

## GAIA Health Workforce Development Program

*Investing in human resources for health and healthcare capacity for the future*

### Context

Eighty-two percent of Malawi's population live in rural areas, and 40% live further than 5 kilometers from the nearest health care facility – a distance often traveled on foot, particularly for the 72% of Malawians living in extreme poverty. The country also faces a chronic shortage and maldistribution of healthcare workers – negatively impacting health outcomes and the delivery, quality, and accessibility of health services nationwide.

Gaps in Malawi's health workforce can be attributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, widespread poverty, low educational attainment of adolescent girls and young women, declines in government funding allocated to human resources for health, and challenges related to job placement and health worker retention. With 54% of nursing positions in public health facilities vacant, a small pool of nurses forms the backbone of healthcare delivery, particularly in rural areas where they are often the only trained healthcare providers. Together, these challenges put millions of lives at risk, especially the rural poor who suffer from high prevalence of maternal and neonatal deaths and preventable and treatable diseases like HIV and malaria.

### Solution

#### Nursing Scholar Program

GAIA's Nursing Scholar Program funds the next generation of frontline healthcare workers. In partnership with Ministries of Health and local universities, we support the education and training of needed health worker cadres through wrap-around scholarship support for economically disadvantaged nursing and midwifery students.

Tuition, psychosocial support, living stipends, clinical supplies, preparation and payment for licensure exams, and ongoing follow-up ensure students complete their studies on-time and are quickly licensed and deployed.

Post-graduation service commitments, which require scholars to serve in the local health workforce for the same number of years that they were sponsored by the program, incentivize qualified health workers to remain in the country – preventing "brain drain" and building health infrastructure for the long-term.

Deployed scholars secure stable, fulfilling jobs – creating pathways to economic self-sufficiency and better, healthier lives for students, their families and the communities they serve. Scholarships provide opportunity for vulnerable young women, promoting gender equity and supporting them to lead as powerful drivers of social and economic change. As many GAIA scholars are the first in their family or village to attend university, they serve as role models for adolescent girls, inspiring them to complete school and pursue professional jobs.

### Nurses and midwives per 1,000 people



Source: World Bank



#### GAIA Nursing Scholar Profile

- 907 nurses supported
- 75% female
- 40% have lost one or both parents



### Nursing Fellow Program

GAIA's Nursing Fellow Program deploys health workers to improve the quality of care provided across Malawi over the long term in partnership with the Malawi Ministry of Health and Population.

One-year paid fellowships for recently graduated nurses promote continued learning, skill building, and clinical practice while new health workers await permanent deployment. In-service fellow trainings on priority areas like Antiretroviral Therapy, Maternal Newborn and Child Health, Integrated Management of Childhood Illness, and Emergency Obstetrics and Newborn Care provide nurses with the necessary skills to improve quality of care and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals for health.

### Impact

GAIA scholars are posted across all of Malawi's 28 districts, bringing quality care to the most remote areas. GAIA has supported 10% of nurses currently working in the country's public sector.

- ✓ 98% of graduates complete their service commitment.
- ✓ 99% of graduates remain working in Malawi.
- ✓ 79% of graduates are working in public sector health facilities.
- ✓ 60% have held management positions.
- ✓ 10% are working as nurse educators.
- ✓ 2/3 of female scholarship recipients cited independence, decision-making, and the ability to support others, like family members, as the program's main impact on their lives.

### A Recognized, Locally-Led Model

GAIA's work in Malawi is led by a 100% Malawian team—53% women and 34% nurses. Our proven model is built on 25 years of in-country experience driven by GAIA's dedicated team of qualified staff, many of whom have practical nursing and teaching backgrounds, technical expertise in health workforce development and systems strengthening, and extensive familiarity navigating Malawi's complex healthcare landscape. GAIA's success in scholar tracking, monitoring and follow-up has been recognized by the Ministry of Health, USAID, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and with expressed permission, MSF has adopted the GAIA program tracking tools.

### Return on Investment

Each GAIA nurse graduate is estimated to provide 300,000 high-quality patient visits over the course of their career. With an annual direct cost of \$2,500 to provide a comprehensive scholarship to pursue a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree, this represents a huge return on investment that impacts development and health outcomes across Malawi, the health of each patient served, and the trajectory and quality of life for every GAIA scholar, their family members and communities.



#### History

Launched with generous support from the **Gruber Family Foundation**, GAIA's Nursing Scholars Program has grown significantly since it started in 2005 through numerous partnerships, including with **UCSF's Global Action in Nursing**, the **Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation** and **USAID**. Building on its success, GAIA piloted its Nursing Fellows Program in 2017, thanks to the support of the **Steward Family Foundation**.

GAIA has been a **USAID Human Resources for Health** partner since 2010, implementing two 5-year cooperative agreements to graduate new nurses and train in-service health workers.

In mid-2014, GAIA replicated its proven scholarship model in Liberia during the wake of the Ebola crisis, partnering with **Global Strategies** and **Mother Patern College of Health Sciences** to rebuild Liberia's health workforce. The first Liberian scholars were inducted in early 2015, followed by a second cohort in 2018.

With the support of the **Health Carousel Foundation**, in 2025, GAIA further expanded its impact by launching the **Zambia Health Workforce Development Program**. In collaboration with **Lusaka College of Nursing**, GAIA now offers comprehensive scholarships to diploma-level nurses pursuing advanced diplomas in midwifery. In partnership with **Catholic Relief Services**, GAIA also places licensed nurse-midwives in high-burden health facilities.

GAIA has also sponsored Malawian graduate students to obtain advanced degrees in South Africa at the **University of Witwatersrand**.