



# A call to roll out a comprehensive physical activities plan in Malawi's civil service

## The burden of Non Communicable diseases in Malawi's civil service

Malawi is struggling to manage the increasing challenge of Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in addition to an already high communicable disease burden. The high burden of NCDs highlights the need to address the prevailing risk factors. Physical inactivity is one of the leading risk factors for NCDs. Malawi is undergoing rapid urbanization which is associated with lifestyle changes including changes in physical activities with 24% inactivity in urban as compared to 9% in rural areas (1). The concern for NCDs therefore becomes a pressing issue.

## A physical activity policy on paper only

Efforts by Government of Malawi show a commitment to deal with NCDs through the Malawi Public Service Management policy (2018-2022) but a study looking at population level interventions to tackle NCDs shows there is hardly implementation on the ground. The policy aims to strengthen the human resource management function by implementing wellness programs focusing on HIV, NCDs and work-life balance.

The sedentary and stressful nature of civil servants' work renders them high risk for developing NCDs such as Diabetes, Hypertension and cardiovascular diseases. Research shows that NCDs account for 28% of deaths in Malawi. Physical exercise in the civil service is therefore increasingly important.

The policy by the Government and Statutory corporations, although well-meaning has suffered suboptimal implementation because there are no scheduled activities and responsible persons for the physical activities.

## What can the government do?

- 1 Ensure that the Office of Nutrition and HIV/AIDS in each government ministry includes physical activity in its mandate and coordinates a schedule of physical activities.
- 2 Provide staff with dedicated time, at least 30 minutes within the work day to engage in some form of physical activity that does not impinge on their personal time
- 3 Encourage the participation of all civil servants in planned physical activities by introducing incentives.
- 4 Develop sports facilities that allow mass participation

### REFERENCES

1. Msyamboza, K.P., Ngwira, B., Dzowela, T., Mvula C., Kathyola, D., Harries, A.D., & Bowie, C. The burden of selected non communicable diseases and their risk factors in Malawi: nationwide STEPS survey/ *Plos One* 2011:6:5



# Implications of implementing the recommendations

The implementation of planned physical activities within the civil service will have numerous benefits. Though this has already been incorporated in the Malawi Public Service Management Policy (2018-2022), there is a need for implementation on the ground.

The capacity of the office of nutrition and HIV/Aids which is the responsible office will need to be strengthened to include NCD awareness and sensitization. The members of staff within this office will require training so that they are able to facilitate NCDs education and the coordination of physical exercise programs. NCD education and education is necessary to influence decision making and address any potential resistance from civil servants. Furthermore, there is a need to direct funds to this program and to partner with the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development as well as relevant city councils.

Of vital importance, civil servants will have better health outcomes and be able to prevent NCDs such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Studies indicate that less physical activity is associated with more sick leave days (3.5 times more). Even though the government will be required to invest in its human resources and infrastructure, it will bear less financial costs associated with medical expenses in the long run.



Bingu National Stadium Lilongwe

## Key stakeholder observations on the implementation of physical activities policy

- 1 The physical activity policy by the Government and Statutory corporations lack enforcement.
- 2 Absence of scheduled exercises and responsible personnel in the workplace, leading to lack of motivation from civil servants to participate in the physical activities.
- 3 Given the short amount of time in the day between work duties, civil servants struggle with competing priorities between exercises and personal errands