

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in South Sudan



International Medical Corps is a global, humanitarian, nonprofit organization dedicated to saving lives and relieving suffering through health care training and relief and development programs.

Established in 1984 by volunteer doctors and nurses, International Medical Corps' mission is to improve the quality of life through health interventions and related activities that build local capacity in underserved communities worldwide. By offering training and health care to local populations and medical assistance to people at highest risk, and with the flexibility to respond rapidly to emergency situations, International Medical Corps rehabilitates devastated health care systems and helps bring them back to self-reliance.

International Medical Corps began working in South Sudan in 1994, ten years before it signed a peace accord with the north.





THE CONTEXT

After more than four decades of conflict, South Sudan became a sovereign state in July 2011. Both national actors as well as the world were optimistic about the potential of this new born state. Reconstruction and development efforts were started in earnest, working closely with the government. However, since March 2013 growing tensions within the government and the ruling SPLM political party led to the violence that erupted on the 15 December 2013 in the capital Juba and escalated into a tribal-political confrontation around the country. The unrest has left thousands dead and there are currently an estimated 1.5 million internally displaced people (OCHA, April 2015). Moreover, between November 2011 and July 2012, an estimated 120,000 people fled the violence in Kordofan and Blue Nile State in Sudan into South Sudan. Maban County, in Upper Nile State received the largest influx of refugees. International Medical Corps has been implementing programs in South Sudan since 1994.

Programmatic areas include health, reproductive health, mental health and psychosocial support, gender-based violence and nutrition. Through funding from ECHO, BPRM, OFDA and CHF, International Medical Corps is implementing community based integrated mental health and psychosocial services in four States: two Maban refugee camps (Kaya and Gendrassa) and Malakal UNMISS protection of civilians (PoC) site in Upper Nile State; Awerial in Lakes States; Juba PoC in Central Equatoria State; and Akobo in Jonglei State. International Medical Corps is among the few and the lead organization providing comprehensive mental health services in South Sudan.

OUR SERVICES IN SOUTH SUDAN

1. INTEGRATION OF MENTAL HEALTH INTO PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

International Medical Corps is providing access to psychosocial interventions and medications to people with mental, neurological and substance use problems in the internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps. Our services are integrated with general health services and available to an estimated 306,251 beneficiaries across five sites. Such integrated services are less stigmatizing and more accessible to the affected population. National and local staff are trained in mental health using the WHO mhGAP-Intervention Guide (IG) and national guidelines. Trained staff also receive on the job support supervision and refresher trainings. Additionally, our expatriate psychiatrist based in Juba provides online (Skype, phone, email) consultations whenever required. Severe mental illnesses such as postpartum psychosis/depression; severe manic episode, suicidal patients, patients with uncontrolled seizures etc. are some of the conditions that require additional support by the psychiatrist. It is important to note that there is no referral point/service for inpatient care in most of the sites except in Juba and Akobo where International Medical Corps runs inpatient facilities. Many individuals who have been tied up at home for months or put in prison for their behavioural changes (perceived as dangerous for self and others) are benefiting from our services and are now leading independent lives.

2. CASE MANAGEMENT

We are providing mental health case management for people with multiple needs such as problems coping with stressors, family and social relationship problems, livelihoods and more. Our case management team, led by our mental health officers based in the health facility, includes medical doctors/clinical officers and community health workers. The team is also supported by an expatriate psychiatrist and clinical psychologist based in Juba and Maban, respectively.

3. PROVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION, AWARENESS CREATION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY

International Medical Corps provides education on mental health issues via the following methods:

- **Weekly Health Education Sessions:** Key mental health topics are included in the weekly health education sessions being conducted in the health facilities where we provide mental health services.
- **House-to-house Visits:** Community health promoters are trained in mental health and mainly deliver mental health messages through house-to-house visits. Community health promoters are also trained to identify cases of mental illness and link with our services.
- **Radio Shows:** We conduct live radio talk shows on mental health issues and include topics such as the definitions of mental health and mental disorders; why it is important to address mental health; treatment options and fighting stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

4. DOCUMENTATION AND SHARING OF EVIDENCE BASED RESULTS AND BEST PRACTICES

We are implementing a global project that documents our experiences to share with other agencies on lessons learned from integrating mental health with general health care using the WHO mhGAP-IG in humanitarian settings.

Story of success: Four months before the crises began in December 2013, Jafar (46 years of age) was getting treatment for a mental illness in a private clinic in the capital state, Juba. The family said the clinic became very expensive and Jafar was not showing signs of improvement. Then, Jafar was referred to International Medical Corps' clinic in Awerial by the community health worker. On his arrival he was aggressive, talkative, singing and dancing during the interview. However, one of his family members said Jafar's mood is sometimes very low and he has lost interest in things he used to enjoy.

An assessment conducted in line with WHO mhGAP guidelines showed that Jafar has Bipolar Disorder and was currently experiencing a manic episode. The team provided treatment including a combination of antipsychotic medication, a mood stabilizer, psychosocial support and education about managing bipolar disorder that involved the family. Jafar has shown significant improvement in both day-to-day functioning and overall

severity of symptoms. When interviewed, Jafar said he is very happy because he is back to his senses which he thought would never be the case again. International Medical Corps mental health workers report Jafar has a very good prognosis due to his high level of medicine compliance, good family support, and regular home visits and follow up.

5. COORDINATION AND ADVOCACY

International Medical Corps South Sudan is a regular and active participant of the mental health and psychosocial platform at Juba level and member of the proposed technical working group for mental health policy for South Sudan. We also actively participate in coordination and cluster meetings at the field/site level.





Since its inception 30 years ago, International Medical Corps' mission has been consistent: relieve the suffering of those impacted by war, natural disaster and disease, by delivering vital health care services that focus on training. This approach of helping people help themselves is critical to returning devastated populations to self-reliance.

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