

| FEATURES

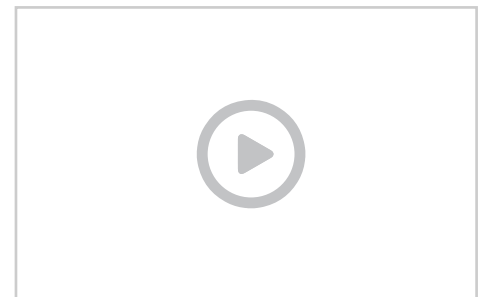
# The Positive Circles of Inspiration

## Interviews with TIWACT Members



On the eve of summer vacation in 2023, a group of university students, teachers, and community volunteers visited Chiputula Primary School in Mzuzu, Malawi. They announced the upcoming English reading workshops scheduled for mid-August and enthusiastically invited children to participate. Among the group, one Asian face stood out—Yokogawa Rena, a student from the Department of Sociology at National Taiwan University.

Rena, along with Blessings Chirambo from Mzuzu University, founded TIWACT in early 2023. They subsequently invited Jasmine (Zi-Ying Lee), Anna (Anna Lao), and Jennifer (Xin-Wei Chen), also from NTU, to join the team. Their mission was to reduce the dropout rate among Malawian students. Organizing English reading workshops and inviting local community members to share their career experiences, they worked to enhance learning opportunities for local children and provide them with role models.



| Intro video of TIWACT.

## Creating Synergy through Transnational Action

Rena first visited Mzuzu, Malawi's largest city, in 2022 as part of the course “Global Health Project Planning and Implementation” taught by Professor Chen Chi-Hsin

and MOE's USR project "SHANTU". There, she learned about the high dropout rates among Malawian primary school students. Upon returning home, Rena remained concerned about the local children and continuously discussed potential solutions with Blessings. Initially, she only thought of returning to Malawi to help the children. Blessings's response, "Sure, let's do it together!" gave her great confidence and marked the first step in their project.

Facilitated by Blessings, they visited the principal of Chiputula Primary School and members of local NGO organizations. They discovered reasons behind Malawian children's high dropout rates, including early marriages for girls leading to leaving school prematurely and uneven distribution of English learning resources resulting in significant disparities in academic performance among children in public schools. After multiple discussions, Rena and Blessings focused the project's goals on "enhancing children's English reading abilities" and named the project "TIWACT," representing "Together We Act." The initial "TIWA" stands for the Chewa language phrase "Tiwalimbikitse," meaning "We encourage them together."

In mid-2023, as Rena pondered how to promote the project in Taiwan to gain more resources, she found Anna. Anna had just completed work on community management, making her a perfect fit for Rena's team. She began introducing TIWACT through cute illustrations and brief essays on Instagram and Facebook.

Jasmine, who conducted research on social issues for the team, was inspired by Rena's sharing during a mentoring event. Rena expressed her desire to join international NGOs after graduation, but her professors pointed out the challenges Taiwan faces in international affairs. Jasmine wondered, "As a Taiwanese, what can I do for Malawians to build relationships beyond formal diplomacy?" She wanted to join Rena and see what changes they could bring about.

In September, Jennifer, who had been engaged in community service, joined the team. Jennifer, who was deeply concerned about rural education issues, was invited by Rena to participate in online meetings. Inspired by the team's enthusiasm and ideals, she contributed her experiences to TIWACT.

## Bridging the Gap with Goodwill

Due to the six-hour time difference between Malawi and Taiwan, when it was time for TIWACT's online meetings, it was already late evening in Taiwan. Anna and Jennifer noted that due to English accents and evening fatigue, communication could be challenging, but Malawian partners always smiled, which dissipated any awkwardness during discussions and conveyed a strong sense of goodwill and thoughtfulness.

Another challenge of transnational cooperation was the lack of information. Rena pointed out the scarcity of courses related to African culture and society in Taiwan, reflecting Taiwan's long-standing lack of interest in African affairs. Anna mentioned that NTU has few exchange activities with African countries, making it difficult to collect relevant information.



Yokogawa Rena, a co-founder of TIWACT, along with the team members Jasmine (Zi-Ying Lee), Anna (Anna Lao), and Jennifer (Xin-Wei Chen).



Yokogawa Rena (second from the left) with Blessings Chirambo, also co-founder of TIWACT.



The goal of TIWACT is to enhance children's English reading abilities, aiming to contribute to the reduction of the dropout rate among Malawian students.



TIWACT team members brought many English books to Chiputula Primary School to conduct English reading workshops.



Therefore, Rena actively sought advice from Prof. Chen Chi-Hsin, who had experience in collaborative projects in Malawi. Malawian partners also helped confirm the accuracy of their information and provided feedback online. Additionally, the Yulen Project and Autonomous Learning Project of NTU provided support in knowledge and funding. Prof. Wu Chia-Lin from the Department of Sociology also kindly wrote recommendation letters for the team members, for which they were very grateful.

## Returning to Malawi with Everyone's Encouragement

In July 2023, Rena returned to Mzuzu, Malawi, preparing to put the project into action—five English reading workshops. After announcing the activities on the last day of the semester, the team brought many English books to Chiputula Primary School and read with the children. Surprisingly, on the first day of the workshop, three hundred students showed up, leaving Rena both astonished and moved.

During the last workshop, a child arrived two hours late. He explained to Rena that he had to assist his family farming and couldn't attend in the morning, but he really enjoyed reading books. Rena said that the children's motivation to learn was high. Given the opportunity and resources, they could enjoy learning English. This further solidified Rena's direction, and the team began planning grammar courses to improve the children's English proficiency.

James, a Malawian member of TIWACT, established a 24-hour library near Chiputula Primary School a few years ago. After the workshops, the team placed the books purchased at the library, where primary school children visit daily to read. In Taiwan, TIWACT members plan to establish a club and organize activities with the African Student Association to recruit members and accumulate African knowledge. However, Rena, Anna, Jasmine, and Jennifer's biggest vision is for this educational project to continue long-term, even after they graduate.

"We want to do this for ten years!" Recalling Blessings's words to her, Rena was amazed at the powerful encouragement among her companions. She said that if she were alone, she might have given up halfway. Rena encourages classmates with similar aspirations to share their ideas with others, thereby turning ideas into action.



Children selecting the English books they want to read.