

ART FOR THERAPY



'A tool to promote mental well-being'

A case of Mathare Informal Settlement

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About SDI-K/Muongano Wa Wanavijiji

SDI-Kenya is a non-profit organization that supports the urban poor to advocate for inclusive cities, through Movement building, agenda setting and precedent setting in community urban development. Our advocacy goal is Making slums visible.

SDI-Kenya is dedicated to providing technical support to Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the National Movement of the urban poor in Kenya. Founded in 1996, Muungano wa Wanavijiji is a powerful movement that unites local groups from Cities and towns to advocate for policy changes and engage in dialogue. Their aim is to improve the quality of life for slum dwellers and urban poor in Kenya through, policy advocacy and communication with the federal, state, and municipal governments, as well as civil society and private sector groups.

"Muungano wa Wanavijiji's fundamental principles, which we promote revolves around land, housing, sustainable livelihoods, and access to essential services."

SDI Kenya shares **Muongano wa Wanavijiji's vision of creating inclusive cities, where low-income communities have access to adequate housing and services and can live with dignity.** Building on our expertise and experience, we work towards this vision through movement building, agenda setting, and precedent setting in community urban development. Our slogan, **"Building inclusive cities for the urban poor,"** reflects our commitment to creating equitable and sustainable urban environment for all.

Muongano wa Wanavijiji, actively encourages its members to join savings organizations in order to address the unique challenges faced by informal settlement-based groups. Muungano supports and organizes these groups to advocate for community-wide issues such as securing land rights and improving housing, water, sewage, and electricity services. The federation also supports youth groups focused on climate change action by building networks and strengthening their capacity to catalyze collective activity in their communities.

Additionally, Muungano follows a community-led data collection model, which helps deepen the understanding of settlement-related challenges, overstretched services, and infrastructure. This model helps identify the type and level of services needed to improve the settlement's functioning.

Key messages that inform SDI-Kenya/Muungano Wa Wanavijiji's work



- To collaborate with both state and non-state actors for access to basic services, land tenure, decent livelihoods and housing.



- To collaborate in strengthening our agenda setting and precedence setting



- Through policy advocacy and community engagement, SDI-Kenya is improving the quality of life for slum dwellers and urban poor in Kenya.



- The organization leverages its expertise and experience to advance the agenda of inclusive cities in Kenya.

The transformation we seek



Good economic livelihoods



Improved health and well being



Quality education



Upgraded, climate-friendly settlements and housing



Safety and security in settlements



Pro-poor data-driven development



Collaboration between the urban poor and government



Secure land tenure for the urban poor



Introduction

Muongano wa Wanavijiji with the support of Shack Dwellers International Kenya (SDI-K), conducted the Covid Collective research in Hospital ward, Mathare informal settlement. This research, funded by UK FCDO played a vital role in assessing the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community and evaluating their resilience in the process of recovery, post the pandemic.

COVID-19 Impacts on the Mental Well-being of Mathare Residents

Based on the research findings, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the mental health of residents living in informal settlements, particularly in Mathare slums. These communities already face inherent challenges and vulnerabilities, and the pandemic has further exacerbated their existing issues such as overcrowding, limited access to healthcare, and inadequate sanitation facilities have been magnified, intensifying feelings of fear, anxiety, isolation, and economic distress. The sudden emergence of the pandemic caught everyone off guard, leaving community members grappling with immense stress as they try to navigate the best approaches to address these pressing mental health concerns.

Key challenges faced during the pandemic

Many residents in Mathare rely on informal employment, receiving daily wages. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of numerous workplaces, mainly due to lockdowns imposed in Nairobi County and its surrounding areas. A significant number of residents depend on the nearby Eastleigh Business Centre for work, engaging in casual jobs such as house helps, drivers, movers, businessmen, and load carriers. The loss of communities' main source of income and the inability to meet basic needs led to increased stress, anxiety, depression, gender based violence, insecurity among community members, particularly those who were severely affected.

According to Mathare residents, they stated that,



Covid 19 pandemic has caused stress and anxiety as many people were living in fear and uncertainty, in that majority were very worried about their health condition and that of their loved ones putting into consideration the Covid 19 regulation on keeping at least 2 meters social distance. This was difficult in the slums since Mathare is congested and has limited access to health facilities bearing in mind that mathare had only one hospital offering Covid 19 services that is Mathari Mental Hospital.



The economic hardships, heightened stress, and mental health challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic pushed some people to resort to using drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they faced.

The restrictions on movement and increased time spent at home during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a rise in domestic violence cases in Mathare and encouraged the separation of many families. The economic and emotional strains faced by individuals and families contributed significantly to this alarming trend, which had a detrimental impact on mental well-being within the Mathare slums.

During the community dialogues we held, concerns about the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health were expressed by community members, particularly the youth. These concerns were supported by our research findings, which highlighted the mental health challenges faced by community members. Recognizing the significance of the youth as agents of change in our society, Muungano wa Wanavijiji conducted a mental health session specifically aimed at supporting the young people in the community. It is crucial to empower and assist the youth, as they play a vital role in the development of our communities and have the potential to create positive change.

COVID-19 as a stressor and amplifier of existing inequalities.



The Art for Therapy tool

As a result, Muungano wa Wanavijiji facilitated an ‘Art for Therapy’ session in June 2023 in Hospital ward in Mathare settlement to help promote resilience when it comes to mental health in the informal settlements. The ‘art for therapy’ is a tool that uses creative expression as a means of promoting emotional and mental well-being. Through the process of creating art, community members were able to express their emotions that may be difficult to put into words. The aim of the tool was to help individuals gain insight into their emotions, develop coping skills, and improve their overall quality of life through the help of the community health volunteers (CHVs).



Moreover, the use of this tool proved beneficial in effectively addressing mental health issues through the use of creative art and incorporating interactive games that promote critical thinking.

Muongano wa Wanavijiji identified three community health volunteers (CHVs) trained on mental health (*i.e. Christine Wambui, Kevin Oduor and David Ojiem*) from Hospital ward in Mathare informal settlements to address mental health concerns. These CHVs played a crucial role in facilitating the session, which primarily focused on the youth. During the session, the CHVs provided the youth with an understanding of mental health. Interestingly, the youth commonly associated mental health with stress, depression, and diseases affecting the brain.

Through this session, the youths had the opportunity to reflect on the impacts they had experienced during the pandemic. It became evident that these impacts have continued to affect them even after the pandemic, largely due to the high cost of living in the country.

The challenge witnessed???

While reflecting on the effects of COVID-19, some of the youth found it challenging to open up and share their thoughts during the session, and were therefore silent. However, it is important to recognize that silence can also serve as a form of communication. Therefore, the art for therapy tool provided a platform for those struggling to express themselves verbally to find solace in art and writing as alternative means of communication.

There were three themes that emerged from using the tool during the session.



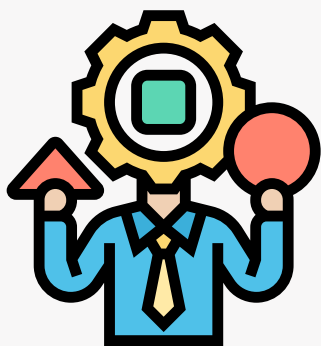
Theme 1: Critical thinking

The first activity involved a game played by a group of five youths. The objective was to stack plastic cups in a hierarchical order using only strings attached to a rubber band, without using their hands. This game fostered a mindset of creative thinking and encouraged the participants to explore alternative approaches to achieve their goal through teamwork.



Lessons learnt

1



A valuable lesson that emerged from this game was the importance of adaptability, resilience and innovation in navigating challenges. The research findings also supported this, as it revealed that some community members were able to swiftly adapt to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting from one business to another. This adaptability and resilience was evident in the significant number of individuals who began selling masks, soaps, and sanitizers due to the increased demand for these items.

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Furthermore, another key takeaway was the significance of effective communication, collaboration, and perseverance. Despite encountering multiple failures, they persistently made efforts until they successfully established a hierarchical structure using the plastic cups.



Theme 2: Vulnerability



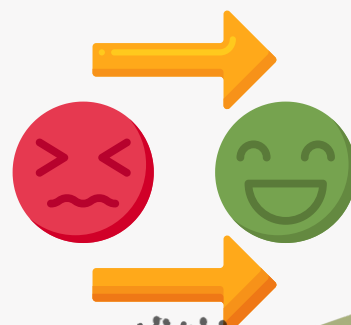
The second activity revolved around a demonstration involving a small plastic bag filled with water and a toothpick. The carrier bag symbolized the heart, while the water represented the challenges individuals face. By pricking the carrier bag, water would start dripping from the hole, and if multiple holes were made, water would flow out from each one.

Lessons learnt

ASKING FOR
HELP
IS OK

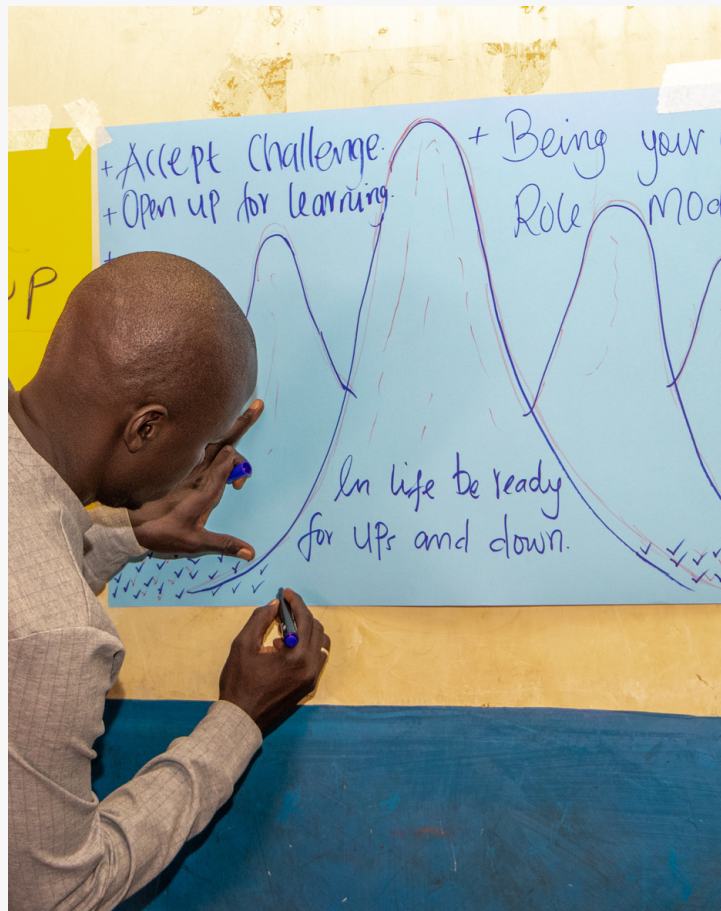
This demonstration emphasized the significance of opening up and allowing oneself to be vulnerable. When we share our problems with someone, it allows us to release the burden in our hearts and experience a sense of relief. On the other hand, if we keep everything to ourselves, the stress accumulates, potentially leading to increased depression. This activity highlighted the importance of having the courage to seek help from others, as they are often willing to lend support and share the load. Moreover, opening up serves as a crucial step to prevent resorting to drug abuse or engaging in criminal activities as unhealthy coping mechanisms for stress.

The findings of the COVID-19 collective research further underscored the rise in drug abuse among young people. Therefore, it was important to educate the youth about the benefits of opening up, as it offers an alternative to relying on drugs for temporary relief.



Theme 3: Creative expression

The final activity involved the use of paint colors, manila papers, and writing materials. During this session, the youth had the opportunity to express their thoughts and emotions through drawing and coloring. The choice of colors held deeper meaning as it resonated with their current state of mind. Additionally, they wrote down the challenges they are currently facing, which contribute to their stress and depression. To symbolize their release of stress, they discarded these papers into the dustbin, signifying a proactive step towards self-improvement by letting go of things that had piled up in them.



Moreover, they wrote affirmations on what they are proud of about themselves, serving as a source of hope and a reminder that life is not all bleak. This practice encouraged them to find healthy ways to cope with stress and avoid the accumulation of depression. As a final act, the youth painted their hands with colors that resonated with them and left their handprints on white manila papers. This symbolized the beginning of a movement of mental health ambassadors within our informal settlements.



The youth developed the slogan **#BeyouDoyou**, signifying their commitment to prioritize their mental health and become catalysts for change in the society.

Our take home



Mental health awareness plays a crucial role in promoting the well-being of community members. Therefore, there is a need to conduct regular mental health sessions targeting various categories of the population. These sessions will be guided by community health volunteers trained on mental health, who will not only facilitate the sessions but will also follow up with the community members to monitor their mental well-being. Furthermore, they can refer them to counselling and therapy services as needed. It is also crucial to hold continuous training and support for well established counsellors and therapists to become our mental health champions

One notable outcome from the session conducted was the sense of relief expressed by the youth. This positive response highlights the potential benefits of conducting frequent sessions, allowing communities to collectively cope with the stresses they face and easily adapt to the current circumstances. By encouraging open conversations and providing a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, we can foster resilience and empower individuals to prioritize their mental well-being.



Additionally, it is essential to create a support system that extends beyond the sessions. This may entail forming alliances with local mental health specialists, organizations, and institutions to ensure individuals have continued access to services and professional help on mental health.

There is a need to make a significant difference in the lives of communities by prioritizing mental health awareness thus promoting their overall well-being and resilience. Additionally, mental health initiatives should be given priority in the informal settlements as this will help reduce suicidal cases, divorce, alcohol and substance abuse.

