Challenges and Opportunities for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in the COVID-19 Response in Africa: A Mixed-Methods Study

Background: The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health Services

- 93% of the countries reported disruption in their mental health services*
- 17% ensured that full additional funding is available for MHPSS activities*
- 89% reported that MHPSS was part of their national COVID-19 response plans*

* % of the total countries responded to the WHO survey

The impact of COVID-19 on Mental, Neurological and Substance Use Services: Results of a Rapid Assessment, World Health Organization (2020)
To what extent were MHPSS activities included in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic in African countries?

What are the challenges and opportunities for MHPSS integration into the COVID-19 response?

Methods

A web-based survey was sent to Ministries of Health (MoH) and WHO Regional and Country Offices in the African Union member states (55 countries).

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders from MoH, WHO, and civil society (17 interviews).
Results

Responses received from 28 out of the 55 African Union member states

68% of the countries implemented less than 50% of the recommended MHPSS activities*

* Based on recommendations from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group on MHPSS in Emergency Settings
Most implemented MHPSS Activities*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing MHPSS coordination group</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing an MHPSS strategy</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing protocols for funerals</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Least implemented MHPSS Activities*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing activities for children</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing the developed MHPSS strategies</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on recommendations from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group on MHPSS in Emergency Settings
Interim Briefing Note Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak, IASC (2020)
Challenges

The lack of political commitment and engagement

Low prioritisation of mental health within emergency response structures

The lack of available and sustainable funding

The lack of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms

Human resources challenges (e.g. Availability, training, and underpayment)

Failure to apply lessons learned from previous emergencies

Communication challenges (e.g. poor telecommunication infrastructure)

Competing priorities in emergency situations
Opportunities

Capitalising on the increased attention to mental health during COVID-19

Promoting MHPSS integration in emergency response

Integration of mental health in routine services and strengthening mental health systems in the longer term

Sustaining multi-stakeholder coordination of MHPSS activities beyond emergencies

Drawing from lessons learned in previous crises to inform the preparedness and response to future emergencies

Engaging communities and people with lived experience to improve the MHPSS services provided and address the stigma

Building regional networks to facilitate sharing experiences and learning between countries in the region

Better public understanding of mental health following the pandemic
**Recommendations**

- Establish an MHPSS pillar as part of future responses to emergencies
- Sensitise national leaders to the importance of MHPSS in emergency preparedness and response
- Undertake an in-depth review of MHPSS components of the national response to COVID-19 and identify lessons learnt
- Improve data and information systems in routine national mental health systems to improve this function during emergencies

Ensure that MHPSS components of the national emergency preparedness and response plan include:

- Specific support for children and families
- Feasible monitoring, evaluation, and reporting framework
- Multi-sectoral collaboration
- Allocated resources to implement MHPSS components
- Community engagement during response
Acknowledgement

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References

- World Health Organization. The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental, Neurological and Substance Use Services: Results of a Rapid Assessment; World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland, 2020

Citation


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