



Culture and Bodies—using community arts for non-communicable disease prevention

The growing challenge of non-communicable diseases in Sub-Saharan Africa

The number of people with chronic (long-term) non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and diabetes is rapidly increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2010, more than 2 million people died from NCDs in Sub-Saharan Africa, an increase of 46 percent since 1900. Malawi and Tanzania are going through a period of rapid social transition, and this is associated with an increase in some of the lifestyle factors associated with NCDs.

For example, people are eating more processed high sodium, energy-dense foods and drinking more sugar-sweetened drinks than they used to.

At the same time, traditional cultural norms, such as people viewing a larger body size as attractive, contribute to increasing risk of developing high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and diabetes.

If initiatives to prevent NCDs are to work, they must consider traditional cultural values as well as scientific evidence. Community arts offer a way of understanding these local values.



The Culture and Bodies approach

Over the last 12 months, the Culture and Bodies team worked with communities in Area 25 Lilongwe, Malawi and Bagamoyo Town, Tanzania to develop a new community arts approach to NCD prevention. We use:

1. observations to build relationships with local communities and understand what they know about NCDs and which community arts forms are popular locally.
2. in-depth discussions with local people to understand their health concerns, and attitudes towards NCDs.
3. creative workshops using community arts (for example drama) to play out how and why people make poor lifestyle choices, and how we might encourage them to change.



“I was a character who liked to eat a lot, I could eat every time and was eating everything that I saw especially sugary food and drink until I became sick”

Extract from a creative workshop on causes of diabetes, from Bagamoyo Town, Tanzania

What next?

We currently are using the creative workshop findings to work with community members to develop NCD prevention activities. These will be showcased in community events.

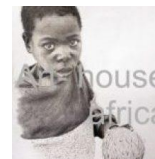
In 2020, we hope to get funding for a much larger project to use our community-arts approach to develop high blood pressure prevention initiatives in Malawi and Tanzania.

We will then test these initiatives in a scientific study to see how well they work.

What is Culture and Bodies?

Culture and Bodies is a partnership of Malawi, Tanzania and UK researchers and artists including:

- Art House Africa, Malawi
- Arts and Global Health Centre, Malawi (<https://www.artgloafrica.org/>)
- Chancellor College, Malawi (<https://www.cc.ac.mw/>)
- Ifakara Health Institute, Tanzania (<http://ihi.or.tz/about/>)
- Malawi Epidemiology and Intervention Research Unit (MEIRU) <http://meiru.lshtm.ac.uk/>
- The University of Glasgow, UK (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/>)



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