

Project Title: Passing and supporting: Building tactics for community mental health care

Project Lead: Youth Net and Counselling

Project Technical Partners: Zomba Mental Hospital and Tackle Africa

Project Brief

Youth Net & Counselling with funding from COMIC Relief implemented a three year project. The project sought to build and connect mentally ill persons to community-level and home-based care structures in Malawi. It integrated Mental Health Educators, user groups, and Community Mental Volunteers to recognize, treat and prevent mental disorders. This allowed service retention at nearest level of care to ease burden of seeking services from referral hospitals.

The action blended Theatre for Development and Sports for Social Change approaches. Football drills were developed representing different stages in the continuum of mental health care such as: diagnosis, psychosocial support, service access, treatment, and referral, adherence to treatment, service coordination, stigma and discrimination.

The project has been implemented in 3 districts of Malawi which are Nkhosakota, Lilongwe and Zomba targeting 3 Traditional Authorities (T/As), which include T/As *Kafuzira* in Nkhosakota, *Mlumbe* in Zomba and *Kalumbo* in Lilongwe District.

Overall Objectives

- The project overall objective is to increase access to mental health care services among Malawians and promote social integration of the persons with (and with histories) of mental disorders.

Project Specific Objectives:

- Increase access to mental health care and support for poor and marginalized communities
- Institutionalize user-led structures to advocate and facilitate community-level mental health services
- Enhance economic integration for people with mental disorders by reducing stigma and discrimination

Expected Outcomes

- Increased knowledge of mental health issues among the target population

- Increased access to mental health care and support for poor and marginalised communities
- Enhanced economic integration for people with mental disorders by reducing stigma and discrimination

Project Beneficiaries: PLWHIV, youth, prisoners, street children, and GBV victims and people with various mental disorders

Key Successes:

- The quality commitment of trained Health surveillance assistants and caregivers under the project has also been positive, as they have made sure that there is an increase uptake of mental health services at community level, **1551 Clients (687M, 864F)** with mental disorders accessing treatment and support facilities at community level through a more sensitive and rights based approach in the three districts of implementation
- Through the community structures & technical partners managed to reach out to a total of core targets 6,024 (3,077M, 2947F) during the 36months.
- At the start of the Passing & Supporting project Malawi had a mental health policy (2001). Even though the policy was outdated, the policy provided the opportunity as it defined the policy direction for the government. Through its membership in the National non-communicable diseases Technical working group YONECO was able to lobby and contribute towards a review of the policy, through presentation of the Policy brief that the organisation developed and shared at dissemination workshop.
- Mental health Talk sessions have equipped clients and guardians on how to manage well clients with mental health problems. Mental health Clients who were screened was treated and those already on treatment received mental health information and counselling.
- Government commitment to provide medication in hard to reach areas that is preventing more relapses of the mental disorders to the marginalized clients in the districts; clients were able to be supported during COVID-19.
- The trained helpline counsellors on mental health issues helped to provide necessary mental health counselling and referral interventions to clients thereby meeting the demands of mentally challenged individuals on mental health which enabled the project to reach out more clients with necessary mental health interventions through online and individual counselling across the country.

Success Story

Back to school after overcoming mental illness



Vitumbiko captured at Dwambazi Rural Hospital. Photo/Wasiri//2019

24 year-old Vitumbiko Phesele of Chimoyo village in Traditional Authority Kafuzira in Nkhotakota District recounts of the difficult period when she suffered a mental illness.

“In 2016 while undergoing training at Mtakataka Police Training School in Dedza district I started feeling malaria symptoms but after being given treatment the situation became worse because I started mumbling unstopably for three days,” she says.

Vitumbiko also recalls the time when she was admitted at Zomba Mental Hospital for two weeks and later withdrawn from the training due to mental illness.

“After my situation had improved, I was discharged from Zomba Mental Hospital but after arriving at school I was told by management that I could not continue with the training hence I was sent back home,” she says.

After Vitumbiko returned to her home village, life back was very tough. The thought of going back to school and how to get money for day to day life was driving her crazy.

“It was a difficult moment in my life because I could have gone into marriage, having children and ending up as house wife but I did not give up,” she says.

But despite the setback, Vitumbiko did not give up her dream of excelling through education.

“In 2017 I applied for a Bachelor of Arts in Education at Mzuzu University and I got selected,” she says.

However, the move ended in another setback as despite being selected to pursue her education at the university, lack of school fees became a stumbling block.

Finally Vitumbiko got a lifeline after she got employed by a local organization as a Data Clerk at Dwambazi Rural Hospital.

Following the introduction of a three year Comic Relief funded project called Passing and supporting: Building tactics for community mental health care project which Youth Net and Counselling (YONECO) in partnership with Zomba Mental Hospital and Tackle Africa is implementing, Vitumbiko was provided counselling and training in financial literacy.

“Through the training I learnt that mental health issues can affect everyone so I accepted everything that has happened in my life and decided to move on with my life,” she says.

Vitumbiko joined a Village Savings and Loans (VSL) group and got a loan to start a small scale business.

“After selling some commodities such as water, yoghurt which I produce myself, I get a profit of about K3, 500 a day which I use for household needs and I keep K1, 000 for my savings,” she says.

Vitumbiko, now a stable mentally ill person, is back to school to realize her dream of getting tertiary education.

“I am now doing a weekend Diploma in Tourism Management programme at Mzuzu University,” she proudly says.