

Scoping Review of the Potential to Embed Mental Health Impact in Global Challenges Research

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Abstract : In June 2021, the World Health Organization launched its guidance and technical packages on community mental health services, stressing a human rights-based approach to care. This initiative stems from an increasing acknowledgment of the role mental health plays in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, mental health remains a relatively neglected research area and the estimates for untreated mental disorders in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) are as high as 78% for adults. Moreover, the development sector and research programs too often side-line mental health as a privilege in the face of often immediate threats to life and livelihood. As a way of addressing this problem, this study aimed to examine past or ongoing GCRF projects to see if there were opportunities where mental health impact could have been achieved without compromising a study's main aim and without overburdening a project. Projects funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) were analyzed. This program was initiated in 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. By the end of May 2020, a total of 15,279 projects were funded of which only 3% had an explicit mental health focus. A sample of 36 non-mental-health-focused projects was then sampled for diversity across research council, challenge portfolio and world region. Each of these 36 projects was coded by two coders for opportunities to embed mental health impact. To facilitate coding, the literature was inspected for dimensions relevant to LMIC settings. Three main psychological and three main social dimensions were identified: promote a positive sense of self; promote positive emotions, safe expression and regulation of challenging emotions, coping strategies, and help-seeking; facilitate skills development; and facilitate community-building; preserve sociocultural identity; support community mobilization. Coding agreement was strong on missed opportunities for mental health impact on the three social dimensions: support community mobilization (92%), facilitate community building (83%), preserve socio-cultural identity (70%). Coding agreement was reasonably strong on missed opportunities for mental health impact on the three psychological dimensions: promote positive emotions (67%), facilitate skills development (61%), positive sense of self (58%). In order of frequency, the agreed perceived opportunities from the highest to lowest are: support community mobilization, facilitate community building, facilitate skills development, promote a positive sense of self, promote positive emotions, preserve sociocultural identity. All projects were considered to have an opportunity to support community mobilization and to facilitate skills development by at least one coder. Findings provided support that there were opportunities to embed mental health impact in research across the range of development sectors and identifies what kind of missed opportunities are most frequent. Hence, mainstreaming mental health has huge potential to tackle the lack of priority and funding it has attracted traditionally. The next steps are to understand the barriers to mainstreaming mental health and to work together to overcome them.

Keywords : GCRF, mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, LMIC

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