



HPTN 084 EXCITES

Cabotegravir injection is nine times more superior to oral truvada for HIV prevention



HPTN 084 protocol co-chair Prof. Mina Hosseinipour and some HPTN 084 team members during a press briefing held on November 11 2020.

Researchers from the HIV Prevention Trials Network (HPTN) announced on November 9, 2020 data from the HPTN 084 clinical trial indicated that a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) regimen of long-acting cabotegravir (CAB LA) injections once every eight weeks was safe and superior to daily oral tenofovir/emtricitabine (FTC/TDF) for HIV prevention among cisgender women in sub-Saharan Africa.

The HPTN 084 study was done in 20 sites in 7 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa namely: Malawi, Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

In Malawi the study was done in Lilongwe by UNC Project and in Blantyre by the John Hopkins Research Project. 111 and 113 participants were enrolled in Lilongwe and Blantyre, respectively.

Prof. Mina Hosseinipour, HPTN 084 protocol co-chair, professor of medicine at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill School of Medicine and Scientific Director of UNC Project-Malawi told local press that results from the study were really

important for HIV prevention in women as they could have a potentially discrete method to use.

"Because it's (cabotegravir) an injection, they can do this without necessarily engaging their partner; they can make independent decisions. There is no pill they have to store, which might be concerning to them, and they don't have to remember to take the pill everyday," she said, adding that the injectable could really make life easy for women.

She said in the two arms of the study for cabotegravir injection and Truvada pills, those taking pills had a little bit more gastrointestinal upset and nausea than those receiving the injection. Those receiving the injection further had some site reactions like pain and tenderness.

Commenting on the study results research medical officer for the HPTN 084 study at UNC Project-Malawi, Dr. Thandie Lungu Mabedi described the results as worth celebrating.

"The results are revolutionary, special thanks to our study participants and the research team for taking part in this transformative discovery in HIV prevention amongst women."

UNC Project recently made five presentations in a virtual meeting - 14th International Conference on HIV Treatment, Pathogenesis and prevention Research in Resource-Limited Settings: (INTEREST 2020) held from 30 November - 4 December 2020.



Some of the media members during the briefing.

Photos: Callisto Sekeleza



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Five presentations from UNC Project at INTEREST 2020

UNC Project recently made five presentations in a virtual meeting - 14th International Conference on HIV Treatment, Pathogenesis and prevention Research in Resource-Limited Settings (INTEREST 2020) held from 30 November - 4 December 2020.

The annual INTEREST Conference is the premier scientific conference for HIV in Africa and brings together scientists involved in HIV treatment, pathogenesis, and prevention research from around the world.

The conference showcases cutting-edge knowledge in the diagnosis and treatment of HIV and the prevention of the HIV-1 infection. It also aims to foster building a community of African physicians and scientists to facilitate the implementation of local solutions for the management of patients living with HIV-1 infection and for the prevention of HIV transmission.

The five presentations made during the virtual conference were:

1. Early Experiences of Switching to Dolutegravir in Women Enrolled in Option B+, Malawi, presented by Allan Jumbe.

2. Maternal Tenofovir Exposure in Pregnancy and Risk of Preterm Delivery Among Women Living with HIV in Malawi presented by Friday Saidi.

3. Pregnant Women at Higher Risk of Hepatotoxicity When Initiating TDF/3TC/EFV in Malawi presented by Emmanuel Singogo

4. Test and Treat, The Dilemma of the Woman in Antenatal Care in Malawi presented by Jennifer Tseka

5. Pooling Sputum Samples for GeneXpert Tb Testing in HIV Positive Women in Lilongwe, Malawi: A Cost-Saving Method presented by Jonathan Majamanda.



This is an in-house publication. Its mission is to promote a sense of community by communicating information relevant and vital to the operations and staff of UNC Project Malawi.

In a drive to increase participation and bring variety to the publication, all UNC Project staff are free and encouraged to contribute articles in this publication. Write ups are welcome in the range 400 – 600 words for event stories and a maximum of 1000 words for other more technical issues worth sharing.

Forward your contributions to:
csekeleza@uncilongwe.org

Graphic layout:



COMMUNICATIONS



Facilitators and participants on 20 October 2020 during a bacteriology SOP training at Mponela.

Fleming Fund Country Grant

Bacteriology laboratory staff oriented

Laboratory staff doing microbiology under Fleming Fund national grant on antimicrobial resistance in humans and animals were advised to put into practice lessons they learnt during a series of workshops held in the months of September and October at Mponela in Dowa.

Speaking during one of the bacteriology standard operating procedure (SOP) workshops held from 19 to 23 October 2020, Dr. Danny Chinombo from Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Luanar) said they were interested in three main types of bacteria. He added that it was a concern that poultry and daily animals received more antibiotics to fight bacteria.

He advised the participants to take the lessons they would get from the session seriously.

"Anything which is learned but is

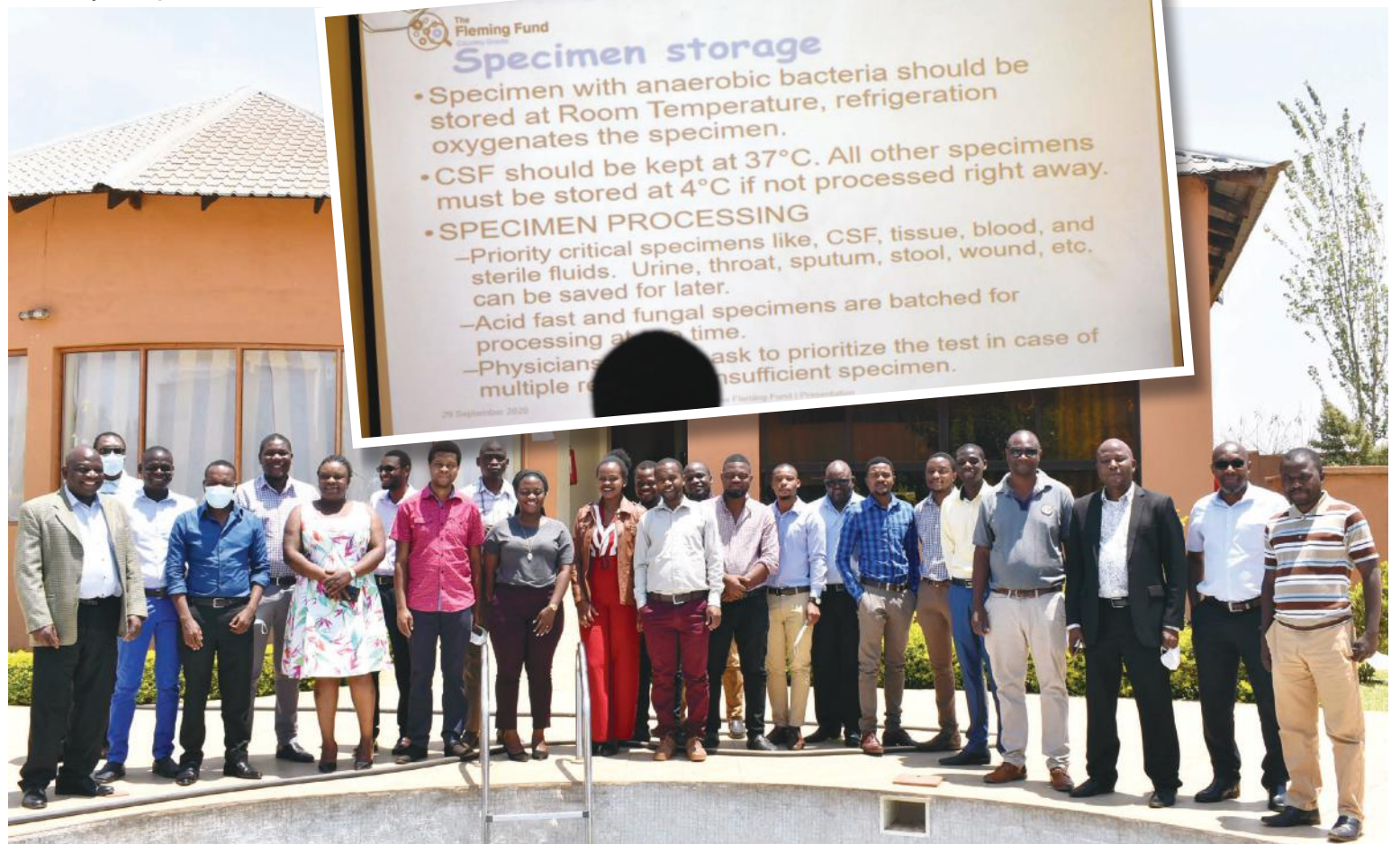
not put into practice, goes down the drain fast," he said.

Speaking during the same event, Dr. Joseph Nkhoma, desk officer for antimicrobial resistance in the department of animal health, also advised the participants to follow the SOPs and save time.

"Let's remind each other the right way of doing things. If we don't collect the right samples (for bacteriology tests), the results will also not be right," he said.

The training tackled the following topics, among others: culture protocols, identification of organisms, anti-biotic mechanisms of resistance, antimicrobial susceptibility testing, introduction to new culture protocols, storage of isolates, inventory management and introduction to database software for management and analysis of microbiology laboratory data.

Project Manager Gerald Tegha presenting during the September training.



Facilitators and participants on 29 September 2020 during a similar meeting.

Mulanje shines in integrating depression services into the NCD Clinic



A photo occasion for the review meeting participants. Below: A representative from Mulanje shows the gift.

Mulanje District Hospital was on Friday 23 October 2020 recognized by UNC Project-Malawi for its outstanding role in integrating depression services at their non-communicable diseases (NCD) clinic.

This came under the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Partnership (SHARP) for Mental Health Capacity Building programme being implemented in Malawi by UNC Project under the title 'A Clinic-Randomized Trial of Strategies to Integrate Depression Care in Malawi'.

The recognition was made during a review meeting held at UNC Project Annex Building grounds and through an award of a certificate and a wall clock to be used by staff at their base.

During the meeting UNC Project-Malawi Country Director Innocent Mofolo commended all the stakeholders from the districts where the project is being

implemented for their perseverance especially when there was a general slowdown of activities in many sectors because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not easy to do your work under these circumstances," he said.

Deputy Director of Clinical Services responsible for NCDs in the Ministry of Health Dr. Jones Masiye also highlighted that there was need to lace up integration of depression into the NCD programmes.

"Literature is telling us that in a few years to come, many diseases will have vaccines while the NCDs will remain just like they are," he said and further commended those districts which were doing better than others in the project.

Receiving the recognition Brenda Nkhonjera of Mulanje District Hospital thanked the project management for the recognition.

"We will continue working hard and we will also work on our challenges," she said.

The five-year project is operational in ten health facilities in Karonga, Chilumba, Kasungu, Salima, Mchinji, Lilongwe, Machinga, Phalombe, Zomba and Mulanje.

The study is sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The goal of the study is to have data that can help the Ministry of Health to come up with an action plan to be used to integrate mental health services into non-communicable diseases.



GEORGE JOAKI RESEARCH CENTRE SET FOR DNA AND RNA SEQUENCING



Lab staff Isaac Thengolose (L) and Chimwemwe Chinyama (R) before the newly installed equipment.

In September UNC Project Laboratories installed sequencing analyzers at the PCR laboratory at the George Joaki Research Centre at Area 18. The installation runs were successful.

According to Illumina, manufacturer of the iSeq 100, one of the equipment to be used for sequencing, the system makes next-generation sequencing easier and more affordable than ever, allowing labs of all sizes to sequence DNA and RNA at the push of a button.

The equipment will be used for a study that will generate important information about the etiology of possible serious bacterial infection (pSBI) and the epidemiology of bacterial anti-microbial resistance genes among young infants. Once aggregated into IDSeq (a global software platform that helps scientists identify pathogens in metagenomic sequencing data), it will allow for the comparison of resistance patterns between Malawi and other resource-limited settings.

The machines were bought with funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's - Grand Challenge for a pilot study to support Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR) activities in Malawi.

Installation of the equipment and testing of samples in the project has been delayed because of the slowdowns due to COVID-19.

Principal investigators in the study are Drs. Tisungane Mvalo and Emily Ciccone (Chapel Hill) while other investigators are Gerald Tegha, Msandeni Chiume (KCH) and Pascal Lavoie (Canada).

'Chief' Kabota, others, retire

On Friday 16 October 2020 UNC Project-Malawi bid farewell Rankin Kabota, popularly known as 'Chief', who has served the institution for 20 years.

Also celebrated in absentia during the ceremony were research nurse Sarah Mwambakulu who has also served the Project for 20 years and Elizabeth Mseula who has served as clinic aide for 17 years.

Speaking during the farewell function Kabota said he was thankful to UNC Project for entrusting him with responsibilities.

"I am very grateful for what management and all members of UNC Project-Malawi have done to me. I will not forget. You have done something good to me. I had many challenges but once I came to you, you advised me what to do," he said.

He said because of approachability of managers and supervisors, he managed to solve various challenges and managed to achieve a number of things.

However, a cheerful Kabota said he felt it was early for him to retire as he had fond memories of the Project.

"If I was able to turn back the hands of time; adjust the retirement time, I would still love to be here," he said.

UNC Project-Malawi Country Director Innocent Mofolo told Kabota that UNC Project-Malawi was highly indebted to him for his dedication since the year 2000.

He said, Kabota, just like the others, had been part of the history of UNC Project-Malawi

"You have been with the project through its growth when UNC Project-Malawi's had only 21 employees. By the time that you are leaving after 20 years, UNC Project-Malawi has almost 400 employees. Of the many employees we have, we can say there is nobody who can say they don't know you, said



Rankin Kabota receiving a gift from Country Director Innocent Mofolo and Associate Country Director Debbie Kamwendo

Mofolo.

He added that such long service and interaction with all staff spoke volumes of dedication and maturity.

"You have been a father figure and interacted with the younger ones. A lot of people have a lot to learn from the way you conducted yourself," he said.

Human Resources Manager George Bonomali came into the UNC Project loop after an 'employee scavenger hunt'.

"We asked people to give us names of the potential office assistant and surprisingly the name of 'Rankin Kabota' kept coming out. When we asked why the name was coming up, somebody said the guy had good reputation.

"We sent messages to his place but could not find him. We still hunted for him until we found out that he was in Mchinji and sent someone to send the message to him. Mr. Kabota came the following day," he said.



Kabota cuts the 'retirement' cake.

Both Mwambakulu and Mseula (in absentia) also dedicated themselves to UNC Project. We shall miss them, and we thank all of them.

Meanwhile, after this occasion, Chief Nursing Officer Mary Kadiwa retired on 30 November 2020 after serving the Project for 20 years.

"I would like to thank

management and each one of you for the support you have given me since I joined UNC Project on 15th January 2001. Time has come that I have to retire and I thank God that I have reached this far, all because of your support and team work," she said.

Happy Festive Season

Best Wishes for a New Year
of Happiness and Peace.

UNC
PROJECT
Lilongwe, Malawi



PICTORIAL FOCUS

WINDING UP THE YEAR



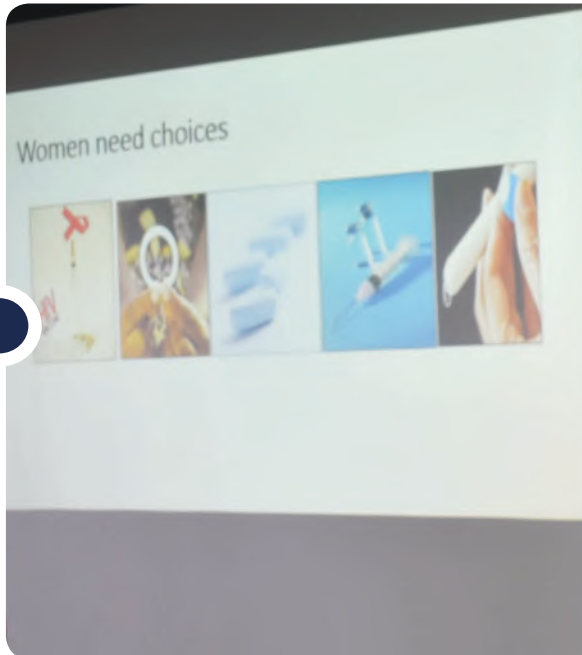
LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!: Dr. Thandi Lungu (right) and media personnel in TV programme shooting in the aftermath of release of the HPTN 084 results.



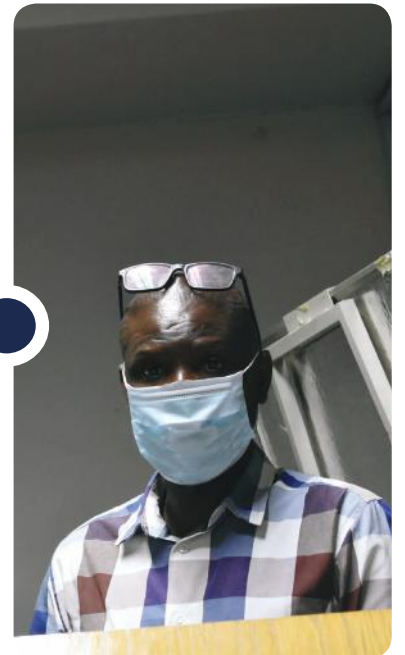
Deputy Director in the Ministry of Health who is also responsible for NCDs, Dr. Jones Masiye addressing participants during the SHARP review meeting held on 23 October 2020.



Cross section of the DACC in the Tidziwe Lecture Hall listening to presenters.



WOMEN NEED CHOICES!: Tchangani Tembo addressing the Lilongwe District AIDS Coordinating Committee (DACC) on 18 November in the Tidziwe Lecture Hall on the positive outlook of the vaginal microbicide ring for HIV prevention.



EXPLAINING COVID-19 STUDIES: Dr. Terence Tafatatha presenting to the DACC.



Contruction underway for rooms to be used for COVID-19 related studies at the George Joaki Research Centre at Area 18.



A PARTING SHOT: UNC Project staff (in March 2020) flanking breast cancer awareness activist Blandina Khondowe (in pink) who died in November 2020. She was a familiar face to many at UNC Project because of her activities like the Think Pink – Malawi campaign for breast cancer awareness. She was the founder of Hope for Cancer Foundation.

Inset: Blandina Mlenga in a video shooting on breast cancer awareness produced by the UNC Lineberger Malawi Cancer Centre in 2018.

GRATEFUL FAMILIES SPEAK

Six pupils (three girls and three boys) from Dzama community were in September awarded scholarships to study away from home in boarding facilities under the banner 'Charlie Scholars' in remembrance of Charles van der Horst who died in 2019. The three girls are now at the Lilongwe Nazarene Private School and the three boys at the Victoria Gardens Private School. In addition to their regular

classes, all the children will receive individual tutoring in English, Composition, and Math.

UNC Project management said they hoped the educational opportunities being provided to the six would lead to happier lives for them. Other pupils from the area are expected to benefit from the scholarships in coming years.

'The people who are driving this initiative are like my parents now' –Evidence's mother

In the interior of Mkoka village, Maria Sosola, Evidence's mother was born in 1984. She went to school in the same area at Magwero Primary School but her future was thrown in turmoil. She dropped out halfway through the primary school lane.

Today she is proud to see her second born child receive a scholarship to study at a boarding school. In her life she never thought this opportunity would land on any of her immediate family members.

"I am so glad that Evidence got this opportunity to study at a boarding school. You can imagine, I could not even afford to pay for school fund at the local school where he used to learn," says the single mother.

Maria says it was actually one of the teachers at Evidence's former school who felt her plight and contributed to the welfare of her son through financial support.

She says she still has not fathomed how she can express her gratitude to the well-wishers who have come up with this initiative.

"I just don't know how. The people who are driving this initiative are like my parents now," adds Maria.

When she dropped out of school in class 4, she did not do anything out of the ordinary apart from helping her family with household chores and farming. She

engages in farming up to now though at an insignificant scale to meet her needs and those of her family.

Maria has been a single mother having divorced her husband a year after Evidence was born in 2005. After her initial divorce, she has been in other marital relationships which never saw the light of the day.

"Life is not easy. At the moment I just grow and sell vegetables," she says.

The mother of five says she does all the work at the garden and during the maize growing season she normally harvests an average of 6 bags weighing 50 kilos each.

Her first child is into casual work, selling meat snacks in the village square while the other siblings are learning at Nafutsa Primary School in the village.

The mother looks at Evidence's chance to have the scholarship as a ray of hope for her family.

At the age of 15, her son dreams of a bright future and is eager to utilize the scholarship opportunity.

"I was so happy to hear the news about the scholarship because I would be studying at a new place. When I

complete my studies, I would like to be a medical doctor because I want to help sick people," he says.

When at home his hobbies include playing football and making baskets.

We could not have afforded such school fees -Liviness' parents



As he sits on the verandah of his house beside his wife, Maxwell Magombo reminisces how he dropped out of school in class 8 because of lack of financial support to cater for his needs. He would have loved to continue with education which would open up other opportunities for him but that was never to be.

Today his family cherishes the scholarship their 13-year-old daughter, Liviness, has received. She is the third born child in a family of four.

Both Maxwell and his wife are 41 and in their married life they have been subsistence farmers.

"We usually grow vegetables which we sell at the nearby Dzibweze Market in Area 25," says Ezelina, Maxwell's wife.

In a good day they make sells amounting to K4000 (about \$5.28) which just helps them to get some of their basic needs.

During the main growing season which is locally rain-fed, the family is able to get at least 40 bags of maize weighing 50 kilos each.

The family stays in a brick house roofed with iron sheets but devoid of proper finishing for longevity.

Upon hearing news that their

third born child had been awarded a scholarship to study at an admired school within Lilongwe, the family were above the moon.

Says Maxwell: "I was very happy to receive this good news. Nobody from my background has ever been awarded a scholarship."

Maxwell is full of praise for the academic performance of his daughter: "She does well in class. Ever since she started primary school, she has always been in three top positions," she says.

He says the family could not afford to pay K267,000 (Liviness' current school fees) per term for any of their four children.

"Actually I have never even got this amount in my life," he says.

Liveness's mother, is equally still stunned with her daughter's leap from a community school to a boarding school.

"When I heard the news, I couldn't believe it. I was so happy. We could not have afforded to do that for our daughter or for the rest of the children," she rejoices.

The Christian family is thankful to God for this opportunity for Liviness which gives hope to a good future for her and the entire family.

We lacked the money – Prisca's mother

Prisca's father, Maxwell Kanyama and mother, Eunice Patrick, came to Dzama in 2005 and mostly survive through providing casual labour services. Basic life is ill affordable for this four-member family.

Sitting on the edges of her house, Eunice laments that they even have no garden of their own. This may be not quite surprising for recent comers in the village. The family has once tried to keep some livestock but it did not work.

"We normally do casual work. My husband does that within the Kanengo industrial area and I normally work in other people's gardens," says the 32-year old mother.

Her background made it hard for her to believe the good news that her second born child, Prisca, had received a scholarship to study in a better school away from the village.

"This was news well received. It has never happened before in my life experience," she says adding that many people in the area lack money for school fees especially at secondary school level while for others within the free primary education system, even lack money to contribute to the school development fund.

Prisca's sibling is at the nearby Magwero

Primary School within the area and will be sitting for Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations in 2021.

Having passed through various tribulations Prisca comes from a quite religious background. One of her hobbies is actually reciting Bible verses.

"When Prisca is not doing this, she sometimes participates in netball games at the village ground," says her mother.

The family sees Prisca's scholarship as an opening of good things to come in future. They believe that this opportunity is God given and through it, their life may change.

"We all like reading the Bible because we want God to lead our lives and help us in our needs," she says.

At 12 years of age Prisca feels so lucky to have been awarded this scholarship.

"I would like to be a lawyer later in life. I would like to stand up for people in trials. Currently in the village court, we, young ones, are not allowed to spectate but I would want to even help in judging cases when I grow up."

In a previous school term before joining her new school, Prisca passed well at position number 3. She likes Mathematics and English.



Charlie Scholars

INAUGURAL CLASS, 2020

Other village kids are now motivated - Ethel's parents

Margaret Mayimba, Ethel's mother, believes that many people in her village are uneducated because they lacked school fees or scholarships to pursue education.

It is against such background that Margaret is very thankful for the opportunity that her daughter Ethel got under the Charlie Scholars sponsorship programme.

"When I heard about Ethel's selection as one of the beneficiaries of the scholarship programme, I felt very good. This is something strange to happen in our village," she says.

Margaret, 52, believes her daughter is now a model for the village as other kids are now motivated to receive a scholarship just as she did.

According to the mother, Ethel is a book worm.

"When she finishes doing her household chores, she often locks herself so that she can read," says Margaret.

The mother of five who is also a traditional leader, responding to the name of Senior Village Headperson Malembe, believes education is key and is optimistic that her daughter has the chances to excel in life.

"Am so happy with this scholarship because it gives us hope that Ethel will be able to complete her education. The materials that she will be using at her new school are expensive such that we could not afford.



Actually I have never used such in my life," she says.

To her, even the entire profile of her village has been raised because of the scholarship.

Her positive sentiments are shared by her 68-year-old husband, Aliel Mayimba.

"I was very happy when I heard the news about the scholarship and I am still happy up to now. May God bless those who are taking part in this scholarship arrangement," he says.

Ethel's family is one of the luckiest families because among her siblings, two of them completed their secondary education while the other two are in the final grade of primary school.

The family survives on subsistence farming. They grow maize and raise some livestock. Sometimes they also buy and resell livestock as a form of business.

Expressing her gratitude before she joined school Ethel lauded the scholarship programme.

"I am happy to receive this scholarship because my parents would not have afforded to send me to a boarding school. When I grow up I want to be a nurse and assist the sick. I believe many things are possible if one gets educated," she said.



Even the chief of this village is also excited. – Harrison's father

Binwell Davidson, 48, has been around the Dzama community for six years having arrived there in 2014 from other sojourns. Life to him, in the visibly low income household, has been normal since that is what a majority of fellow villagers live like day in and day out – surviving on less than one US dollar in day.

However, gods seem to have turned in his favour when he heard that his second born child had been awarded a scholarship to study in a better school away from the village.

Binwell says given his current financial situation he could not afford to take his Harrison to a better school.

"We live a hard life. I work as a casual labourer in construction sites and sometimes I work in brick moulding sites or in gardens. The little that I get does not even suffice basic necessities of life," he says.

The first born in the family, Harrison's brother is deaf and dumb and the parents failed to take him to suitable education facilities which could help him acquire an education.

"He just stays at home and helps in household chores," says Binwell, adding his other children who came after Harrison are also at school in the nearby Nafutsa Primary School at



Dzama.

Binwell says that his entire household is quite happy that one of them has landed this opportunity.

"This brings joy to our family. We could not even think of our son going to study somewhere under a fully paid for scholarship. We could not afford to do that under any circumstance," he expresses his joy.

Binwell believes that the entire profile of his village has been raised. On top of that, other school going children have been motivated so that they too may get similar recognition and support.

"I would say most people are seemingly happy and even the chief of this village is also excited by the news," explains Binwell.

He is also full of praises for his son's hardworking spirit not just in class but through arts and crafts and household chores.

15-year-old Harrison likes making baskets and also likes building. During this visit his father pointed at an incomplete structure which his son constructed around his home.

However, Harrison himself says when he completes school, he would like to be a secondary school teacher.

"When I grow up I want to be a primary or secondary school teacher. I like the exposure teachers get and the way they establish connections with other people in society," says Harrison



This is very unforgettable - Chimwemwe's parents

It is on a cloudy and wet afternoon and Madalitso Jackson and his wife are sitting inside their three-roomed house. It just rained in what seemed to be first rains in the 2020-2021 growing season. The little rains bring hope of a good farming season soon to come. So does their son's selection to study under a scholarship.

Their 13-year-old son, Chimwemwe Madalitso, is among the six scholars sponsored to study under the 'Charlie Scholars' program.

"We saw this as a vision that things would be better for our son in future. This is very unforgettable," says the father of five with Chimwemwe as the third born.

The 40-year old dad is very proud of his son because he himself did not go far with school.

"I have been doing casual work after I dropped out of school in 1994.

Seeing my son have the chance to excel academically makes me feel proud," he says.

Jackson says that his son has been having outstanding academic performance since he started school and this gives him hope that upon completion of his academic journey, he may realise his desires.

37-year-old Elizabeth Bitoni,



Chimwemwe's mother is optimistic that her son will do well in future.

"We have hope that he will help uplift his siblings," says Elizabeth, exuding a typical Malawian family expectation when a member manages to excel academically or achieves in other endeavors.

Chimwemwe's three other siblings are also still in primary school while the last born in the family is still breast feeding.

Apart from academic excellence in his previous school Chimwemwe is an ardent player of football.

Although he likes football a lot, Chimwemwe's dream is not to be a professional footballer but to work in a financial institution.

"It is my hope that I will do well and become a bank manager. I want to be counting money which people bring and take out of the bank," he says.

UNC PROJECT PEOPLE

FRED MAVUTO CHITEMA

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR

Please tell us about yourself?

I am Fred Mavuto Chitema and was born in Mulanje on 19 June 1968 at Namulenga Mission Hospital. I grew up at Chenguwo Village in Traditional Authority Mkanda's area and went to Namulenga Boys Primary School from 1980 to 1986. My parents were subsistence farmers and we relocated to Sharpe Valley in Ntcheu looking for farming land. Right now my home Village is Saiti in Traditional Authority Ganya's area.

I continued primary education from classes 6 to 8 at Sharpe Valley Primary School. I sat for primary school certificate exams twice and was selected to go to Ntcheu Secondary School on the second attempt. I did my school there from 1989 up to 1993.

Before end of 1993 I joined the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) at Mtonda Training Base, where youths were gaining skills in various technical fields, and obtained a certificate in leadership. I stayed at the village in Ntcheu for a while and proceeded to Blantyre to look for employment.

I got my first job in 1994 at Southern Bottlers where I worked as internal production clerk. I kept on applying for other jobs and in early 1995 I got employed at Kandodo Stores and worked at the main shop along Victoria Avenue as shop assistant.

In 1996 I was transferred to work in Lilongwe. This was a tough time for me as many people discouraged me to come and work in Lilongwe. Word was going around that Lilongwe was a very expensive place to stay and I could not manage since I was staying in fairly affordable city of Blantyre. My first duty station was Kandodo shop at Gulliver in Area 49 where I worked as shop supervisor. The shop was doing fine and I was transferred to a new shop at Malangalanga. Soon it was reported that my previous workplace at Gulliver was declining in performance and I was moved back to Gulliver.

At end of 1999 the Kandodo Stores was sold to a foreign company. It was a sad situation and soon the company was declared bankrupt and in November of same year many of us were retrenched. Many went back to the village and I thought of staying in town to do some small businesses.

It was a tough situation to look at expenses like rentals and daily necessities. I stayed for four years from 1999 to 2003 without any formal employment.

In 2003 one of the several applications I had made received positive feedback. That was UNC Project. By the time I was coming here I had good experience from the commercial sector but having stayed for four years, I was just looking for any kind of employment. I joined UNC Project on 20 February 2003 as a security officer, backed by the certificate I obtained from MYP.

My first duty station was at Prof Mina's, guest house, in Area 14. After some months I also worked at



Prof. Martinson's house in Area 10. I also rotated between Tidziwe and other UNC Project offices outside Kamuzu Central Hospital. Then, I used to see several vacancies being released and I thought I could go back to school and get some papers in community development. I studied for a certificate and then a diploma. Administration also guided me on what to study. In 2007 there was training vacancy at the Lighthouse for HIV counselling and I approached management if they could sponsor me to enroll for the course. That was my turning point from the security department to counselling.

I started working as counselor at CHAVI study. In 2009 I was transferred to work at George Joaki Centre at Area 18 for the MAL 055, malaria vaccine trial, as field clerk. Work at the MAL 055 was tough as we managed to enroll 1620 participants into the study. I also got more experience in community engagement and also played role of counsellor when need arose. This study took at least four years. When it was over I was moved back to Tidziwe where I worked for MTN 020 as community educator. After the MTN 020, I've been roving in various studies where my skills were needed. After some multi-tasking in various

studies, I was sent back to Area 18 to work for the HVTN 705 (Imbokodo) in 2018. Here I also multi-task within Imbokodo, Family Planning-ART study and assist in participant's recruitment, enrolment, participant tracing and engaging stakeholders.

What are some of the challenges that you face in your roles?

Sometimes I meet logistical challenges when I have to commute between the three centres of Area 25, Area 18 and Tidziwe. Transport may not be available to do all required tasks within the intended time. Often times I divide my time; like working for two days at Area 25, then two days here at Area 18 and then at Tidziwe.

How do you handle challenges in the field like in terms of misconceptions?

I have observed that sometimes the sources of misconceptions are people who never qualified as study participants and they go about creating issues to tarnish image of participants and the organisation. When we are in the field meeting the communities, people observe us and want to be sure we are really from UNC Project. One always needs to be professional when approaching such people.

What's the farthest place you have gone to trace study participants?

I have been to many areas



within the central region and even some parts of the northern region of Malawi like Mzuzu and Nkhata Bay. For some participants like those in the Imbokodo study, we often trace through phone. Just a few hours ago, we were discussing logistical arrangements for a participant who stays at Likoma Island. For your information, in Imbokodo we have participants who come from many corners of the country because their nature is quite mobile.

I wish I were a woman under this study so that I would cheat you that I was at a far corner of the country while in reality I was just within Lilongwe!

No we can capture that. We have our own means of knowing if someone is lying about where they stay. On two occasions we have been able to catch those lying.

So what do you like to do in your free time?

I like reading books and listening to the radio. I also like going to church and swatching football.

Are you married?

Yes, I am married and we have two boys and two girls.

What food do you like to eat?

I like nsima or rice with chicken.

Where do you see yourself in the next five years?

I see myself preparing for retirement. Sometimes it's good to see where you are going. It's not good to be reminded when time comes but you need to be aware of that time on your own and prepare accordingly. Preparations should start now to avoid shocks when time comes. I also like farming, having grown up in a peasant family and I would love to continue that later in my life.

Do have anything to say before we wind up?

I thank my team leader Nelecye Chome, for her advice and assigning me in various studies which has expanded my experience. I also thank management for their roles in the development of my career under the community department.