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Secondary School Bursary Scheme Evaluation Report – April 2021

This report describes the findings of an internal impact evaluation of Temwa’s secondary school bursary scheme. This evaluation covers the last five-year funding period from 2016-2021. The findings are based on interviews with current beneficiaries, graduates and secondary school teachers as well as on focus group discussions with parents, guardians and representatives from School Management Committees, Mother Groups, Parent-Teacher Associations and local governance structures. As described in detail below, the scheme has had life-changing, positive impacts on beneficiaries, their families and wider communities. We are very grateful for the Nick Webber Trust’s generous support towards it.

Educational context in Nkhata Bay North

Over 90% of people in Nkhata Bay North are subsistence farmers and 58% of them live below the national poverty line of £0.52 per person per day. In the past five years, the communities have also been hit by the severe food crisis affecting sub-Saharan Africa in 2015-2016 and the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic over the past year, the wider social and economic impacts of which have been worse than the virus itself. A huge proportion of the community members therefore live in extreme poverty and are very vulnerable to climate, economic and health shocks. According to the Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2015-2016, about 70% of the population in Nkhata Bay district have completed some of primary school, but only 2.9% of women and 5.5% men have completed secondary school. As secondary school is not free, bursary schemes are crucial for increasing access to education, particularly for the poorest families, to help break the cycle of poverty.

Since 2016, Temwa’s bursary scheme has supported 24-31 students annually, with one of them funded by an individual sponsor since 2018 and the rest exclusively by the Nick Webber Trust. The students have attended six Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) in Bunga, Chikwina, Chipunga, Khondowe, Mzgora and Usisya, and until the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, also two private boarding schools, Bandawe Girls’ Secondary School and Bandawe Secondary School.

Supporting the most vulnerable

The aim of the bursary scheme has been to improve access to secondary education for vulnerable but gifted students and to therefore improve their life opportunities. Despite the challenging circumstances that many of them face, **100% of interviewed current and former bursary beneficiaries strongly or somewhat agreed that being on bursary made them less worried about problems or challenges at home.** Over the past five years, the scheme has supported 52 disadvantaged students (58% girls), out of whom 15 are still on the scheme (67% girls)¹. The students can be selected based on multiple vulnerabilities, with the following being the main categories: 42% low-income families, 27% orphans (lost both parents), 29% single parent, 17% elderly guardians and 12% of families affected by HIV or disability.

¹ At the time of the interviews, the 10 new students for the 2020-2021 school year had not yet been recruited.

61% of interviewed beneficiaries live in large households with more than 6 people, which is above the national average of 5 people. Many of them simply do not generate enough income to be able to afford school fees. The interviews revealed that each benefiting family has another 1-7 children in need of external educational support either at primary or secondary level, but the only benefiting child in each family was the one on Temwa's bursary. **It was also discovered that, tragically, half of the students did not live with their parents, but stayed with a related guardian.** This was either because they are orphans or because divorce or disagreements between parents has forced them out of home, with parents in some cases denying responsibility for the child. Although in Malawi it is common for children to be looked after by the wider family, **this can significantly increase their level of vulnerability:** they may not be cared for as well as biological children and are less likely to be prioritised for education. One former student, Lameck Chiumia, from a low-income family affected by disability, said: "without Temwa, I had no hopes of acquiring secondary school education".

Empowering girls

The education of girls in poor, remote communities is often not prioritised. They are also at a high risk of teenage marriages, child pregnancies and early school dropouts. This scheme has significantly reduced these risks for the benefiting female students, as during the past five years, **only 3 out of 30 girls have dropped out due to pregnancy or marriage.** Furthermore, as reported in our last annual report, Temwa conducted an impact assessment on the educational impacts of Covid-19 in autumn 2020. We discovered an alarming six-fold increase in teenage pregnancies and child marriages in the district during the pandemic compared to the previous school year 2018-2019, with 17% of students getting pregnant and 13% married. School dropouts were also three times higher, at 26% of students. By contrast, of the students enrolled on Temwa's bursary scheme, during the last year only 8% of students dropped out, one due to pregnancy and the other due to marriage, with no cases recorded in the previous year. Based on this data and anecdotal evidence from focus group discussions, **the bursary students appear to not have been as badly affected by the pandemic as the general student population.** The bursaries have specifically helped to protect girls from early marriage and to keep them in school.

Out of interviewed female graduates, 57% were not yet married. Most of the graduated young women said that they first wanted to get educated and reach financial stability before starting a family. In a rural setting, it is unusual for women over the age of 20 to not yet be married, which shows the notable impact that the opportunity to access secondary education has had on the life and livelihood views and choices of the beneficiaries. **About 85% of previous graduates, including the same percentage of women, also said that they are now more able to make their own life decisions,** including age of marriage and career choices, even if still living with their parents or guardians. Both beneficiaries and community stakeholders widely appreciated the target of 60% of girls, noting that deliberate policies are key to improving access to education for girls. The bursary is motivating for the girls, but also helps to change social and cultural perceptions about girls' education and creates role models for future generations of female learners.

Broadened life opportunities

78% of interviewees strongly felt that being on bursary improved their wellbeing and motivation to pursue their dreams. Based on previous discussions with the bursary beneficiaries, their secondary school education and complementary mentoring and motivational talks have inspired them to explore different opportunities and to seek employment, self-employment or further education. School has widened their awareness of possible paths beyond traditional agricultural livelihoods and the steps to achieve those. Common career ambitions include healthcare or social work, teaching, journalism, agricultural extension work, running a business and joining the army. However, possibly about half to two-thirds of the beneficiaries may now have left Nkhata Bay North, and despite continuous search over the past few months, Temwa's team has not yet been able to make contact with over half of previous graduates. Based on interviews with available graduates and anecdotal information from focus group discussions about other

beneficiaries, it appears that **some have found employment elsewhere in Malawi or abroad, while others have set up their own businesses, are engaged in agricultural livelihoods or are in further professional or vocational education**². It may be that some of the most interesting stories are yet to emerge from previous students who we have not yet reached. Case studies will be produced on these graduates in due course; see below one success story of Alice Wana, a female beneficiary studying to become a teacher.

Comparing the life opportunities of bursary and non-bursary students, it emerges that those who are lucky to have funding from their guardians for secondary school, also have better chances to pursue their dreams after graduation. This is due to their families having more money to financially support them, whether to resit exams to improve grades or to fund tertiary education in public or private institutions. **A common pattern amongst bursary students who have not met admissions criteria for further education is to try to resit Form 4 or Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) exams**, although their family finances often make it difficult to fund the additional attempts of exams. What motivates them to keep trying is the hope of being awarded a governmental scholarship at a public university and college.

“This new Alice wanted to excel and break the family poverty chain”



Alice Wana comes from a large family and has nine siblings, only five of whom are currently attending school, at primary level. She feels lucky to have completed secondary school – thanks to the bursary she received from Temwa. When at school, Alice’s parents had no means of earning money and struggled to provide food for the family, let alone the fees to send Alice and her siblings to school.

Alice, like many children in Malawi, was arranged to be married in Form 3 because her family could no longer afford the school fees. In 2016, when Temwa was recruiting new bursary students, her school in Khondowe presented a list of vulnerable learners and Alice’s name was among them. As a disadvantaged but talented student, Alice was offered the bursary which would pay the fees for her to stay in school. It changed the way she viewed her life.

“The suitor came to marry me, but when Temwa said they will pay for all my school requirements until I graduate from secondary school, I chose to pursue my dreams.”

Alice is now 20 years old. After successfully receiving her Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) qualification, she was accepted into tertiary education at Karonga Teacher Training College. She is currently in her second year working towards her goal of becoming a primary school teacher. Even though not yet qualified, Alice helps her peers and primary school children who are struggling with school in Khondowe.

“I have earned respect and a voice in the community. I am not yet a teacher but people are already addressing me as one. People see Temwa making a change in the community. Out of 10 people in my community, only a few make it further and I am glad to be one of them.”

Her dream is to one day become a secondary school teacher and then a lecturer at a college, representing her community proudly: “I am the number one benefit to my community because I now represent my community wherever I go. As a teacher I will teach with passion to make sure more and more children in my community get educated.”

² Numbers to be confirmed once a greater proportion of previous graduates have been directly reached for an interview.

Positive educational outcomes

The bursary students are generally found to work hard, but their own backgrounds, often with multiple vulnerabilities, affect their performance. This is further exacerbated by the lower quality of education in these rural settings, where the schools are poorly resourced and under-staffed and there are no science laboratories or even curriculum books for student use. Bursary students do therefore sometimes struggle and fail their exams. The evaluation found, however, that the schools have developed very good systems to support students, including remedial studies, study groups, counselling, rewards for best performers, competitions and at one school, even a special fund to incentivise teachers to offer extra-curricular activities. Despite the challenging circumstances, some students also do really well and **a few of Temwa's bursary beneficiaries have been recognised to be among the best academic performers in their schools.** Teachers also acknowledged the good conduct of students on Temwa's bursary.

96% of evaluation respondents strongly felt that the bursary helped them stay focused on school and work hard in class. The basic package of support has included the payment of tuition and exam fees, material support such as stationery and school uniforms as well as regular home visits and monitoring visits. In addition, during the past five years, Temwa has trialled various forms of complementary support, with funding from other donors, such as a mentoring scheme, health monitoring and mosquito nets specifically targeting bursary students. We have set up school libraries at all six Community Day Secondary Schools and across local primary schools, and further developed services at the Usisya Community Library. This has improved access to curriculum books and complementary reading materials, and created a conducive learning environment for students who do not have adequate facilities to study at home. We also built a girls' hostel and toilets at Usisya Community Day Secondary School that have benefited bursary students too. **Complementary support is emerging as a key factor in improving and maintaining student motivation and performance.**

As noted above, non-bursary students have the financial means to attend school and improved opportunities to pursue their dreams after graduation. However, according to teachers, **school dropout rates are lower among bursary students, with almost everyone transitioning from one school year to the next.** This was evidenced by Temwa's assessment on the educational impacts of Covid-19 too (see above). The teachers and community stakeholders attribute this to the motivating impact of the bursary, which also makes parents, teachers and fellow students encourage the bursary students to achieve their academic goals. Temwa's regular support visits were recognised as another factor that helps with good retention and attainment.

Broader community benefits

The bursary has a huge impact on the families of the beneficiaries, as it reduces the financial burden on parents and guardians. As most have large families, **it allows parents to focus on meeting the basic needs and other obligations within the families.** As the students graduate, it brings a prospect of additional income and support. At least one former graduate is currently funding siblings through school through his small-scale gardening business.

The evaluation found that upon completion of secondary school education, most of the former beneficiaries are active in their communities. **70% of interviewed previous graduates are directly involved in community development initiatives,** for example, through community youth networks on climate resilience or reforestation activities. One previous graduate has joined a local drama group that is engaged in various awareness-raising campaigns in Chikwina and neighbouring areas. Graduates have also assisted younger siblings or other children with their learning.

The bursary scheme also has broader educational benefits. The availability of bursary support at secondary level has been found to motivate primary school students to learn. According to interviewed teachers, it is also positively affecting school profiles and helping encourage secondary school enrolment and retention.

Trusted bursary provider

The schools keep a register of students in need of bursary support that is based on robust community stakeholder checks. **The number of students needing bursary support has risen from 29% of all enrolled students in 2016 to a staggering 47% in 2021.** This is due to persistent economic hardships in the rural communities, but also due to reduction or withdrawal of bursaries by other providers and gradual increases in school fees.

There are about 10 bursary providers funding students at the same schools as Temwa. With 25-31 bursary students supported each year, **the scale of Temwa's support has been significant, with around 32% of all bursaries being awarded by Temwa in the past five years.** An average 4% of all students enrolled in Community Day Secondary Schools each year have been on Temwa's bursary. Based on community feedback during the evaluation, **our bursary scheme has become highly valued by the communities thanks to its reliability and long-term commitment of support.** We have established strong relationships with the schools and local governance and the security of support is motivating for the students.

Household incomes tend to fluctuate with seasonality of agricultural production, affecting school access and retention, as students are commonly sent home due to delays in fee payments or lack of uniforms. To the credit of Temwa, even if our payment would have been delayed for some reason, students on our bursary have barely ever been sent home, since the schools know that we have always paid all fees. Our community-driven approach that emphasises school and community ownership in bursary decisions was also commended and improves community satisfaction with our scheme.

Future recommendations

Below are the key recommendations from the evaluation stakeholders for future support.

- **Adequacy of basic material support** – Many respondents said that the basic package of material support is not currently enough to meet the basic needs of education. Provision of uniforms only every two years means that students grow out of them or they get too worn-out, putting them at risk of being turned away due to non-compliance with school policy. Most beneficiaries also trek long distances to school, so the provision of school bags would help them to carry all their school materials, especially during the rainy season. Not having enough stationary, such as notebooks, has led many students to engage in piecework during school time to pay for extra supplies, which reduces time spent on studying.
- **Complementary material support** – There is a huge demand for more curriculum books, as only teachers often have access to textbooks. The Usisya Community Library has some curriculum books, but many students are unable to refer to books outside of lessons, which affects their performance. Most of the beneficiaries come from homes where there is no electricity, so the provision of torches would be useful, so students can study in the evenings. Many students miss school due to waterborne diseases from the contaminated water that they drink, so the provision of simple water filters, that only cost £12, would assist their education and reduce school days lost to illness.
- **Complementary motivational support** – Bursary beneficiaries would also benefit greatly from an expanded programme of motivational and career support, including career talks, role model visits (for example by previous graduates) and the organisation of trips to industries and universities. This would further inspire students to perform well and guide them in their life choices.
- **Tailored support for girls** – As noted above, girls are at a much higher risk of dropping out of school. On top of the cultural challenges, some major practical issues they face are a lack of sanitary products and fatigue from the long walk to school, which results in them missing classes. The Usisya girls' hostel and improvised girls' hostels solve the issue of long distance, but girls still find it very difficult to sustain themselves when boarding, as their families have very low income.

A special self-boarding package at these hostels would not be expensive, but would allow the girls to better concentrate on their studies.

- **Resitting MSCE exams** – If a student fails their MSCE exam or performs poorly, they can get stuck not being able to afford to resit, but also not being able to progress into further education or employment. Half of the students in 2020 failed their MSCE exams, largely due to Covid-19 school closures. Allowing students to resit a year more often or creating a system for paying exam fees for resits would hugely help them.
- **Focus support on government schools** – There are many more students who need bursaries than those who have a chance to get one. Temwa can give three students government school bursaries for the cost of one boarding school bursary, so the communities recommend focusing on more government school bursaries.
- **Linking bursary families with Temwa's other projects** – To improve student performance and wellbeing, where possible, Temwa wants to strengthen the connection of bursary families with other projects to improve their food and income security. If the families are included in livelihood support schemes, the students will be less likely to have to support the family through piecework, and will be able to focus more on their studies.
- **Small-scale infrastructure support** – The lack or poor quality of facilities such as school buildings, school libraries, science laboratories and hostels is detrimental to the academic performance of the students. Although infrastructure is largely outside of Temwa's remit, funding for small-scale projects, such as latrines at school, is possible, while our aim is to also gradually build community skills in their own resource mobilisation, through capacity building of local and school governance.

Final Comments

Temwa is incredibly grateful for the generous, long-term commitment and support from the Nick Webber Trust and a generous individual supporter towards the bursary scheme. The scheme is highly respected and trusted by the communities, schools and local governance because of the reliability and continuity of the support, thanks to your long-term commitment.

As most of the beneficiary families are vulnerable and can struggle to meet even their basic needs, this scheme has increased household financial stability, even in times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. It has also brought hope of a better future for students and their families from these disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of the beneficiaries would not have been able to access secondary education without this support, and it has inspired and motivated them to carry on with their education despite numerous external hardships and to aim higher in life. The impacts are particularly significant for girls.