

SCOPE SUCCESS STORY

MALAWI



Discussions with the chiefs at Mpunga under-five clinic.

USAID/World Relief: Photo by Patrick Kantwanje, SCOPE Project Supervisor

NAME AND ROLE

Felita Kamowa, Health Surveillance Assistant

LOCATION

Nkoola Traditional Authority, Malawi

SUMMARY

An increase in maternal deaths led local chiefs and Health Surveillance Assistants in Nkoola Traditional Authority to sound the alarm and create change in their community.

[WORLDRELIEF.ORG/SCOPE](https://www.worldrelief.org/scope)

CHIEFS AND HEALTH SURVEILLANCE ASSISTANTS PARTNER TO TACKLE MATERNAL MORTALITY

Malawi has made great progress in the reduction of maternal and child mortality in the past thirty years, but there is still work to do for families in Malawi to survive and thrive. Nkoola Traditional Authority has a population of 87,930, of which almost 10% are women of childbearing age.

Seeking medical assistance during labor and delivery reduces the risk of birth complications and death. To encourage women to seek care, Nkoola has laws and by-laws requiring that women deliver their children in a health facility. If a mother does not deliver at a health facility, she is fined based on agreed-upon amounts developed by local chiefs and village health committees.

Despite these laws, there is an increasing number of women delivering at home and only seeking medical help after delivering. In the past three years, there have been three maternal deaths in the Mpiri Health Center catchment area: two due to complications of delivery and one as a result of delivering at home.

GRAPPLING WITH LOSS

Everyone in the community was feeling the weight of these losses. Women in Malawi often hide their pregnancies and choose not to disclose until they are obviously pregnant. One woman declined care from the Health Surveillance Assistant throughout her pregnancy, first stating she wasn't pregnant, and when labor started, she delivered at home with the help of her grandmother. Due to complications

with her delivery, the young woman died the following day.

CHIEFS AND HEALTH SURVEILLANCE ASSISTANTS WORKING TOGETHER TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED

This rise in home births, despite the risks involved, prompted the chiefs to approach Felita Kamowa, a Health Surveillance Assistant in the area, on why this might be and how they could tackle the growing trend. Health Surveillance Assistants are Malawi's cadre of community health workers who play a vital role in connecting the community with the formal healthcare sector.

Through the help of Felita, the chiefs came to understand the fears that caused mothers to deliver at home. Women are afraid of being referred to Liwonde District Hospital, the main referral hospital.

This hospital is very far from the community; thus, it is a challenge to afford the daily costs of staying in the hospital. Others had experienced stillbirths at the hospital, a challenge often from prolonged labor, and believed doctors were killing their unborn babies. Hearing about these experiences, those giving birth to their first baby were often afraid to go.

Because of this discovery, Felicia incorporated more information on giving birth in the facility into her health talks. Felicia has since been talking with mothers about why referrals to the district hospital happen and taking more time to address their fears.

In addition to the fears, Felicia and the chiefs realized that the fines for delivering at home punished mothers but not their partners. The chiefs plan to meet with the Traditional Authority to see how they could encourage men to take responsibility for getting their partners to a health facility for births.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Chiefs and Health Surveillance Assistants working together is a critical step in helping to make changes in Nkoola Traditional Authority. Progress has been made, but there is still work to be done to decrease home births. Through the Health Surveillance Assistant working in partnership with Care Groups, these challenges will continue to be addressed.

This story is written by Patrick Kantwanje, World Relief Project Supervisor for Nkoola Traditional Authority.