

Reflections after Africa Mental Health Leadership Programme workshop

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Photo: The group in March 2024

*This is a good day for mental health in Africa, said Dr Mohammed Abdulaziz, head of Division Disease Control and Prevention at Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) during the opening session of a week's workshop in Kampala. **The narrative of mental health systems is changing.** This workshop is part of a major initiative for better mental health future in Africa. This is a major step towards achieving a public health approach to mental health. A public health approach, with its tools and impact, will give policymakers, professionals and civil society practical tools that are needed to address the major challenges of mental health in Africa.*

The burden of mental health conditions in Africa is enormous, but so are the potential gains from promoting good mental health and preventing poor mental health. Currently, less than 10 % of health budgets in Africa is allocated to mental health, and of that little sum, more than 90 % go to specialist care, typically one or few psychiatric hospitals in the capital, meaning that the treatment gap is over 80 %. A public health approach will include greater focus on promotion of good mental health and

resilience, prevention of mental health conditions, community based care, social determinant, task sharing and a human centered approach. It will also mean greater attention to all of society and multi sectoral co-operation. One example is suicide prevention. 6 of the 10 countries with the highest suicide rates in the world are in Africa. Important measures will be decriminalizing suicide attempts and suicide prevention, including better control of pesticides.

In collaboration with partners, Africa CDC is introducing the African Mental Health Leadership Programme - AMHLP. Through a number of capacity development programmes and other activities AMHLP shall contribute to strengthen policy, financing, legislation, advocacy, interventions and care to promote good mental health, and prevent and treat mental health conditions. This programme will prepare mental health and public health leaders to utilize human rights and public health approaches in addressing mental health problems on the continent thus strengthening health workforce development

For five days, nearly 60 representatives of stakeholders such as academia, Pan African Network of People with Psychosocial Disabilities, civil society organisations, Africa CDC, implementing partners such as The African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET), CBM, and universities as well as Wellcome Trust, met to align programme priorities and curriculum development to ensure quality, realism and inclusion. The level of expertise and the constructive ways of sharing and applying this expertise were extraordinary.

There are four key pillars in the programme, including integration into existing programmes which develop capacity, such as the African Field Epidemiology Training Program. The main activities that were discussed in the workshop were:

- The existing Africa CDC Kofi Annan Global Health Leadership Programme.
- Integrating mental health into the African Field Epidemiology Training Program
- Implementing short Public Mental Health Leadership Courses
- Building networks and strengthening engagement with civil society organizations including organizations of people with psychosocial disabilities and lived experience of mental health conditions.

This week's workshop is a milestone. The participants have co-produced curricula and principles for the capacity development. The content of the courses and strategies are based on contextual knowledge, evidence, human rights and recognition of the role of good leadership. Lived experience is a major part of the glue that holds the components of the programme together, and ensures relevance, acceptability and a human rights approach. Meaningful engagement of persons with lived experience was upheld throughout the week. Moreover, the week strengthened networks of experts and advocates with a wide variety of experience which will contribute to the changed narrative needed for a better future of mental health in Africa -and globally.

The AMHLP prepares for humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings by building systems and resilience. The public health approach encompasses the paradigm shift in global mental health that has taken place in recent years, including attention to social determinants, human rights, lived experience, community based action and task sharing.

The participants in the workshop represented a wide variety of knowledge and rich experience. We were particularly impressed by the significance attached to lived experience and the fundamental and practical role of human rights. The openness to adjustments and inclusion has been striking.

We will leave Kampala a little wiser and a little humbler. But we also leave encouraged and with renewed belief that stigma of mental health conditions can be beaten, and wellbeing for individuals to realize their potential can be achieved. The commitment of Africa CDC and its partners is important so that people can cope better with the challenges in life, work productively, and contribute to the community, all which are fundamental to deal with the challenges the continent, and the world face.



Photo: The group discussing