

How change happens in the private sector

Kate Raworth and Liam Wren-Lewis

Oxfam believes that private sector actors can change their strategies, policies and behaviour to have a more positive impact on poverty reduction, and to do less harm to poor people. There are clear cases where companies have changed in these ways. How and why did those changes happen?

In order to answer this question, we chose two examples of major companies that changed for the better. We got as close as possible to the source of that change to understand the factors that led to it.

At the end of each case study, we summarise the five main factors that we think brought about change, and consider the implications of these for civil society organisations that want to generate more pro-poor change of this kind in the private sector.

1 How the biggest supermarket in Africa (Shoprite) started buying locally grown vegetables in Zambia

The following conversation is between Martin Kalungu-Banda (MK-B) (former Head of Oxfam GB Private Sector Team) in conversation with Kate Raworth (KR), October 2005, with additional interview transcript from Dr Yambayamba.

KR: Sumi¹ and I have been asked to write a paper on the private sector for the upcoming book *From Poverty to Power*. *From Poverty to Power* is going to be about how and why change happens: change in the way a company operates, such as how it starts protecting the environment, or switches to a strategy that is more beneficial to poor people. In our background paper on the private sector, we want to include several case examples of how change has happened. From a distance, we don't really know how it happened, and we either guess or make assumptions. But the closer we can come to the people who actually made the decision to change, the more we can understand about the real motivations, and the personal factors which helped to bring about the change.

I love the story that you tell about Zambia because you were closely involved and instigating it. You weren't the person who changed; but you were absolutely instrumental in causing the person to change the way he thought and acted. I'd like to describe it as an example of how change happens in the corporate sector. Perhaps you would like to tell me the story in the same way that you've told it to me before?

This case study was written as a contribution to the development of *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008. It is published in order to share widely the results of commissioned research and programme experience. The views it expresses are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam International or its affiliate organisations.

MK-B: I was doing research on good governance, for my work in the University. I travelled to the Eastern part of Zambia, also known as the Eastern Province. I went to some villages away from the provincial capital. With a group of students, we camped in the village called Luangeni.

In that village, where we stayed for about ten days, I noticed that there were so many children. In the evening, children would gather round the centre of the village where the elders were sitting and telling stories, and the children would come there and when the elders were not speaking, they would sing, dance and play their own games.

I asked the village headman who was sitting next to me - not because I was concerned but I just wanted to begin a conversation, 'How many of these children go to school?'

He replied, 'Not more than three, four.' I decided to count the children, there were about eighty-six!

Then I followed up with another question. 'Why don't people want to take their children to school?' He said, 'They used to take the children to school until something happened.'

I asked, 'What happened?'

And he said, 'The supermarket - Shoprite - came and camped here.'

I said, 'I don't understand,' and then he answered, 'Before the supermarket came here, we used to grow vegetables of various types in that damp area over there,' - I could see where he was pointing to, even though it was dark - and he said, 'That damp area has water throughout the year, and we used to grow vegetables and every weekend, we put those vegetables on our bicycles and went and sold them to the BOMA,' as the provincial centre is called.

And I asked, 'What is the way out of this, then? This supermarket just pushed you out like that.'

And he said, 'We are just waiting for a time when a riot will come to the BOMA, and probably some people will set that thing alight, and then that will force them to leave.'

'We are waiting for a time when a riot might occur in town. And that would be a good excuse for setting the supermarket on fire. That would probably discourage them from coming back and then we can go on with our business of selling vegetables.'

I asked, 'Have you ever been to the supermarket itself? You could have gone there to say, 'We have these vegetables. Why don't you buy them from us?'

And he said, 'We were told, 'Your vegetables are of inferior quality, and we don't want to deal with you.''

I was probably diverted to something else, but it kept lingering on in my mind. So one day, I decided to break away from the research we were doing and went to the BOMA and asked to see the local manager for Shoprite. I went to him (Mr Botha) and said, 'This is the issue. Is there any way you can work with the community?'

And he replied, 'No, no, no, no. You are not speaking to the right person. I receive products that have already been signed-off in Lusaka, the capital city, because that's where the General Manager for Shoprite in the country (Mr. Fritz) sits.'

KR: Was the local man Zambian or South African?

MK-B: He was Zambian. So, I went back to the capital city and I decided to sit with a group of friends. I said, 'Guys, this is what I've found.' One of them is an agronomist, teaching at the University of Zambia. I said, 'This is the problem we have seen. Our system is dying purely because Shoprite, which is the only supermarket in the country, imports most of its products directly from South Africa. And that has simply put local businessmen out of business. I said, 'Do you think we can go and talk to the Shoprite General Manager about this?' And they said, 'Yes,' and for some reason, I asked that we rehearse what we were going to talk about. Because my colleague was an agronomist, I asked him to put a very strong case on why vegetables must be grown in the Eastern provinces.

KR: What angle were you arguing from - the point of view of Zambia's economy or the point of view of the consumer?

MK-B: From the angle that local communities had become worse off because of Shoprite's importation of vegetables.

KR: So in terms of Zambia's own development, this was an important crop?

MK-B: I wasn't even thinking of Zambia, I was thinking of just the Eastern province. Because I couldn't believe a village like that. I had worked there two years previously, that's how I knew where to go when I was doing this research. I worked under Oxfam. I went there because I was working on economic justice, I had gone there to see some women who had transformed their own lives because Oxfam gave them seeds. And the whole of that had simply changed: I didn't go because I knew the change had happened in a negative way, I went because there was a success story, and I wanted to hear how villagers and their leadership can work to change their circumstances.

KR: Just out of interest, what had happened to those women when you got to the village?

MK-B: They had become worse off. Two years previously, they were the big story we were telling everywhere and saying, 'Look how transformation can happen. You do not need to do anything more important than making seeds available to them and then they will do the rest by themselves.'

KR: The Oxfam project gave them vegetable seeds?

MK-B: Oxfam gave maize and sorghum seeds and also vegetables. So we rehearsed, and then we went to the General Manager's office after making an appointment.

KR: How many people went?

MK-B: It was the two of us: the agronomist Dr. Yambayamba, and myself. And we entered this massive, massive, big, big office. Typical of what you hear about corporate offices. He was sitting behind this very long, wide brown table. He said, 'Yes, gentlemen, can I help you?'

KR: What was the ethnicity, the background nationality, of the General Manager?

MK-B: The General Manager was a white South African.

He was the kind of person who would be classified in those days as Boer farmer, and all that. In his incredibly beautiful offices, he was the typical 'casual,' he wore a khaki shirt and jeans, and did his work in that way.

KR: Were there other people there?

MK-B: Just him. Then we introduced the issue. We said, 'Look, this is what I found out in Luangeni village...'

KR: When you had asked for an appointment, did they say, 'Who are you? What do you want?' Why did they give you the time?

MK-B: That's interesting. At that point, although we had formed the Zambia Partnership Forum, which was an organisation trying to champion partnership between government, business and NGOs for development purposes, we didn't ask for an appointment as that, we asked for an appointment because both of us were teaching in the University. We thought that would gain us space, rather than going there as an NGO.

KR: Do you remember what you said when you were talking to his secretary? 'We're both teachers at the University and we want to come and meet him because...?'

MK-B: 'We want to come and meet the General Manager because of the issues we found when we were doing research on behalf of the University and this is an issue which affects your business - but also affects the community.'

KR: You got your appointment.

MK-B: I introduced the subject and I said, 'Your business has caused the following problem. People were better off and now they are worse off.'

And he immediately interrupted and he said, 'Martin. See the wider picture. You might complain about a few households. See how many people's lives have improved for the better. People access quality foods, people access quality utensils and many other things. People used to line up for bread - now they can have bread at any time they feel like. People could not predict when they were going to have tomatoes or vegetables or celery and all these things. Now it's clear - they will find it there. Besides, the price is unbeatable. Isn't that what it means to serve a community?'

I said, 'I understand, but isn't there a way in which that this can happen and yet the communities are not becoming worse off? We do not have to choose.'

Then my colleague came in and said, 'Look, Eastern Province and the part you are talking about - these are traditional farmers. They have plenty of water. It will not cost them much, and over time, they can be trained to produce what you are looking for.'

And at that point he leaned forward and he said, 'Guys, think, think! This is the beast I run. It is not like any other things you have known. It works on the basis that everything is predictable. There will be tomatoes, there will be onions - and not just that but there will be onion and tomatoes of a certain size, of a certain quality. And that has to be constant. When change occurs, people will know, and will be informed, and the results will be explained. And your people are incapable of understanding that.'

KR: What do you mean, 'When change occurs, people will be informed...?'

MK-B: What he meant was, 'When we have brought in change to the product - size, quality, colouring and all that - we will precede that change with information which will let them know and then again they will expect something - and your people are not capable of understanding that. We have asked them to supply us tomatoes - when they have managed to bring them, they have been of a completely different colour than we would like, the size will not be desirable and they will think that we are just troubling them, because we are asking for this size and not that size.'

My colleague, Dr. Yambayamba, said, 'They can be trained. Most of the villagers you are talking about are extremely literate.'

The manager went on to say, 'What I am saying is, 'I do not buy this every day- I buy on a Thursday noon because of the sequencing of the shelves...'' and he gave us this very long lecture of how the 'beast' works. At that point, I started feeling well, maybe he has a point!

MK-B: But because I didn't verbalise my discomfort, my colleague pushed and said, 'No. These people have been practising agriculture for a long period of time, and they have survived through thick and thin. And I think training them would help us meet your standards.'

Then he said, 'Do you really imagine I would have the time, on top of all the things I'm co-ordinating, distribution within the country, to start sending my staff to worry about training your people?'

I said, 'No, I don't. For instance, if you gave me the specifications of what you are looking for, I have enough skills to train the farmers.'

He said, 'So what do I need to do?'

We replied, 'We just think you must be open to the possibility that we can raise standards of the community's production.'

He was beginning to wind the conversation up when he said, 'Friends, thank you for letting me know about this, but we do not have the time. Our business won't understand why we have to take the risk of relying on people that cannot supply us what we are looking for.'

And then I said, 'I understand that, but if we leave that aside, people are looking for an opportunity to set your shop on fire.'

And he said, 'How can you think like that? Do you know how much money we have invested in that shop? Do you remember the small state shop which was there before we came in?'

I said, 'Don't get angry with me. I have seen that your effort has increased development in terms of structure and trade and all that, but people are feeling very angry, and they are praying for a time when riots will occur. And if we go by history, these things do come once in a while. They will capitalise on that; this is what people are talking about. All I'm saying is, if you upset people to such a point, and you don't seem to be trying to meet them half-way, this surely will come.'

He said, 'OK, sit down.'

I said, 'Our proposal is first of all that you appoint somebody; we understand you are too busy, but surely someone is senior enough to be able to go with us and start thinking about this.'

MK-B: 'We promise you that you'll not expend the energies of your employees, if they are senior enough. However, we expect we will ask you to make a financial contribution towards the training. If possible - we do not say you have to - if possible, you can help us trace where those original seeds can be found to keep up the standards you are talking about.'

KR: The original seeds are the varieties that you want to sell here?

MK-B: Yes, that the supermarket sells. And after some conversation he said, 'Please write for me what this concept now means.'

So, my colleague and I successfully sat down and wrote this project proposal, and we took it to him.

He replied, 'OK. I have somebody who I think will be both interested in doing this and also senior enough to be able to push this agenda.'

So, he got a Regional Manager who was responsible for three provinces, which included the Eastern part of the country. He was a local person and when we had a private conversation with him, he said, 'You know how difficult it is to get jobs in this country. We'll plan this so that I can try to see whether it works. If it does not work, it is not just that this project will not take off: my job will be on the line. I really have to make this thing work. The talk is, we have failed to run our own things in this country. Those of us they have raised to the level of Regional Managers are constantly being told off whenever there is something going wrong: 'you've failed to run your system, shut up for a while and follow what we know works.'

KR: This is South Africans talking to Zambians, is it?

MK-B: Yes. The General Manager said, 'I am committed to this thing, but please, before we begin to remove anything from our shelves, I want to see that it's concrete. And when people (in South Africa) don't load celery on the next trucks, I want to tell them it's because we are going to stock celery on the shelves. And that will be that.'

Anyway, we realised at that point that it needed much more co-ordination and organisation than we had thought about. So we needed to ensure that the water supply was much more predictable than the village people were used to. We went there, we took a water expert, and he said, 'This is fine, but there are times when the water tables fall lower,' and therefore we couldn't always supply the same water to the products. Agriculture is about measuring what you are doing, and knowing that you are doing less or more, deliberately.

And then we realised they needed extra sources of water. We didn't want expensive systems, so we went to the university, where there was an Engineering Department which was working on what they called 'Treadle pumps.' They could produce Treadle pumps that people can use without using fuel.

KR: Is it something you can push with your feet?

MK-B: No. It's an interesting little thing where there are cylinders, which are pressurised. You hear some noise, like 'ch- ch- ch,' like water is being sucked and water is being thrown to the other side and it works only on pressure - there is no electricity, there is no fuel involved.

We realised it would cost us money and we needed seed, trainers with the community. We needed, at that point in time we realised, for the produce to be brought to the BOMA the road needed to be - well, smooth enough, and if it was not, people would have difficulties with transport, and if it was too rough the vegetables would be affected by the movement of the bicycles and the carriers and everything else. It was a huge process of co-ordination. We went to the local bicycle company which was in the Eastern province and we said, 'Do you think you could design bicycle carriers that would take adequate amounts that are reasonable for someone to cycle?' They said they would gladly do that.

We then went to the Dutch Embassy and said, 'We need some money to be able to pay for Treadle pumps and to be able to procure the first bicycles that can be used.'

When the South African General Manager explained what kind of seed they were using, Zam Seed (Zambia Seed Company), said that they could produce it at the quality we wanted, and so we said we would not take it from South Africa when we could make it here. So, we said to Zam Seed that if they gave us free seed for the first two years, we would be wealthy enough to be buying seed from them. They agreed: free seed for the first two years.

Then we went to the local NGOs and said, 'You know how to mobilise the communities. You know the language. Dr Yambayamba will develop the training programme. He will come and do training of trainers and then you will get into the community and work with them to begin.'

KR: You were funding them with money from the Dutch embassy, I assume?

MK-B: No - the NGOs said, 'This is what we have always wanted. If you say you can facilitate this, we do not need any money. This is what we would want to be doing, and we have been funded elsewhere.'

It was the Lutheran World Federation, working with other local NGOs, who then said, 'If you have an agenda, we have the skills in terms of training. We have the financial resources to be able to mobilise a community.' But the local government said, 'We cannot grade that road now, because we do not have fuel. We have a grader we can borrow from another province, but to do that road it will really cost us much in terms of fuel. We said, 'Do you think it's possible for you to shift your budgets temporarily?', knowing that when people transport their produce, they will pay towards the maintenance of the road. Call it a form of tax, if you like. We suggested that it would be possible, and the council agreed. The story ended up - the first produce of onion - and then rapeseed grown as vegetables. The rape: the leaves were longer than Shoprite ones, yes? The tomatoes and the onions were bigger than Shoprite wanted and the content of water in the onion was higher than Shoprite wanted. But in between the publicity had occurred, which totally ignored the challenge we had received from the General Manager. When we did all this, we had agreed on all these things, the pumps, the trainers, and all this had been in the national media, and then they said, 'Look how Shoprite is lending itself to transforming the way that local people trade.'

KR: Is this the way you pitched the story to the media?

MK-B: Yes. We totally ignored the difficulties.

KR: Had the General Manager said anything to you about what you could say, who you could say it to?

MK-B: No. Absolutely not. He just left it to the Regional Manager.

KR: So you got the media in and said, 'This is Shoprite's commitment.'

MK-B: Yes. When we had mapped out all these roles that people were going to play, before the project took off in terms of planting and cultivation, we actually organised a half-day conference. All the parties came in.

We had the University, we had representatives, we had the village headman coming from the village and one member of the community. We did this in the capital city. We had the Shoprite General Manager and the Regional Manager.

KR: The General Manager came from Lusaka?

MK-B: Yes. And the Regional Manager. Then we had the Minister of Agriculture, and other people came in, and we had developed a Memorandum of Understanding. So we sat and debated how you can help local communities participate into big things.'

KR: Didn't Shoprite at this point back-pedal slightly and say, 'How can you make us commit to something? We said, 'We'll buy it if it's good enough,' and now you're trying to make us write a contract.'

MK-B: They wanted to control. They wanted to see every bit of what was in the Memorandum of Understanding. So we moved between our office and their office showing them and saying 'This is it.' 'No no no, you can't say this...and if they see this in public, they'll think we are small, and we are being mean, let's change this.' So they were very difficult. The seed company were very clear; they

wanted to be involved, they wanted to be known as suppliers. Shoprite, out of all these things, wanted to be seen as the main driver. But in the beginning, what they were giving was a contribution for the training. When they saw what the seed company were doing, being bigger, then they proceeded to up the stakes. They wanted to be seen as the drivers of the whole project. We permitted them to push that as much as they could.

So on this day we sat down and had this mini-conference, and then afterwards the public signing ceremony of all the parties, and what they'd said they were going to do. It was on national television and the newspapers covered it. They were all praised the following day. And they were, from then, honourable enough to be able to stick to it.

KR: Now, when the onions had too much water, the onions were too big, the rape was too long...

MK-B: Actually, the General Manager said, 'This is different to what we wanted, but seeing the effort that has been expended, we think this will be achieved. We will stock this, but I do want us to move to a point where we meet the specifications. And at this point in time, the enemy won't be me: South Africa will be the one now to come in and say, 'You are destroying our brand if you are continuing to sell things like that, with the water level of onions like this' so the fight is not between you and me. The fight is not between us, but between the office in South Africa and us here. Let's move this to these levels.'

And that's how the second crop was almost spot-on.

KR: So what were the products?

MK-B: There were onions, carrots, tomatoes, celery, baby corn, those little maize...and then we would also do the cucumber looking like things.

KR: Courgettes?

MK-B: And big maize, depending on the season. So we signed that off, and it worked. The next point is that we saw the General Manager doing his own press briefing when he said, 'Look, in the beginning this was not something I wanted to get involved with. What happened was that when I was made to believe this would work, I did it just because I didn't want to keep annoying the community. And now I can tell you that losses have been less, as we moved rape, celery and all these things from South Africa on these massive trucks, no matter how refrigerated they were there was always some danger of something happening. A tyre burst, accident, this and that. And he said, 'Even when you reach the capital, you still have to make another link of one thousand five hundred kilometres to the Eastern province. So, that we have stopped. And in terms of profits, we are actually much more profitable buying from the local community.' I didn't think we proved this, but he claimed that actually the sales were bigger, they increased in the supermarket because he believed that the community now had enough buying capacity to be able to buy other things. So, he said, he recorded an increase.

KR: How far is this village that you're talking about from the supermarket?

MK-B: It would be ten kilometres.

KR: Was it the nearest? The question is, why that village? Why did you do so much for one village?

MK-B: Because I had a previous connection with it from Oxfam and I saw one problem. Yes, indeed, when it becomes successful, other villages start saying, 'And what about us? Why didn't you get produce from us?' Then the explanation was simply, 'You can grow into this, but you have to be trained.'

My colleague Dr. Yambayamba became the head of this organisation after I left, and he started including other people outside. But it became limited. Then at that point the General Manager said, 'You know what? We shouldn't limit these people if they can grow the capacity. We can pick these, and take it to the other towns towards Lusaka. So the Eastern province can supply other areas within the country. So let that capacity keep on growing.' Then he became personally interested in replicating this in the Eastern part.

I think more than fifty households in the capital had been given portions of land, with the promise that what they produced out of that, Shoprite should buy. So Dr. Yambayamba and I went to this graduation, and the Regional Manager, who was a different person this time, said, 'If we could just increase this capacity of people being able to meet the standards required by modern supermarkets like Shoprite, then our people have more sources of income.'

Now, Lusaka has its own supply, but it's totally inadequate, to the extent that Lusaka still gets vegetables for Shoprite from South Africa. But the company has opened up and it has invested money into some of the local people in Lusaka. The idea was to take this to all the provinces, because Shoprite is the only supermarket in the country to serve all the nine provinces, and see if all the provinces can have a similar capacity to supply. So that was the story.

Further testimony: questions answered by Dr Yambayamba²

Q. How are communities/farmers organising themselves to take advantage of these commercial opportunities?

We encourage these communities/farmers to organise themselves into a cooperative society so that they work together towards common objectives (while also pursuing their own individual objectives). It is much easier for the business partners to deal with a group of farmers rather than individual farmers. Once this is done, we facilitate capacity-building through training sessions that cover a wide range of topics including leadership dynamics, mind setting, cooperative management, agribusiness, horticultural production, etc. This way, they begin looking at farming as a commercial enterprise and that they can do it.

Q. Who in the community first identified the opportunity and how did they make the link to the Forum?

The Partnership Forum was the pioneer organisation in facilitating such untraditional links, and within a short time, we began receiving requests from all directions to help in brokering partnerships. It was not easy and it can never be easy. Anyhow, the Chamba Valley community heard about us one way or another. (By the way, we presented a number of programmes on both radio and TV). They sent one of their community leaders to come and talk to us. We quickly jumped on it because we had just successfully facilitated a similar partnership in Luangeni (Chipata) and our idea was to replicate the same. So this Chamba Valley project came as an opportunity. We are hoping that, resources allowing, we will replicate this project throughout the country.

Q. What was it about these communities that encouraged Shoprite to invest there rather than elsewhere?

One thing we have come to appreciate as an organisation is that "Investing in communities" (or Corporate Social Responsibility - as we call it ourselves) is not yet part of the corporate agenda in Zambia and many other countries for that matter. Corporates probably do not have much time to research and think through such innovative and creative ways in which they can grow bigger and bigger. Many of them still practice business the usual way.... This is where intermediary organisations such as The Partnership Forum come in. Thus, in the above question, Shoprite chose to invest in those communities because The Partnership Forum 'took' Shoprite to such communities. This is not to say other communities were not important. But we had to begin from somewhere, and then move on.

Q. It appears that Shoprite has a strong sense of 'social responsibility'. Why is this so? Are their activities strictly for profit, or are there incentives or a climate of social opinion that is encouraging business towards a 'triple' bottom line (added social and/or environmental value)?

Shoprite is a business in the strictest sense. And even when they deal with the local community partners, it is business they transact. However, where the 'social responsibility' comes in is that instead of Shoprite bringing in a particular product from outside, the company is encouraged to acquire it locally. Thus, all the money that could have been spent elsewhere is now spent within a particular local community thereby building capacity in that community in various ways. In fact, this way Shoprite is able to build itself a great name and therefore becomes a good neighbour and a good corporate citizen. But remember, The Partnership Forum plays a big role in this facilitation. Actually, these untraditional partnerships are not very easy to comprehend and therefore you need an intermediary organisation that has built competence around these issues.

Q. What policies favour effective participation of business with communities? Can you give examples from these Zambian cases?

While there are no direct policies for encouraging investment in communities (or CSR), I think the liberalisation policies allow market forces to determine prices and the general direction of economic activities have played a part in what we are seeing today. Certainly, corporates must do things differently this time around, if they have to survive. Remember that 'investing in communities' (or CSR) is a hard-core business strategy. It's not just 'being good' to the communities!

Analysis: why did this change happen?

Five reasons and their implications according to Kate Raworth:

Reason	Implication for CSOs
1. An entrepreneurial and inspired team (MKB and Dr. Yambayamba) championed the possibility and turned it into a high-profile pilot project	CSO Champions matter because they have a vision, inspire others, and work to line up all the required elements to make a programme happen. They need to be innovative, reactive, and confident to work 'outside the box'.
2. The General Manager feared damage by the local community (something he had not conceived of until then) and this was his first motivation for involvement.	If corporate staff cannot see a business case for acting, are they aware of all the hidden costs of NOT acting (threatening arson is an extreme example)? How can NGOs help articulate negative community perceptions in a way that will inspire change? (the role of a calm mediator appears very important here)
3. The media coverage of the initiative put those involved in the public eye and therefore obliged them to keep their promise and keep trying to make it work	Public partnerships can call people into action – and if NGOs negotiate a high level of commitment, and then praise the company for being involved, those companies may well deliver even when conditions are tough.
4. The presence of the Partnership Forum, as a facilitator and link to local NGOs and communities, for training producers, and linking up many elements needed.	How can more innovative partnering organisations be created, and operate as a facilitator between business and communities? NGOs play an important bridging role in enabling stated company policy to become community involvement. They should start with the community's issues and needs in mind, not with the company's desire to engage.
5. The General Manager came to believe there was a sound business case for buying locally.	CSR is business-minded. There must be a sound business case – don't seek change that does not also support the business. Interesting that MKB did not try to sell a positive case in the meeting (only a negative one, avoiding riot..)

	and then the GM came to express the business case for himself.
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2. How one of the world's largest mining companies, Rio Tinto, is working to address the community-level impact of its operations in Madagascar³

Rio Tinto has come a long way from being a traditional mining company to being very responsible. They have come to realise that looking after the environment is good for business. Leon Rajaobelina, Regional Vice President of Conservation International.⁴

This comment was made in response to the accusation that Rio Tinto's new ilmenite (the raw material for the production of titanium dioxide pigment, mainly used in the production of paint) project in Madagascar was just going to be another environmental and social disaster, a tragedy along the lines of many past mines in developing countries, including some run by Rio Tinto. However, what critics have found when they have come to attack the project is that, not only have they been up against the standard company representatives, but serious NGOs and organisations that have been backing up Rio Tinto's story.

Background: history of Rio Tinto in Madagascar

Whilst Rio Tinto's reputation in some areas is still bad, the project in Madagascar has come to symbolise its newfound commitment to sustainability and biodiversity. Full construction work on the project only began in late 2005, but one thing that has impressed onlookers is the 20 years of preparatory work beforehand, most of which was focused on the impact of the project on the local environment and inhabitants.

Serious research work began on the project in 1986,⁵ when QIT Madagascar Minerals (QMM) was formed as a joint venture between QIT (a Canadian subsidiary of Rio Tinto) and OMNIS (a department of the Malagasy government responsible for mining industry partnerships). The aim was to discover the feasibility of a project mining ilmenite. The deposits are found in the coastal sands of the Anosy region in the south east of the island, near Fort Dauphin. The region is rich in the mineral, and could supply 10 per cent of the world's needs in titanium dioxide for the next 40 years,⁶ but it is also one of the poorest areas of Madagascar. Furthermore, there are remnants of unique littoral forest (forests by the seashore) with endemic species greatly prized by conservationists. Therefore between 1987 and 1992 a preliminary environmental study was carried out,⁷ leading to a report in 1992.

However, the project was initially controversial within the government of Madagascar, and one set of negotiations fell apart.⁸ It was thus not until 1998 that a Framework Agreement to undertake serious research, planning and exploratory work was signed.⁹ This culminated in the production of the Social and Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) in May 2001, which outlined the effects the project was likely to have, as well as QMM's plans to mitigate them.

For some, the SEIA confirmed that QMM was not engaging thoroughly enough with the potential problems. 'At first sight the four volumes of the SEIA seem admirably comprehensive. However, they are decidedly not,' reads a report commissioned by Friends of the Earth, 'Our overwhelming conclusion is that there are numerous defects in the methodology of the SEIA.'¹⁰ A report by Conservation International, commissioned by QMM, was also critical,¹¹ and WWF Madagascar came out against the project. However, it was enough to impress the Malagasy government, which in November granted an environmental permit, requiring 'QMM to comply with a full range of social and environmental obligations throughout the life of a project'.¹² Finally, after a brief delay due to political unrest, a feasibility study was undertaken by QIT between 2002 and 2005. In late 2005, QIT

gave the go-ahead for the project, and it is estimated operations will begin at the end of 2008, possibly running for over 40 years.

What makes this project different?

Not everyone was entirely hostile to the SEIA however, with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) concluding: 'Overall... the SEIA has covered new ground in linking both social and environmental issues, and in tackling biodiversity issues explicitly'.¹³ Certainly, Rio Tinto had already invested much more money than normal into what was only then a potential project, spending about \$4 million a year on forest rehabilitation research by 2000.¹⁴ Moreover, much of the research had been done in a very transparent and thorough way, employing experienced academics and researchers – conservationists who knew what they were talking about.¹⁵ There had also been a fair amount of consultation with the local people, and there were promises to set up conservation areas and provide schools and medical services for the local populace.¹⁶

But perhaps more exceptional than all of this, and what might well increase the chance that the things QMM proposes will bear fruit, are the relationships that QMM has formed with international, national and local organisations. It has worked with a number of governments and NGOs to stop the spread of HIV and AIDS¹⁷ (perhaps the most serious problem in the context of resource development projects in Africa), as well as receiving implicit support through World Bank money to be used in the construction of the nearby port.¹⁸ It has coordinated with USAID on the planting of fast-growing trees as a fuel alternative to cutting down the native forest, a large cause of forest degradation in the area.¹⁹ QMM has also established a Biodiversity Committee that links QMM employees with regional and international conservation specialists and experts and which advises the operation on how best to conserve and enhance biodiversity.²⁰ And it is working with LARO (Linking Actors for Regional Opportunities), a local NGO, to help to put together a regional development framework with the government.²¹ Through this, according to LARO, the communities in the region have been highly involved in the conception of their region's development strategy.²²

Such links with other organisations are important, since they can provide commitment and a more critical independent voice. For example, the World Bank has a very stringent code when it comes to forced displacement, and, working with the Bank, they insisted on QMM compliance 'as a condition to its funding of the port construction. Consistent with bank guidelines, QMM will ensure that the families are reinstalled in conditions at least as favourable as before.'²³ Local feedback has also resulted in both the port site and the processing site being moved to places that would affect the local population less.²⁴ For Rio Tinto, these partnerships also provide access to knowledge and skills that they might not have. For example, Rio Tinto set the high goal for its projects to have a net positive impact (NPI) on biodiversity but was not quite sure how to go about measuring its performance. Partnerships with environmental NGOs have been instrumental in helping to develop Rio Tinto's biodiversity strategy and practice.

Slowly, some of the originally hostile NGOs have come round to the project. 'On balance, it's very favourable to the region and favourable to Madagascar in general,' says Martin Nicoll, senior conservation adviser for WWF in Madagascar.²⁵ He started to take Rio Tinto's efforts seriously when the QMM team began to talk about secondary effects, such as migration issues and dust from the access roads. Local NGOs, and partners, the Wildlife Conservation Society, are partly putting these issues on the agenda. They 'discovered that four communes are affected by the conservation site, rather than the one commune originally identified by QMM during its preliminary site assessment',²⁶ and under the request of the Biodiversity Committee, an area of rainforest 10-15km away is being studied as potentially vulnerable to future migration. Through its commitment to local stakeholders, Rio Tinto is breaking new ground as a company.

It is this work to protect the native forest that is pushing many to support the project – it is clear that if nothing were to change in the area, desperate local communities would continue to degrade the forest

in an unsustainable way. 'I'm not defending the mining sector,' adds Martin Nichol, 'but one could argue the conservation community is somewhat hypocritical by strongly protesting mining development when at the same time we are unable to stop really destructive slash and burn agriculture. Perhaps mining can bring more good than harm, it will do harm, but it may be something we can live with and use the benefits to reduce the on-going loss of forests in the country'.²⁷ This view is a popular one amongst those working in Madagascar. In a country where poverty and its causes seem so static, NGOs on their own can only make a very limited contribution. The temptation to see Rio Tinto as a 'change-maker', as a force that brings not only unprecedented risk but also unprecedented opportunity, is seductive. Indeed the local representatives on the Regional Development Committee had even said that if QMM didn't proceed with the project, it would seek another mining company to do so.²⁸ These local NGOs may now see their job as mitigating the risk whilst making sure the opportunities come the way of the local people.

How much mitigation is possible?

At this point, a note of caution must be put in. Whilst the relatively supportive IIED report suggests that QMM's 'significant social and environmental investment in the project seems to indicate a genuine intention to implement a considered and responsible project' it has to be considered that this effort may not make the project a success.²⁹ Even if the mining company does all it can, this may not be enough.

Meanwhile, the local fishermen have been consulted on the weir, and the design of the weir was modified to allow the passage of tourist and villager boats, the passage of migrating fish and to allow the water level to fluctuate to limit its environmental impact. But it appears that the conversion of the lake from brackish body to freshwater, along with water pollution from the plant, may well change the ecosystem on which they depend. It is also clear that while the planned plantations will go some way to provide the needs of local communities, much more will be needed, particularly given possible migration into the area.³⁰ There are also disputes about quite how bad the alternative, business-as-usual scenario would be. 'The company's assessment is misleading,' says Jane Ingram, a researcher at New York's Columbia University. 'They say forest disappears at 86 hectares per year but they extrapolate from just two aerial photographs - 1950 and 2000. It's too simplistic'.³¹

This is not to say necessarily that QMM's efforts have been half-hearted, or that its attempts to have a positive impact are limited. But everyone agrees that with such a big project – the biggest in Madagascar's history – it is difficult, and probably impossible, to prevent things going wrong.

What caused these changes?

Despite these limitations, it is clear that there has been a shift in the way Rio Tinto has gone about this project compared to some in the past. To an extent, this is a reflection of the change in policy that has occurred within Rio Tinto. Over the last decade, in response to changing expectations by society, Rio Tinto has come to place a greater stress on sustainable development. Leon Davis, who became CEO of Rio Tinto, began the change in 1995, by recognising that 'there are major opportunities for growth in outback Australia which will only be realised with the full co-operation of all interested parties', after praising a judgment of the Australian high court on indigenous land rights which others claimed would be the 'death of the mining industry'.³²

At the same time, other forces have developed to put pressure on Rio Tinto to behave. While direct shareholder pressure may have a limited effect, the growing set of ethical and environmental indices may encourage changes in behaviour to avoid the disinvestments of large pension funds or other bodies with ethical codes. Similarly, the sustainability of a business is taken by some investors to be a good indicator of how generally well governed a company is, and hence, how it might perform in the long term. These mechanisms will obviously only work as well as the accuracy of their measurements, but such targets may encourage good practice by rewarding managers when they have made positive improvements on the ground. The willingness of NGOs to give credit for good performance and set

achievable targets may also be a contributing factor. Richard Sandbrook, the founder of Friends of the Earth and later Executive Director of IIED, who went on to co-ordinate the Mining Minerals and Sustainable Development project of the IIED, is credited with having achieved an awful lot by highlighting best practice and working with companies like Rio Tinto to improve the ways of the whole sector.

But certainly most of the concern for such issues, and the resulting policies and partnerships that have stemmed from this, seems to have been largely generated by the business case made for them: that ultimately, it is in the interest of Rio Tinto to keep local communities, national governments, and international opinion on its side, and the only way to do this is through prioritising these concerns within their projects. For example, Francisco Dallmeier, a conservation biologist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, suggests that 'maybe being environmentally sensitive could be a big marketing advantage. Maybe it could give a big company access to deposits that others can't get at'.³³ Indeed, in a world where the 'low hanging fruit' in terms of potential mining sites have been taken, companies will need to go into increasingly difficult situations.

This 'social license to operate' argument is a persuasive one – often there are occasions when mining projects require access to land midway through their operations, and they need the permission of the local government to get access. Refusal of land access has sometimes been what has sent companies down the path to more CSR. Meridian Gold of Reno for example commissioned a report into how its community relations were going wrong after 81 per cent of the local population voted against its mine in Esquel, Argentina.³⁴ Another example of this process in practice is the Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) project in South Africa. Looking to expand its operations, the company sought to start mining its reserves north of St. Lucia. However, the government denied permission, due to environmental concerns from some local and international NGOs.

However, a change of attitude and policy decisions at the top do not immediately translate into changed practice on the ground, and each business unit has a varying degree of the overall corporate enthusiasm. In the Mining Sector Report of the Institute for Social and Ethical Accountability, they state: 'while more of the senior leadership in mining companies is speaking out about the importance of community relationships, there is a need for demonstration of that commitment with far greater investment in developing and maintaining those relationships'. Within Rio Tinto, the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) argues that there are no clear lines of responsibility between London and the local operating companies with respect to the oversight of guidelines, a situation that leads to inconsistencies in the implementation of Rio Tinto's global CSR agenda.³⁵ Not surprisingly, there is a greater commitment to such practice in newer projects: old ones are perhaps more likely to be set in their ways, and maybe more pessimistic about what can be done. In this sense, QMM, which is something of a pilot project, is much more likely to follow through with most of the official policy.

However, what exactly Rio Tinto means in its corporate policy on these issues is sometimes unclear. The ICEM believes that 'Rio Tinto itself knows that implementation may most certainly not be universal: the ambiguity over 'community' in the documents makes it unclear whether the firm views CSR primarily in terms of moral responsibility or business strategy. The fact that there might be a tension between these two approaches is never addressed'.³⁶ Similarly, Paul Kapelus, CEO of the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship argues: 'For their part, Rio Tinto and RBM seem to make assumptions that deny the existence of any tension. At the moral theoretical level, as we have seen, they tend to assume a harmony between good ethics and good business. At the practical level, they also seem to assume that the company is committed to the values that it expresses and that their managers can act upon them'. Perhaps, in the case of mining projects such as QMM, the tension is limited by the length of time of the project: since projects tend to last 50-100 years, the local community has to be supportive of the company. But there is still likely to be a boundary over which interests do clash. If QMM is to be a model example, and to rise above these contradictions, then it may well be down to pressure from the local bodies it has committed to. If these partnerships are

strong enough, then they may be able to win through when business interests come up against environmental or social concerns. If not, then its success will be limited to how much QMM's interests align with those of the community.

Analysis: why did Rio Tinto change?

Five reasons and their implications, according to Liam Wren-Lewis:

Reason	Implications for CSOs
1. A judicial ruling in Australia that gave rights to indigenous people, prompted evaluation of relations with local communities generally. Further disputes about land (e.g. RBM in South Africa) and worries about future government decisions going against them gave further motivation to have communities onside.	Judgements that were made against mining companies were often led by CSOs, and CSOs were particularly powerful when representing local communities. This underlines the importance of CSOs fighting hard on local cases, to raise profile and increase legitimacy of cause.
2. Pressure from NGOs at top level and large international campaigns made executives very conscious of the fact they had a 'bad reputation' which raised questions and the desire to get rid of it which made selling policies to the boardroom relatively easy.	Shows that large-scale campaigns that seek to influence public opinion of a company can be effective, though possibly not immediately. Indicates CSOs should still work hard on raising profile of bad companies, but suggests that they may have to hint that such a campaign might relent if companies did 'enough'. Otherwise, there is no opportunity to remove risk to reputation.
3. Problems with violent or uncooperative communities in the past (and with other companies) made the 'social license to operate' argument very strong; created the impression that it was essential to have communities onside, and thus business/civil society's interests aligned. Also, the fact that new sites are in ever more 'difficult' situations gave encouragement that a reputation for good practice might give Rio Tinto a competitive advantage.	(a) Encourage governments (+ World Bank?) to favour companies with good records to create competition (b) Respond to problematic situations with practical positive proposals, including things that they could do at other sites to prevent the same problem, as this may be a time when a company is particularly open to new approaches. (c) At the same time as emphasising to business how much concerns overlap, make clear the issues where business interest conflicts with interests of civil society. These can then be approached in a different way, perhaps with more direct campaigning.
4. Industry-wide movements, such as MMSD, had a large effect in guiding practice. Ethical Indexes of shares also helped as a means of recognising good work, i.e. translating success on the ground into boardroom indicators.	(a) Set industry targets based on best practice and praise those that attain them, as well as criticising those that don't, <i>relative to competition</i> . Make sure there are clear industry-wide guidelines in place that enthusiastic companies can sign-up to. (b) Make sure ethical indices' ratings are based as much as possible on change 'on the ground'. Encourage mass use of indices, e.g. pension funds.
5. Partnerships with experienced NGOs (i.e. Earthwatch, CI) brought knowledge of how to	Create a spectrum of NGOs engaging on different levels – some working in paid

translate good intentions into outcomes, and brought a degree of commitment.	partnership, some independent and critical.
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This paper was written by Kate Raworth and Liam Wren-Lewis in April 2006. It is one of a series written to inform the development of the Oxfam International publication *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008.

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Notes

¹ Sumi Dhanarajan, Head, Private Sector Team, Oxfam GB.

² As posted on a World Bank listserv discussion on business partnerships, April 2004.
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³ This section is by Liam Wren-Lewis and is based on telephone interview with three representatives of Rio Tinto, and with CSO actors involved, and on internet resources.

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⁵ Sustainable Forest Resource Management For Biodiversity Protection in Madagascar -
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