



An update from the MCA-T ROADS II Project, Tanzania

Road projects increasing economic opportunities for rural communities while helping to check the spread of HIV

The story of Scholastica Ponela a 40-year-old resident of Namtumbo District, illustrates how ordinary people are benefiting from infrastructure projects such as the Songea-Namtumbo Road. This is one of four major road projects being implemented by the Millennium Challenge Account-Tanzania (MCA-T) as part of a US\$698 million Compact between the Tanzania and the U.S. Governments through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The overall goal of the Compact is to reduce poverty by improving transport, energy and water infrastructure.

SONGEA, Tanzania, March 2011 — In November last year, Scholastica Ponela returned to her Utwango Village home in the southern Tanzania district of Namtumbo. Twelve years earlier, she had left to seek business opportunities at Mtera, a growing town near Dodoma, the country's capital.

Ponela returned home with her three children after her once thriving cereals business collapsed following her divorce.

“My parents called and told me that the Songea-Namtumbo road was being constructed and could bring opportunities,” says Ponela. “It is then I got the idea of selling food to construction workers.”

Using her savings, she built a grass-thatched bamboo shed that became the kitchen and eating area for her new venture. Business peaked quickly because the workers liked her food.

Five months later, there are now 10 new sheds and a grocery store. Most food kiosks are owned by people from the community. More than 50 people are employed directly in the food business. Many more visit every day.

A once quiet homestead has been transformed into a bustling commercial hub. Here, residents mingle with the construction workers building the 67-kilometre Songea-Namtumbo Road, one of four major trunk roads being built in an infrastructure development program implemented by MCA-T, the entity responsible for managing and implementing the US\$698 million MCC grant.

Says Ponela: “I have about 25 customers daily. There is enough for the other traders as well because I alone cannot satisfy the demand for food.” She earns about Tsh40,000 or US\$25 a day.

Scholastica and other food vendors have formed a self-help group called Furahia. The group aims to help members to pool capital so that they can improve and diversify their businesses. Scholastica is the group's treasurer.



*Scholastica Ponela outside her food kiosks.
(Photo: FHI)*

In February 2011, Scholastica and other group members attended a course organized by MCA-T to train them on leadership and business skills. The course, led by the MCA-T Namtumbo District Gender Focal Person, also included hygiene and sanitation education.

The women appreciated the training, especially the importance of keeping records. Previously they operated a merry-go-round savings and credit scheme but now opened a bank account for the group to accumulate savings.

Ponela is building a block of rooms for rent with income from her food business. She is left with enough money to pay school fees and care for her three children. She is also saving money to restart her grain business.

The change in Ponela's life illustrates some of the early economic benefits that better roads will bring for ordinary Tanzanians. It will promote trade and commerce, creating employment and improving access to markets for farm produce.

Addressing new challenges

But the opportunities for communities along the road that is being upgraded also bring new challenges. Like all large infrastructure projects, road construction attracts people from different places, increasing social interaction and with it the risk of HIV. This requires that construction projects include a strong HIV prevention component.

Correct knowledge of how HIV is transmitted enables people to protect themselves and others from infection or forward transmission. However, the level of such knowledge is generally low in Ruvuma Region. According to the Tanzania HIV/AIDS and Malaria Indicator Survey 2007-2008, only 28.3 percent of young women and young men aged 15-24 in this region have comprehensive knowledge about AIDS.

There are many risk factors that could fuel the spread of HIV in the region including low knowledge of HIV, economic vulnerability (especially among women), unsafe sex, alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy and lack of male circumcision.

To mitigate the potential impact of HIV/AIDS, MCA-T and MCC have partnered with USAID and FHI through the Roads to a Healthy Future (ROADS II) project to implement a comprehensive HIV prevention program during the lifetime of the road construction projects.

ROADS II is working with the contractors, government officials and community groups to implement innovative interventions that will combine awareness creation, HIV prevention and mitigation measures. In addition, individual traders such as Ponela are helping to stem the spread of HIV through their social networks. Ponela has offered one of her sheds for HIV/AIDS education for the community, including her fellow women traders.

ROADS II brings into the program its vast experience in implementing HIV/AIDS programs with mobile workers and communities along major transport corridors in eight African countries.

The program is devising strategies tailored to the needs of construction workers and various target groups in the community, including vulnerable youth and women. Besides HIV/AIDS, the program will address related issues such as gender-based violence, alcohol and drug abuse as well as child abuse and neglect.

“We will work through existing community structures so that we can build their capacity to sustain some of the activities after the project ends,” says Nelson Rutabanzibwa, ROADS II Project Site Coordinator supervising the HIV prevention component of the ROADS/MCA-T partnership in Songea.

To mitigate the potential adverse effects infrastructure projects can have on communities, USAID/Tanzania has partnered with the MCC and [Millennium Challenge Account-Tanzania](#) to forge a partnership with the ROADS II project. ROADS II, a regional initiative of [FHI](#), is implementing a US\$3 million comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention program in four transport projects funded by MCC. These are: The Tanga-Horohoro Road, Tunduma-Sumbawanga Road, Songea-Namtumbo Road and Peramiho Junction-Mbinga Road.

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