

TIFA Accelerator Series – Malawi

Improving TB Notification and Care in Malawi

“In Malawi, close to a third of estimated people with TB are missed and undiagnosed every year. This is partially attributed to sub-optimal TB screening strategies deployed at the health facility level. Systematic TB screening strategies in health facilities face numerous challenges, hindering the identification and notification of people with TB. However, through dedicated effort and the introduction of innovative strategies, significant progress has been made in improving TB detection rates through a TIFA grant,” explains Birru Shigut, Senior Technical Advisor, GF & TB, NTLEP.

Through a TIFA TB commitment grant, implemented by the National TB and Leprosy Elimination Program (NTLEP) in Malawi, substantial progress is being made to accelerate the country's efforts to end TB. The first grant, initiated in 2021, implemented a facility-based case finding approach in 29 facilities across 7 districts, aiming to increase TB notification and improve linkages to care and treatment.

Targeted facility-based case finding approaches

The key strategy employed under this grant is FASI (Finding TB cases actively, separating safely, and treating effectively). It focuses on strengthening the capacity of health workers to identify, diagnose, and treat people with



Figure 1: Mentorship visit at Bangwe Health Centre in Blantyre. Photo by P. Gomani, JSI.

As part of the **Global Accelerator to End TB**, the **United States Agency for International Development** (USAID)–funded Tuberculosis Implementation Framework Agreement (TIFA) project, led by **JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.** with partner **Open Development**, focuses on enhancing collaborative, locally-led efforts to build countries' capacity to plan, finance, monitor, and sustain their own high-quality TB programs. TIFA works with country partners to develop fixed amount awards—known as TB commitment grants (TCGs)—contracts, or other awards to support priority activities.

Under TCGs, accountability and funding amounts are based on results: negotiated **milestones** are tied to payments.

Together, NTPs and USAID identify country priorities, TIFA then works closely with them to develop the grant. TB commitment grants are implemented by NTPs or local entities. Completed milestones are submitted to and verified by USAID and TIFA. The **TIFA Accelerator Series** highlights grant achievements.

TB. NTLEP recruited, trained, and supported 100 community health volunteers to identify individuals with presumptive TB in facilities and through community-based contact investigation. It provided training to 90 health workers in chest X-ray and computer-assisted diagnostics (CAD) for TB to enhance detection of people with TB. NTLEP also trained qualified health workers in Focused Assessment with Sonography for HIV-associated tuberculosis (FASH) to aid in the detection of TB, including extra-pulmonary TB among people living with HIV, using sonography.

To support qualified and non-qualified staff, NTLEP equipped facilities with updated screening and recording tools and conducted quarterly mentoring visits to review data, acknowledge achievements, identify challenges, and discuss solutions.

The FAST strategy, which aims to achieve early identification, prompt treatment initiation, and improved infection control, plays a crucial role in the overall provision of TB care. By actively identifying individuals with TB, the FAST approach can reduce diagnostic delays and contribute to curbing TB transmission within communities and health facilities. Similarly, the implementation of FASH, a specialized approach tailored for people living with HIV and TB, enhances diagnostic accuracy for timely initiation of treatment and improved management of HIV-associated TB.

"The community and health center team has gained trust in us as the FAST promoters, and many patients were willing to be screened which resulted in having more people diagnosed with TB," explained Sulifa Awalu, FAST promoter at Chiponde Health Centre in Mangochi.

Improving Malawi's TB Response

"This grant has been of enormous importance to the NTLEP and the Ministry of Health at large. It has enabled the program to increase the case notifications thereby reducing the treatment coverage gap, " explains Dr. Tisungane Mwenyenkulu, Research, Care, and Treatment Officer, NTLEP.

The results and outcomes of NTLEP's grant implementation have been encouraging. A total of 35,149 presumptive people with TB were identified, representing a 134% increase compared to the year prior to grant implementation. The contribution of FAST promoters in identifying people with presumed TB was significant, accounting for 24,231 (69%) of the total individuals presumed to have TB.

Out of the 29 implementation facilities, 17 reported identifying more than double the number of individuals with presumptive TB compared to the previous year.



Figure 2: Mentorship visit to discuss documentation of data in the TB registers. Photo by Knox Banda.

Additionally, a total of 3,022 people with TB were notified in 2022, marking a 37% increase compared to 2021. FAST promoters accounted for 86% of TB notifications across the facilities where they operated. While some facilities experienced a decline in TB notifications, overall progress has been substantial, with a majority of facilities reporting higher identification of individuals with TB.

The Way Forward

By leveraging targeted facility-based case finding approaches, along with efforts to strengthen capacity, this grant has significantly enhanced the identification and notification of people with TB. These achievements highlight the dedication and collaborative efforts of NTLEP and USAID in driving progress towards ending TB in Malawi.

To build on and sustain the success of this activity, NTLEP has integrated this approach into its next Global Fund proposal. NTLEP is working towards a future where TB is eliminated, and the health and well-being of all Malawians are safeguarded.

“Engaging dedicated staff in systematic TB screening proved to be an effective strategy for increasing facility-based TB case notification. Enhancing the capacity of FAST promoters and establishing collaborative relationships between volunteers and facility staff yielded positive outcomes. Providing volunteers with adequate training, tools, stipends, and on-site support enhanced implementation of TB screening activities,” noted Shigut.

NTLEP has made significant progress through mentorship, collaboration, and targeted interventions, resulting in substantial increases in the identification of individuals presumed to have TB and those notified with TB. Utilizing fully dedicated personnel for TB screening within health facilities, along with establishing strong working relationships between volunteers and facility staff, and providing stipends, can prove to be an effective strategy for enhancing the detection of TB in individuals.

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