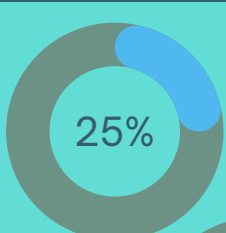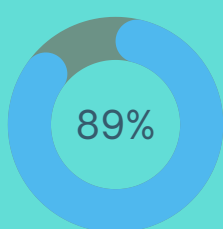# Challenges and Opportunities for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in the COVID-19 Response in Africa: A Mixed-Methods Study

Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), WHO Regional Office for Africa & the Regional Office for Eastern Mediterranean, West African Health Organization (WAHO), the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), and the UK Public Health Rapid Support Team (UK-PHRST)
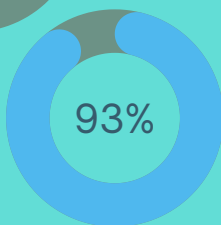
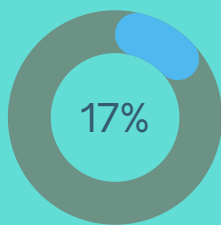## Background: Mental Health during COVID-19

25% increase in the prevalence of major depressive and anxiety disorders in 2020

89% reported that MHPSS was part of their national COVID-19 response plans*

93% of the countries reported disruption in their mental health services*

17% ensured that full additional funding is available for MHPSS activities*

* based on the % of the total countries that 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)

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

To what extent were MHPSS activities* included in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic in African countries?

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

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

57% Establishing MHPSS coordination group

45% Developing an MHPSS strategy

32% Implementing the developed MHPSS strategies

28% Developing activities for children

21% Establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

* 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)

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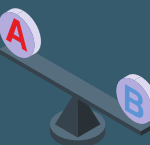
Challenges

The lack of political commitment and low prioritisation of mental health

The lack of financial and human resources

The lack of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms

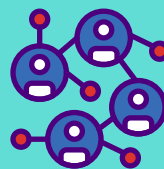Failure to apply lessons learned from previous emergencies

Competing priorities in emergency situations

Opportunities

Capitalising on the increased attention to mental health during COVID-19 to integrate it into emergency response plans and strengthen mental health systems in the longer term

Sustaining multi-stakeholder coordination of MHPSS activities beyond emergencies

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

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

Recommendations

Establish an MHPSS pillar as part of future responses to emergencies

Sensitize 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

monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms

Allocated resources to implement MHPSS components

Multi-sectoral collaboration

Community engagement during response

Scan to read the full-text

This infographic was prepared by Muhammad Alkasaby, UK Public Health Rapid Support Team   For more information: muhammad.alkasaby@lshtm.ac.uk