Voices from the Field: “Twinning” for sustainability in Malawi
By Chenai Kadungure, Cuso International Volunteer, Malawi (May 2019)

Those who work in the sector know that international development is sometimes criticized for causing dependency, exploiting the communities it is meant to serve, or being a waste of time. Yet, as an international development worker and Cuso International Volunteer, I stand on the side of hope. And so far, in my practical experience with the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) in Malawi, SANI is proving to be a project with a positive impact on the ground.

Specifically, I volunteer with four of the Interagency Coalition on AIDS ad Development (ICAD)’s twinning partners in Malawi. As a SANI partner, ICAD is leading a capacity-building initiative to improve the health outcomes of women living with HIV and children living with and/or affected by HIV in Malawi and Zambia. The ultimate aim is to contribute to the reduction of maternal and child mortality in targeted regions.

This capacity-building initiative is being accomplished through four “twinning partnerships” between organizations in Canada and in selected districts in Malawi and Zambia. Small grants have been awarded to selected organizations to implement 18-month community projects that focus on gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV and nutrition/food security.

Twinning is a formal, substantive collaboration between two or more organizations. Twinning encourages civil society organizations to collaborate and form partnerships with like-minded organizations in other countries or regions and provides a platform for the two-way exchange of knowledge, expertise and strengthening of capacity on specific project related approaches, strategies, interventions, and lessons learned from local contexts. In the collaborations that I have personally seen in my work so far, the enhanced capacity achieved by sharing resources enables organizations to take on larger projects and/or to scale up faster.

The SOUTHERN AFRICAN NUTRITION INITIATIVE (SANI) is a 24,652,087 million CAD project to address undernutrition in women of reproductive age (15-49) and children under 5 in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. SANI is a partnership between CARE, Cuso International, the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD), McGill University, and the Governments of implementing countries. The project is funded by the Government of Canada, CARE, and the Canadian public. SANI is a four-year and six-month project, from March 2016 to September 2020.
The fact is, lack of food security has a direct impact on HIV prevention and treatment efforts leading to worse health outcomes and higher health care costs. As such, ICAD partners are working to improve health outcomes through interventions like supporting community gardens, which are a source of healthy and affordable food. These gardens, with seeds sponsored by SANI and land offered by support group members, offer people better nutrition and create a source of income. SANI partners are working with community structures, such as support groups for people living with HIV, to train community members around nutrition, food preparation and preservation, adherence to anti-retroviral treatment. Partners are working to address the nutrition needs specific to people living with HIV in a safe and non-stigmatizing space. SANI partners are also supporting Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA)s, which enable self-managed groups of 20 to 30 people to have a safe place to save access loans and obtain emergency insurance.

What we see in SANI is that local people have full ownership, local people are empowered, and they vow to continue doing the work long after the project is over. The lifeblood of the project rests on local hands, local minds and local hearts. A key focus of SANI is training and equipping health care workers and community leaders (and building links between these groups) so that the work will continue when the project ends. This means district hospitals and agricultural bodies, for instance, will be able to better serve their constituents. I have seen first-hand how myths impact community health practices, and how interventions focused on mentoring mothers and fathers as well as community champions, whether male or female, have a lasting impact.

Stigma and fear around HIV continue to lead people to avoid testing or cause those with HIV to fall off their treatment plans. Gender imbalances also impact access to and adherence to treatment. Support groups and Mentor Mothers, who focus on educating and supporting their peers, are influencing community members to get tested and start or stay on treatment. Communities working together are breaking down the stigma and fear around HIV.

The changes are evident and the progress is happening. Through the work of its partners like ICAD, SANI is showing that local ownership of development projects and a holistic approach to inter-related causes are key to sustainability.

*PAWOC = Passion for Women and Children, a local organization working in SRHR.*

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