



## Temwa Provider-Initiated HIV Testing and Counselling Report – March 2022

This report shares the achievements of Temwa's Provider-Initiated HIV Testing and Counselling Project from January 2021 to February 2022. In 2019-2020, Temwa responded to community requests and helped introduce provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling at two of the five local health centres in Nkhata Bay North. The project has over the last year been expanded to the remaining three health centres. By reaching every health centre in Nkhata Bay North, this project is making HIV services more easily accessible to a population of 55,000 people.

Like elsewhere in the world, Malawi experienced new waves of Covid-19 during 2021, following the emergence of new variants. There has been very little governmental support for Covid-19 awareness, testing or vaccines in Nkhata Bay North to help prevent transmission. At the same time, 16% of the population in Nkhata Bay North are HIV-positive, higher than the national average of 8%. Recent regional studies have found that Covid-19 presents a higher mortality risk for HIV-positive individuals, especially if they are not receiving antiretroviral treatment. Due to the increased risks, expanding the provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling approach has been very timely. This approach, recommended by the World Health Organisation, means that everyone who comes to a clinic is automatically offered a HIV test. It is more important than ever to ensure communities have access to HIV testing, know their status, and are able to access treatment.

### Community health achievements

We are proud to report that, during the reporting period, the project has helped reduce stigma and improve access to HIV testing through the following achievements:

#### Outcome 1: Increased community knowledge about health

Improved understanding about health issues helps community members make informed decisions about their personal health. It also helps them assess the importance and effectiveness of risk reduction strategies, such as HIV testing and condom use. To support this, Temwa runs awareness-raising activities tailored to each community's needs. During 2021, the key focus was on improving community understanding of the provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling (PITC) approach in the communities and reducing the stigma around getting tested. Temwa worked with five health centre areas, where **our awareness events directly reached 1,360 community members of all ages (45% women)**. The topics covered included HIV prevention, testing, treatment adherence, and the provider-initiated approach. While event attendance was lower than originally planned due to Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings, we are planning to conduct additional events over the next couple of months. The benefit of face-to-face meetings is that community members can interact with and ask questions from local health officials.

Community members can also access information about HIV at the five health centres, which are visited by up to a few thousand people each month. At these clinics, staff talk through the approach with patients when offering the HIV test to them. Furthermore, radio programmes were broadcast to raise awareness about the provider-initiated approach, HIV and AIDS in general, and Covid-19 prevention. These **radio programmes were estimated to have reached up to 20,000 people** in the lakeshore and uplands areas of Nkhata Bay North.

Reportedly, following the introduction of the provider-initiated HIV testing approach, **cases of people refusing HIV testing have reduced in all five health facilities by up to 75%.**

## Outcome 2: Improved community health services

The five local health centres in Nkhata Bay North 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 health services within these remote communities. We work closely with health centres and local governance structures, such as Area and Village Development Committees, to ensure local ownership of planning, implementing, and sustaining activities. In line with Temwa’s community-led approach, this project was designed with the support of the Nkhata Bay District AIDS Coordinating Committee and has been implemented in accordance with the Malawi Government’s guidance for HIV services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the Malawi Government has recommended using the provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling approach for a while, most local health centres have not been able to fully adopt this due to lack of knowledge and skills. **Across all five targeted health facilities, 100 members of local governance structures**, including representatives of Health Management Committees, Area Development Committees and chiefs, **were trained on their roles and responsibilities in HIV service provision and the creation of local strategies.** This also involved knowledge exchanges between new areas and ones where the project has already been running. More technical training was conducted for **56 health centre staff in Bula, Khondowe and Ruarwe** where this approach was introduced in 2021. Refresher training sessions were attended by **46 health centre staff in Chikwina and Usisya** where this project was introduced in 2020. The increased understanding of HIV should allow health staff to support patients better, provide information informally, and to give staff the confidence to offer the provider-initiated support.

Like elsewhere in the world, over the last two years, the main focus of the healthcare service in these rural communities has been on responding to the Covid-19 crisis. However, this project has laid strong foundations for provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling to be delivered as a standard service. Review sessions held with the facilities have shown that the provider-initiated approach has already been widely adopted: for instance, based on the latest available data, **90% of HIV tests at the Usisya health centre were provider-initiated, with 70% of those tested having never had a test before.**

Finally, as some villages have very limited access to healthcare provision due to their hard-to-reach location, **Temwa has worked with health centres to support provision of mobile services to these remote communities.** In 2021, these outreach clinics reached 378 community members in remote areas, 60% of whom had never been tested for HIV previously. We are pleased to report that, of those who tested positive, everyone started antiretroviral treatment.

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## Community story: “People come from very far areas to access services at this hospital”

*Linda Ziba is a nurse at Bula hospital and has been involved in Temwa’s Provider-Initiated HIV Testing and Counselling Project. Before the project began, patients at the hospital often feared the HIV testing process and insisted that they were only treated for the illness they were currently presenting.*

*Since Temwa’s involvement, provider-initiated HIV testing and counselling has become a normal part of client consultation. Linda has seen how community knowledge on the approach has greatly improved, and patients are less afraid or aggressive when they are referred.*



*She says that she now frequently advises her clients to be tested: "I have lost count of my referrals!"*

*Linda says that mobile clinics have been hugely important to the success of this project, particularly when reaching people who have never been tested for HIV before. Bula hospital serves communities who are often located very far away, so helping those patients can be challenging. The hospital contacted Temwa to support outreach events and mobile clinics to reach those living in more remote areas. Through the clinics, access to health services and HIV testing has increased, and Linda hopes that they will be able to reach even more communities with Temwa's continued support.*

### **Community story: "I was physically fit, and I couldn't believe those were my results..."**

*55-year-old Tymon Katawa from Ruarwe is the chairperson of the Ruarwe HIV Support Group. The group was established by Temwa many years ago, and has been running independently for a few years, with some support from other organisations. The group currently has 45 members and continues to be a huge source of health and wellbeing support for people living with HIV in Ruarwe.*

*When Tymon was first diagnosed in 2007, he didn't believe the results. Being a physically fit person, he was shocked at the news. Thanks to Temwa's work with local HIV Support Groups in Nkhata Bay North, Tymon was able to receive help which helped him come to terms with his status. "It took counselling, guidance and support from the healthcare providers and friends for me to accept my condition and come into the open about it."*



*The expansion of the Provider-Initiated HIV Testing and Counselling Project to the Ruarwe area in 2021 has meant that more people like Tymon can have access to HIV services. People who test positive can be referred to the HIV Support Group for peer support. The group also raises awareness of HIV within their community and encourages people to get tested, so that they can receive the support and treatment they need.*