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As Soya Village Thrives: Youth Peers Lead The Way



Rayan (middle) displays a tablet which he obtained through MFPIII to promote Adolescents', Sexual and Reproductive Health to his peers PHOTO | BMF

Chemba. Rayan Fatai, 24, is a promising entrepreneur in the Soya Village of Chemba District. He exudes confidence as he speaks about his journey since he started dabbling in small-scale ventures such as selling second-hand clothes. Previously, he was like many others in his village where—for years—youths like him have grappled with limited access to information and cultural barriers surrounding adolescent and reproductive health. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) lurked beneath the void of accurate health information.

“We witnessed many girls getting pregnant under the age of 20,” explains Tatu Rashidi, the District Reproductive and Child Health Coordinator (DRCHCO) for Chemba, where Soya is found.

But life in Soya began taking an empowering turn, and Rayan is at the center of what many in the village—young and old—describe as “the journey of success.” Rayan says, *“For me, this has been like a stepping stone,”* as he narrates how he eventually became part of the Mkapa Fellows Program (MFP) Phase III, implemented by the Benjamin Mkapa Foundation (BMF). Since then, he—and his peers in Soya—have embarked on a new transformative trajectory in life.

The BMF, supported by Irish Aid, arrived in Soya with a mission of economic empowerment and improving Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH). At the core of this mission was an innovative pairing model.

In the context of the project, the establishment of Youth Peer Educators (YPEs) together with individuals such as Rayan, and Community Health Workers (CHWs) was proposed to serve as the fundamental framework of this strategy. These groups were intended to collaborate in order to bridge the divide between the community and essential healthcare services. It worked.

Recognizing Rayan's potential, the village's leadership recommended him as a Youth Peer Educator (YPE). He started within his close circle, dispelling myths and misconceptions surrounding SRH. His relatable approach and growing knowledge resonated with his peers, drawing more members to the group.

"I reached out to the unreached communities and educated them about their sexual and reproductive health. Mkapa Fellows Program was instrumental in all my efforts," says Rayan, explaining how he was empowered. The BMF provided critical tools like tablets loaded with age-appropriate SRH information.

"We used various tools we got from BMF to educate young people and address their sensitive questions in a safe and informative way," he says. These tablets became a lifeline for Rayan and 49 other YPEs across 25 villages in Chemba. They used these devices to inform their peers about upcoming discussions on adolescent health, gender-based violence, and economic opportunities.



Rayan teams up with his peer as they operate a sunflower oil refining machine obtained through youth support PHOTO|BMF

But it wasn't just about health. Economic stability was also an important part of the project. Recognizing this crucial link, Rayan's group, empowered by BMF and the district council, embarked on a sunflower oil production project. "BMF provided invaluable support in helping us establish the group, register it officially, and draft a constitution," explains Rayan. The district council (DC) played its part by extending a loan to purchase a refining machine and bolster their working capital.

A TZS 20 million injection from the District Council's Youth Development Fund further fueled their sunflower oil production. That wasn't all; the BMF equipped Rayan's group with entrepreneurial skills and encouraged them to capitalize on the government's youth credit scheme.

"The loan improved attendance and cooperation among the youth," Rayan narrates. *"We've even outgrown our current space and need a separate office to accommodate our expanding business."*

Dr. Sabuni Kasongi, the Medical Officer in Charge of Soya Dispensary, is seeing a dramatic shift. He says, "Previously, we would see 30-40 youths per month seeking medical attention. Now, that number has more than quadrupled, with many specifically seeking family planning guidance." This initiative not only addressed the root causes of risky behavior but also yielded tangible health benefits.

BMF trained 50 YPEs in 25 villages. The YPEs and Community Health Workers, working in tandem through BMF's innovative pairing model approach, brought in a sense of community ownership of healthcare initiatives. As Dr. Ngonja highlights, "Their collaborative efforts improved healthcare management at the community level, leading to a deeper understanding and a stronger sense of ownership of these health initiatives."