MENTAL HEALTH POLICY, PLANNING & SERVICE DEVELOPMENT
Integrating Systems & Services, Integrating People

MENTAL HEALTH POLICIES & ACTION PLANS
Key Issues & Basic Definitions

What is a Mental Health Policy?

- A mental health policy is an official statement by a government or health authority that provides the overall direction for mental health by defining a vision, values, principles and objectives, and by establishing a broad model for action to achieve that vision. It is important because it coordinates, through a common vision, all programmes and services related to mental health. The policy document constitutes the official government guideline for the interrelated areas for action or directions that will be taken to improve mental health (see figure 1):

- Financing;
- Coordination;
- Legislation and Human Rights;
- Organization of Services;
- Promotion, Prevention, Treatment & Rehabilitation;
- Essential Medicines Procurement & Distribution;
- Advocacy;
- Quality Improvement;
- Information Systems;
- Human Resources & Training;
- Research & Evaluation;
- Intersectoral Collaboration.

To be effective, the mental health policy should be accompanied by an action plan that concretely specifies the specific actions that will be out in place to achieve the policy objectives.

Glossary

- **Value**: A cultural belief concerning a desirable mode of behavior or end-state which guides attitudes, judgments and comparisons.

- **Principle**: A fundamental truth or doctrine on which rules of conduct are based.

- **Areas for action**: Complementary aspects of a policy that are separated for the purpose of planning.

- **Strategy**: An orderly organization of activities for achieving an objective or goal.

- **Mental health stakeholders**: Persons and organizations with some interest in improving the mental health of a population. They include people with mental disorders, family members, professionals, policy-makers, founders and other interested parties.

What is a Mental Health Action Plan?

- A mental health plan details the strategies and activities that will be implemented to realize the vision and achieve the objectives of a mental health policy. It also specifies a budget and timeframe for each strategy and activity, as well as
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delineates the expected outputs, targets and indicators that can be used to assess whether the implementation of the plan has been successful (see the module "Mental health Policies, Plans and Programmes - updated version", WHO, 2005a).

Why the Policy and Action Plan are Complementary?

➤ The mental health policy and plan are interrelated elements needed to improve mental health in a country. While the policy provides the global vision, the plan provides the operational details to make the vision to become a reality.
  - A policy without strategic plan remains a dream,
  - A plan without policy is an aimless and disorganized list of activities.

➤ Countries can have a specific mental health policy and plan or it can be integrated into a more global health policy and plan.

➤ The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the policy and plan:

Figure 1: Structure and Relationships between Mental Health Policy and Plan.

The WHO MIND Project: Mental Improvement for Nations Development
Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse, WHO Geneva
WHO Key Recommendations for Developing a Successful Mental Health & Action Plan

Successful policies and plans have usually been developed through an inclusive process, where the content follows best practice principles and where the policy is clearly defined and appropriate to local needs and conditions.

Key elements to consider for the development of a mental health policy and action plan are the following:

- Policies and action plans must be informed by data and evidence:
  - On the country specific situation, both in terms of:
    - mental health needs and
    - available resources (financial & human),
  - On effective strategies, drawing both on the literature and on exchange within the country and with other countries.

- Broad stakeholder consultation and negotiation are essential to ensure a common vision and commitment for implementation of the policy and action plan. It is fundamental to:
  - Listen and understand different stakeholders perspectives,
  - Blend their views to achieve a consensual document that upholds the evidence base for action and ensure all main stakeholders' support to the policy and action plan.

- Major roles and responsibilities of different sectors must be clearly identified.

- Policy objectives, plan strategies and activities for mental health must be prioritized.

- Strategies, activities, timeframe and budget must be coherent, realistic and designed to meet the priority objectives.

- Policies and plans must be regularly monitored and evaluated.

Mental health policies and action plans must be CLEAR, CONSENSUAL and REALISTIC.

Namibia Policy Launching
November 2005
References

- The WHO Mental Health Policy & Service Development Guidance Package.
  WHO Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance Package (14 modules). url: 
  - Mental health policy, plans and programme (updated version). Geneva, World 
    Health Organization, 2005 (Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance 
    Package).
  - Monitoring and Evaluation of Mental Health Policies and Plans. Geneva, 
    World Health Organization, 2007 (Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance 
    Package).


Useful Links

- To the Mental Health Policy & Service Development Guidance Package webpage: 
  click here
- The WHO MIND Project brochure: click here
- For Best Practices examples, a selection of Country Summaries and official 
  documents: click here

Citations

September 2007; Mental Health Policy, Planning and Service Development 
Information Sheet, Sheet1).

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