

The view on partnership from Global South business leaders

Spotlight interviews



Folia Water - Director,
Md Zia Uddin



Sasini PLC - Group
Managing Director,
Martin Ochien'g



Brands on a Mission
- Founder and Chief
Mission Officer,
**Professor
Myriam Sidibe**



Md Zia Udin

Director, Folia Water

Folia Water has created the world's first consumer goods water filter: Folia Filters™. Folia's mission is to ensure access to clean drinking water for 500+ million low-income populations in South Asia by 2031. Folia filter papers are the world's first-ever Fast-Moving Consumer Goods category water purifiers to be sold at a price that is affordable to those living on US\$2–10 per day.



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What are the biggest challenges facing 'Base of the Pyramid' (BOP) enterprises?

Prioritising social values in an enterprise model often compromises economic value to some extent. As a result, scalability and profitability remain one of the biggest challenges for social enterprises. We have higher operational expenses in the early stages due to the difficulty of reaching people living on low incomes. This includes challenges like driving behaviour change or adopting alternative distribution approaches.

Why are partnerships important to Folia Water and who are your main partners?

Forming meaningful and productive partnerships is key to ensuring sustainability. From Folia's perspective, our partners have contributed significantly to our journey. During our proof-of-concept stage, in partnership with Unilever and the FCDO-sponsored TRANSFORM initiative, we conducted a trial launch of the Folia Filter in Bangladesh's Jessore-Khulna region to test consumer acceptance at the base of the pyramid (BOP) and achieve product-market fit. With grant support from Aqua for All, and from Folia's impact and angel investors, we conducted a retail market pilot and are currently scaling. Beyond grant support, we have partnered with market system agencies such as the BOP Innovation Center, IDE, and other social alliances that brought in sector-specific expertise in areas such as WASH, gender, behaviour change, Impact Measurement and Management systems, and market development.

How could your partnerships with business, especially global multinationals, be improved?

Developed by Folia Materials, the filter is a mass-market staple in corner stores alongside brands like Coca-Cola and Unilever. Our B2B strategy leverages partnerships with these multinationals to access BOP markets. Since our commercial scaling began in October 2023, targeting Dhaka's periphery, we've achieved a 78% monthly growth rate with 90% repeat sales. This traction indicates readiness for further expansion, pending investments in marketing and resources, and a national distribution partner to scale across Bangladesh and other emerging markets. Additionally, our portable FMCG filters are ideal for NGOs addressing the safe drinking water needs of the ultra-poor, and for disaster management.

With impressive traction and initial sales growth, we believe that Folia's growth is primarily constrained by spending on marketing and resources.



Are you optimistic about the future for Folia water? Why?

Yes, due to several positive factors. Our approach combines 21st-century material innovation with an FMCG model, ensuring accessibility and affordability for BOP populations while facilitating easier scalability through strategic partnerships. With impressive traction and initial sales growth, we believe that Folia's growth is primarily constrained by spending on marketing and resources. We are ready to acquire new customers, expand our impact and attract B2B partners to help scale Folia Filter sales throughout Bangladesh and other emerging countries.



Martin Ochien'g

Group Managing Director, Sasini PLC

Sasini PLC is Kenya's largest agribusiness, selling tea, coffee, avocado, and macadamia to global brands in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Managing Group Director Martin Ochien'g joined Sasini PLC in 2019 with a mission to integrate the SDGs across the business. He is also Chair of the UN Global Compact (UNGC) Kenya and helped establish the African Business Leaders Coalition.

Why is partnership important to Sasini?

When we decided to include sustainability as one of Sasini's six strategic priorities, we knew that we would see higher rates of achievement if we worked in tandem with partners in our value chain. We actively look to work with our 25 business customers to pursue partnerships in our priority areas (which include climate, water, living wages and gender equity). For example, Taylors of Harrogate buy tea from us, and we approached them to support our water stewardship work to deliver boreholes to tea-growing communities. We also identify other businesses that can help us achieve our goals. When we decided to invest US\$6.5m in a solar power station, we had to find the latest technology at the cheapest cost for the greatest efficiency; so, we worked with like-minded people in the banking sector who were committed to green financing. We were the first African company to use panels that move with the axis of the sun, and we are now generating about 30% of our energy from renewables. This year, we are measuring our carbon footprint,

and we hope to be net positive. We also have a new partnership with shipping giant Maersk, who wanted to expand into land-based logistics, as we were eager to ensure our crops were not sitting in warehouses waiting to be shipped. So, now we are loading containers at the factories – it's working for both of us.



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Do you face any challenges with partnerships?

Not so much, because we are very careful about selecting who we partner with. For me, it's all about working with like-minded CEOs and individuals and seeing what you can do together, rather than organisations, per se. Then we find solutions. It's also why I'm personally committed to building the African Business Leaders Coalition, which is the first of its kind, and why Sasini was one of the first 15 members of the Kenyan UN Global Compact network, which has now grown to 70 members. These networks can facilitate partnerships, and we can influence and shape policies across the continent. Some people still question the financial implications because sustainability is new to them, but this misses the point. My generation is moving the dial: we cannot mortgage our children's futures, so we have to do the right thing. Further to this, our sustainability work pays for itself as we are becoming known for our approach; it's opening doors.

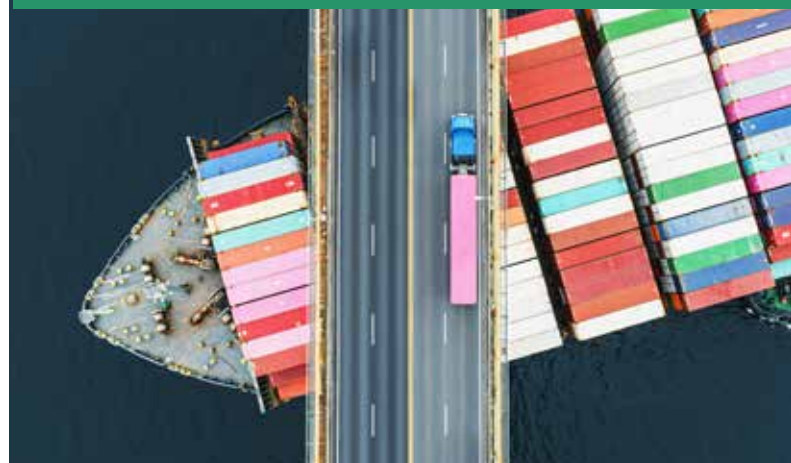
More broadly, commitment can be an issue. A lot of people talk about the SDGs and sustainability but do not always follow through with action. Similarly, buyers often ask us to provide data for their ESG reporting, such as avocado farmers' wages. Yet, we have to push back and ask how they are willing to contribute, rather than putting the conditions and obligations on us.

What about partnerships for the future?

On gender, we hope to achieve a 50:50 balance in management and on the board by 2026. We are at 60:40 presently, so I'm confident we can get there. We would like to do more on living wages, which is still a relatively new concept, and many people are resistant. We have the opposite stance: we want and need to pay our workers to be able to improve their living standards. We also want to develop new housing schemes for employees in all our businesses. Yet, we need to find partners to help us achieve these things.



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Professor Myriam Sidibe

Founder and Chief Mission Officer,
Brands on a Mission

Myrriam is one of the world's leading experts on brands that drive health outcomes through mass behavioural change. She was also the Co-founder and Chair of the multi-stakeholder platform the National Business Compact on Coronavirus¹.

Why did you start Brands on a Mission, and what is its current focus?

During my 15 years at Unilever, I saw firsthand the potential brands have to drive meaningful social and environmental impact. This included the movement I helped create to change the handwashing behaviours of one billion people (the single biggest hygiene behaviour change programme in the world), and transforming the Lifebuoy brand into a billion-euro business.

During a sabbatical from Unilever I went to Harvard Kennedy School. I dedicated a year to capturing what I had learned in a framework I called The Purpose Tree. This framework served as the foundation for broader research and eventually became the basis for my book, Brands on a Mission. I realised that this concept could transcend being just a book; it could become a movement with the potential to transform businesses at both corporate and brand levels. That's when I realised I wanted to help more organisations to harness the power of their brands for social good.



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Currently, our focus is on driving impact in select public health issues, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. We are addressing areas like nutrition, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and sexual reproductive rights, taking intersectional approaches that consider broader environmental, economic and social factors. Being home to some of the fastest-growing economies and critical areas for health and wellbeing, these regions offer significant untapped opportunities. Given the approaching 2030 SDG deadline and the intensifying climate crisis, there is a pressing need for the private sector to contribute meaningfully. Brands on a Mission aims to be the leading impact catalyser and bridge builder in health and wellbeing in these regions.

¹ <https://sid-us.org/myriam-sidibe>

How did Brands on a Mission facilitate the establishment of the National Business Compact on Coronavirus (NBCC) in East Africa, and how has it changed perceptions of partnerships?

Within three days of the first COVID-19 case being reported in Kenya, the NBCC was co-founded by myself, the Marketing Society of Kenya, AMREF Health Africa, plus support from the UN. Unilever played a significant role in these efforts. The NBCC quickly built on existing relationships and trust, aligning with government priorities and harnessing core business competencies alongside philanthropic funding. To ensure efficient use of resources and avoid duplication, we decided that the Secretariat of NBCC would be hosted and managed by Brands on a Mission.

The NBCC demonstrated what can be achieved through multi-stakeholder partnerships. Traditional corporate competitors, such as Unilever and Reckitt, worked alongside local players and global brands like Lifebuoy and Dettol, showcasing the power of a fluid structure and lean governance led by a neutral Secretariat. This collaborative approach allowed us to adapt to the pandemic's evolving needs, shifting from managing funds and donations to logistics, public health announcements and service delivery.

The unique context of the pandemic facilitated this unprecedented collaboration, but the lessons learned from NBCC's multi-stakeholder approach can be applied to other contexts. We are now extending these principles to other initiatives, such as addressing alcohol abuse in Zambia and gender-based violence in South Africa.



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What are the key challenges of working in partnership, and what could be done differently?

The impact-led work of the private sector cannot be done alone. Partnerships across sectors are critical to achieving success at scale. One of the strengths of Brands on a Mission is acting as a bridge builder between sectors, understanding the different ways they operate and even the language they use. The private sector excels in moving quickly, but this pace is often not aligned with the public and social sectors, creating challenges within partnerships.

Our role is to bridge these gaps, **helping different sectors understand each other's ways of operating to leverage the best of each. This is essential for building sustainable partnerships that unlock impact at scale.** Additionally, it's about finding ways to build mission-driven companies from the outset, particularly within the SME sector in Africa. We need to create brands that are inherently responsive to their local contexts and challenges. This approach can significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of impact initiatives.

