Voices from the Field:

Body Mapping as art therapy in Malawi

By Chenai Kadungure, Cuso International Volunteer, Malawi (August 2019)

As a Cuso International Volunteer, I work daily with the practical implementation of the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) in Malawi. Specifically, I volunteer with four of the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD)'s twinning partners in Malawi. As a SANI partner, ICAD is leading a capacity-building initiative to improve the health outcomes of women living with HIV and children living with and/or affected by HIV in Malawi and Zambia.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend an innovative art therapy session called “Body Mapping”, conducted by (local twinning partner) Coalition for the Empowerment of Women and Girls (CEWAG) with members from seven SANI HIV Support Groups.

In Malawi, CEWAG works with women and girls to ensure they are able to enjoy their rights and participate fully in public affairs. It promotes the interest of women and girls to enable them to positively contribute toward the development of their communities. It also conducts capacity building interventions targeting women’s groups. It’s no surprise then, that CEWAG employs an emotionally enriching form of art therapy known as Body Mapping.

The Body Mapping method evolved from the Memory Box Project designed by Jonathan Morgan, a clinical psychologist from the University of Cape Town. The Memory Box Project was a therapeutic way for women with HIV/AIDS to record their stories and provide a keepsake for their loved ones in a handmade memory box. In fact, Body Mapping was first seen as an advocacy tool to bring attention to the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa. However, it rapidly became a tool for story-telling, helping women with HIV/AIDS to sketch, paint, and put their journeys into words. And this type of empowerment is definitely what I witnessed in the CEWAG session.

The SOUTHERN AFRICAN NUTRITION INITIATIVE (SANI) is a 24.6 million CAD project to address undernutrition in women of reproductive age (15-49) and children under 5 in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. SANI is a partnership between CARE, Cuso International, the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD), McGill University, and the Governments of implementing countries. The project is funded by the Government of Canada, CARE, and the Canadian public. SANI is a four-year and six-month project, from March 2016 to September 2020. To learn more and get involved in the campaign “Feed Her Future”, go to: www.feedherfuture.ca
**What is the Body Mapping process?**

Simply put, body maps are highly personal “self-portraits”, and although the body mapping process triggers many emotional memories, it is primarily a celebration of courage and strength. The CEWAG Body Mapping session that I attended included drawing, painting visualization, group discussion, sharing, and reflection. Information about HIV, its treatment, and side effects was offered at key learning moments. There was also a lot of singing, dancing, and laughing.

Specifically, in small groups, the women began by drawing each other’s outlines; two per person. One outline was the “core person” and the other was a “shadow body”. The core included their names, birthplace and symbols. The shadow body included drawings of their “support system”, including people who keep them going. They also wrote slogans and verses that they personally live by. Finally, they highlighted their visions and dreams for themselves. For some, nutrition was a focus, and food / agriculture prevailed; others loved talking about animals that they wished to purchase or breed on their land. Everyone wished to build or extend a house. At the end, each woman told the story of discovering her status as HIV positive and combined it with a plan for the future.

**Why is this form of art therapy relevant and significant for SANI?**

ICAD introduced the concept of Body Mapping to its SANI twinning partners to be used as a qualitative monitoring tool with the aims to evaluate the impact of the twinning initiative as a whole; to complement the quantitative monitoring within each project; to understand experiences of nutrition and living with HIV in the broader context of people’s lives; and to engage women in the storytelling process.

In my experience, the strong men and women in SANI’s HIV Support Groups benefit from Body Mapping because of the mental and emotional break it offers. Taking time out of their daily routines and demanding schedules, wherein expectations are high and their identities are so closely linked to others, helps to restore their dignity and connects them with others who are also HIV positive. Indeed, imagination and the ability to dream and hope again, can do as much for development and change efforts as any complex intervention. After all, the ability to dream and hope are essential to sustainable development, because sustainable development can only be carried out by leaders with strong vision and commitment. Personally, I had the good fortune to witness some of these community leaders in action during the Body Mapping session, and I am excited to see how far they go in implementing the bold visions expressed in their vibrant Body Maps.

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