



Community Initiative Dramatically Improves Child Health

In February 2006, little Linly Kalulu weighed only 7.3 kgs at 13 months of age. February is the height of the *hungry season* in Malawi where farmers have all but finished their stores of food as they wait for the new crop to be harvested in April. This hungry season was very severe and many children in Mwangala Village in Phalombe district were, like Linly, underweight.



Linly with her mother.

Phalombe lies in the shadow of Mt. Mulanje in Southern Malawi. Lush, green tea estates cover the fertile foothills of the mountain while small scale farmers occupy more marginal lands. The run-off from the mountain and normally good rainfall patterns mean that agricultural potential is good but farmers have little capacity to adequately develop this. Although a wide variety of crops would grow well in Phalombe, most families still depend on a single harvest of the country's staple food, maize.

Without adequate nutrition and proper care and feeding practices a small child's health can deteriorate rapidly. Weak and lethargic, Linly had been taken to the hospital several hours' walk from the village. Although she was underweight, Linly didn't have to stay in hospital. A new initiative facilitated by the Salvation Army (TSA) under the USAID funded I-LIFE program was just starting in her village and Linly was referred to *Hearth sessions* instead. This changed the lives and health status of the entire Kalulu family in just one short month.

Hearth is an approach to treating moderate malnutrition in children, that draws on the knowledge and capacity of so-called *positive deviant* mothers, who despite deep poverty are managing to raise healthy, well-nourished children. For twelve days, mothers of malnourished children meet daily to cook together and feed their children, while the positive deviant mothers and other Hearth volunteers share information on nutrition and food preparation, as well as health and hygiene.

Every mother is supposed to bring something for the meal but during the hungry season this is a big challenge that often prevents the Hearth sessions from taking off. Linly was lucky. In her village, TSA had managed to create such awareness of child malnutrition that chief Mwangala mobilized the community to undertake *ganyu*, or piece work, to raise money and pay for the ingredients for the sessions.

Since Hearth draws on the community's own resources and focuses on utilizing locally available foods, results have every chance of lasting permanently. Visiting the Kalulu household in April, it was easy to see the profound impact of the sessions more than a month after Linly had 'graduated'. Today, she is a happy and healthy little girl of 13 kgs – almost double her weight from back in February before she joined the Hearth sessions.

Mrs. Kalulu explains how Linly's older siblings have also benefited, "These days I cook nutritious food for the whole family and everyone feels better. And after constructing the outhouse and place to wash hands as well as a dishrack for drying dishes as we were advised in the Hearth session, we don't have diarrhea anymore." In addition, the Kalulu homestead also features a newly established home garden that will continue to provide nutritious ingredients to the new way of cooking.



A local green leaf vegetable, eggs, peanut flour and sunflower oil are added to porridge during a Hearth session to create a healthy meal.

All photos by Cristina Hanson, I-Life