

## **CS-CLMA FACILITATES CHANGE AT KASUNGU DISTRICT HOSPITAL**

**By Starphel Sithole**

There has been a construction of a modern ART infrastructure at Kasungu District Hospital following demands of the community members and recipients of care as a result of community empowerment and engagement meetings with duty bearers facilitated by Citizen Science Community Led Monitoring and Advocacy (CS\_CLMA) project.

Kasungu District Health Office is one of the health facilities in the central region of Malawi which had a small ART room resulting in extended queues for recipients of care waiting outside the facility. This led to lack of privacy, confidentiality and stigma hindering quality HIV services at the facility. Limited or poor infrastructure is one of the bottlenecks for accessing quality services in Malawian health facilities.

In May 2021 Malawi Network of Religious Leaders infected and affected by HIV (MANERELA) conducted an engagement meeting with service providers, recipients of care, religious leaders, chiefs and other implementing partners in the district aimed at understanding the gaps hindering quality health services. Among the problems mentioned and discussed was privacy due to small ART infrastructure.

The ART Coordinator promised to convene a meeting and contact other implementing partners. This was after the meeting noted the need for enough space and rooms because the ART room was too tiny to carry out its intended service purpose properly. Kasungu ART Coordinator Mirriam Mkangala commended the coming of the CS-CLMA project which has empowered recipients of care to take the lead in raising issues they encounter during treatment for addressing by duty bearers

'At our facilities, this project has resulted in numerous improvements. For example; recipients of care now know their role at the facility and they are able to voice out their needs and concerns which leads to problems being addressed. Just after the project commenced in 2021, one of the recipients of care who is also a data collector in the project voiced out the need for a bigger room for ART; as many people living with HIV were interrupting treatment due to lack of privacy and confidentiality. Through the project we noticed the need and acted accordingly by calling on other partners to render help. Fortunately, Partners in Hope with funding from USAID successfully constructed the modern structure.' Mkangala narrated.

Mkangala further said that the newly built structure will help in enrolling integrated service delivery which will also assist in solving privacy and confidentiality issues at the facility.

'The new modern building which is double the old ART will now provide enough space for one stop service for almost all HIV related services. We are planning to include TB, Cervical cancer screening and viral load testing which will make it easy for recipients of care. When recommended to go for viral load testing, which is done outside the ART room, many recipients of care choose to instead sneak out to their homes since

they feel their privacy will be infringed upon by the clinic's obviously small size. A private and confidential atmosphere, essential for any healthcare institution, is anticipated to be created by the new, roomy infrastructure with several rooms.' Mkgangala explained.

According to a 16 January 2019 PEPFAR Solutions Platform report, integrated tuberculosis and HIV services in Eswatini led to better and improved individual and population health outcomes.

Idah Katimba, 60, who has been on ART for 18 years and a beneficiary of CS-CLMA project describes the new building as a life saver as it will reduce defaulter rate at the facility.

'There are some people who do not want to disclose their HIV status despite being on ART for so long, I was one of them. Due to the lengthy waiting time and overcrowded ART rooms that forced us to wait in an open area where people occasionally pointed fingers and made fun of us, I once interrupted treatment and considered switching to a distant facility where no one would recognize me. However, this new building will prevent many in my situation from doing so because we are confident that our privacy will be protected hence reducing defaulting from ART'. Said Katimba.