



Family Planning, Sexual Health and Life Skills



2022 Report

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Covering all topics relating to Life Skills to help people make informed choices and decisions

Our work within schools and with members of the community has continued but with two changes including a new member on the team. We were sad to say goodbye to Khumbo, our nurse-midwife, but she was keen to return to clinical duties. However, Khumbo ensured the right person replaced her and we have taken on Rebecca, who has been one of our pre-school teachers since 2015.

During the first part of 2022, Rebecca was trained by Khumbo who said, "Her eight years in education along with her own life experiences and passion for the project has seen her bring another dimension to the team. I am proud to have been involved with such a project and I know that Rebecca will continue to empower the youth in our local area."

The other change is the introduction of Children's Corners. These are effectively a version of a youth club but monitored by the Social Welfare Office.

UNICEF defines Children's Corners as "community owned safe spaces for children aged 6 to 18 years which provide Psychosocial Support (PSS), life skills education and empowerment on children's rights."

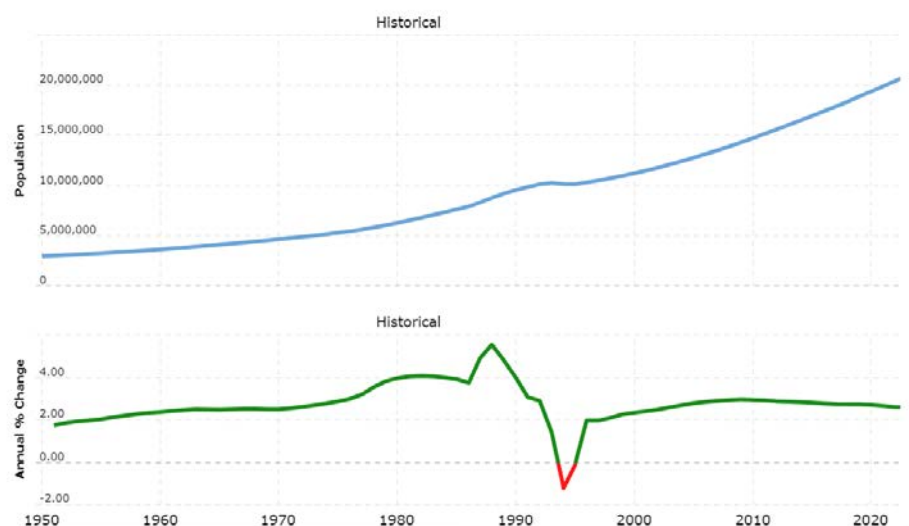
Looking at Malawi as a whole, the country continues to see a rapidly growing population which adds to the challenges being experienced across Malawi including poor infrastructure, under-resourced schools and medical services, and limited job opportunities.

In 2022 the population of Malawi was 20,405,317, an increase of 2.59% from 2021, and with an average age of 18. Even though the birth rate is in decline, life expectancy continues to increase and the number of deaths is five times less than births. The fertility rate in 2022 was 3.980 births per woman, a 1.68% decline from 2021.

The *United Nations - World Population Prospects* estimates that by 2100, Malawi's population will have reached over 58.5 million.



Rebecca joined the team in 2022



Outreach

Schools

Success is my dream has continued to be the slogan for the life skills lessons, and as well as continuing at primary and secondary schools, we have also developed our outreach sessions to ensure we are able to reach young people during the school holidays. This is mainly done through sports activities and we are proud that the team training sessions have been well-attended for both football and netball.



The students continue to show an interest in the topics discussed and interesting questions are being posed including one girl asking, "Why are there no contraceptive methods for boys other than condoms?" This was echoed by the other girls who felt that it was unfair that nothing has been developed for men. It was an interesting class.

Our team are also working with the area Social Welfare Officer to discuss and address issues such as child marriage and teen pregnancy. Working together strengthens our messaging and enables us to reach more people.

Gender roles have been a focal point of the Life Skills Education sessions at primary schools during the latter part of the year. Discussions were about the typical roles that men and women take in Malawian culture and whether the youngsters agree with these roles.

During one session at Chiomba Primary School there was a real split with some of the boys agreeing that times had moved on and equal partnerships should be encouraged whilst others said that it should stay the same as it has 'always been that way'. The girls on the other hand, were keen to push the conversation towards equal partnerships as they already have to do more chores at home than their brothers and male cousins.



In the school holidays, Watson and Rebecca continued with this topic in mind and ran sessions focused on gender roles and strength. Groups of boys and girls were challenged to carry water and firewood with teams scoring points, for example, more points for not spilling water. When similar challenges have been carried out before, although the boys believe they are 'stronger', they never manage to carry water without spilling it. These simple demonstrations are really important to push and change the narrative.



As mentioned, our original youth groups have now merged into Children's Corner groups. The Social Welfare Department is encouraging the establishment of these groups so we have set up 11 of them which allows us to reach almost 1,000 children outside school hours. Although some of the children were already attending our youth groups, with the new groups established we are working with at least 50% more children than before. The groups follow the same plan - informative talks with question-and-answer sessions and sports and games.



We have been overlapping our outreach work with female students and their mothers who are part of the women's groups we meet with. We are encouraging mothers to talk more openly with their daughters.

One women's group highlighted how many mothers know that their children are sexually active but despite having discussions about family planning options etc., have expressed a concern that their children don't seem to listen or fully understand the potential consequences of their actions.

Elbie, 24 said, "I had my first child at 19 when I was in Form 3. My boyfriend was in Form 4 and he was allowed to continue writing his exams. I haven't been able to return to school as my parents wouldn't support me. I try and share this story with other girls at school so they can finish their education before becoming parents, but they don't think it will happen to them."

We currently have a Canadian teacher volunteering with us for a year. Carolyn has spent time observing Watson and Rebecca and said, "This is a great program that provides young people with a safe place where they can get honest answers and facts about family planning. It encourages young people to take responsibility for their lives and make the best decisions for their future."



Community Groups

Throughout the year, Watson and Rebecca continued to work closely with community groups including village banks, women's groups known locally as kitchen top-up groups, sport teams and with couples and individuals. They also delivered talks to Under Five clinics and at antenatal and postnatal clinics.

Across the year they engaged with over 4,500 people during the above meetings and workshops and covered a broad range of topics relating to Family Planning and Sexual Health. People are keen to have their questions answered so that they can develop their knowledge on the topics, and this combined approach of working with all members of the community will have a positive effect in improving communication and people being able to make informed choices and decisions.

One of the village savings groups that we work with is Tiyesiyepu Women's Group. Watson and Rebecca meet with them monthly to listen and share information on topics they wish to cover. With a combination of ages, the group dynamics offers us a great insight into the views of those at different stages of their lives.

Listening to the women speak about their role in society, their passion for providing a better future for their children and their enthusiasm to learn is refreshing. One member of the group, Ruth, said, "Meeting together gives us the chance to talk about issues within our community and come up with solutions, and we learn from each other too. Our group also encourages us to save money so that we have it for farming and school fees for our children."



Rebecca and Watson are well received by the community. Here they are with the Tiyesiyepu Group

Talking about these women's groups Watson said, "Generally in rural areas, women have been sidelined and are not involved in decision making which we believe is slowing development in Malawi. During our meetings we take time to listen to them, we ask questions about their relationships, and encourage them to begin talking with their husbands with the idea that the husbands will be keen to engage with us to learn more."

Rebecca continued, "Women and men should be equal when making decisions which affect their day-to-day life as women carry most of the work load. Women are keen to have smaller families so that they can educate their children and give them a better quality of life."

As mentioned above, meeting women at group sessions opens up the opportunity to meet with more couples. Watson and Rebecca focus on encouraging partners to communicate better and have open discussions on all topics from how many children they want and the use of contraceptives to talks on farming, finances and chores. Helping to create equal partnerships leads to better relationships and a happier couple and family.

Many of these couples are already parents so are hearing what their children are learning at school and are beginning to attend groups with them which opens up more channels of communication.

The Under Five clinics remain one of the busier places we do talks as the women can get their children weighed and vaccinated, and ask questions. The majority of the questions asked are about contraceptives and the pros and cons of each one. This gives the team the opportunity to give accurate information as there are lots of misunderstandings.

Rebecca said, "We do a lot of activities at the Under Five clinics as the women are keen to learn. They really engage with the 'Over-populated Malawi Map' demonstration. They ask lots of questions about contraception and learn that if one method doesn't suit them, then they can switch to try another. Understanding that not one method suits everyone is important."



A slightly younger demographic makes up the members of the sports clubs we work with. Many of these youngsters are yet to get married but openly talk about having girlfriends and boyfriends.

Watson said, "There are many myths and beliefs that make young people hesitate when it comes to contraceptive use. There is also the problem of being able to access family planning services."

Watson and Rebecca's first objective is to answer questions and remove the fear of going to a clinic to ask for contraceptives. They also focus a large part of their sessions on the consequences of casual and unprotected sex including unplanned pregnancies, HIV and other STIs. These lessons are done through games and activities to show for example, how easily HIV can be spread. Whilst the activities are intended to be fun so that they are memorable, they are informative and play an important role in making sure these youngsters take precautions to protect themselves and prospective partners.



Future Plans

This year we plan to continue with the existing schools, groups and couples that we work with as well as expanding to cover the Under Five clinics managed by Kande Health Care. The team also hope to work with more men's groups through the local game of bawo. These groups are being split into smaller groups to ensure everyone has a voice and chance to ask question, and to maximise impact. Several of the women's groups will be trained to go out into the community to talk with their peers and we hope that by the end of the year, we will have men representing the project in the same way.

Watson said, "Peer-to-peer education is best because people tend to trust and understand their neighbours more than an outsider. We plan to have people to support our work in their villages, talking to their community about the topics mentioned. Building trust is very important."