

CLOSING MENTAL HEALTH GAPS IN SIERRA LEONE.

Pathways for closing the gaps at the policy, legislative and regulatory levels.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone faces significant challenges in addressing mental health issues, stemming from a history of conflict, trauma, and limited resources. The Mental Health Solidarity Collective advocates for comprehensive measures to close the gaps in mental health care and support across the nation. This policy brief outlines key recommendations to advance mental health services in Sierra Leone, emphasizing collaboration between civil society, government entities, and international partners.

“...with the establishment of a National Mental health Taskforce, we will as a government continue to invigorate our commitment to reaching the last man and woman with access to mental health services.” H.E. Dr. Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh,
Vice President of of Sierra Leone

From our work as a Mental Health Collective, several advocacy issues in this policy brief merit prioritization. Firstly, destigmatization efforts are paramount to foster understanding and acceptance of mental health conditions, encouraging individuals to seek support without fear of discrimination. Additionally, advocating for increased funding and resource allocation is crucial to enhance mental health infrastructure, including facilities, trained professionals, and community-based services. Promoting policy reforms that prioritize mental health within broader healthcare agendas ensures sustainable support and integration into healthcare systems. Advocacy for culturally sensitive approaches acknowledges diverse experiences and needs, facilitating inclusive and effective interventions. Emphasizing prevention and early intervention strategies underscores the importance of holistic mental well-being for especially fragile contexts like Sierra Leone.

At the launch of the Presidential Taskforce on Mental on the on the 16th of May 2023, Dr, Carol Labor, Adviser to the President, acknowledged the Government’s strides in dealing with mental health, referring to the repeal and replacement of the outdated 1902 Lunacy Act with modern legislation that prioritizes people-centered and culturally appropriate mental health practices, surpassing global standards.

WHAT ARE THE GAPS?

Sierra Leone, like any other country that has witnessed traumatic experiences, faced significant challenges and the urgency for robust mental health services that matches with the prevailing gaps. Some of the major gaps holding progress for Mental Health in Sierra Leone aligns very well along these challenges:

POLICY DEFICITS



Sierra Leone lack comprehensive mental health policies, backed by often limited political will and funding allocated to mental health services. Awareness of the population on related issues of mental health is weak, just as the institutional capacity within and outside of government to fully deliver. Further to this, Sierra Leone does not have all-inclusive policies and legislation regarding mental health. The political will for this matter is often limited along with insufficient funding allotted towards these services.

REGULATORY DEFICITS

Sierra Leone suffers from a shortage of mental health experts such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses. Furthermore, there is an absence of updated regulations and uniformity in rendering mental healthcare services. Vital strides towards enhancing these services involve intensifying regulatory frameworks alongside allocating resources for training programs to elevate the workforce retention rate among professionals who offer psychological healthcare solutions.



LIMITED INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION



Limited infrastructure and inadequate resources pose major obstacles to delivering sound mental health care in Sierra Leone. A lack of mental healthcare facilities, medications, and community-based services is evident due to the decades of neglect to these services. However, integrating mental health treatments into primary-care settings along with implementing interventions at the community level is yet to be put into force to overcome these drawbacks by enhancing access to healthcare.

Did you know?

Mental disorders affect 1 in 10 people at any given time, in any given place – and 1 in 4 people over their lifetime.

9 out of 10 of people living with mental disorders do not receive basic treatment. And the scale of the problem goes beyond just those living with mental disorders, impacting family members in care-giving roles.

Mental Health Solidarity Collective (MHSC)

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URGENT CALL TO ACTION!!

The MHS Collective calls on government, development partners, and civil society to take urgent steps in the following areas:

1. *Enhanced Funding and Resource Allocation:*

Advocacy for increased government funding and international support to bolster mental health infrastructure, including the establishment of mental health facilities, training programs for mental health professionals, and accessibility to psychotropic medications. There is further need to prioritize budgetary allocations to integrate mental health services into primary healthcare systems, ensuring widespread access to mental health care across rural and urban communities.

2. *Stigma Reduction and Public Awareness:*

Launch public awareness campaigns to combat stigma surrounding mental health disorders, utilizing diverse media platforms, community engagement initiatives, and educational programs. There is further urgency to foster partnerships with civil society, local communities, schools, religious institutions, and traditional healers to promote culturally sensitive dialogue and understanding about mental health.

3. *Community-Based Interventions:*

Increase advocacy for the development and implementation of community-based mental health programs, empowering community members to identify, support, and define referral pathways individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

Facilitate training workshops and peer support groups to equip community health workers, teachers, and volunteers with the skills to recognize early signs of mental illness and provide appropriate support.

4. *Policy Reform and Advocacy:*

Lobby for the speedy enactment and enforcement of comprehensive mental health legislation, safeguarding the rights and dignity of individuals living with mental health conditions. There should also be joint engagements with policymakers to integrate mental health priorities into national development agendas, advocating for the inclusion of mental health indicators in healthcare metrics and reporting mechanisms.

5. *Evidence-Based Policy Making:*

Facilitate collaboration and deepen engagement for results-based services; considering areas on mental health prevalence, treatment outcomes, and service utilization patterns, providing evidence-based insights to inform policy decisions and programmatic interventions. A national mental health data repository must be established in providing accessible and reliable information that will enhance programs and wider engagement within the mental health community.

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ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH SOLIDARITY COLLECTIVE (MHSC).

WHO ARE WE?

The Mental Health Solidarity Collective (MHSC) is an independent consortium of civil society organizations committed to advancing mental health in Sierra Leone. It combines the expertise of its founding members (Youth Empowerment and Development Association (YEDA), Democracy and Development Associates (DADA), Youth Partnership for Peace and Development (YPPD), Network Aid (NetAid), Vulnerable Charity Foundation (VCF), Advocacy for Mental Health and Human Rights (AMHHR), Initiative for Women's Empowerment (IWE) and Kingdom Culture Church (KCC) Mission to address mental health challenges in Sierra Leone.

The collective recognizes that post-conflict, epidemic, and pandemic situations have left a significant impact on the mental health of individuals, necessitating a comprehensive approach to provide support and influencing policies and raising awareness. MHSC seeks to collaborate with local and international organizations, government agencies, and stakeholders to achieve its goals. This collective effort enhances the capacity to address mental health challenges comprehensively.

MHSC's existence represents a significant step towards addressing mental health issues in Sierra Leone and creating a supportive and inclusive environment for those facing such challenges.

Our Vision: MHSC envisions a Sierra Leone where mental health is prioritized, and individuals facing mental health challenges are supported, empowered, dignity upheld, and integrated into society. The collective aims to foster a mentally healthy nation that thrives both individually and collectively.

Our Mission: MHSC's mission is to create a more inclusive and mentally healthy Sierra Leone by promoting mental health awareness, providing support to those in need, and advocating for better mental health policies and services.

WHY ARE WE IN MENTAL HEALTH?

In the face of the many challenges, an active Civil Society advocacy consortium is not just desirable but essential. Such a consortium, like the Mental Health Solidarity Collective (MHSC) remains pivotal in advocating for, raising awareness of, and addressing mental health issues through influencing policies and practices.

The consortium draws upon the expertise and resources of its membership, each with a unique background and set of skills. The collaborative efforts particularly effective in advocating for increased investment in mental health services, the reduction of stigma, and the development of comprehensive, community-based mental health programs have been an integral part of the MHSC.

MHSC's objectives, such as raising awareness about mental health, providing support services, and conducting evidence-based research, align perfectly with the needs of Sierra Leone's mental health landscape. The consortium remains a voice for the voiceless, for those marginalized and struggling with mental health challenges, and for a nation striving to rebuild and heal after multiple shocks and event. The Collective's engagement is to strengthen engagement with an array of stakeholders and at the national and sub-national levels.

OBJECTIVES OF MHSC:

The MHS Collective seeks to:

- Raise awareness about mental health and reduce stigma.
- Provide support and services for individuals with mental health needs.
- Collaborate with existing mental health organizations and government agencies.
- Advocate for improved mental health policies and services.
- Facilitate evidence-based influencing through research to better understand and respond mental health issues.
- Build and strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations as non-state actors to effectively engage and increase voices across all of Sierra Leone's 16 districts.
- Advocate for increased investment and prioritization of mental health within government policies and plans.



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