



When communities come together



Community Health Programme Annual Report 2020

February 2021

Community Health Programme Summary

This report describes progress under Temwa's community health programme in Nkhata Bay North, Malawi, during 2020. The programme improves community knowledge and health services – allowing community members to better understand and take control of their health. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, Temwa had just finished community training and awareness campaigns on the provider- initiated HIV testing and counselling (PITC) approach. While it was rolled out successfully, the focus of the communities, and Temwa, then had to turn to addressing the unfolding public health emergency of Covid-19 for most of the rest of the year. We are ready to further strengthen and expand the PITC approach to new areas, as Covid-19 restrictions allow.

Covid-19 Impacts in Nkhata Bay North

Following the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic to Malawi in 2020, Temwa paused most of our programmes for several months, to follow local guidelines and to protect our staff and the communities we support. Since April, our health work has primarily focussed on an urgent Covid-19 response.

Officially there have only been about 420 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Nkhata Bay district by the end of January 2021, but testing capacity is very low in Malawi. A senior local chief, TA M'bwana, who was deeply respected within the community sadly passed away from Covid-19 in July, which started driving home the seriousness of the threat posed by the virus. There has been **no governmental support for PPE or community awareness in Nkhata Bay North to help prevent transmission or to tackle misinformation** widely circulating in social media. Temwa was able to divert and raise funds to support a community response to the crisis (read more on this under the Community Health Programme Achievements below).

The impact of Covid-19 has, however, gone way beyond public health. Prolonged school closures have led to an alarming, unprecedented increase in sexual relationships, substance misuse, teenage pregnancies, child marriages and school dropout rates among children and youth. Luckily, out of 47 married girls, 41 have now been successfully rescued by the local governance, partly with Temwa's support; child marriage is illegal in Malawi. Furthermore, as many families in Nkhata Bay North depend on small-scale businesses or hand-to-mouth 'piece work' for income, they have struggled to feed themselves as local markets have had to close due to Covid-19 restrictions.

As of February 2021, Covid-19 cases are very rapidly increasing in the country. The severity of the quickly changing situation has deeply shocked our team both here in the UK and in Malawi, and we must sadly report that two of Temwa Malawi's trustees tragically passed away due to Covid-19 within one week, making the devastating impacts of the pandemic far more real.

All of Temwa's work is carried out in line with the Malawi government's Covid-19 guidelines and staff are taking every opportunity to update community members on the situation.

Community Health Programme Achievements

Below we describe in more detail the programme's progress, successes and lessons learnt in 2020.

Outcome 1: Increased community knowledge about health

The adult HIV prevalence rate in Nkhata Bay North, at 16% (equivalent to one in six adults), is higher than the national average (9%). The region also suffers from a high prevalence of sexually transmitted infections, especially amongst sexually active teens. Temwa aims to improve understanding of health issues, such as HIV and AIDS, which helps community members to take control of their personal health. It also means that they are better able to assess the importance and effectiveness of risk reduction strategies, such as condom use and regular HIV testing.

HIV and AIDS awareness – The key focus during the reporting period has been on strengthening the provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling (PITC) approach in the communities, as recommended by the WHO and adopted by the Malawi Government. Based on the level of funding secured for the project, Temwa worked with two out of five health centre areas, Usisya and Chikwina, where **our awareness campaigns directly reached 873 community members of all ages (44% women) in 2020**. With a total of 2,711 people (54% women) reached since the project start in late 2019, we exceeded the target of 2,400 people (as adjusted to the reduced scope of the project).

Additionally, staff at the two health centres, which are visited by up to a few thousand people each month, would talk through the approach with patients when offering the HIV test to them.

The aim of these campaigns has been to increase people's knowledge about the availability of stigma-free testing at health centres and to make them feel more comfortable about the approach and getting tested.

Based on Temwa's monitoring, many people had already heard about the concept of PITC, but had concerns or questions about it. Therefore, in consultation with local governance, we adjusted our approach from carrying out a leafleting campaign to instead organising awareness events where community members could meet local health officials and NGO representatives face-to-face. **The events involved talks, film screenings, and importantly, question and answer sessions.** The main focus was on preventing HIV, PITC approach, importance of testing and treatment adherence, but other topics such as nutrition were also covered. The questions raised by community members showed that there are still varying levels of knowledge and a lot of misconceptions among them about HIV and AIDS. Therefore, these events and disseminating accurate information are very important to help allay persisting concerns.

The communities also recognise that **youth are particularly at risk of contracting HIV**. There are reports of young boys, who make good money from fishing, paying for sex with prostitutes, and both young people and sex workers say that adolescents prefer not to use a condom. This translates into increasing numbers of HIV and sexually transmitted infections among the youth. Temwa's activities, therefore, specifically targeted sex workers, fishermen, bar owners and vendors. As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation even worse with increased sexual relationships, alcohol and drug abuse and sexually transmitted infections among youth. Temwa is having discussions with the communities and health officials about doing more talks about HIV and sexual and reproductive rights at schools as well as offering over 13-year-olds the chance to get tested for HIV.

Covid-19 awareness – Around the time the Covid-19 pandemic first started spreading to Malawi, Temwa rapidly launched an awareness campaign about the dangers of the disease and prevention measures. Our approach has been agreed together with the District Health Office and the five local health centres in Nkhata Bay North. We have worked with **two local radio stations**, in the lakeshore and uplands, **to broadcast interactive Covid-19 radio talk shows as well as short daily information jingles about the virus** that have been running for almost 300 days. **Temwa has distributed 2,000 local-language leaflets**, some with pictorial guidance to make the information more accessible for illiterate community members. We also organised socially-distanced Covid-19 awareness events, directly reaching 1,369 people (64% women) in remote communities. Two murals were painted along a main road with Covid-19 prevention messages. Community members have thanked Temwa for helping to bust myths and rumours, as misinformation about Covid-19 has been widely circulating in social media.

Outcome 2: Improved community health services

Healthcare services in Nkhata Bay North are inadequate and hard to access due to the area's topography, low population density and lack of reliable transport infrastructure. The five local health centres in the area are under-resourced and sparsely located – with some community members living a nine-hour walk away from the closest clinic. All too often, the community loses citizens to long-term illness and death due to poverty, poor health awareness and lack of access to health services. Temwa's aim is to improve access to and quality of available health services within these remote communities.

Strengthening provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling (PITC) – While the Malawi government has recommended using the PITC approach for a while, many local health centres have not been able to fully adopt this due to lack of knowledge and skills. As part of this project, **Temwa trained 88 people (48% women) on PITC**, slightly below the target of 100 people. This included staff members at the Usisya and Chikwina Health Centres, Health Advisory Committee (HAC) members, representatives of local governance and traditional authorities. In early 2020, we were already witnessing positive results: **the proportion of people tested for HIV through PITC almost doubled from October 2019 to March 2020**. While Covid-19 has since disrupted this service provision, we will keep monitoring changes over time as we get the annual 2020 data from the district.

In Nkhata Bay North, the health centres acknowledged that it is difficult for staff working in other specialities to access opportunities to learn about HIV. The training provided by Temwa was hence a welcome opportunity for experts to be on-hand to answer questions about PITC but also HIV more generally.

The training covered basic information about HIV and its spread in Malawi, local challenges, roles of health centre staff in PITC, instigating tests and referrals to HIV testing and counselling services. The increased understanding of

HIV should allow health staff to support patients better, provide information informally, and to give staff the confidence to offer PITC.

While the healthcare service's focus has had to turn to responding to the Covid-19 crisis in the communities, this project has laid the foundations for PITC to be delivered as a standard service. With funding secured for 2021, Temwa will build upon the work already done and further strengthen and expand the rollout of PITC, as the Covid-19 situation allows, while also supporting local clinics to deliver PITC in line with governmental Covid-19 guidelines.

Mobile service provision and outreach clinics – Some villages have very limited access to healthcare provision due to their hard-to-reach location. **Temwa works with health centres to support provision of mobile services to these most remote communities.** In 2020, Temwa worked with 12 members of staff from the Usisya and Chikwina Health Centers to help identify potential hotspots for HIV infection as well as remote villages that do not have access to nearby HIV testing and counselling services. It was proposed that PITC could be offered at the hotspots and in nine villages where Health Surveillance Assistants already provide other outreach health services, such as under-5s clinics. This would enable testing in locations where many people have never been tested before. Subject to available funding, these outreach clinics could also offer testing for sexually transmitted infections, tuberculosis screening, cervical cancer screening, family planning and antenatal care.

During the reporting period, Temwa supported Usisya Health Centre staff to offer a variety of mobile health services in the remote villages of Chiwisi and Sanga, visited by 200 people (see more information under Community Stories below). Mobile HIV testing was also available during many of the community awareness events (see Outcome 1 above), with 120 tests carried out in 2020 and a total of 351 since the project start in 2019. No testing kits were purchased by Temwa during the reporting period, as initially planned, since sufficient testing kits and antiretroviral medication was available through the District Health Office.

Covid-19 material support and training – As part of our Covid-19 response, **Temwa has trained the five local health centres and local governance structures on Covid-19 and has been distributing protective medical equipment,** including surgical masks, gloves, plastic aprons, hand sanitiser and infrared thermometers. We made and distributed 2,492 reusable masks, and set up 38 hand-washing stations, supplied with 1,600 bars of soap, for the clinics and community hubs such as schools, churches and shops. The health officers in charge at the clinics expressed their gratitude for the support, as they had none of these items that are crucial for practicing good hand hygiene and infection control. Temwa's support has helped increase knowledge, prevent transmission and protect healthcare workers and broader communities. Based on local clinic data, increased handwashing has reduced the prevalence of other diseases too.

Building capacity of local structures – Temwa works closely with local government structures to ensure local ownership of planning, implementing and sustaining activities. This work has seen **local governance, particularly the Village Development Committees, become more aware of the importance of having sufficient health service improvements included in their local Village Development Plans.** In 2020, they set up local Covid-19 task forces and introduced Covid-19 bylaws to improve community compliance with restrictions. Members of the relevant local governance structures and traditional authorities were represented at all the training sessions and events organised by Temwa.

Temwa participates in coordination meetings with the District Health Office and other NGOs in the region to create a consolidated District Implementation Plan to reduce HIV transmission in Nkhata Bay North and to share best practice in HIV prevention. This helps to ensure that communities in the region are as well served by statutory and NGO providers as possible, considering especially the limited governmental resources. As needed, Temwa has also supported Quarterly Review meetings that involve healthcare providers, local governance and community representatives to allow for real-time feedback and adjustments to health service approaches, such as PITC, and to ensure community ownership. These meetings were on hold for some of 2020 due to Covid-19.

Outcome 3: Increased access to safe and clean water

As many as 80% of households, especially along the lakeshore, cannot access clean and safe water for drinking and washing. Waterborne diseases, including bilharzia, diarrhoea, intestinal parasites and even cholera, are common due to reliance on open water sources, poor sanitation infrastructure and poor hygiene practices. With support from other funders, since 2017 Temwa has been offering simple WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) solutions to the communities, as they are proven to help prevent these common, yet sometimes deadly, conditions.

Community awareness and water filtration – The success of Temwa’s Water Filter Project, implemented in five villages so far, has exceeded expectations: The project has seen an **86% reduction in cases of all major waterborne diseases** including bilharzia, diarrhoea and dysentery as well as no outbreaks of cholera. This has been thanks to simple but durable ceramic water filters that the beneficiaries have purchased at a subsidised price, accompanied by WASH training to the participating households. The project now provides **access to clean water to about 660 families, translating to over 3,900 people**. The support will be expanded to a further 1,800 people in two new villages in 2021. As a simple and cost-effective intervention, it is almost certainly saving lives, whilst contributing to wider economic development and poverty reduction by minimising working days lost to illness.

As the project targets entire villages, the **improved sanitation awareness and reduction of disease also helps HIV-positive community members** to keep healthy, while reducing the caring responsibilities of families who are already under pressure due to other illnesses.

Local governance and investment in health infrastructure – A Water Committee, overseen and supported by Village Development Committees, has been established and trained in each of the targeted villages. They manage the distribution of filters, collection of filter payments from beneficiaries, project monitoring and support to households. The modest amount that beneficiaries pay for the water filters helps ensure that households value and take care of them. This repayment mechanism also generates income for the Water Committees which can then invest the funds in community health initiatives, as chosen by the local community. In 2020, the village of Livuwu built three corbelled pit latrines at a local primary school which provide a practical resource for the school, while demonstrating to community members how to improve sanitation facilities at home. Another village, Chiwisi, has renovated an existing structure that is now being used as a clinic for under-5s, while New Salawe community has also started constructing an under-5s clinic. These facilities will be able to host outreach healthcare services, including PITC.

Community Stories

Outreach clinics making healthcare services accessible for remote villagers

Usisya Health Centre staff travelled on Temwa’s boat to offer mobile health services in the remote village of Sanga which is home to about 1,700 people. The services included HIV testing and counselling, tuberculosis screening, testing for malaria and sexually transmitted infections as well as antenatal and family planning services.

Emmanuel Njikho, Temwa’s Project Officer for Health, said: “[The mobile event] received very positive feedback from the community members who were expressing their gratitude. It is a challenge for them to go to the Usisya Health Centre or Nkhata Bay District Hospital for these services.” The residents of Sanga live 23km away from the nearest health centre, which is a two-hour boat journey but many cannot afford to travel by boat regularly, so they have to walk up to 8 hours there and back. The mobile services were accessed by 107 people in Sanga, out of whom 59 were tested for HIV, including nine pregnant women. One person tested positive and was enrolled on ART treatment the same day.

While the core idea of PITC is to offer HIV testing to everyone presenting to a health centre, Temwa will continue to work with the health centres to offer mobile service options to the hardest-to-reach villages, as needed. This provides an opportunity for those to access health services who are rarely able to visit the centres by themselves. One woman visiting the outreach clinic with her 2-year-old baby said that testing women during pregnancy is very important for knowing the HIV status of both expectant mothers and their husbands – something that helps men too to start living responsibly with their status.

Increasing community awareness of Covid-19

This is one of the local-language posters raising awareness of coronavirus and how transmission can be reduced. Visual presentation of the information is crucial in a context where over one in three adults are illiterate. The poster is being distributed by various organisations in Malawi, including Temwa.



