



## Improving Girls' Secondary Education in Malawi

With fewer than 100 secondary schools in the 1990s, the Malawian government responded to significant demand for secondary education in 1998 by converting hundreds of skeletal Distance Learning Centers into a new type of secondary school – the "Community Day Secondary School" (CDSS). Today, Community Day Secondary Schools are a testament to the will of the government and the desire of the people to expand access to secondary education, but they still face significant challenges from poorly trained teachers, to limited teaching and learning materials, to an outdated curriculum that is ill-suited to meet the needs of the economy or of the next generation of graduates. This has led to almost universally poor perceptions of the schools and by extension poor perceptions of the value of secondary education. Parents, students, and communities are unsure of the value of schooling at the CDSSs, and thus early marriage for girls and early work for boys is often prioritized over secondary enrollment.

In partnership with the MasterCard Foundation, Dubai Cares, and the Flora Family Foundation, Firelight is leading an initiative supporting **4 local organizations in Malawi** working with over **6,000 students and over 7,000 community members and parents, teachers, local leaders, and government officials** on improving transition, persistence, and exam pass rates for the most vulnerable students in Malawi's Community Day Secondary Schools – girls.

Based on the belief that community-based organizations are critical agents of social change in Africa and can be strong partners to governments in changing education outcomes, Firelight and its partners are using human-centered design to develop community-led approaches that support girls in secondary schools and will potentially be replicable, scalable, and sustainable across the whole CDSS system. We have already begun to see significant results: reduced school dropout rates, increased girls' participation in class, increased community support of girls' education, and increases in parents' contributions to their girls' education.



*Prevalence of HIV (adults 15-49)*  
10.6%

*% of women who were first married by age 18*  
46%

*Secondary school net enrollment rate*  
97%

*Primary school completion rate*  
79%

*Youth literacy rate*  
72%

*Youth female unemployment*  
14.8%

*Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women)*  
137

## Background: the challenge and the opportunity

Girls in Malawi face a number of obstacles when it comes to accessing and succeeding in school. If families can afford to send their children to secondary school, boys will usually be given preference over girls. In addition, parents often do not see the value of a secondary education, as the national curriculum does not include applicable skills to improve livelihoods in rural Malawi. Faced with the decision to send a daughter to secondary school or to send her to work in the fields, parents weigh the opportunity costs of forgoing household income for an education that does not reap automatic rewards for them. And with the only option for many being a poorly resourced Community Day Secondary School, too many parents choose early marriage or work for their daughters.

At Firelight we believe that the conditions are right for improving the system.

We believe that community-based organizations can play a significant role in rethinking and redesigning local approaches to secondary school and helping parents make the investment in secondary education for their girls.

We believe that with training in human-centered design as a discipline for rethinking systems and services, Malawi's community-based organizations can help develop fresh ideas and approaches to what many have viewed as an intractable problem.

We have also been working directly with the Malawian government at national, district, and local levels to create the building blocks for these programs to scale.



## What our partners are doing

Driven by an omnipresent desire to build solutions that are community-driven and community-supported, our partners first engaged in an extensive period of human-centered design training and application. Our partner organizations used human-centered design to build on their skills and knowledge to develop stronger prototypes to address these challenges.

Informed by the students, families, and teachers they seek to serve, the partners then developed four separate ideas for reforming aspects of the Community Day Secondary School system, from entrepreneurship training in schools, to a dedicated social fund to support young girls, to a multi-faceted cultural program to shift community attitudes towards secondary schooling, to dedicated livelihood development for families supporting young women through secondary school. Our partners will continue to evolve their programs with the idea that they could one day be scaled across other communities or by the government itself. Two of our partners' models are shared below:

### Namwera AIDS Coordinating Committee (NACC)

In the Mangochi district of Malawi, NACC is supporting vulnerable girl students through school bursaries, allowing them to stay in school instead of dropping out to get married or to work. In order to strengthen community support for these girls' education, NACC encourages voluntary contributions towards these girls' education from individual community members. NACC is also working with local leaders to establish community educational funds that would support education for needy students regardless of gender. Community members contribute small amounts of money periodically towards this fund. These efforts represent a significant change in community mindset, where the education of girls has not previously been a priority at the same level with the education of boys. In 2017, 75 students (36 boys and 39 girls) who would have dropped out of CDSSs have been supported to stay in school.

### Adolescent Girls Empowerment (AGE) Africa

AGE Africa aims to inspire a positive attitude toward informal sector employment and to inculcate a culture of entrepreneurship in adolescent girls. In Malawi, where attitude and perception towards entrepreneurship is a problem, the program allows young women to venture purposefully into entrepreneurship as a livelihood, which will only enhance their financial independence after finishing secondary education. AGE Africa developed a special curriculum that deconstructs myths about young women and work and that trains girls to believe in their full economic potential. The curriculum has since been piloted in target secondary schools and full implementation is on course. The girls are excited to graduate from secondary schools with the necessary skills and knowledge to enable their financial independence whether or not they qualify for tertiary level of education.

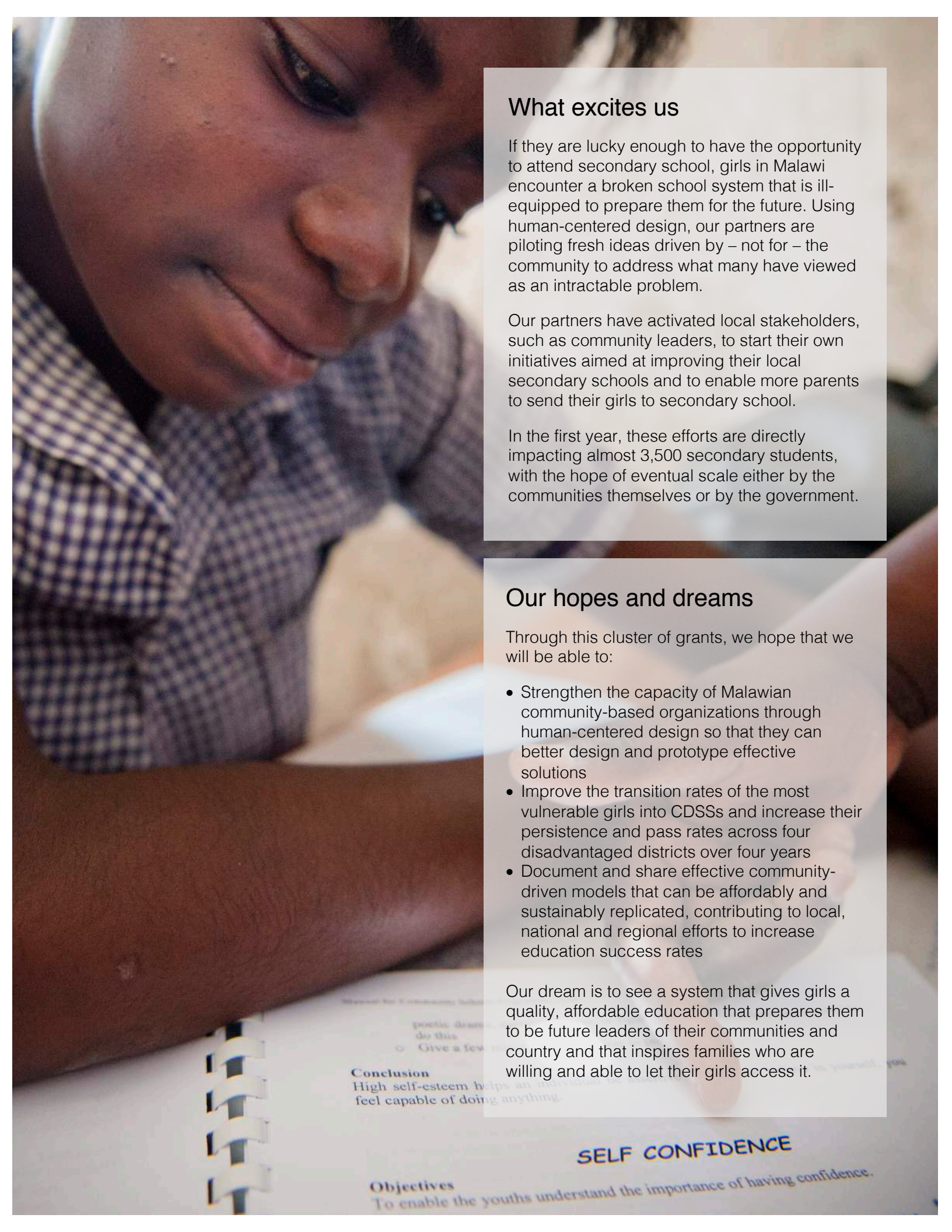
## Firelight's role

One of the key elements of this funding cluster has been the introduction of human-centered design over an intensive period to allow our partners to really listen, learn, and iterate. Human-centered design unleashes creativity and innovation by leveling the playing field among stakeholders so that all voices are heard, and emphasizes deep empathy with those affected to truly understand the problem and to create workable solutions. As a result, our partners came up with four different but deeply community driven ideas to change the way communities see school, support school, and understand how students thrive.

Firelight has helped its grantees with unparalleled training in human-centered design, helped them build their programs, and has given each organization training and mentoring in program implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and organization-specific support related to their innovations.

Firelight is also playing a substantial role in convening stakeholders for a national conversation about the Community Day Secondary School system and in empowering our grantee-partners to keep that conversation going at a district and local level.

Finally, Firelight is helping to document the efficacy of both human-centered design in a community context and of our grantees' models so that all can be replicated and scaled by communities themselves or by the government.

A close-up photograph of a young girl with dark skin, wearing a blue and white checkered school uniform. She is looking down at a notebook, with her hands visible near the pages. The notebook has some text on it, including 'SELF CONFIDENCE' and 'Objectives'.

## What excites us

If they are lucky enough to have the opportunity to attend secondary school, girls in Malawi encounter a broken school system that is ill-equipped to prepare them for the future. Using human-centered design, our partners are piloting fresh ideas driven by – not for – the community to address what many have viewed as an intractable problem.

Our partners have activated local stakeholders, such as community leaders, to start their own initiatives aimed at improving their local secondary schools and to enable more parents to send their girls to secondary school.

In the first year, these efforts are directly impacting almost 3,500 secondary students, with the hope of eventual scale either by the communities themselves or by the government.

## Our hopes and dreams

Through this cluster of grants, we hope that we will be able to:

- Strengthen the capacity of Malawian community-based organizations through human-centered design so that they can better design and prototype effective solutions
- Improve the transition rates of the most vulnerable girls into CDSSs and increase their persistence and pass rates across four disadvantaged districts over four years
- Document and share effective community-driven models that can be affordably and sustainably replicated, contributing to local, national and regional efforts to increase education success rates

Our dream is to see a system that gives girls a quality, affordable education that prepares them to be future leaders of their communities and country and that inspires families who are willing and able to let their girls access it.

### Conclusion

High self-esteem helps an individual feel capable of doing anything.

### Objectives

To enable the youths understand the importance of having confidence.

**SELF CONFIDENCE**

## The story of Nduuzani Davis



Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) is a grassroots movement of girls and young women that works to support and improve the wellbeing of vulnerable and marginalized young girls in Malawi. GENET wants to make its presence felt in the schools that it currently works in by helping school communities establish social funds – collective savings groups fueled by local businesses – that can support girls’ education over the long-term without outside help. They also seek to to capitalize on their success in national advocacy to strengthen their national platform and impact Malawian education policy. The story of Nduuzani Davis is a perfect example of how a little help and counseling can change a life.

Nduuzani Davis is in Form 1 at Dziwe Community Day Secondary School and is the third born of four children. Nduuzani lives with her mother who is a smallholder farmer and has never known her father because her parents are separated. “I like listening to the MBC Radio 1 where female radio announcers are my role models. I would like to be a radio announcer too when I finish school,” she said. Nduuzani has been inspired by Joyce Banda and her neighbor studying Journalism at university. “Watching her achieve great things keeps me motivated and focused on my dreams.”

Nduuzani faces many barriers on her way to achieving her dreams. Nduuzani and her brother live 13 kilometers away from their schools. She leaves home at 5 am on an empty stomach to begin the long journey to school often arriving after 8 am. Arriving at school tired and hungry impedes her concentration. Her brother works menial jobs to make money to pay his school fees which his mother cannot afford. GENET stepped in to help Nduuzani, giving her a bursary to continue her education as well as monthly counseling support. It is planned that soon the bursary payments for girls like Nduuzani will not come from “outsiders” like GENET, but from the community’s own social funds for girls’ education.

Nduuzani said:

“The GENET bursary has been an enormous relief. It has meant so much to my family and future. Since they started paying my school fees my life has been easier and I am able to work wholeheartedly towards my future. Since GENET started giving me education support material and monthly counselling by mentors and GENET staff, my performance has improved. In my first term I failed my exams but in my second term my scores put me in 28th position in a class of 40 girls.

However, when I look in the distance, sometimes I feel pressured to get married like my sister. She didn’t go on to high school after her standard 8 exams because we did not have the money for school fees. She got married because it seemed like a shortcut to a better life. Her husband courted her by buying her soap, body lotion and food. We all thought it was true love. After a few months my sister started complaining that her husband beats her up and at times they go to bed on empty stomachs. I feel very sorry for my sister and all she is going through. I don’t want to go through a similar experience and believe that enduring the long journey to school and the hard work to perform well is the best option.”

Firelight and GENET are inspired by the courage and determination of girls like Nduuzani and are committed to turning her dreams into a reality.