

Network for Africa – A summary of achievements in 2020

2020 brought us Covid-19, yet so far, the countries where Network for Africa has its mental health projects have averted the tragedy and chaos seen in the UK and USA. Sierra Leone and Uganda learned much during the Ebola epidemics they experienced: they were quick to close their borders and implement response systems. Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda have networks of community health workers, usually volunteers embedded in their local communities who are the messengers of important public health information. Public hand washing facilities were set up everywhere, wearing masks was mandatory, curfews were imposed, travel between districts was banned - all within days of the WHO declaring Covid-19 a pandemic. Impressive stuff and so far, so good.

Bearing in mind all the constraints imposed by the pandemic, our project partners have managed remarkably well, showing agility in adapting their work accordingly. Yet, working in post-conflict countries brings particular issues. Emergencies of any description can cause flashbacks. And for people who have anxiety, depression or more serious mental health issues, the impact can be more severe. The sense of isolation from losing your support network is hard; the impact on poverty when you are a 'day trader' living hand to mouth day to day, unable to sell your vegetables in the street; and the fear of catching Covid-19 can be paralysing. Knowing this, our partners set up telephone counselling services; held mental health clinics daily instead of monthly so that people could still be treated without breaking social distancing rules; even the counselling and self-help groups managed to continue their monthly group savings. We are proud to share their achievements in 2020 below.

In Rwanda we supported a further 263 young genocide survivors through our group counselling programme. They were divided into 12 groups and met twice a month, supported by two peer support counsellors per group who were selected by the group members. These peer support counsellors provided a vital role moderating sessions and referring any participants who needed extra support for individual counselling. By the end of the year, most participants felt positively about their future, whereas at the start they had little hope. Their isolation has reduced, and their self-esteem has increased. They are now able to cope when things go wrong, using the coping techniques they have been taught, dealing with trauma and its symptoms. Government officials have remarked on the impact, citing peace building and reconciliation, an unintended consequence. Looking ahead, we hope to provide 60 participants with entrepreneurship training and loans to set up their own businesses. We are also raising funds to offer free childcare for the mothers who have to bring their babies and toddlers to the group counselling sessions.



A group counselling session in Rwanda

A few highlights:

- **263** young genocide survivors were enrolled in peer support groups where they received group counselling and support, bringing the total helped since the start of the project to more than **1,300**.
- **24** new Peer Support Counsellors were trained to run the peer counselling groups. They also keep a watchful eye on their group members, referring those that need extra support to SURF's counsellors. So far **130** peer support counsellors have been trained.
- **461** home visits were made to offer extra support to particularly vulnerable participants.
- **856** participants were offered individual counselling.
- **1,340** participants received telephone counselling during Covid-19 lockdowns.
- **24** new Health Workers were trained in recognising signs of mental ill-health, e.g. anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, bringing the total since the start of the project to **102**. This ensures that knowledge is embedded and has long-term sustainability.

I have really learnt much from this counselling service, and I am thankful for the support, which has helped me to overcome my depression and anxiety. I have learnt different techniques that can help me when I face stress symptoms. Being in the group has helped our hearts and now we are dreaming of changing and developing ourselves.

In **Sierra Leone** we recruited a mental health expert in country to work with our Port Loko team, building their counselling skills and providing them with supervision. The team secured previously inaccessible epilepsy medication for clients. The team has also organised regular review sessions with the mental health nurse, and quarterly reviews with another nurse with more specialised epilepsy expertise. They are mapping mental health resources in Port Loko District to identify the areas with need and what the specific gaps in mental health services are, which includes consulting mental health nurses nationwide. The team provides the self-help groups with village savings and loans with lockable safes; and they ensure there is enough PPE equipment including mobile hand washing facilities and masks. Community education continues to increase people's understanding of mental illness and epilepsy, reducing the stigma that people face. We are also linking up with maternal and child health posts (MCHPs), where the team's counsellors now provide mental health education as part of the MCHPs' existing antenatal and postnatal programmes on child health, nutrition, family life and childhood infections. Supported by our mental health expert, the team is also training staff to recognise and support their patients encountering postnatal depression, while working through an established community health structure that will hopefully increase the sustainability and impact of the team's education and counselling work. Looking ahead, we are hoping to provide the self-help groups with livelihoods in 2021, which will help their long-term health and recovery by lifting them out of poverty. Hege, our mental health expert will also work with the team to build their skills and knowledge of maternal mental health.



A beneficiary from Port Loko



Village Savings & Loans Boxes

A few highlights:

- **10** team members received mental health refresher training and supervision.
- **161** patients in Bakeloko, Maforki and Kasse chiefdoms attended our mental health clinics, run by the Port Loko district mental health nurse and supported by the team.
- **112** participants took part in community education sessions (1 session per community per month) in villages/community centres.
- **459** people with mental illnesses and/or epilepsy and **43** carers received counselling.
- **9** Self Help Groups with a total of **179** members continued to be supported.

- **131** people joined community outreach sessions which covered referral pathways, stigma reduction, mental health signs and symptoms, family support.
- **56** participants were prescribed epilepsy medication and attended monthly review sessions with a mental health nurse, including 17 children.
- **9** secondary schools received Covid-19 and mental health awareness sessions reaching around **800** students

SB lost her husband, her brother-in-law and her brother to the Ebola virus during the west African epidemic in 2015, before then testing positive for the virus herself. She survived, and after some time at the treatment centre returned to her community. However, on her return she faced ostracization, name calling and humiliation from community members, who spread rumours about her and feared that she was cursed. This sent her into a deep depression, on top of the trauma she had yet to process about losing her husband and other family members. Eventually she encountered the team at one of their community education sessions in her village. They provided her with regular one to one counselling, as well as increasing the outreach and education for her community, helping them to overcome the collective trauma left by the Ebola epidemic. Though the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a resurgence in anxiety in the community, for whom the horrors of the Ebola epidemic remain fresh in their minds, the support from the team has helped build their resilience. In fact, for SB the end of 2020 was a time for celebration, as she remarried in December.

In Uganda our Comic Relief community mental health grant concluded, with impressive results. 61 self-help groups have been formed, exceeding the target of 30. These provide vital support to people with mental illness and/or epilepsy and their care-givers, reducing their isolation, allowing them to share their experiences, enabling them to support each other, and setting up group savings schemes. We have seen positive changes in health-seeking behaviour, judging by the number of people attending the mental health clinics and counselling sessions far exceeding the targets. Thankfully, these mental health clinics will be continuing. 85% of participants reported that they are able to function in everyday life, as opposed to 23% at the start of the project. Every teacher in the four beneficiary areas had awareness training in mental health and epilepsy – vastly exceeding our plans. Self-help group members started developing their advocacy plans and saw them successfully lobby local government officials for improving road access to the mental health clinics, increasing the number of health workers and the supply of medication at the mental health clinics. The National Lottery Community Fund was so impressed by our results that they are funding the project for a further two years. We look forward to providing 25 self-groups with livelihoods training and inputs and carrying out a Learning Study to understand the impact of livelihoods on the long-term health of the self-help group members. We will also be actively fundraising to provide livelihoods training and inputs to the other 36 self-help groups. As the programme director said in a recent email:

In January (last month), a caregiver travelled 60 kilometres to Kalongo to say THANK YOU to BNUU counsellors who supported her child. This is what motivates the team, and drives them to work every day. Our hearts are full of joy when we see people's lives change and we hope to continue helping more people. (Florence Adong, Programme Director)

And to quote the person who recently evaluated the project: *That's a really special team in Agago, you know.*



Sarah, BNUU Counsellor



Patrick, BNUU Counsellor & child with epilepsy

A few highlights:

- **441** clients with mental illness or epilepsy had individual counselling.
- **733** clients received treatment at our monthly mental health clinics in Agago District.
- **36** new self-help groups were formed with a total of **692** members, bringing the total number of self-help groups to 61.
- **25** self-help groups were selected to receive start-up items to set up income generating activities. They will be receiving these at the end of February 2021.
- **450** self-help group members received group management and financial literacy training.
- **437** self-help group members received enterprise selection training to choose suitable income generating activities. 2,046 people took part in community education sessions to raise awareness about mental illness and epilepsy, including symptoms, causes and where to seek treatment.
- **62** self-help groups members received training in advocacy and human rights, and then shared this training with the remaining **630** self-help group members.
- **10** health workers from the 4 health centres took part in participatory data analysis, meaning they were able to get involved in analysing the project's progress and participants' feedback.
- **77** self-help group members took part in focus group discussions to get their feedback on the support they had received.
- **29** project staff and self-help group leaders took part in in-depth interviews about stigma reduction, and subsequently lobbied local leaders to address human rights abuses experienced in their communities.

My father and two brothers were killed by the LRA, I was worried, started taking alcohol to make me sleep and forget. My son (OM) would drink all day, sometimes he could chase me away from home. I stopped repairing bicycles. He started "fitting", the community here believed that epilepsy is contagious. OM started telling me, "Mum, I am seeing strange people coming to arrest me. He could run away from home and spent several nights in the bush. One of the beneficiaries came to me and said, 'BNUU can help your son get out of this condition.' When the health worker visited OM, he was found drunk and dressed in rags. The health worker diagnosed him with alcohol induced psychosis and he was enrolled onto medication. BNUU organised awareness session and OM started recovering. OM said "I was stopped from taking medication after six months and my life is better and people no longer talk about me and call me a mad person. I'm busy repairing bicycles and grateful for BNUU's support."