

REAFFIRMING THE NEED FOR INTEGRATED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR HIV, TB AND MALARIA PROGRAMMES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The theme for 2023 is 'Mental health is a universal human right'. In an era where the world is experiencing volatile and unprecedented geopolitical tensions, violent conflicts, climate change and pandemics – we cannot forget the adverse impact on mental health on key and vulnerable populations living with and/or affected by HIV, Tuberculosis (TB) and malaria who are especially impacted given the stigma, discrimination, lack of psychosocial support, financial burdens, criminalization, side effects, ageing, amidst other factors. People with poor mental health frequently have higher HIV and TB infection rates than people without, and those with HIV or TB infection are more at risk of mental ill health, leading to lower treatment adherence and greater mortality” according to a study.¹

Pranab Barui, Mental Health Wellness Counselor at Keshav Suri Foundation (India) reiterates, “the concept of ‘one-world family’, as represented by Vasudev Kutumbakam during the G20 in India can only be realized if we ensure that no one is left behind. Neglecting those at the margins contradicts the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Stigma still affects People living with HIV (PLHIV) in this time and age, underlining the pressing need for improved mental health support. Even with the most advanced prevention tools, we risk falling short if we fail to see individuals as more than just their medical condition. Our approach must be people-centred and recognise individuals as people, not just patients”.

Mental health and well-being are an essential component of achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC), equitable TB and HIV responses, and for preparing for any future pandemics. The three High-Level Meetings (HLMs) on TB, UHC and Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response (PPPR) which were just concluded in September have placed greater emphasis on the inclusion of quality and affordable mental health services for people affected by the diseases and also those of health workers.

- The [TB Political Declaration 2023](#) recognizes that “TB disproportionately affects people in vulnerable situations in all countries, the epidemic is driven by both health and social and economic determinants, such as poverty, undernutrition, HIV, housing conditions, **mental health**”, etc. Additionally, it notes “the multidirectional relationship between TB, mental health conditions, social and economic determinants, including stigma and discrimination, that can lead to greater morbidity and poorer treatment outcomes, that the **prevalence of depression is as high as 45% amongst individuals with TB**, and that this needs to be addressed through integrated programming.”
- The [UHC Political Declaration 2023](#) notes that “more than 1 billion people live with a mental health disorder and those with severe mental health conditions die on average 10 to 20 years earlier than the general population, with suicide accounting for more than one in 100 deaths annually, numbering approximately 703,000 deaths annually”. The political declaration stresses on ensuring “that no one is left behind, with an endeavour to reach the furthest behind first, and **address the physical and mental health needs of all**, while respecting and promoting human rights and the dignity of the person and the principles of equality and non-discrimination, as well as empowering those who are vulnerable or in vulnerable situations, including women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, People of African Descent, Indigenous Peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants, and those living in poverty and extreme poverty in both urban and rural areas, people living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing”.

¹ [Mental, Neurological, and Substance Use Disorders in People Living with HIV/AIDS in Low- and Middle-Income Countries](#), Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

- The [PPPR Political Declaration 2023](#) stresses “the need for Member States to further strengthen national health systems to prevent non communicable and communicable diseases and address their impact on mental health and wellbeing, through the provision of mental health and psychosocial support services for achieving UHC”.
- The [HIV Political Declaration 2021](#) reaffirms “the right of every human being, without distinction of any kind, to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and affirm that the availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability and quality of HIV combination prevention, testing, treatment, care and support, health and social services, including sexual and reproductive health-care services, information and education, delivered free from stigma and discrimination, are essential elements to achieve the full realization of this right”.

Funding for mental health technologies and start-ups have increased in recent years, leading to further privatisation, and the concern remains for those who cannot afford the treatment unless provided at a subsidised rate and/or by national health programme schemes. And while mental health funding streams have expanded in the last decade, more investment is urgently needed. Approximately US\$38 million is spent on mental health domestically in low-income countries (LICs) and US\$1.5 billion in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with considerably more spent in upper middle-income countries (UMICs) and high-income countries (HICs) in volume terms. This leaves a global financing gap of more than US\$200 billion. In LICs, the gap is US\$219 million and in LMICs US\$3,081 million. For LICs and LMICs to reach basic mental healthcare provision, LICs would need to increase funding fivefold while LMICs would need to double their current financial support.²

As the largest financing institution for HIV, TB and malaria, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria (Global Fund) is committed to protecting and promoting the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The 2023 – 2028 Global Fund Strategy “[Fighting Pandemics and Building a Healthier and More Equitable World](#)” recognizes the need for providing quality, people-centred diagnosis, treatment and care, to improve well-being and mental health care for people living with and/or affected by HIV, TB and malaria. In addition, it also stresses the need to expand partnerships with communities living with and affected by emerging and related health areas such as mental health and disability to support more inclusive, response and effective systems for health.

“The Global Fund has set a benchmark for others to follow by incorporating mental health in its strategy for the first time. HIV, TB and malaria responses will truly put people at the centre of all programmes and interventions when there is an integration of mental health care services, especially as part of Primary Health Care (PHC),” says Rachel Ong, Regional Coordinator of Global Fund Advocates Network Asia-Pacific (GFAN AP). “And the Global Fund has a huge part to play with its new strategy in ensuring that key and vulnerable populations living with and/or affected by the three diseases receive quality and accessible treatment, including comprehensive and holistic mental health services. Putting the last mile first is especially important if we are to achieve UHC by 2030 and to do that we have to ensure that we achieve the US\$18 billion target for the [Seventh Replenishment](#) of the Global Fund where we still have a gap of US\$2.7 billion”.

As the region with the largest populations in the world and the youngest; where HIV is concentrated amongst key populations; TB is concentrated amongst the poor and vulnerable; and where many countries are close to malaria elimination, there is an urgent need to ensure and step-up funding for the Global Fund where financing for is essential to expand the mental health needs to the most impacted. We call on public and private donors to #MeetTheTarget of the Global Fund Seventh Replenishment of **at least US\$18 billion** and for all countries to:

- Expand mental healthcare to community and primary settings, including in the most remote and poor regions;

² [Financing Mental Health: the current situation and ways forward](#), United for Global Mental Health, published 10 October 2023.

- Generalize the curriculum for mental health workers to include specialized training on LGBTQIA+ issues, HIV, TB and other communicable and non-communicable diseases; and
- Ensure the well-being of and provide adequate mental health support to the health workforce to avoid stress, burnout and other impacts on mental health.