

Title of Project: *Sensitization Campaign for the Silent Crisis of Mental Health and Illness in The Gambia*  
Country of project implementation: The Gambia  
Sponsoring College: International House NY  
Designated Project Leader: Mitsuki Koh

**Project Goals:**

The project goals are to empower local NGOs to run effective social media campaigns by participating in this project, develop a mental health campaign in The Gambia, and finally use the produced multimedia to convince different stakeholders of the importance of this under-discussed issue.

**Additional Fundraising:**

No additional funding was sought.

**Project Rationale:**

My stay in the Gambia in the summer of 2014 offered me a glimpse into the many health issues faced by the local communities. In particular, I had the opportunity to observe many local beliefs surrounding mental health issues. For example, some believed that mental health issues were caused by evil spirits, and hence spiritual, rather than medical care was sometimes sought. This meant that oftentimes, people did not receive the proper form of care they needed.

Even when appropriate help is sought, the Gambia, a country in West Africa, has very limited resources allocated to mental health services. It is likely that the true number of people with mental health issues and their reported effects on Gambians are under-estimated. Mental health issues can arise from various sources such as trauma, and affect many aspects of daily living, producing tensions within local communities and families. These issues need to be discussed more openly and people should be educated to seek proper care when possible. Through these measures, those with mental health issues and their loved ones can work towards more peaceful living.

**Potential Causes**

In many communities, suffering from mental health issues and discussing them with others is highly stigmatized. A person discussing these issues could be seen as weak and having a mental illness could be seen as being possessed by evil spirits. This disincentivizes people from talking to their family members and even to professionals. Since resources are constrained in the Gambia and mental health issues are not prioritized, there is very limited infrastructure for mental healthcare. This results in people failing to seek proper care. At a macro-level, mental health issues tend to be under-discussed and under-prioritized in global health policy. A contributing factor to this is that mental health issues are difficult to measure, assess, and thus address. This leads to less immediate visibility, and hence there is less urgency to address these issues.

**Host Site Rationale and Experience:**

Because of my stint in the Gambia as an undergraduate, I had a familiarity with the country and Gambian perception of public health issues on the ground. I reached out to Cinatrix Media to discuss ideas for a peace-related public health campaign, and we decided on the topic of mental health. I chose to work with Cinatrix Media as it is an experienced media company that has been producing content for social media campaigns on behalf of various organizations. Due to travel hurdles from COVID-19, I was not able to make a trip to The Gambia to be involved in person. Cinatrix Media took a lead on the ground and through remote collaboration, we have successfully completed our final deliverables.

**Challenges on the Ground:**

One of the challenges was that not all the NGOs we initially targeted decided to get involved in the project due to commitment and compensation issues. This outcome was unforeseen as the primary incentives that were designed into the project for local NGOs were for them to learn about social media campaign creation and access to a high-quality camera. Obtaining these incentives would allow them to be more flexible and independent in any future campaigns they help produce. During the project, keeping our local NGO partners involved throughout was initially difficult. However, engagement improved when the draft videos were shared with the partners. We built on this momentum and when training took place at the end of August, partners started becoming more active again. Our sixth video was supposed to be on success

stories of people with mental health illnesses. However, true to the strong stigma surrounding mental health issues in the country and their poor health status, we were not able to find people willing to be on the video. After brainstorming for potential alternatives, we pivoted to presenting famous people in The Gambia talking about mental health.

### **Communication Challenges:**

One of the communication issues that we had was regarding our agreement with the actors and actresses of the hired drama group. There were misunderstandings on the roles and compensation for the project. There was also a miscommunication between our team and the Tanka Tanka psychiatric hospital on the procedures for shooting in their facility. Because of this, we could not film on our planned day and consequently faced some difficulty rescheduling the shoot once we had adjusted our filming protocol.

### **Definition of Peace and Project Contribution:**

My Definition of Peace: Peace is about people's sustainable access to basic human rights, such as healthcare, without fear of violence or threat to their lives. It is also about providing people safe opportunities and spaces to flourish in their communities. It is important to have access to proper care and create safe spaces to talk about mental health issues, this is especially so when people have experiences trauma such as abuse.

Project Achievement Summary: Over the course of this project, we produced 38 videos on six mental health topics: (1) What is Mental Health, (2) Mental Health Illness, (3) Mental Illness and Drug Addiction, (4) Mental Health and Domestic and Gender-based violence, (5) Treatment of Mental Illness, and (6) Famous People Talking about Mental Health. Topics (1)-(5) were produced in six languages and topic (6) was produced in eight languages to ensure broad reach within the community. We also produced 18 radio spots (six topics in three languages) that were adapted from the six videos. These scripts were written in collaboration with our partners, including the Ministry of Health. The final videos are in the process of being approved by the Ministry of Health and our partners for the official campaign in October 2021. These materials will be given to our partners. Additionally, we conducted three training sessions with local NGO partners on (1) how to use cameras to shoot professional content, (2) public health communication, and (3) running effective social media campaigns. Online assessment was conducted to assess participants' understanding and receive feedback.

Short-term Contribution to Peace: These materials will be used in the mental health campaign that will be launched on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021 in honor of World Mental Health Day in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. Our current plan is to use social media platforms to distribute these videos while airing the radio spots to reach the wider community through a more traditional form of media. Cinatrix Media will be on hand to provide any technical support to the campaign, upload all the videos to their Youtube page once they launch the campaign in October 2021, and maintain the links to the final products of this project for future use. Under our agreement, the purchased camera can be used by our partners to run their own campaigns in the future.

Long-term Contribution to Peace: To our knowledge, this video series is the first locally produced set of multi-language videos that focus solely on mental health in The Gambia. It is important to have local resources so that people in the community relate better to the mental health issues of concern to them. Once released, these videos will serve as an accessible resource to Gambians that can be repeatedly shared, discussed, and referenced within the community. Through the mental health campaign, we aim to directly reach those who need help and move them to consider seeking it. On a broader scale, by facilitating greater awareness and sparking conversation in the community, the videos can gradually help people become more open about discussing mental health and destigmatize it. Longer term, this can potentially influence more people to seek necessary care. At a systemic level, the desired outcome is that these materials will help shift the needle on convincing different stakeholders to invest in improvement of mental health support systems in The Gambia.

### **Personal Evolution:**

The project strengthened my conviction to continue working in global public health, especially on issues that are traditionally neglected.

**COVID-19 Pandemic Impact:**

Because of the logistical complexities surrounding travel due to COVID-19, I did not manage to be present in-person in The Gambia as planned. Locally, the Gambia was not experiencing lockdown measures and all trainings took place in person. However, it was difficult to oversee the project remotely and gain a good awareness of the issues on the ground. This was alleviated to some extent by detailed weekly reports from Cinatrix Media that kept me informed, with many logistical decisions entrusted to local personnel. For the future PfP grantees, I recommend implementing the project on-site as much as possible for better oversight and communication. However, if remote participation is necessary, my advice is to implement routine check-in and communication protocols.

**Personal Statement:**

“Absence of discussion does not warrant ignorance; invisibility does not imply nonexistence. Mental health is a precursor to a personal and collective peace.”

**Contact Information**

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## Section II: Photographs

