

case 8-913-601
June 2, 2026

Ted London

Pioneering Change for Girls in Rural Malawi: Othakarhaka's Community-Led Empowerment Strategy

Turning their attention away from the majestic Mount Mulanje, Ida Puliwa Mwango and Ted Mwango looked at each other and smiled. They had just gotten some good news. A new potential donor had approached them about expanding the activities of their Othakarhaka Foundation (OTK) to a nearby district. Based in the Mulanje District in southern Malawi, OTK empowered communities to remove barriers and change mindsets that limited opportunities for girls in rural society. All too often, Puliwa Mwango and Mwango heard the phrase “just a girl,” which captured the local communities’ perspective on how they invested in their children. Boy children were regarded as more valuable to the family’s future and therefore deserved preferential treatment. Embracing the concept of “passing on the kindness,” OTK focused on programs and processes that enabled girls to envision and achieve their full potential.

Awareness of OTK’s success since its 2012 founding was spreading. More girls from Mulanje District were completing primary and secondary school and going on to university. Although this new donor thought highly of OTK’s model, they wanted to invest in scaling an organization that deeply understood what made it successful. In the past, the donor had encountered other organizations with great stories and anecdotes about their positive impact on rural Malawi. Yet these organizations often struggled to explain why their approach was particularly effective.

Growing the geographic footprint of OTK also aligned with the organization’s long-term strategy, with the first such step being in the nearby district of Phalombe on the other side of Mount Mulanje. While Puliwa Mwango and Mwango were confident in their ability to positively impact rural communities, they wanted to be sure they fully understood what made OTK “special” and how their experiences and capabilities could most effectively be transferred to a new location.

Published by WDI Publishing, part of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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