



Context

Under the Young Leaders Program initiated in 2019, the aim was to address social challenges and foster improved relationships between young generations and their elders within families and communities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the health, social relationships and social cohesion of the Afghan population, leading to an increase in inter-family conflicts.

To address the mental health challenges faced by the general public, an online and hotline support programme was established. This programme established a strong connection between the Young Leaders community and the distance psychosocial support programme, leveraging the expertise and involvement of young leaders.

Service users and their family members

The young leaders participating in the programme required awareness, knowledge and skills enhancement to effectively manage the COVID-19 situation for themselves, their families and their communities. However, the stress and novelty of the pandemic left them in shock, needing time to adapt and deliver according to the demands of the situation.

Service providers in health and social care

Healthcare providers were overwhelmed and under stress due to the constant rumours and uncertainties surrounding the novel virus. They required capacity building, increased awareness and support to effectively navigate the challenges and fulfill their duties.

Simultaneously, beneficiaries faced economic and social restrictions during the lockdowns and quarantine, they were overwhelmed with distress and confusion. These challenging circumstances severely diminished their coping abilities in the fight against COVID-19.

Challenges

Several challenges emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and the provision of mental health and psychosocial support services.

Fear created by mass media regarding the pandemic.

Quarantine restrictions hindered access to in-person counselling sessions.

The spread of myths and rumours negatively impacted people seeking help.

Fear of infection transmission posed challenges for face-to-face counselling sessions.

Limited resources hindered the expansion of the Young Leaders Program.

Many individuals lacked access to smartphones or the internet.

Delivering mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) and ensuring continuity

In response to the challenges faced, several innovative solutions were implemented to ensure the delivery and continuity of mental health and psychosocial support services during the pandemic.

Brochures containing COVID-19 precautions and contact information for counsellors were printed and distributed to provinces through the young leaders in their respective communities.

Young leaders took the lead in raising awareness through messages posted on walls, promoting hygiene practices, sharing basic SOPs for COVID-19 prevention and marking social distancing spaces in community gathering areas.

Young leaders supported isolated community members who experienced negative impacts on their mental health due to the pandemic, offering assistance and guidance to cope with quarantine-induced aggression within families.

Local individuals were motivated to join the initiative and assist the teams and young leaders in raising awareness about social distancing, hygiene promotion and effective ways of cooperation within families during home confinement.

Lessons learnt

Lessons learnt from the Young Leaders Program implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic include:

Young leaders played a crucial role in community work compared to other segments of the community, including health service providers.

Services provided by young leaders were cost-effective and more impactful than those provided solely by health workers.

Remote psychosocial support through online and hotline services was widely accepted by community members.

Online counselling sessions were time-efficient and convenient for both counsellors and service users.

Young leaders successfully raised awareness about COVID-19 and other important issues within their families and communities.

The involvement of young people in such programmes and initiatives served as a source of motivation and inspiration.

The pandemic accelerated the shift towards online counselling and awareness programmes, making processes faster and more efficient.

The success of COVID-19 emergency response programmes advocates for the inclusion of distance services even after the pandemic ends.

References

[Stay home, stay safe](#)

[Together to combat COVID-19](#)

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