

Advocacy Brief:

Mobilizing Community Support for Mental Health Among Persons Affected by Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)

Empowering Communities, Restoring Dignity

Overview

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are a group of debilitating infectious diseases that primarily affect the world's most vulnerable populations. While their physical consequences have long been documented, the profound mental health impact on people affected by NTDs and their communities remain largely overlooked.

This advocacy brief calls upon community leaders, health professionals, policymakers, and civil society to rally around those affected by NTDs and prioritize their mental well-being as central to holistic care and social inclusion.

Background: The Double Burden of NTDs

NTDs such as leprosy, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis, and others impose a double burden—physical and psychosocial distress. Visible symptoms, chronic pain, and disability

can lead to stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, and loss of livelihood of persons with NTD complications. These challenges often trigger anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation.

- Over 1.7 billion people globally are at risk of NTDs, with the majority living in impoverished, rural, or remote areas.[1]
- Stigma and discrimination remain pervasive, affecting the mental health of persons affected by NTDs and impeding their access to care and community participation.
- Women, children, and marginalized groups are particularly susceptible to the psychological and social consequences of NTDs.
- Women and girls affected by NTDs often face compounded stigma and caregiving burdens, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

The Mental Health Crisis: Invisible and Unaddressed

Despite mounting evidence, mental health often remains neglected in NTD programming. Myths, misinformation, and cultural taboos prevent open dialogue and timely intervention. Many individuals cope in silence, leading to cycles of isolation and further psychological distress. Access to mental health and psychosocial support is a matter of dignity and equality, essential for enabling persons to rebuild their lives and fully participate in society.

Key Barriers:

- Lack of awareness: Mental health is rarely discussed in the context of NTDs, even among caregivers and local health workers.
- Limited services: Few community-based mental health services exist in NTD-endemic regions, and most lack trained personnel.
- Stigma & Discrimination: Persons affected by NTDs often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, both for their illness and for the mental health effects it can cause. Also, persons with disabilities, including those with NTD-related impairments, face systemic exclusion from health services and community life.
- Underfunding: Inequitable resource allocation leaves programmes addressing the psychosocial aspects of NTDs severely underfunded.

Why Community Support Matters

Communities are the first line of support for persons with NTDs. Local advocacy and collective action are vital to protecting the dignity of persons with NTDs and ensuring their full and equal participation in society. These actions serve to dismantle systemic stigma, promote inclusion, and foster environments where open conversation about mental health can thrive. When empowered, communities can:

- Actively combat stereotypes and dismantle discriminatory narratives surrounding NTDs and mental health.
- Integrate NTDs and mental health awareness into religious, educational, and social structures.
- Enable persons with NTDs to access support and engage meaningfully in all decisions that affect their lives.

[1] Grijsen ML, Yangaza YE, Kadri A, Strub F, Freeman EE, Enbiale W (2025) Rethinking neglected tropical diseases: A shift towards more inclusive and equitable terminology. PLOS Glob Public Health 5(2): e0004094. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0004094

- Facilitate peer-led initiatives that focus on the lived experiences and expertise of persons affected by NTDs, ensuring these networks are accessible, equitable, and culturally grounded.

Community-Driven Solutions: What Works

CBM Global has worked in Community Mental Health for more than 15 years, reaching over 3 million people with mental health problems. Leveraging CBM Global's extensive experience, innovative community-led initiatives can strengthen mental health resilience among persons affected by NTDs.

Initiatives such as creating and sustaining safe, community-led spaces for dialogue and peer support affirm the dignity of individuals and promote mutual empowerment. Simultaneously, engaging with religious and cultural leaders helps to integrate mental health awareness within daily community life, respecting existing belief systems and strengthening collective well-being.

Regular community forums and platforms for dialogue ensure that persons affected by NTDs can exercise their right to meaningful participation, voice their priorities, and influence the development of local health responses.

By providing accessible skill-building workshops and equitable livelihood support, communities can work to advance the right to work and economic participation for all members, countering isolation, fostering dignity, and strengthening social inclusion. By centering the expertise and lived experience of persons with NTDs, initiatives shift power dynamics and enable self-determination. This ensures that solutions are relevant and sustainable, and that persons with NTDs are recognized as leaders and active partners in their own health and development.

CBM Global's experience asserts that sustainable mental health support for persons with NTDs is most effective when anchored in community engagement and culturally-responsive practices. In addition, advocacy efforts must ensure that all interventions are disability-inclusive, including accessible communication formats, mobility support, and participation in decision-making. Gender-sensitive programming must address intersectional barriers that women, youth, and persons with disabilities–including those with NTD-related impairments–face by ensuring safe spaces, leadership pathways, and tailored mental health support for women and girls. These models not only enhance access to care but also foster dignity, inclusion, and long-term resilience.

Consequently, the following key strategies should be implemented:

1. Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns

- Host workshops, radio programs, and community theatre to address NTDs and mental health issues.
- Engage local champions — persons with lived experience, caregivers, and respected community leaders – in rights-based campaigns to share stories and counter stigma and discrimination.

2. Integration into Primary Health Care

- Train frontline health workers to provide person-centered mental health and psychosocial support, grounded in respect for individual dignity, autonomy, and human rights.
- Establish effective and equitable referral systems that connect individuals to specialized mental health support.

3. Peer Support Groups

- Foster inclusive community-based groups for persons with NTDs and their families to address shared concerns and build collective action.
- Support meaningful participation to facilitate experience-sharing, develop effective coping strategies, and engage in collective problem-solving.
- Leadership opportunities should be extended to women, youth, and persons with disabilities within peer support groups and community coalitions. This ensures diverse representation and strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

4. Youth and Women's Empowerment

- Engage youth clubs and women's associations in implementing culturally-appropriate mental health promotion activities that respect their dignity and ensure their meaningful participation.
- Provide equitable access to leadership and vocational training programmes that empower women, youth, and persons with disabilities to exercise their economic rights, increase their autonomy, and build financial resilience and dignity.

5. Advocacy and Policy Engagement

- Enable meaningful participation of community members, including persons with NTDs, in local health committees and policy dialogues.
- Champion the full and equitable integration of quality mental health services into all NTD programmes and health budgets.

Call to Action: How Your Community Can Make a Difference

1. Start the Conversation (For Community Leaders, Teachers, and Faith-based groups)

- Organize community forums (for example, school assemblies, religious gatherings) for open dialogue about NTDs and mental health.
- Invite guest speakers — health professionals, persons with NTDs, and advocates to share lived experience and practical knowledge.

2. Break Down Barriers (For Youth groups, Local media, and Civil Society Organizations)

- Launch awareness campaigns to challenge stigma and misinformation about NTDs and mental health.
- Support reintegration efforts by enabling equitable access of persons with NTDs to inclusive education, decent work, and full participation in social life.

3. Build Partnerships (with Local Government, Health Workers, and NGOs)

- Collaborate with health centres, community-based organizations, and traditional healers.
- Form coalitions to mobilize resources, share expertise, and advocate for inclusive health policies, plans and programmes.

4. Monitor and Celebrate Progress (Community volunteers, Peer support groups, and Local Councils)

- Track and document community-led NTDs and mental health activities and outcomes using simple tools.

- Community monitoring tools should include GEDSI-sensitive indicators—such as participation rates disaggregated by gender, age, and disability status—to track progress toward inclusive mental health and NTD programming.
- Celebrate milestones and recognize local champions – volunteers, peer leaders, and advocates – who are driving change.

Conclusion

Recognizing and fulfilling the mental health rights of persons with NTDs is vital for upholding their dignity and building communities founded on the principles of inclusion and non-discrimination. Grassroots action, driven by solidarity and mutual respect, empowers communities to challenge stigma and discrimination, fostering environments where all persons, including those with NTDs, can assert their rights and find support. Together, we can ensure that mental health is recognized as a vital component in the fight against NTDs. By fostering inclusive, community-driven solutions, we can create a future where every person – regardless of their condition – can heal, belong, and thrive.