where it can add the greatest value: market access, resource mobilisation, and advocacy for fairer trading systems.

To guide this work, three strategic areas of focus emerge from the lessons of the past decade.

1. Sustaining and expanding market access for Kilombero rice

Securing sustainable market opportunities for Kilombero rice in the UK remains central to True Origin's mission. However, the continuation and scale of future purchases will depend on being able to import and process rice at a viable price, as well as generating sufficient demand, particularly through engagement with larger retail partners and ethical trade channels. While significant sales growth may not be achievable in the short term, maintaining market visibility and awareness of Kilombero rice may help create opportunities for future trade as market conditions evolve.

Continued awareness-raising around Kilombero rice may help stabilise purchase volumes, support income flows to Malawi, and strengthen the foundation for ongoing community development. Even modest sales volumes can contribute to household resilience and uphold a trading model built on fairness, continuity, and long-term partnership.

"Seeing Kilombero rice on the shelves at Central Co-op shops and hearing how it is helping families both here and in Malawi is amazing. It really does make a difference to my

community when people choose fair trade products like ours.”

Howard Msukwa

2. Mobilising resources for infrastructure and community-led development

True Origin Partnerships will continue to leverage grant funding, partnerships, and advocacy to support investments that strengthen farmer resilience.

Priorities include:

- education and training
- irrigation systems and water management
- renewable energy solutions
- expansion of briquette production
- climate-adaptation initiatives

These interventions have demonstrated long-term impact by reducing labour burdens, improving productivity, and enabling farmers to withstand climate shocks. Continued resource mobilisation will be essential to ensure that community-led projects remain adequately supported and can scale where appropriate.

3. Championing a fairer model of trade

Beyond importing rice, True Origin plays a significant role in demonstrating how trade can be structured around long-term relationships, transparency, and farmer leadership. By documenting experiences, publishing reports, and engaging with supporters, the organisation aims to influence wider conversations about ethical trade and development.

This includes sharing learning from the partnership, advocating for fairer trading systems, and amplifying the voices of farmers whose experiences illustrate the transformative potential of equitable trade.

“Our dream is that one day, Kilombero rice will be known not just for its taste — but for the transformation behind it.”

KASFA farmer, Karonga (2018)

13. Conclusion

Through this growing partnership, True Origin, KASFA, and NASFAM have demonstrated how market access, capacity building, and fair-trade practices can work together to support sustainable livelihoods, enhance food security, and create tangible opportunities for rural communities in northern Malawi.

This 17-year collaboration demonstrates how consistent, fair trade relationships, even where trade volumes are relatively modest, can contribute to sustainable development in rural farming communities. Although direct sales to True Origin represent only a small proportion of KASFA's total production, the stability and reliability of the partnership have supported improvements in livelihoods, education, women's empowerment, and climate resilience, while enabling farmers to plan, invest, and strengthen their position within local and national markets. The combination of market access, capacity building, and community-led initiatives has created a strong foundation for long-term progress.

Over the years, True Origin, KASFA, and NASFAM have shown that trust-based partnerships grounded in local ownership can generate meaningful benefits for smallholder farmers. Investments in infrastructure, training, gender-inclusive programmes, and environmental initiatives have enabled farmers to increase productivity, access more reliable markets, and strengthen their technical and organisational capacities.

The partnership highlights the value of integrated approaches: from improved rice production and certified seed systems to irrigation, water management, and women-led enterprises, coordinated interventions have produced multi-dimensional and sustainable impacts. KASFA's evolution into a technically skilled, democratic, and community-driven association underscores the importance of bottom-up development, where farmers

lead innovation with support from committed local and international partners.

Despite ongoing challenges, including climate variability, limited infrastructure, and restricted access to finance, the resilience and determination of KASFA members remain central to the partnership's success. The evidence presented in this report shows that small-scale, well-targeted interventions, when embedded in long-term, trusted relationships, can generate lasting benefits for farmers and their communities. These lessons offer valuable insights for fair trade organisations, development practitioners, and others seeking to support rural communities in similar contexts.

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