

**Project Title:** Creative Solutions for Sustainable Designs

**Country:** Malawi

**Nominating College:** Skidmore College

**Project Leader:** Novilhelha Moleni '22

**Partner Institution:** Chifumbe Community Based Organization

### **Summary**

Creative solutions for sustainable Designs Centre is a vocational learning centre where widows, orphans and those living under the poverty line in Malawi can learn how to design and make clothes. In order to build their skills and become self dependent. This vocational centre is also a way of uniting the Chifumbe community through celebrating the Malawi culture and educating the orphans and women in the community.

### **Project Description**

Malawi is ranked 172 out of 189 in the United Nations' Human Development Index, with over 71% of Malawians living below the poverty line<sup>1</sup>. Poverty in Malawi is very high, and it manifests itself in various indicators, such as in the economy, education and healthcare, rendering it one of Africa's poorest nations. In addition to the fact that an estimated 1 million Malawians are living with HIV/AIDS. HIV/ AIDs has caused so many deaths in Malawi, leaving children parentless without a home sometimes. Having lived seeing many people including family and friends suffer from HIV/ AIDS, it has always been a passion of mine to create a future for communities who have been affected by the HIV epidemic. One of the solutions is to provide communities with skills building opportunities and that's why I choose to work with the Chifumbe Community based Organization (CBO) that is located in area 50, rural outskirts of Lilongwe city. Founded in 2000, Chifumbe CBO is made up of 95 individuals, who consist of orphans, widows, the elderly and people living with HIV. The organisation works toward bringing together the Fumbe community but they lack several resources that can help in scaling people's skills. The community has weekly meetings where volunteers from the Lighthouse Organization in Malawi, bring a nurse practitioner to teach the community the importance of drinking the Antiretrovirals drugs, practicing safe sex, and living past the stigma associated with HIV/AIDs. Apart from that, the women visit the elderly every Thursday to cheer them up in their respective homes. Every month, the members contribute 98 cents that collectively amounts to 5 dollars which is used to buy the orphans items such as school uniforms, food, clothes. However this collective amount is never enough to support all the orphans, the widows and elderly.

### **Challenges the CBO Faces and How the Project Brought Solutions**

The organisation is made up of a diverse group of people (45 widows, 30 orphans, 10 elderly and 5 disabled). There was only a program to support people living with HIV mainly because there was no outside financial support to develop the community. Building a sewing design centre helps the people come together collectively and learn a new skill. Several of the widows do not have a job, or activity to keep them busy during the day, which leads many to beg in the streets, or become prostitutes. Having the women now learning how to make clothes, brings them together, to share skills, and have time to make themselves better. These skills can then lead them later to teach others in the community but also start their own enterprises. Apart from that the collective monthly money that is raised amongst themselves is far from being enough to buy clothes for the orphans, the centre will be used to train the people in the community to make school uniforms for the orphans and clothes as well. Our Project for Peace received moral support from the chief of the Fumble community. I was able to connect with the

Malawi government official who is in charge of the broader community, Honourable Jiya, who gave a donation of \$50 to support the creative solutions in the Fumbe community. The project will continue ongoing, as I received so much support. For instance, after announcing the project to people in Saratoga Springs where Skidmore College is located, I received so many donations in books, clothes, and toys which were shipped to Malawi in May. The Fumbe community still needs support in structuring the organisation and creating more creative opportunities for mostly the women and young girls. Right now, I plan to fundraise money so that the women can start farming corn and soybeans, which will enable the community to have food all year round. Since the organisation is already registered, I plan to partner with more New York organisations who would like to work in volunteer programs in Africa, as the orphans would like an after school program where they can learn English and get tutoring lessons. Right now, we have established an all-community meeting which will be happening every Saturday, where everyone comes together, and receives training on sewing for the orphans. The widows meet daily to practise sewing and to make clothes for the orphans and elderly.

### **Reflection**

The project was the definition of resilience. We had to be agile to changes in the broader environment. I had previously identified a different program partner, but when I arrived to begin the project, the original partner declined to participate. I took several weeks to look for another community or organisation that needed support. I put word out in the city and that is when I came to learn of Chifumbe Community Based Organization. I visited the organisation's premises and talked to the people, who were very welcoming. From them I learnt that their monthly contributions are what supports the organisation. The people want to see a difference in their lives but do not have adequate resources. We brainstormed ideas together, we sang Malawian songs and danced together in celebrating our culture. I strongly connected to everyone and heard their stories of survival. Some shared that they were beggars, prostitutes, security guards, widows, or orphans struggling to stay in school. We all created a community of support and peace together in knowing that making and designing clothes is our one step toward fighting the cycle of poverty in the community. One challenge was that I found Malawi to be in a horrible economic state, where the Malawi kwacha was being devalued and the value of the dollar was fluctuating everyday. I had planned to buy four sewing machines but ended up having to adjust the budget to buy two so we could have the new building completed. I could not walk to the organisation as it was too far from home and because of rising gas prices transportation was very expensive throughout the project.

### **Personal Statement**

This project made me realise the importance of peace in finding solutions that address challenges like poverty in a community where education is a privilege, even food is a scarcity. Being present to build a centre, engage in conversations, and listen to people's daily lives of struggle has inspired me to keep living the words of Nelson Mandela: "It is in your hands, to make a better world for all who live in it." This project will enable women, some who are widowed mothers living in absolute poverty, orphans, girls and disabled people to discover a new skill for themselves and come together to grow the Fumbe Community while celebrating the Malawi culture.