The Power of Film: Spreading Family Planning Messages in Malawi

Health Systems Strengthening [2]

Cross-posted from the K4Health Blog [3].

The overhead lights dim and in the dark, the high-spirited rhythm and melodic line of a Malawian song rises and overtakes the quiet buzz of conversation. We are seated in a large auditorium at the International Conference on Family Planning [4] in Dakar, Senegal and watching the first film focused on the K4Health Malawi project [5] in a festival hosted by Population Services International (PSI) [6].

The film festival is a rich visual and audio break in an intense day filled with technical presentations and serious conversations about what works in programs that promote reproductive health and family planning.

The District Hospital Band in Nkhotakota performs much of the music that accompanies the film about the K4 Health Malawi Project. Their songs package and deliver important messages to patients about public health, tuberculosis, family planning, and more—affirming the information coming from doctors and health workers. The film revealed the impressive power of music to move an idea into reality.

Reach Families Where They Live

Over the course of 18 months, this small project has transformed health delivery for thousands of families in two large districts. The project puts three simple, scalable interventions into play:

- Create an online repository [7] of health-related tools and clinical resources.
• Establish **web-enabled learning centers** in district hospitals, which connect health workers to the online repository.
• Distribute **mobile phones** to 77 percent of front-line health workers in the program area.

This film’s narrator is Thokozani “Thoko” Bema, who leads the Malawi project team. He threads a clear path through project activities and unpacks the results in a way that makes sense of the interventions at work in this project. We meet health workers and clinicians, and we get to see—at the village level—what happens when a woman is sick and, because of K4Health, able to access immediate treatment.

Thoko explains the **innovation** here: how the commonplace technologies of Internet capability and mobile phones can reach families where they live with the information and health services they need to create smaller, healthier families. The project also creates **empowerment**—what happens when you provide the small miracle connecting health workers in remote locations with the very latest clinical data and care protocols.

K4Health Malawi generates its most striking results at the village level, where a **simple mobile phone is actually a lifeline in the hands of a trained health worker**. Mobile phones make it possible for front-line health workers to greatly increase the territory they can cover. Travel costs drop by 90 percent when cheap, fast SMS (texting) technology replaces bike rental. The frequency of stock-outs drops, because it becomes easy to report when supplies are getting low. Referrals are fast and efficient. A health worker talks about a big rise in self-confidence and effectiveness. And, most significantly, healthcare workers with mobile phones can save the lives of men, women, and children who otherwise might have died.

**Sustainability is within reach.** K4Health Malawi is one of the lucky few pilot projects in which the Ministry of Health has taken a serious interest. Ministry officials plan to include Internet connectivity and SMS costs in their budgets. And, moving forward, they have offered to maintain and grow the online repository (**K4Health Malawi Toolkits [7]**).

“These films put a human face to the work,” noted PSI president, Karl Hofmann, who opened the film festival.

How right he is. The camera brings our project to life in a vivid and human way—hard to forget, hard to walk away from.

**Watch the K4Health Malawi [5] video.**

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**cell phones [8], Family Planning [9], International Conference on Family Planning [10], K4Health [11], Knowledge for Health [12], Malawi [13], mobile health [14], mobile technology [15], music [16], Population Services International (PSI) [17], reproductive health [18], scalability [19], sustainability [20], texting [21], The District Hospital Band [22], Thokozani ?Thoko? Bema [23], video [24]**

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