Voices from the Field:
The varied strengths of Body Mapping in Malawi
By Sheriff Wiredu, Cuso International Volunteer, Malawi (November 2019)

As a Cuso International Volunteer, I work daily with the practical implementation of the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI). Specifically, I volunteer with two of the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD)'s twinning partners in Malawi. ICAD is leading a capacity-building initiative in SANI to improve the health of women living with HIV and children living with and/or affected by HIV in Malawi and Zambia. The partners I work with are the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Malawi (NAPHAM) and Coalition for the Empowerment of Women and Girls (CEWAG).

This past year, I’ve had the opportunity to attend several two-day Body Mapping workshops conducted by NAPHAM in both Dowa and Nchisi districts. Sessions are delivered by trained Group Leaders and each Support Group includes (on average) 20 women and 5 men. Although Body Mapping workshops are unique and tailored to the Support Group in that community, they showed me that, overall, the strength and relevance of Body Mapping to the SANI project lies in several key areas: stigma, symbols and strength.

■ Fighting stigma and myths

While Body Mapping is essentially a tool for story-telling, helping women and men with HIV/AIDS to sketch, paint, and put their journeys into words, it is also more than that. Because of the Support Group context in which a workshop takes place, the sessions include an invaluable opportunity for members to share information, experiences and emotional support. For instance, they teach each other about treatment and symptoms, and they discuss how they first reacted when they tested positive. They even broach the difficult issue of the stigma around AIDS/HIV in Malawi. Simply put, it is believed to be the result of promiscuity, it results in community isolation, and it often leads to domestic violence and marriage breakdown.

In the workshops I attended, the Support Group Leader shared stories which demonstrate that being able to come together and discuss “taboo” subjects has empowering outcomes. For instance, one group member had been hiding her medication and HIV status from her husband out of fear and shame. When she finally told him, he threw away her medication and threatened her with violence if she told...
anyone in the community about her HIV status. So she turned to the Support Group for help, the Group intervened and the situation was reported to the police. The couple has since divorced, but the woman is definitely now in a stronger personal and emotional position to manage her medication and plan her future.

- **Developing symbols and vision**
  The concentration of each participant’s face as they work on their body map indicates the level of care and concentration they give this work. The body maps are created as the participants work in pairs, tracing each other on paper, and then detailing their own map with names, labels, phrases and symbols. Overall, they slowly build a very personal expression of their own life, family and values. In particular, the exercise in using “symbols” helps to introduce a valuable new language. Symbols are not something that are typically used in Malawian culture and expression, so it was significant to observe the men and women tapping into a new form of communication. One group member used the church as a very important symbol in her journey to improve her health—signifying that spirituality is very important for her positive living. Another used a bridge as his symbol, because it helped him connect with people and institutions outside his own community. Overall, as everyone shared and spoke about their own symbols, it contributed to the next, equally significant exercise—which was to visualize one’s future. Visualization helps participants to set goals and believe in their achievability; thereby taking away a feeling of isolation and helplessness. Commonly expressed symbols that tied directly to the improved health, nutrition and/or empowerment of the group member included spirituality, money and fertilizer.

- **Strength in numbers**
  Another important link for SANI in Body Mapping exists between Support Groups and Village Banks. Village Banks are part of the SANI project as a means to provide women with the opportunity to access loans. Specifically, SANI has provided women with skills to manage their funds, seeds to grow in their community gardens, as well as opportunity to sell some of the produce they grow, thereby empowering them in their family and community. When a Village Bank Group intersects with an HIV/AIDS Support Group, not only do the women have an opportunity to develop their money management skills, but the entire group has the chance to address some of the gender norms and stigma which surround the issue of earning power and decision-making in the family context. The fact is that most Village Bank Groups and Support Groups continue to attract mostly women, and men are more hesitant to join. But as Village Bank Groups continue to report remarkable group savings within short time frames, and as Support Groups continue to involve men, the slow march toward gender normative change continues. Overall, there is strength in numbers—whether those numbers reflect village bank savings, the sharing of symbols and visions for the future, or people coming together in a support group to fight stigma and share information. And, in my experience to date, the Body Mapping workshops being implemented in Malawi through SANI tap into all these strengths.

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