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Prioritize Mental Health to Enhance Citizen Participation in Governance A Position Paper for Inclusive and Accountable Governance

Background

People with mental health conditions in Ghana, particularly those in deprived communities, face deep-rooted social exclusion, stigma, and systemic barriers that limit their participation in national decision-making processes. These factors leave them marginalised, impoverished, and disempowered compared to the rest of society. Approximately 2.6 million people in Ghana (10.7% of the population) live with mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depressive disorder.¹ These individuals are often excluded from decision-making processes, leaving them without a voice in matters directly affecting them. This is most pronounced in civic and political participation, making exacting governance and accountability is inadequate.

BasicNeeds-Ghana (BNGh), recognizing this systemic social exclusion and inadequacies, took the opportunity of Ghana's recent (2024) presidential and parliamentary elections to implement an initiative, funded by STAR-Ghana Foundation (SGF) with funding UK FCDO, to improve the participation of persons with mental health and psychosocial disabilities in electoral processes. This took the form of reviewing the manifestoes of the three leading political parties that fielded presidential candidates and had up to 50% of parliamentary candidates. The key activities covered a review of the manifestoes to understand how inclusive they were, town hall meetings on the manifesto promises, and voter education for casting valid votes. These activities were carried out in a participatory service-user-led manner, involving people with mental health conditions and their caregivers. These efforts laid the groundwork for inclusive participation and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the needs and rights of people with mental health conditions and their caregivers are recognised and addressed in Ghana's democratic governance.

The Manifesto Promises

The manifestoes had limited information on persons with mental conditions and other vulnerable groups, with an overemphasis on persons with physical disabilities, and as it is said '*if you are not mentioned, you are not catered for*'. Although the manifestoes mentioned review and integration of mental health into Primary Health Care, commencing the establishment of a mental health hospital in the Northern sector, and refurbish existing mental health hospitals, the promises were silent on how mental health care will be sustainably funded, and how the erratic supply of psychotropic medicines will be addressed.

In addition, the manifestoes, particularly that for the National Democratic Congress, the political party that won the election, stated in its 2024 Manifesto to enhance accessibility to essential primary healthcare services for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and the elderly by providing among others sign language interpreters, initiate the 'Big LEAP²' to pursue an economic inclusion programme for LEAP beneficiaries and the urban poor with complementary funding support from state and non-state sources, improve access to essential services for LEAP households by implementing multiple complementary initiatives. Although these manifesto commitments are

¹ Mwangi, G., Sakyi, L., Ayuurebobi, K., Lund, C., & Weobong, B. (2023). Mental health and disability research in Ghana: a rapid review. *Pan African Medical Journal*, 45(1).

² LEAP is Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty

REGISTRATION DETAILS

BasicNeeds-Ghana Registered No: CG031202019
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laudable, all the social protection measures do not mention people with psychosocial disabilities, and people with mental health conditions are likely to be left out during implementation. For instance, most households of people with mental health conditions are currently not benefiting from the LEAP programme.

For effective citizen participation, it is important that mental health is prioritized and made inclusive by ensuring that people with mental health conditions are included and participate actively in the country's democratic processes and benefit equitably from development interventions. Hence, our position is that citizen participation and inclusive accountable governance can be enhanced where every effort is made for the involvement of broader population groups. People with mental health conditions supported to participate in civic and political activities can enhance broader citizen participation and inclusive and accountable governance. A democratic governance system is one that gives voice to the most vulnerable and marginalized. In this direction, BNGh, working with 3,981 people with mental health conditions, particularly in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, maintained the informed position that the government of Ghana ought to prioritise genuine engagement and involvement of persons with mental health conditions. These include, among others:

1. Development of a comprehensive roadmap to improve community mental health care.
2. Establishment or completion of mental health hospitals in the Northern sector and refurbishment of existing mental health hospitals, and ensure that Psychiatrists are posted to all regions, particularly in regions where there are currently no Psychiatrists, such as North East, Upper West, North East, Savannah, Bono, Bono East and Ahafo regions.
3. The establishment of a dedicated fund for mental health services.
4. Address the urgent need for affordable rehabilitation services for people with mental health conditions.
5. Have specific provisions that target people with psychosocial disabilities.
6. Address stigma that excludes people with mental health conditions in social protection interventions.
7. Implement initiatives that will enhance the inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities

Conclusion

Inclusive and accountable governance for people with mental health conditions and their caregivers is very important, and the government must facilitate genuine engagements and involvement of these vulnerable people. Mental health is integral to human health and must be prioritized to enhance citizen participation in governance and national development.

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