



# Youth FORWARD: Scaling up An Evidence-based Mental Health Intervention in Sierra Leone

## BACKGROUND

More than one billion youth live in countries affected by war and communal violence.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of exposure to violence, societal disruption, and personal loss include high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress in youth throughout Sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>2-4</sup> including Sierra Leone. Even more problematic, the prevalence of untreated mental disorders among adults in LMICs is estimated at 78%; for youth it is likely higher.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the mental health services gap in Sierra Leone, we have developed the Youth Readiness Intervention (YRI), a cognitive behavioral therapy-based intervention developed in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and local mental health providers. The YRI is a culturally-informed group for youth exposed to violence and other forms of adversity that can be delivered in community settings by layworkers.

The YRI is a promising approach for addressing mental health problems among at-risk youth in Sierra Leone. In our prior research in secondary schools in urban Freetown, youth who received the YRI showed improvements in mental health, pro-social attitudes, daily functioning, and educational outcomes. Teachers reported that YRI participants were more likely to persist in school (28.8% vs. 4.7%) and had better attendance and classroom behavior.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of the Youth FORWARD study is to implement the YRI at a larger scale in partnership with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in the context of their *Employment Promotion Programme* (EPP). The YRI will be implemented as the psychosocial skills component of the EPPs for youth ages 18-30 in three rural districts of Sierra Leone: Kono, Koinadugu, and Kailahun. Service providers from Siplaw are currently completing YRI training and will deliver the YRI to youth.

## Youth FORWARD STUDY OBJECTIVES

**Investigate the effectiveness of the YRI delivered via the EPP platform.** We will compare the effectiveness of the YRI for improving mental health, emotion regulation, and functional impairments among at-risk youth in the EPPs to findings from our previous study of the YRI.

**Identify factors that influence the integration of the YRI in the EPP.** We will conduct a process evaluation to understand barriers and facilitators to effective YRI implementation, including service agency leadership practices, staffing policies, sensitivity to youth participation barriers, and policy and contextual factors.

**Investigate feasibility and acceptability of a collaborative team approach (CTA) to scaling up and sustaining the YRI.** In the CTA, service providers previously trained in the YRI train and supervise a new team of providers. We will assess quality of YRI delivery, sustainment of YRI delivery, staff satisfaction with the CTA, and agency leadership buy-in.

Lessons learned in Youth FORWARD will inform the ongoing work of the GoSL and future health policy initiatives that aim to improve access to mental health services and close the treatment gap by scaling up evidence-based mental health interventions via alternative delivery platforms in Sierra Leone and other LMICs.



## IMPACT

- An integrated YRI and employment program, if proven feasible, has strong potential to increase access to evidence-based mental health services for thousands of high risk youth in Sierra Leone and other post-conflict LMICs.
- A successful model for delivering evidence-based mental health services via alternative platforms like youth employment programs can address limited human resources for mental health and urgent mental health treatment gaps in Sierra Leone.
- By exploring the CTA as a strategy for scaling up the YRI, we can guide best practices for supporting implementation and sustainment of evidence-based interventions across alternative delivery platforms.

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