2021 PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FORUM

(Hybrid physical\(^1\) and virtual)

Main Physical Forum: Maputo, Mozambique

13 – 15 October 2021

FORUM COMMUNIQUÉ

\(^1\) Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
WE, THE DELEGATES to the 2021 PSS Forum representing 62 countries, comprising of children and youth, experts from Government Ministries and Departments responsible for Children and Youth, Health, Education and Skills Development from East Africa Community Partner States and Southern Africa Development Community Member States; traditional leaders, International cooperating partners; civil society; academic partners; journalists committed to ethical reporting on child mental health and psychosocial wellbeing; representatives of UN agencies; national and global humanitarian emergency experts; practitioners; and community caregivers, engaging physically in Maputo, 12 other countries and virtually across the globe on 13 – 15 October, 2021, under the theme “Innovate. Integrate. Thrive.”.

ACKNOWLEDGING guidance on children’s rights in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; commitments to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) for children and youth as articulated in instruments such as Agenda 2040 - Fostering an Africa Fit for Children; The IASC MHPSS Guidelines; messages from The Paris 2021 Global Summit of Mental Health; and the 2021 World Mental Health Global Awareness Campaign under the theme “Mental Health in an Unequal World”; The Maputo Plan of Action on the Continental Policy Framework on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR); The SADC Minimum Package of Services for Orphans and Vulnerable Children and Youth; The SADC Psychosocial Support Conceptual Framework; The EAC Children’s Policy; The EAC Regional Minimum Standards for Comprehensive Services; The Sustainable Development Goals; The Africa We Want 2063 Agenda; WHO COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan for The African Region 1 February 2021 – 31 January 2022 (Pillar 9); and the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General’s “Keeping the Promise: Ending Violence Against Children by 2030”;

RECOGNIZING that the psychosocial and mental wellbeing of African girls, boys, adolescents, youth, parents, caregivers and the essential services workforce is affected by COVID-19 and other health emergencies, HIV, neglect, poverty, conflict, disability, stigma and discrimination; limited access to services; child marriages; adolescent parenting; child exploitation, violence, abuse and neglect;

UNDERSTANDING the benefit of MHPSS interventions for girls, boys, youth, and those who care for them and provide services to them, where PSS is a continuum of love, care and protection that enhances the holistic development (cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and physical) of a person and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness and resilience. Therefore, emphasize that girls, boys, youth, parents, caregivers and affected communities must actively and meaningfully participate in making
decisions on issues that affect them. Noting that the holistic nature of psychosocial and mental wellbeing requires that psychosocial support is appropriately, adequately and consistently provided through home, family, friends, community, local and national services including for education and health;

ACKNOWLEDGING ongoing, and encouraging continued, prioritization by Governments, Regional Economic Communities, UN organizations, Development Partners and Civil Society Organizations to support and improve MHPSS and strengthen the wellbeing of girls, boys, youth, their families, caregivers and communities;

CONVINCED that collective efforts to innovate and collaborate across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus by Governments, Regional Economic Communities, Development Partners, Civil Society, Religious Organizations, Traditional Leaders, the Private Sector and communities can bring about comprehensive psychosocial and mental wellbeing, or thriving, of girls, boys, youth, their families, caregivers and communities.

The 6th Regional PSS Forum therefore issues the following recommendations

We call upon decision and policy makers to:

- Develop and implement an Africa Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Strategic Framework;
- Adopt a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder approach to promote wellbeing and thriving and prevent child, youth, caregiver and community mental health and psychosocial disorders;
- Strengthen MHPSS services quality management, monitoring and learning by
  - Implementing a common MHPSS evaluation framework across the continent
  - Developing and implementing mandatory MHPSS reporting guidelines to be used and adhered to by all in the COVID-19 and other responses;
- Facilitate and accelerate development and dissemination of standardized MHPSS definitions and delivery of accredited MHPSS in all countries, actively engaging leaders, practitioners, caregivers, service users and essential services workforce;
- Increase MHPSS budget allocations within health budgets; specifically, for strengthening MHPSS workforce capacity and competence, with focus on community level competence to provide MHPSS services, such as screening for MHPSS issues in children;
• Combine innovative efforts, across member states and regional economic blocks, to mitigate and combat the many social ills that Africa’s children, youth, families and communities’ face to promote thriving;
• Collaborate to strengthen preparedness to maintain and improve access to services during anticipated climate-related emergencies and possible future health emergencies;
• Actively and meaningfully involve children, youth, affected communities and those with lived experience in developing and implementing response plans and programmes, recognizing that they are agents of change with skills, creativity and the abilities to find solutions;
• Leverage increased awareness of the importance of MHPSS in the current COVID-19 context to build better MHPSS systems and destigmatize MH.
• Embed MHPSS into disaster preparedness and response plans at national, continental and global level, specifically including MHPSS capacity development and enhancement for all essential service workers across African countries, with leveraging of task sharing.
• Ensure that sexual and reproductive health education and psychosocial support are prioritized in all forms of education.
• Address socio-economic and gender-related inequalities in accessing technology required for online learning. For example, implement a hybrid approach for delivering education.
• Prioritise and fund support, regular supervision and ongoing training and professional development for all levels of the social service and MHPSS workforce, in governmental and non-governmental roles, and ensure adequate remuneration, improved working conditions and equipment, and access to safe transport for community outreach.

We call upon practitioners, academics and civil society to:

• Strengthen advocacy for incorporation of MHPSS within key sector responses, including ECD; caring for caregivers of children, especially adolescent and young mothers; promoting positive male involvement, encouraging fathers to engage in the social, emotional and material/financial support of their children; with mobilization of public and donor financing for these.
• Continue the agenda to destigmatize mental health.
• Develop programmes to engage children and youth to innovate and promote mental and psychosocial wellbeing. Psychosocial skills and resilience should be prioritised within SRHR practice
• Ensure regular interaction with traditional and cultural leaders to increase SRHR knowledge and to address difficult issues including unsafe abortions
• Expand innovative programmes to expand youth and adolescent friendly health services; with focus on enhancing adolescents’ access to holistic care for prevention and treatment of HIV.
• Deliver effective MHPSS services to Children on The Move
• Intensify efforts to protect the girl child and reverse increasing vulnerability and threats to education because of the COVID-19 emergency, including re-entry to school for girls who have been pregnant and boys who have entered child labour

• Integrate MHPSS in programmes that address prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and ensure coverage to the most vulnerable groups including girls, Persons with Disabilities, women and the LGBTQI community

• Partner with youth to deliver youth-friendly programmes and services

• Strengthen multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration, including the media, to strengthen MHPSS referral systems and pathways at community level.

• Innovate to effectively manage and reduce staff and caregiver stress and strengthen family MHPSS.

• Strengthen collaboration between schools, families and communities to improve safety and reduce all forms of violence against girls, boys and youth; reduce access to drugs and alcohol, guarantee access to education and acquisition of livelihood skills for the most vulnerable children, including those living on the streets;

• Generate and use evidence, contributing to national data systems

We will work towards realization of these recommendations in the next two years and report on progress at the 7th PSS Forum in 2023.