The purpose of the Mental Health and Poverty Project is to develop, implement and evaluate mental health policy in poor countries, in order to provide new knowledge regarding comprehensive multi-sectoral approaches to breaking the negative cycle of poverty and mental ill-health. MHaPP is based in 4 African countries: Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia.

Summary of success:

A collaboration between MHaPP researchers at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and provincial Department of Health in the Northern Cape Province has produced the first mental health strategic plan for the province. An internal departmental process is underway to move for the adoption of the plan.

The draft plan was developed by a drafting committee based on a detailed situational analysis in the province. It emphasises community-based mental health services and integration of mental health into district and regional hospitals.

Key objectives include health promotion to reduce mental illness-related stigma and discrimination, improving mental health practitioner capacity, organisation of mental health services and intersectoral collaboration to deliver quality mental health care, support to mental health care user participation in their recovery, development of a mental health information system and evidence based planning and service provision.

Mental health policy implementation in South Africa takes place through national, provincial and district structures, as set out in the White paper on the transformation of the health system in South Africa, 1997. The national Department of Health provides policy direction to the 9 provincial mental health authorities to which all health services and budgets are devolved.

However, strategic planning at the provincial level has been identified as a key barrier to successful policy and legislation implementation for mental health in South Africa. Development of a provincial strategic plan is a key intervention that can address difficulties with policy implementation at provincial level. Lessons generated will be used to inform other provincial strategic planning processes for mental health in South Africa.

The Northern Cape is by far the largest of South Africa’s nine provinces, taking up 29.7% of the country’s land area, yet it is the most sparsely populated province with the mid-2007 population estimates at just over 1.1 million people, a population density of 3 people per square kilometre.

Despite low population density and difficulties with gaining access to mental health care, the province has commissioned and will soon complete construction of a large psychiatric hospital built on the edge of its capital, Kimberley, using a nationally allocated conditional grant for the revitalisation of hospital services. No provincial plan or needs assessment for service development was in place to inform this decision, which runs contrary to international trends, current mental health legislation in South Africa, and WHO recommendations to downscale psychiatric institutions and develop community-based care.
The overarching research question for the project is: What interventions facilitate the development, adoption and implementation of realistic, comprehensive and evidence-based mental health plans at provincial level in South Africa?

The project consists of both intervention and research processes. The overall aim of the intervention component is to develop a provincial mental health plan to inform mental health service development from 2010-2015 in the Northern Cape Province. The objectives include:

- Obtain a high level mandate to develop a mental health plan through presenting and disseminating the findings of the situational analysis. (objective completed)
- Undertake a situational analysis (objective completed)
- Draft a mental health plan (objective completed)
- Undertake broad consultation (objective completed)
- Submit the mental health plan for adoption (objective completed)
- Prepare for the implementation of mental health plan (next step)

The aim of the research component is to document lessons from the Northern Cape Study which can facilitate the development, adoption and implementation of mental health plans in other provinces and countries. The research objectives are to determine:

- what lobbying strategies are effective in achieving high level commitment from government for a mental health plan.
- the extent to which findings of a situational analysis influence and inform the content of a mental health plan.
- how different areas of expertise of a drafting committee influence the content of a mental health plan.
- how the consultation process can effectively inform the content of a plan.
- which strategies are effective in facilitating the adoption of a mental health plan.
- potential challenges to the effective implementation of mental health plans and strategies to overcome these.

Membership of the drafting committee included representatives from health, education, social development, the NGO sector, and service users. The intersectoral nature of the membership has facilitated the inclusion of several areas for the plan which will require intersectoral attention for effective implementation, and participation has developed individual members' capacity for the development of a strategic plan. Interviews revealed the value of the broader consultation process in raising awareness of the importance of mental health as a public priority, and providing a networking opportunity for role-players who can contribute to addressing mental health in the province. One service user has become a provincial representative on a national user forum, as a result of his participation in this process.
The service user representative to the drafting committee had the following to say on the importance of engaging all stakeholders, and raising awareness amongst decision-makers about mental health:

“…like with any new plan or in any business venture or anything, you need to make sure that all the people that are involved buy into it as well; they all need to be part of the process. I don’t think you want to reach the situation where people don’t want to implement it because they say I wasn’t consulted or I wasn’t spoken to. So I would say that would be important is to make it all-inclusive so that everybody feels that they are part of the process…Involve all the players in the province…all the way from the foot soldier right the way up to the premier…If there is factual evidence showing that mental health or mental disease or mental disability is on the increase – it needs to be shown to these MECs and to the premiers, those that are in power, so that they can do something about it, because obviously it’s in the interest of the community and of the interest of the province that it gets seen to”

Currently there is no service user body in this province, but participation in this process has sparked interest in advocacy from this service user, who has subsequently joined a national working group that advocates for user participation in mental health policy and plans.

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What made our research successful?

- Active participation from involved stakeholders, which is essential to ensure the intersectoral approach needed for comprehensive attention to mental health needs of the population.
- Leadership provided by the public sector participants throughout the development of the plan. This is essential to ensure ownership and confidence in continuing the implementation process beyond MHaPP.
- Academic research support for the situation analysis and design of the evaluation.

Why is our research novel?

Our research is novel for several reasons:

- It is a unique partnership between academic researchers, clinicians and public service managers from different sectors involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the mental health plan.
- This is the first time that an evidence-based mental health care plan has been drafted to inform mental health care provision in South Africa, using international best practice methods.
- The intervention will also include a thorough evaluation, using qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to generate lessons for other low and middle-income countries.

What is the actual or potential impact of the research?

The mental health plan gave direction to the provincial programme manager’s input to the broader provincial strategic plan for health submitted to national department of health in July 2009, as part of the country’s revision of national and provincial health plans for the next 5 year period under a new president.

At provincial level, approval of the plan will also provide support to:

- programme manager lobbying for the allocation of a budget to support identified service development priorities for mental health in the province;
- provide a framework for addressing neglected intersectoral service development issues,
- address the current insufficiency of accessible community based mental health services for non-urban, poor service users.

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The research protocol and draft plan are available on request.

**References:**


