

TAI FUNDER CALL SERIES: PHILANTHROPY ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENTS



The Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion Collaborative (TAI) is hosting a series of funder learning calls on models for engagement with and support to government reformers in the Global South. Discussions focus on how engagement with governments affects the work of philanthropy and why it matters. We are presenting practical examples of what works and what doesn't and brainstorm together on the critical role of philanthropy.

Case Three: Working with government – focus on delivery: insights from the Chandler Foundation's partnership with the Government of Malawi

24th April 2025

This session explored the **Chandler Foundation's** evolving partnership with the **Government of Malawi** to advance good governance and anti-corruption reforms. This session provided practical insights into what effective and hands-on partnership bridging government and civil society can look like, including challenges and learnings.

SPEAKERS:

- Dr. [Janet Banda](#), Deputy Secretary to the President and Cabinet, Government of Malawi
- [Tim Hanstad](#), Vice-Chair of the [Chandler Foundation](#)

Reimagining philanthropy's entry point: why start with government?

Tim Hanstad emphasized a central tenet of the Chandler Foundation strategy: *governments are the most powerful lever for shaping the social and economic outcomes of people's lives*. Despite this, much philanthropic and NGO activity traditionally bypasses government, focusing instead on alleviating the consequences of dysfunctional systems.

The Chandler Foundation sought to break from that mold. Since its founding, the organization has placed good governance at the heart of its work, particularly emphasizing preventing and addressing corruption as a foundational entry point, focusing on building cultures and government systems that advance integrity. This thematic focus emerged from a careful review of governance indices, including the [Chandler Good Government Index](#), which consistently show that low levels of corruption are the best indicator of a good overall governance score.

From global to grounded: choosing Malawi

Initially operating in a geographically agnostic way, the foundation decided that deeper, more focused country engagement was necessary. A set of criteria—political will, opportunity for reform, and alignment with Chandler’s priorities—led to the selection of Malawi as a priority country.

But perhaps most striking was their approach: instead of beginning with civil society partners, they started by engaging directly with the government. In mid-2022, Tim met with President Lazarus Chakwera of Malawi. Rather than presenting a set menu of funding opportunities, he asked: *What are your governance priorities? Where could we add value at the intersection of our mutual priorities?* This set the tone for a trust-based, government-led collaboration.

The Chandler Foundation's first concrete engagement was supporting a presidential- led national anti-corruption conference and a subsequent anti-corruption campaign. Then came a pivotal discovery—Malawi had been a former member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), but its membership had lapsed due to inaction. The Chandler Foundation believed that the OGP framework could help accelerate the government’s good governance priorities. President Chakwera agreed to rejoin, and Chandler committed to helping the country revive its role in the OGP framework.

Co-creating reform: a National Action Plan rooted in trust

Supporting Malawi’s return to OGP became the focal point of the partnership. The government was tasked with creating a new National Action Plan in collaboration with civil society. But as Dr. Banda noted, trust between government and civil society was low.

Here, the Chandler Foundation played a facilitative role—helping recruit an academic consultant to act as a neutral bridge between both sides to help develop the National Action Plan. The strategy worked. The action plan, finalized at the end of 2022, focused on five major governance priorities, where there was already some consensus: corruption prevention, sovereign debt transparency, political party financing, digital governance, and natural resource governance.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, Chandler supported both the government and civil society in implementing the plan. Their contributions ranged from modest financial support to brokering relationships with external funders, including helping Malawi tap into a World Bank governance trust fund (which the Chandler Foundation joined with two other TAI members) for beneficial ownership and procurement reforms—unlocking \$20 million in performance-based payments.

A model of mutual trust, accountability, and local ownership

Dr. Janet Banda offered a moving reflection on the partnership’s impact. She described Chandler’s role as “a breath of fresh air”—never imposing, always humble, behind the scenes, yet with huge impact for the country. Their presence, among other things, helped normalize collaboration between actors who previously could not sit at the same table. Perhaps the most

profound shift was behavioral: civil society and government, once adversaries, now co-create and co-implement reforms.

The Chandler Foundation supported the government in the design and development of a National Action Plan that contains specific policy commitments around good governance, and has been supporting the government and civil society partners in implementing the National Action Plan. “The Chandler Foundation has become an extended part of our team,” she said.

She emphasized some critical factors behind the partnership’s success:

- **Local ownership** – All reforms are home-grown and align with Malawi’s development priorities.
- **Trust-building** – Achieved step by step, through consistent, reliable support and respect for local leadership.
- **Political will** - Engagement at the highest government level and connecting with leaders who want genuine reform
- **Confidence and visibility** – Chandler’s investment in Malawi’s story—supporting the government to showcase its progress internationally—helped build ambition from within.

Dr. Banda also highlighted Chandler’s role in enabling Malawi to become a peer mentor. For example, they recently shared lessons with Zambian officials looking to apply the OGP model—evidence that the impact of the work is already spreading across borders.

Learning from the model: reflections from the field

The discussion prompted several questions and observations from other participants. One funder representative noted that one of the recurring challenges in the OGP framework is securing resources to implement action plans, and asked how Malawi and Chandler are navigating that.

Tim responded that trust remains the “most important currency,” and that their approach—based on alignment, relationship-building, and practical facilitation—has helped draw in additional support. Events like “Friends of Malawi” receptions at UNGA were ways of generating attention and attracting funders in an organic, relational way.

Another participant raised questions about peer learning and how these models fare in more restrictive environments. Dr. Banda acknowledged that the approach may not fit all contexts. But in Malawi’s case, it has helped build political will and civil society capacity in tandem.

Others reflected on the importance of non-financial support, emphasizing that funders must look beyond money—bringing in technical expertise, convening power, and reputational support are often just as critical.

Looking ahead

The partnership is evolving. Dr. Banda shared that the government has institutionalized a permanent, politically neutral OGP Secretariat, and has established technical working groups for each of the five policy commitments in the initial National Action Plan that are co-chaired by both government and civil society, ensuring balanced representation and reducing political bias. A new four-year National Action Plan is under development, drawing on the lessons of the last two years.

For the Chandler Foundation, this experience in Malawi is not just a proof of concept—it's an invitation to reimagine how philanthropy can engage governments. The foundation is now applying this same government-first approach in Zambia, trying to encourage Zambia to use the OGP framework to accelerate its good governance priorities.

What emerged clearly from the call was that **this model is not about a funder taking the lead**, but about helping governments lead in areas of shared priorities—with humility, patience, and trust. It is also about active, ongoing engagement with the government reformers, as well as leveraging relational networks to build connections for both government and civil society. It may not be for everyone, but for those willing to invest in long-term partnerships and walk alongside reformers, it offers powerful possibilities.

***Note:** While we understand from this call that civil society actors have been involved and consulted all the way, we recognize that this conversation did not include civil society actors.