



# A call to roll out a comprehensive physical activities program in Malawi's civil service

## The burden of Non-Communicable diseases in Malawi's civil service

Malawi is struggling to manage the increasing challenge of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in addition to an already high communicable disease burden. The high burden of NCDs highlights the need to address the prevailing risk factors. Physical inactivity is one of the leading risk factors for NCDs. Malawi is undergoing rapid urbanization which is associated with lifestyle changes including changes in physical activities with 24% inactivity in urban as compared to 9% in rural areas<sup>1</sup>. The concern for NCDs therefore becomes a pressing issue.

## Physical activity policies on paper only

Efforts by Government of Malawi show a commitment to address NCDs through the National Health Promotion Policy and a National Sports Policy. The policies focus on promoting community participation in physical activity. However, a study looking at population level interventions to tackle NCDs shows there is hardly implementation on the ground<sup>2</sup>. Even though some initiatives like the Sports for Health initiative was launched to promote physical activity at the workplace among the civil service, implementation is sporadic and not supported by a national program.

The sedentary and stressful nature of civil servants' work renders them high risk for developing NCDs such as Diabetes, Hypertension and cardiovascular diseases. Research shows that NCDs account for 40% of deaths in Malawi<sup>3</sup>. Physical exercise in the civil service is therefore increasingly important. The policies by the Government and Statutory corporations, although well-meaning have suffered suboptimal implementation because there are no scheduled activities and responsible persons for implementation of the physical activities.

## What can the Office of Nutrition and HIV/Aids do?

- 1 Ensure that each government ministry includes physical activity in its mandate and coordinates a schedule of physical activities.
- 2 Advocate for the introduction of incentives to encourage the participation of all civil servants in planned physical activities
- 3 Provide staff with dedicated time, at least 30 minutes within the work day to engage in some form of physical activity that does not impinge on their personal time
- 4 Work with the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to develop sports facilities and infrastructure that allow mass participation



## Key stakeholder observations on the implementation of physical activities policy

1 The physical activity policy by the Government and Statutory corporations are not enforced and translated into a national program

2 Absence of scheduled exercises and responsible personnel in the civil service, lead to a lack of motivation from civil servants to participate in physical activities.

3 Given the short amount of time in the day between work duties, civil servants struggle with competing priorities between physical exercises and personal errands

## Implications of implementing the recommendations

The implementation of planned physical activities within the civil service will have numerous benefits, there is need to ensure there is no divergence between policy and practice and have the commitment of all stakeholders.

The capacity of the office of Nutrition and HIV/Aids which is the responsible office will need to be strengthened to include NCD awareness and sensitization. The members of staff within this office will require training so that they are able to facilitate NCD education and the coordination of physical exercise programs. NCD education and advocacy is necessary to influence decision making and address any potential resistance from civil servants. Furthermore, there is a need to direct funds to this program and to partner with the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development as well as relevant city councils to ensure there is an environment which is conducive for physical activity.

Civil servants will have better health outcomes and be able to prevent NCDs. Studies indicate that less physical activity is associated with more sick leave days (3.5 times more). Even though the government will be required to invest in its human resources and infrastructure, it will bear less financial costs associated with medical expenses in the long run.



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### REFERENCES

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