



Clinic-to-Community Referral Networks in Malawi

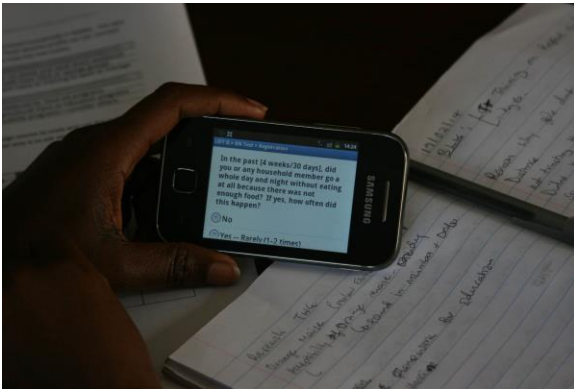


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Top: LIFT II Leland Fellow Zach Andersson works with service providers during the CommCare mobile data collection platform demonstration in Balaka.

Bottom: Using Android devices, LIFT II tested an adapted version of CommCare for a mobile-based referral system which service providers can use to conduct and track client referrals.

The **Livelihoods and Food Security Technical Assistance II (LIFT II)** project was launched in 2013 by USAID as a follow on to the LIFT project (2009-2013). LIFT II's primary goal is to build the continuum of care for people living with HIV and other vulnerable households by increasing their access to high quality, context appropriate, market-led economic strengthening, livelihoods and food security opportunities to improve their economic resilience and lead to better health. LIFT II is implemented by three core partners—[FHI 360](#), [CARE](#) and [World Vision](#).

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A [recent health study](#) conducted at the main public hospital in Lilongwe, Malawi showed that people newly diagnosed with HIV are likely to have others within their social networks that are undiagnosed. A [study on informed choice in Tanzania](#) looked at perceptions of PMTCT clients when provided with *multiple service choices* versus *direct advice*. Too many choices tended to create uncertainty, whereas direct advice led to increased confidence in the service provider and utilization of advice. A [study from rural Uganda](#) demonstrated that food insecure PLHIV have 50% higher odds of defaulting on treatment and 47% higher odds of a CD4 count below 350, meaning that food secure PLHIV have higher retention in care - *improve food security → improve HIV care*.

Why are these findings important? Each one illustrates the potential power of a formalized and clearly outlined referral system to improve health and nutrition outcomes for vulnerable populations. Since 2013, the Livelihoods and Food Security Technical Assistance II (LIFT II) project team has been working at the systems level in Balaka District, Malawi, actively engaging a diverse group of local and national stakeholders throughout the process of developing a referral system that will link clinical health and nutrition services to community-based economic strengthening, livelihoods and food security services.

When service providers work independently of each other, the result is that a client is subject to fragmented services, none of which might address the client as a whole person. Effective systems and diagnostic tools can help create standardized processes and routines that facilitate appropriate referrals for clients in need, thereby increasing confidence in service offerings and limiting stressful and sometimes risky decisions about how to allocate already scarce household resources. By including a wide array of service providers specializing in different areas, the referral network can touch upon all 360 degrees of client need. LIFT II is helping to establish a mechanism for clients to know about and benefit from every form of available support instead of just one-off services.

In February, 2014, a trimmed-down version of the LIFT II-facilitated referral system in Balaka was demonstrated for 31 participants from 26 distinct service providers active in Balaka District. Using CommCare (<http://www.commcarehq.org/home/>), a mobile data collection and sharing platform that LIFT II has adapted, participants role-played as clients and service providers, following the referral process through from initial client registration, to counseling on available services and eligibility criteria, to referral. The sessions allowed stakeholders to provide their honest appraisal of the system so that together we can maximize its potential. Participants appreciated the opportunity, expressing strong understanding of the referral model and "...looking forward with great anticipation to the next steps in this commendable effort." LIFT II will build on the momentum from the demonstration sessions as CommCare programming is finalized and preparations are made for a more in-depth training with referral focal points at each service provider before system launch.

[LIFT II] is a project that more people need to know about. Its multi-sectoral approach, linking clinics to community-based services via bi-directional referrals in order to better address the needs of vulnerable people holistically, is truly fascinating.
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