Mental health policies define a vision for the future, which in turn helps to establish benchmarks for the prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of mental disorders, and the promotion of mental health in the community. Mental health policies are important because they coordinate, through a common vision and plan, all programs and services related to these objectives. Without this type of organization, programs and services are likely to be inefficient and fragmented.

A paradoxical situation is emerging, worldwide. As scientific evidence mounts concerning the cause, course, and consequences of mental disorders, and new treatments are emerging that can make real differences in the lives of sufferers, most people with mental disorders do not receive even the most basic treatment, and suffer from stigma and discrimination. National policies and programs in mental health are urgently needed to change this situation, yet over 40% of countries have no mental health policy, and over 30% have no mental health program. The majority of countries' mental health budget constitutes less than 1% of their total health expenditures.

A Mental Health Policy Project has been created by WHO’s Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence. A Guidance Package is being developed, which consists of a series of practical, inter-related modules, designed to address a wide variety of issues pertaining to mental health policy and service development. The Guidance Package will serve as a framework for assisting countries to create policies and services and then put them into practice, which, in turn, will lead to improved mental health care, treatment and promotion.

**Key areas of work**

- To develop a guidance package for mental health policy reform, covering context, advocacy, legislation and human rights, policy and plans, financing, planning and budgeting for services, organization of services, quality improvement, access and use of psychotropic medicines, child and adolescent mental health, human resources and training, mental health information systems and indicators.

- To assist countries in reforming mental health policies, plans and services.

- To enhance the capacity of countries to manage mental health issues over the long-term.

**WHO Mental Health Policy Project**

**Mental Health outcomes are optimized when:**

- Mental health is an essential component of public health
- Government policies and actions protect and promote the mental health and well-being of its peoples
- Services are appropriate, accountable, accessible, and equitable
- People are treated in the least restrictive and intrusive manner

**Importance of mental health policies and plans**

- Establish national priorities
- Plan, organise and coordinate different components of mental health system
- Implementation of effective interventions
  - Decreased burden
  - Improved mental health

**Facts:**

- 450 million people experience mental or neurological disorders around the world. These disorders constitute 5 of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide, thus creating devastating socioeconomic impact for individuals, families, and governments.
- Mental disorders can be diagnosed and treated cost-effectively.
- In many parts of the world, mental health is still not acknowledged as important and remains a low health priority. Access to effective treatments is limited.

**Why have a project focused on mental health policy and service development?**

Dr B. Saraceno  
World Health Organization  
Tel: +41-22-791 3603  
Fax: +41-22-791 4160  
Email: saracenob@who.int

Dr M. Funk  
World Health Organization  
Tel: +41-22-791 3855  
Fax: +41-22-791 4160  
Email: funkm@who.int

http://www.who.int/mental_health/topics.html