Several recent articles have highlighted the critical situation for the population of Malawi.

The Norwegian Nurses Association (NSF) has initiated a development collaboration with the National Nurses Association of Malawi. The project, with financial support from Norad, has to main goals: organizational strengthening of the nurses association and providing care and support to HIV-positive nurse, midwives and other health care workers.

The picture shows a young Malawian patient lying on a “floor bed”, that is a plastic mattress placed on the floor of a hospital corridor.

Malawi is often described as “The warm heart of Africa”. This can be experienced through the courtesy, warmth and friendliness one encounters when on arrival in Malawi. But our colleagues in this Central African country are suffering. In a country with 12 million inhabitants, most of them struggle with severe poverty. Failed crops due to shortage of rain, with accompanying hunger, combined with disease and death due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have had a devastating effect. This has created a condition of unimaginable personal and professional tragedy for nurses in Malawi.

Among these many challenges, the following can be mentioned:

- Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world with an annual per capita income of less than USD 300
- Recent figures indicate a maternal mortality rate of 1.800 per 100,000 cases, making this the second highest figure in the world, surpassed only by Sierra Leone
- The HIV/AIDS pandemic has fastened its grip on the population, as is the case in most other sub-Saharan countries
- Hunger has reached epidemic proportions with over half of the country’s population affected. The country’s President has recently declared a national emergency.
- Migration of health care workers to neighbouring countries, or the more affluent western countries, has tapped Malawi for vital manpower.
- Approximately 5.000 nurses and some 150 medical doctors are attempting to service the country’s 12 million inhabitants.

New Development Cooperation Initiated
NSF has for some time been considering the possibility of initiating development cooperation with its sister organization in Malawi – the National Association of Nurses of Malawi (NANM). With good results from similar work in Zambia, NSF has decided that the time is appropriate to commence collaboration. This is taking place as part of NSF’s framework financial agreement with Norad collaborating country by Norad.

Collaboration will have two main foci:

- Organizational strengthening of the national nurses association
- Care and support activities to HIV-positive nurses, midwives and other health care workers.

Based on recommendations from Norad, the target population in Malawi will include nurses, midwives and other health care workers. This is a positive development with an expanded responsibility, viewed in relation to collaboration currently being carried out in Zambia. Here the target population is limited to nurses and midwives. Experience has shown that it is appropriate to include other health care workers, especially in more remote rural areas, as not doing so can often cause feelings of division and dissatisfaction. At the same time this poses greater challenges to both NSF and NANM.

**Needs Assessment Survey Carried Out**

*Patients must often share beds. One on-duty nurse can be responsible for 60 to 80 patients, on a 30 bed ward. Most patients suffer from several serious diseases, often combined with malnourishment.*

In order to establish an empirical base for defining project goals and activities, a Malawian nurse-researcher was hired to map nurses’ perceptions of needs and challenges. This is done prior to commencement of project activities, drawing a more nuanced picture of actual needs as perceived by nurses, rather than designing a project based on what “outsiders” might believe.
The Needs Assessment Survey has been completed and results were presented at a 3-day workshop in Malawi’s capital city, Lilongwe, 3rd to 5th August, 2005. 30 nurses from each district in Malawi were invited to attend. At the same time a Malawian parliamentarian draftsperson provided insight into relevant Malawian laws and regulations that can influence organizational development of the nurses association. A thorough presentation by the NSF International Secretary provided insight into the various roles and responsibilities that national nurses associations are expected to assume.

The Needs Assessment Survey was carried out during April through August 2005. Through the use of questionnaires, group discussions and in-depth interviews, several hundred nurses provided valuable input as to how they regard their current situation – personally and at their workplace – and what should be done in order to rectify situations. Results show that the greatest needs are related to providing up-dated information about HIV/AIDS, providing care and support directly to individual health care workers, providing protective equipment at the workplace, and no-cost access to medical treatment for HIV-positive health care workers. Stigma is still a major issue among health care workers, and needs to be actively addressed. These survey results create a strong background for designing the future project collaboration between NSF and NANm, a collaboration that will stretch a number of years into the future.

Main Contract Signed

Based on a Master Plan developed after presentation of the Needs Assessment Survey, an initial overarching contract was signed for the coming six year period. The following main goals were formulated:

- Develop NANM into a vibrant, sustainable civil society organization, representing nurses and midwives, providing optimal care and support to its members and thereby contributing to the highest possible levels of quality care for the people of Malawi.
- Mitigate the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on health care services in Malawi by providing various training, care and support activities to HIV-infected or affected nurses and other health care workers.

Based on the main goals, objectives, activities and result indicators are developed.

The Project is started!

The project has been commenced and the first, initial activities carried out. Office space has been found and equipped, one vehicle has been purchased (in collaboration with sponsors from a safe water project where NSF provided technical support). A new logo has been designed by a Norwegian designer, with valuable comments provided by Malawian colleagues. Road signs, office procedures and a lot more are rapidly falling into place due to a tremendous effort by our local colleagues.

During the month of December NANM held its Annual General Meeting in the northern city of Mzuzu, with nursing representatives from all 30 districts country-wide participating. The incumbent president, Mrs. Dorothy Ngoma, was reelected. There is an
air of hope among the nurses in Malawi, with a feeling that positive action is being taken to ameliorate their situation.

**Solidarity Fund Established**

Most Malawian nurses suffer under difficult, and at times impossible, social and workplace conditions. Most of them are in need of support, but the nursing association has no financial resources with which to provide help. Some nurses are in desperate need of support, and these too often have no one to turn to. This feeling of powerlessness surfaced during recent discussions, and led to a decision to establish a Solidarity Fund for nurses in extreme need. The Fund was formally opened in December through the generous offer of one Norwegian nurse student to provide a small amount of regular support to one such Malawian nurse. Additional contributions are expected, and will be administered by a committee under the auspices of NANM.

**Coordinated Efforts**

Coinciding with NSF’s efforts, a group of six Norwegian Nursing Schools have initiated collaboration with 10 Malawian nursing school counterparts. Their objective is to strengthen the Malawian nursing schools’ curriculum, infrastructure and capability to train enrolled nurses. The goal is to double the number of enrolled nurses being trained by the end of year 2009. This is being carried out in cooperation with the Norwegian Church Aid organization, through the generous contribution of funding by the Norwegian Embassy in Malawi. NSF’s regional office in the county of Vestfold is also involved in this particular collaboration and shall be helping out by developing a regional office for NANM in the southern city of Blantyre, and through activities aimed at creating a vibrant and attractive student environment.

*A large number of nursing students are noe registered members of the Malawian nursing association. They have seen that things are starting to happen and want to be a prt of this positive development, strengthening the nursing profession in Malawi.*
NSF is also involved in providing technical project support to a collaboration between NANM, NSF bidrar også med faglig og teknisk støtte i samarbeid med NANM, ICN (International Council of Nurses) og et amerikansk firma som produserer et pulver som benyttes til å rense vann for forurensning, giftstoffer, tungmetaller, bakterier, m.m. Som en del av sin humanitære satsing deler dette firmaet ut penger til gode formål. I dette tilfellet er penger gitt til et vannprosjekt i Malawi der sykepleierne skal hjelpe lokale samfunn og fosterhjem til å forbedre vannkvaliteten. Dette er en viktig satsing i et land der mange barn dør på grunn av mageinfeksjoner grunnet forurenset vann.

Til sammen utgjør NSFs satsing og nettverksbygging en betydelig innsats for sykepleiere i Malawi.

Malawi, 2006.
Ord og Bilder: Michael Vitols