Project Title: A Mental Health Approach to Peace Building
Country of Project Implementation: Lusaka, Zambia
Sponsoring College: Dartmouth College
Project Leader: Michael Moyo, Lusaka, Zambia
Organization Website: www.mentalliberty.org

Project Goals' Summary: Promoting peace by revolutionizing Zambia’s mental health landscape using technology and culturally–tailored and experience–based, grass-root interventions.

Personal Inspiration and Project: Growing up, I watched my two elder brothers turn into alcohol addicts, lost my only elder sister to a stroke and consequently depression, and lived in a neighborhood where drug abuse and violence among teenagers is common.

In June 2020, at the onset of the COVID–19 pandemic, I mobilized Zambian youths over Zoom and founded The MentalLiberty Foundation, a youth–led initiative revolutionizing mental health using technology and culturally–tailored, experience–based, and grass-root interventions to erase mental health inequities, destigmatize, and de-westernize mental health.

Target Problem: Those affected with mental disorders typically deal with the symptoms and disabilities of their illnesses and widespread stigma embedded in Zambia’s mainstream culture, amongst family members, amid health care providers, and government where mental-health–centered policies are ignored. This stigma is influenced by a misunderstanding of how varied factors such as gender, culture, socioeconomic status among others influence mental health. There is also a general “westernization” of mental health whereby individuals consider it as “foreign.”

In addition to mental illness stigma, peer pressure, bullying, rape culture, GBV, toxic masculinity and relationships, have stimulated an upsurge in mental health disorders and suicide rates, disproportionately impacting males and females’ suicide rates (8.8% males and women 3.5% women) according to WHO (2016).

Lack of mental health education in Zambian schools and complete absence of counsellors elevate mental health deterioration among students. Our recent study with partners at The Copperbelt University School of Medicine revealed that of the 114 student participants, 57% experienced issues with studying and 89.5% of these issues were mental health related. These issues resulted in poor academic performance (90.7%) and relationship difficulties (83.1%). Additionally, only 56.1% of the participants had someone to talk to, 98.5% had never sought mental health therapy, and 21.9% considered suicide (The MentalLiberty Foundation, 2021).

Finally, mental health personnel and facilities are also inadequate: 0.06 Psychiatrists per 100 000 population of the over 17 million Zambians and Zambia’s largest mental health facility, Chainama, is understaffed and underfunded, making it difficult for patients to seek and receive care.

Project Implementation: Support from The Davis Projects for Peace enabled us to execute multiple mental health–revolutionizing projects, which include the following:

The Pamodzi Project: This is a five–month long project running from August 2021 to January 2022 aimed at recruiting mental health advocates in all 10 provinces in Zambia to create a nationwide in–person outreach network that spreads mental health awareness in churches, schools, colleges, universities, radio stations and tv stations, specifically aiming at reducing escalating suicide rates. We recruited 25 volunteers (mentalPals) across the nation and conducted in–person outreach on three popular tv (Muvi, KBN, Camnet) and radio (UNZA, DC, and Christian) stations. We also conducted an outreach at Nsansa Village, an orphanage hosting over 100 ex–street children. Because of the COVID–19 pandemic, we were unable to conduct outreach in schools due to restrictions. However, at the onset of October 2021 we'll begin conducting outreach in school with a target to reach 500 schools across the nation by January 2022.
The MentalPal Hub Project: This is a six–month project aimed at creating a network of online mental health advocates conducting outreach and engaging in mental health topics on Facebook and Twitter. We recruited 34 volunteers (mentalPals) across the nation. These online advocates are also responsible for sharing mental health flyers and creating an online peer–support network.

Partnership with CBU School of Medicine: We supported the Cortex Club at the Copperbelt School of Medicine during their Brain Awareness week in July. We conducted outreach in local schools (Kansenshi Secondary School) across Ndola, Copperbelt Province and visited the Psychiatry ward at Ndola Teaching Hospital and National Vocational Rehabilitation Center where we made grocery donations.

Mental Health Curriculum Development and School Chapters: To create chapters across schools and colleges, we devised a two-phase plan: 1) crafting a culturally–tailored and experienced–based curriculum transcribed in different local languages and 2) partnering with the Ministry of General Education to deploy the school curriculum in local school through trained teachers who will serve as chapter patrons. Establishing a Curriculum Development Internship, we recruited 5 highly trained local mental health experts to design, develop, and transcribe into different local languages Zambia's first–ever mental health curriculum. The comprehensive curriculum, which is under development and will be complete mid–October, incorporates topics ranging from gender-based violence to alcohol and drug abuse and a peer–support training component for chapter members. We’re also working with the Ministry of General Education to sign a Memorandum of Understanding, granting us access to schools.

Telemental Health Platform: This platform is set to launch in the first week of October 2021. 90% completed, the online platform connects mental health patients to a network counsellors and therapists affiliated to The MentalLiberty Foundation. A patient typically Signs Up for an account, granting them access to a repertoire of mental health personnel. The patient is at liberty to select a mental health personnel and timeslot of their choice. Appointments (chat, audio, or video call) are all hosted on our online infrastructure.

Personal Reflection: Executing the above projects allowed me to redefine peace in my own way through mental health. To me, peace entails creating an inclusive environment that embraces people’s differences and fosters mental wellbeing. A close inter–linkage exists between one’s inner state of mind, its external expression, and its impact on society. Therefore, mental health deterioration potentially affects one’s external expression, impacting society at large. This project, therefore, provides a human centered, culturally tailored approach to peace building that fully incorporates the intrapersonal dimension as an essential foundation for long–term social peace.

COVID–19 Pandemic–Induced Challenges: The Covid–19 pandemic greatly impacted and delayed the execution of this project. We had initially planned to open school chapters as early as July. However, schools in Zambia were closed and the Ministry of General Education couldn’t grant us access to these schools. We, therefore, had to restructure our approach and timeline. We had also planned to conduct a special project targeted at curbing suicide rates in Luapula Province, which has the highest suicide rates in Zambia. However, project participants were unable to travel to Luapula due to movement restrictions imposed by the government. Additionally, we postponed our in–person outreach program at Chainama Hills Hospital to early October 2021 due to Covid–19–related conflicts. Despite these challenges and my inability to visit Zambian due to travelling challenges caused by the pandemic, however, we were able to influence even more impact than we had earlier anticipated as we were able to conduct online–outreach and in–person outreach with people in their local communities, thereby reducing mobility and enhancing impact since these people are more familiar with their communities. In total, we’ve impacted over 30,000+ people through our in–person and online initiatives.

Advice to future PfP grantees: Everything comes down to how strong and committed the team you’re working with is. Work might sometimes seem very overwhelming when you’re doing it all by yourself. The key is to identify individuals who are as passionate as you to create change. I was fortunate to have had an amazing team on my side due to the strong partnerships I created before apply for PfP funding. I’m, therefore, thankful for the great effort and commitment that my 65+ people team continues giving to The MentalLiberty Foundation.