



# **Breaking Barriers Across The Hustles of Stigma and Discrimination: A LIFE-STORY OF MASUNGA**

Bukombe DC is one of six district councils that make up the Geita region in the north-western Tanzania. The name Bukombe came from the native language, meaning "feeding cup". According to the Tanzania census of 2022, the district has an estimated population of 266,667 people. The majority of the population depends on small-scale farming, artisanal mining, and livestock keeping for their livelihood. 60% of the Bukombe land has been designated as a forest reserve, leaving about 40% of the remaining land for human activities.

The younger population in the council is at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases due to transactional sex fueled by interactions and influx of people coming for small-scale mining activities. Presence of transportation corridor due to the major trunk road, crossing the district for over 150km, that connects the district with Kagera, Kigoma, Shinyanga regions, and neighboring countries of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda is another factor precipitating HIV transmission especially to young girls and women.

Afya Plus's 'JIPANGE' project with funding support from US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the Ambassador's Fund for HIV/AIDS Relief (AFHR) has been of great impact not only to the supported groups but also to individual members on driving economic empowerment strategy tailored for PLHIV in Bukombe DC. *"Despite beneficiaries being in groups, at some point we treated group members individually due to diversity needs and uniqueness of the challenges they encounter in order to improve their well-being"* narrate 'JIPANGE' Project Officer. It is through mission, Afya Plus managed to extend support to the young boy who was encountering stigma and discrimination from his blood brother and other family members after disclosing his HIV status and become a member of one of the supported PLHIV group.

One beautiful morning, our team was invited to meet with members of one of the supported group-AMAWA PLHIV group. During the meeting, the team had an opportunity to speak with a young boy who appeared to be the youngest member of the group.



This was none other than Masunga (not his real name). At 23 years, he was living with HIV and luckily he was already enrolled into ART treatment and other medical support at the Bukombe district hospital. He looked weak, malnourished, and psychologically depressed.

Masunga's HIV status made him prone to all sorts of stigma and discrimination from his brother whom they lived together. The brother mistreated Masunga and often blocked him from accessing some of the opportunities for his daily earnings.

Worse enough, he often misses meals, and no one was there to remind him to adhere to daily ARV intake and frequently misses his scheduled clinic appointments. Consequently, his adherence to ART became poor, and he gradually started to lose weight and became vulnerable to opportunistic infections.

After a long conversation with AMAWA-PLHIV group members where Masunga belong, Afya Plus team in collaboration with the community development officer who serve as the custodian of the group, started walking the journey of hope with this young man who was courageous to disclose his HIV status.

We gave priority to his specific needs as part of 'JIPANGE' project goal of ensuring the well-being of PLHIV is improved. Several actions were taken at different stages along his journey of hope to ensure the well-being of Masunga is restored and sustained.



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At first, we guaranteed Masunga financial risk protection by supporting him to enroll into iCHF, an improved community health insurance scheme for him to have access to health services without financial hardship. Hence, Masunga became one of the early members to enjoy iCHF. He was later linked to a psycho-social counselor at the district hospital where he was regularly attended, and his condition started to improve and became stable over-time.

We also linked Masunga with social welfare office where he received essential protection services and reuniting him with some of his family members who were ready to offer him food and other basic needs and also serve as his treatment supporter at family level to improve his adherence to ART and well-being in general.

For ensuring his freedom from dependency, which is instrumental to overcome stigma and discrimination, the long-term economic empowerment goal became a pivotal measure of *Afya Plus*. Through “JIPANGE” project, we provided special and sustainable economic empowerment support to Masunga to enable his “journey across the hustles of stigma and discrimination”. We supported Masunga to acquire financial literacy and basic entrepreneurship skills, national identity card famously known as (NIDA) and later welding skills through apprenticeship training for three months necessary for him to initiate self-income generating activity and become financially independent. Masunga now earns a living with required competence in metal welding. His life has been greatly transformed *“Today I own a welding workshop that has started to attract customers..., my earning continues to increase gradually. I can now afford three meals a day..., looking healthy and consistently adhere to ART. Currently, I have engaged myself with another group of youth working in a community for experience sharing. Indeed, my life has transformed substantially, I have restored hope and started seeing the bright future ahead”* Masunga attest.



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We are also grateful to the funding support from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the Ambassador's Fund for HIV/AIDS Relief (AFHR). Your generous contribution has been the cornerstone of our efforts towards zero stigma and discrimination while driving economic empowerment efforts among HIV Services recipients in Bukombe DC.

**Disclaimer:** The information and insights presented in this success story are the perspectives of the author(s) and may not necessarily reflect the official stance of the funding agency or the Government of Tanzania.



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