2015 SCOM PROGRESS REPORT

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The year 2015 was a year of mixed experiences in the work of the Student Christian Organization of Malawi [SCOM]. There were various experiences. Programmatically, the year was full of activities at various levels and schools, communities and other stakeholders were engaged with various activities aimed at improving the quality of life of students. Financially, while the year started with promises for financial breakthroughs, things turned from good to bad and continued to worsen on that downward spiral as the year came to a close negatively reducing our operations to a bare minimum. The economic challenges facing our society have not spared our organization.

PART A: A QUICK GLANCE AT SCOM!

Student Christian Organization of Malawi was founded in 1961 by a consortium of churches called the Nyasaland Council of Churches [now Malawi Council of Churches] to be an extension of the church on every campus to bring together Christian students to witness for Christ on their campus and beyond. As such SCOM exists to prepare young people; especially students for life in its fullness! Through its various programs, SCOM invests in the social, physical, spiritual and academic development of the students by equipping them with basic spiritual disciplines and relevant life and leadership principles. Focusing on students enables SCOM to significantly contribute to the long-term socio-economic and spiritual development of the Malawi nation through raising a generation of effective workforce and responsible citizens for society and the stability and sustainability of the church.

SCOM is a member of various national and international public and faith based organizations. Locally, SCOM is registered with NGO Board and CONGOMA, and is an affiliate of Malawi Council of Churches and Evangelical Association of Malawi. Internationally, SCOM is a member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, IFES, which is a global fellowship comprising of more than 167 national students movements. SCOM works in partnership with other local organizations such as Anti-Corruption Bureau, Tearfund UK Malawi office, World Vision International among others. SCOM is a Faith Based Organization.

SCOM’s operations are guided by its vision which is “to be a vibrant student movement on every campus capable of impacting the whole society for God” and is achieved through “building a well-coordinated and financially stable organization that is committed to the evangelism, discipleship and training of students and equipping them to live as witnesses of Jesus Christ on campus and beyond”.

Operating Aims:

SCOM operates under the following five aims which some call them the “Big Five” and these are:
1. To call all students to a personal faith in God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit according to the Scriptures, and to a life of union with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit,
2. To deepen the spiritual life of students through prayer, study of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God and true record of God’s revelation of Himself to man, and worship,
3. To help students live as witness to Jesus Christ in and out of school or college, and by study and discussion, fulfill their Christian vocation by living as His true disciples,
4. To bring students into Christian fellowship with each other in serving the needs of all students and of the world,
5. To call students to work for the unity, renewal and extension of the church in Malawi and throughout the world, and to encourage them to be responsible members of their particular church denominations, in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Core Functions:
These operating aims are translated into a number of core functions which are summed up as follows:
1. Spiritual development of students through evangelism, discipleship, retreats, mentorship and counseling programs,
2. Leadership and character development through Life Skills development programs such as mindset change training, mentoring and role modeling,
3. Literature production and distribution to address existing and emerging challenges faced by the young people,
4. Resource mobilization in terms of financial, material and human to enhance delivery of aims,
5. Advocacy and social response to existing and emerging youth related issues,
6. Partnerships and networking with similar minded youth serving organizations and churches.

Scope of SCOM Work
The work of SCOM covers the whole country and takes place on secondary and tertiary academic campuses and the primary focus is the student. The core mandate is spiritual, character and leadership development of students. In this way SCOM complements both the work of the church and the Ministry of Education by investing in the moral and spiritual development of the learners. From the vision statement and operating aims, it is clear that SCOM seeks to reach out to all students with the life transforming messages that will make them become responsible citizens of society!

SCOM has branches in almost all public and most of the privately run secondary schools in Malawi. SCOM is a national organization with structures from the grass roots to the top. SCOM also responds to social issues through its social development section. Most of these responses are in terms of projects such as HIV and AIDS. At the moment, the social development programs are restricted in targeted project areas. Currently SCOM is running a project in 9 school communities in Dedza District. These could be extended to other parts of Malawi if funds are available.

SCOM predominantly works in secondary and tertiary academic institutions. However, there are some special cases where the organization has gone down to primary schools and communities with some specific programs. For example, in Rumphi where SCOM has a chaplaincy programs and reaches out to primary school pupils and out of school youths and community leaders around Kondowe area. Similarly in places where SCOM implements funded projects such as HIV and AIDS interventions, the activities include teachers, parents, local church and community leaders and other influential people.
PART B: A SNOPSIS OF 2015
As hinted earlier the past year was full of challenges that affected implementation of the planned activities. Despite these, some achievements were recorded as well.

1. Focus of the Year
Reflections and evaluations of some years in the recent past have revealed the fact that school visitations which is a core function for SCOM were decreasing. This is as a result of limited consistence of our associates in playing their supportive roles to the Organization. But school visitations remain critical for SCOM as they provide platforms for associates and staff to interact with the students and teachers and appreciate their challenges. It is a fact that students are facing multiple challenges and need consistent support. The visitations by SCOM staff and associates create links where these issues are identified and addressed. SCOM also noted some disturbing developments in schools such as increased rates of vandalism in schools and dropout rates among girl students due to teenage pregnancies.

It was imperative the SCOM prioritize these issues in its annual plans as it constantly positions itself for maximum impact in the schools. Consequently, SCOM had to prioritize among other normal programs:

- School visitations in all regions by members of staff and associates,
- Conferences and retreats for secondary school students,
- Engage students in addressing issues of violence by among things conducting leadership and mindset change training sessions for all student leaders in selected schools. This was aimed at equipping student leaders with appropriate leadership and conflict management skills as a means of reducing conflict in schools. Several schools were targeted in the Centre Region of Malawi,
- Girl empowerment sessions were conducted in some schools especially in Southern and Central Regions. The aims of these sessions were to equip girls with appropriate skills to handle issues of sex and sexuality thereby increasing their chances to remain in school as they make right decisions regarding their sexuality.

These were carried over and above the other usual SCOM activities.

2. What Went on Well: Achievements
2015 provided SCOM yet another rare opportunity to influence student life in many ways. In fulfilling its mandate SCOM, through its staff and associates successfully carried out a number of activities that helped to expand its sphere of influence. These include:

i. Organizing Student Conferences
One of the milestones within the SCOM is student conferences that are held in various places across the country. Each year SCOM organizes student conferences [popularly known as Easter Conferences because they are held around Easter each year] which attract thousands of secondary school students. Over the past five years the total numbers of students attending the conferences have risen from around 7,000 in 2010 to about 15,000 in 2015. This increase is partly due to decentralization of conferences following the current approach of “taking conferences to where the students are” as opposed to the previous approach where conference venues were limited to a few places. Conferences are now held at zonal level as opposed to regional levels as was the case a decade ago. The other attraction is the practical topics that are handled during these events such as Sex and Sexuality, Relationships, Career Choices, Academic Excellence, HIV and AIDS, Human Rights and other relevant Christian topics aimed at spiritual growth of the students.
It is worth mentioning that almost all conferences are organized, funded and managed by associates. In 2015 alone, funds in excess of K20,000,000 were raised by associates and used for student conferences. The SCOM Secretariat only provides technical support to the organizers of the conferences. This arrangement takes off a huge burden from the staff members and has proved to be sustainable. In 2015 for example, associates organized student conferences at 42 different venues across the country.

ii. Biblically Responding to the HIV and AIDS Crisis
SCOM has joined the national response to HIV and AIDS epidemic that has ravaged the Malawi society. As a Faith Based Organization, SCOM’s contribution to the response is promotion of sexual abstinence among students and single staff and associates and faithfulness among married staff and associates; mitigating the impact of the epidemic and advocating for review of policies and cultural beliefs and practices. In all these responses, SCOM seeks to demonstrate the compassion of God to society. Currently, SCOM is running some interventions 6 rural communities and 9 Secondary Schools in Dedza District. SCOM also mainstreams similar messages in all its activities across the nation.

The presence of these initiatives in the targeted communities has brought some transformation in people’s lives. Some of the notable achievements from the project in Dedza include the following:

Prayer time, SCOM brought together traditional, and faith based (Muslims inclusive) counselors under one roof for SRH seminars. Here they join in prayer during one of such seminars at Thete in Dedza
Establishment of Community Based Education Committee which include teachers, parents and traditional leaders to improve the learning conditions within schools in their areas,

Improvement of discipline and subsequent reduction of violence on schools,

Communities taking interests in welfare of students including some churches paying school fees for needy students,

Economic empowerment of vulnerable members of the communities through establishment of Village Saving and Loan groups. These groups have improved the economic status of some parents enabling them to pay school fees for their wards easily,

SCOM participates in HIV and AIDS related activities in Dedza such as celebration of World AIDS Day every year since the start of the project,

SCOM has for three times attended and made presentations to the District Executive Committee meetings

Improved networking between local communities [chiefs and parents] and school administration,

Provision of Mobile HTC services to students project areas. The number of students infected has been found to be less than 1% which gives hope for society if it is maintained.
iii. Supporting needy students with school fees

There is a growing number of deserving students that are forced out of school because they cannot afford to pay school fees. As part of its work among students, SCOM committed itself within the year to pay school fees for 11 needy students from Umbwi Secondary School in Dedza. This commitment continues until the students complete their studies at the institution.

The need for fees is enormous and requires the involvement of many stakeholders and capable individuals. Unfortunately, many are able to assist but only a few are willing to do so for whatever selfish reasons! SCOM continues to challenge its associate members to consider adopting needy students for support in this area and some have taken heed of this call and are assisting as requested.

There is need to emphasize that the NGO community needs to walk the talk by being genuine advocates of the less privileged people in society. While we continue to hear a lot of noise from this community on issues of human rights, very few of them are willing to go beyond the rhetoric and practically assist the people whose rights they advocate for! Considering the large amounts of funds that NGOs receive and use, the situation on the ground could have been different if significant portions of the said funds were invested in the holistic development of the target audiences! Supporting needy but deserving students to access quality education is key for the sustainable development of this nation. The NGO Boards needs to investigate these issues for the sake of the poor people for whom the funds are raised!
iv. Promotion of academic excellence among students

Besides supporting students with fees, SCOM continues to promote academic excellence among students in general and its members in particular. Generally, SCOM conducts sessions in academic excellence and career talks among students in schools and during conferences. This aims at enabling students focus on setting and pursuing academic goals in life. Role models, practical tips on studying, preparing for and handling examinations are used to encourage students to set academic ambitions.

In some small way, SCOM also provides incentives to excelling students as a way of encouraging others to work hard in their studies. For example, in the year, SCOM spent MK180, 000 as cash prizes for six students [SCOM Members] that scored less than 15 points at MSCE in some schools in Southern Region. These cash prizes were given out during the SCOM annual conferences held in various places at the close of the second term in March 2015. The student that did exceptionally well MSCE in Mulanje was promised a scholarship for tertiary education.

v. Mindset Change Training Sessions

Barely a month goes without society hearing of stories where students vandalizing school property. For example in a space of 16 days in October 2015, five Secondary Schools were vandalized in Dowa District alone. The damage will cost the Education Ministry millions of kwachas to repair. Incidences like these have become the order of the day in our society and have created a lot of fear among teachers and worry in every sane minded
person. Parents are forced to pay extra funds for the damages.

As a partner in youth development with the Education Ministry, SCOM implements a series of leadership training sessions aimed at slowly but surely reversing this destructive behavior among students. These series aim at helping all appointed student leaders and other potential leaders in selected schools acquire practical leadership skills to influence fellow students. The series include such topics such as Leadership and Mindset Change, Conflict Management, Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Human Rights and Freedom, Decision Making and Academic Excellence. Feedback from students and teachers reveal that these are important lessons and should be extended to all schools. That is the wish of SCOM but resources are limiting the scaling up of the initiative.

vi. Associates Conferences
Another highlight for the year was the gathering of associates for their annual meeting in October. This meeting brought together associates from all corners of the country to share reports, experiences, and best practices and plan ahead. The meeting was held at Kamuzu Academy in Kasungu and was attended by more than 200 associates, staff and student representatives.

Associates are key drivers of national student movements through the various roles they play. These include financial support, role modeling and mentoring of students, marketing and publicity of the SCOM work, being a pool for full time staff and many more. Their annual conferences there are strategic for the future of the organization as they provide a platform for sharing the vision, experiences and best practices.

vii. Advocacy initiatives
One of the strategic pillars for SCOM is advocacy. SCOM wishes to be a voice of the voiceless students on issues related to harmful cultural and traditional practices and
Some of the Income Generating activities include selling of SCOM branded items.

The major sources of income funding for SCOM are:

- Annual student subscriptions
- Associates subscriptions and contributions
- Well-wishers
- Partner Churches
- Income Generating Activities
- Partner Organizations through donations and funded projects

There was a general decline in the funds that were generated from most of these sources during the year. The audited accounts indicated that there was a decline of income from K69,812,557 to K66,188,754 in the 2015 fiscal year. SCOM developed and submitted a number of project proposals for funding to local and international donors but did not succeed in any of these attempts. This reduced our total income for the year and affected SCOM’s ability to implement some of the planned activities.

ii. Associates commitment

Associates are very strategic to the survival and sustainability of any student movement. They form the backbone of the student movements as former students and beneficiaries of the movements. SCOM has released hundreds of thousands of graduates into society most of whom have not looked back to support the movement that helped to shape them into responsible citizens for society and members for the church. That failure to look back and
support the movement has hindered growth of the movement. For those that have looked back and are supportive, the Paleto Principle applies; 80% of the support comes from 20% of the members and the remaining 20% comes from the majority 80% of the associates. This applies both in finances and visiting of schools and other activities.

There has been a limited consistent commitment of associates. Most of them are only available for major events such as conferences but not to follow up the students in their schools after the conferences. And since SCOM work takes place on campuses where the students are, this affects the quality of our work on the ground! There are many capable associates but only a few are committed and available.

iii. School visitations
While there was an improvement of school visitations in the past year, there are still a lot of schools that were not visited. Some of the factors contributing to this relate to the associates as discussed above. Others include challenges in mobility to schools, negative attitudes of some school authorities, premature closures of some schools due student violence, limited numbers of staff available for visits and many others.

iv. Finding venues for conferences
Conferences provide a platform for students from various schools to interact, share experiences, best practices, build relationships and encourage one another. The recurring challenge however is to find affordable venues to host these annual events. In some cases, the available venues are not able to accommodate large numbers of students while in others the charges for hosting are prohibitive. Some school authorities charge unreasonable fees that SCOM cannot afford. On average between 50 to 60% of the expenses got towards meeting venue charges. As a result of this, SCOM has not been able to organize conferences in some areas and the students lose out.

v. Working with churches around the schools
SCOM was founded by a consortium of churches in Malawi. As such it was supposed to be supported by churches. Unfortunately, some churches perceive SCOM as a competitor while others have since developed negative attitude due to doctrinal differences. It is disturbing to note that some churches have lost their foresight of the future and fail to invest in what matters most, young people. Instead they are busy with building projects and other nonessential things at the expense of the very future of their churches!

vi. Increase in number of school drop outs
The student is the reason why SCOM exists. SCOM gets concerned therefore when student drop out of school due to various factors including misconduct, lack of fees, early pregnancies and early marriages. During the past year several reports were circulated in the media and elsewhere that a good proportion of students drop out of school due to some of these factors. It is disturbing when some of the students that drop come from schools that benefitted from the various interventions SCOM carried out. For example, in some schools in Chiradzulu, 26 girls dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancies. In some cases, girl students left school to get married. In Mchinji district, 111 girls dropped out due to pregnancies in a space of three years. All these are challenges that need addressing and SCOM was not able to reach out to as many schools as possible to empower the students with appropriate skills. The long term impact of these issues on the development of this nation cannot be imagined. There is need to keep students in school until graduation!
vii. **Behavior change remains a challenge**

There is a general decline of morality among students in schools. The effects of this development is the increase in violence in schools, sexual immorality, premature closures of schools, abuse of harmful substances, poor performance and many others. A quick analysis of these developments reveals that students are hiding under the guise of freedom and human rights. It is clear that those that promote Human Rights and Freedoms have not done a good job. They have only emphasized on the rights and not responsibilities; freedom without defining the boundaries within which one can exercise their freedom! This coupled with the laxity of family instilling value systems in children, inability of the church to invest in its children and youthful member and loss of parental spirit among teachers, has turned the school campus into a hostile environment for both teachers and students!

Efforts to address these issues remain a challenge especially when there are various conflicting voices and messages from society! We are raising a hostile generation of Malawians and the future of our society is at stake! We need to intervene and invest in mindset change interventions before it is too late!

viii. **Responding to Emerging Issues**

SCOM as a Faith Based Organization has a God given mandate to prepare its membership for meaningful life. As such it does from time to time provide a position in response to various emerging issues that may have negative impacts on the youth. SCOM is meant to be a voice for the voiceless students in society. Through its Social Development Section, SCOM is required to identify emerging issues and provide appropriate responses. We did not do much on this in the past year.

4. **Other Notable Initiatives of the Year**

Youth work is not static. It is very dynamic as the world in which they exist is always changing. To remain relevant and effective in our work we must be ready to move ahead of the change by anticipating what is coming next. That is not an easy thing to do! 2015 presented to us a few opportunities in the midst of crises. We had to respond to each crisis situation by designing programs that would suit it.

i. **Responding to the Crisis at Sopa CDSS**

SCOM was requested by the Director of Secondary School Education to assist in addressing a disturbing development in some schools in Malawi. There is an increase in sexual immorality and drug abuse in a growing number of schools. While SCOM was aware of some of the issues, others were new.

a. Sopa CDSS in Mchinji came in the limelight last year because of the alarming number of girls that dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancies. In a space of three years [2013, 2014, 2015] years, the school saw 111 girls getting pregnant and dropping out of school. Now considering that 50 girls get selected to the school for Form One each academic year, 111 dropping out before completing their studies is an alarming number. It implies that 37 girls dropped out of school each year! The factors behind this development are many but the major one is lack of hostels at the school where learners would operate from and be secure. Instead they rent in substandard structures that have mushroomed around Mikundi Trading Centre in Traditional Authority Mduwa. SCOM designed some programs to respond to the situation and made some visits to the school. However, long term interventions require involvement of all stakeholders at the school.
b. Creating a peaceful school campus: the school campus is slowly but surely becoming a hostile environment for both learners and teachers. Violent strikes are gaining popularity among students and this compromises the quality of learning and the eventually the graduate society gets. The root causes of this are deep and require concerted efforts to uproot them.

SCOM has been actively involved with some of the schools to try to identify lasting solutions to these emerging challenges. We are convinced that as long as the school campus remains hostile as a result of unruly student behavior, quality of learning will be affected and ultimately the development of the nation will be at stake!

c. Confronting the Root Causes of Corruption: the infamous Cashgate scandal is a wakeup call to all Malawians. Looting of public resources of such magnitude is a reflection of a deep rooted moral decadence in our society. Cashgate is a reflection of corrupted moral standards of the average Malawian citizen! It is a problem of the evil that is harbored in the hearts of men and women. As such the most effective way of addressing the challenge is to consider the heart of man where all the evil intentions originate from.

In its efforts to contribute to this cause, SCOM has been working in partnership with ACB to create a generation of corrupt free Malawians among the students. A Bible study guide suggesting biblical response to this moral virus has been jointly developed by ACB and SCOM and will be distributed to schools within 2016. It is anticipated that this study will provoke the students to initiative conversations that will change their mindsets!

5. As We Look to the Future

We enter 2016 with mixed feelings of anticipation for great achievements and fear of repetition of last year. As a ministry that integrates faith and reason in its operations, we are assured that the God will remain faithful to us as He has been the past 55 years of our service in Malawi. He has distinguished Himself as reliable and remains our strength today and hope for the future. We are at the same time aware that who we are and what we do depends on God’s agenda and not on our plans for even our best intentions are not good enough before Him. As such we need to constantly align our plans to His will for us. This is where the challenge arises; for many are the times when we are tempted to take matters in our own hands!

Nonetheless, in 2016, we will continue trusting God for the core mandate of SCOM hence interface with the students through visits, conferences, trainings and other gatherings. We will also review our strategic plan, publish some manuals and seek to respond to emerging issues that affect the youth such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, homosexuality, self-sponsorship in public universities and many other! We will continue to pursue the various fund raising prospects within the ministry. We will continue with our social development initiatives and keep challenging society to invest in youth development.

We are confident that He who begun a good work in us 55 years ago, will continue to entrust us with adequate resources [materials, spiritual, human, financial, intellectual and whatever else to finish what He has started!