

# *Centering Youth as Co-Researchers: A Model for Community-Led Mental Health Intervention in Nairobi's Informal Settlements*

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Presenter: Clement Oduor

Affiliation: African Population and Health Research Center & Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM)

Authors: Clement Oduor (APHRC & LSTM); Blessing Mberu (APHRC); Laura Dean (LSTM); Sabina Faiz Rashid (BRAC); Maaiké Seekles (LSTM)



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# Introduction



- Youth in Nairobi's urban informal settlements navigate profound adversity, which disproportionately impacts their mental wellbeing.
- Traditional top-down interventions often fail by ignoring community context and stifling local voices.
- We implemented a Youth Mental Wellbeing (YMWB) study, targeting youth (15-24-year-olds), living in Korogocho Informal Settlement, in Nairobi, Kenya
  - Project activities implemented between June and September 2025
- Sought to challenge the traditional top-down paradigm, employing **a *community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach*** to co-design a sustainable, community-owned mental health intervention model.
- YMWB study is being nested in the larger project, strengthening Community Health Systems by Addressing Community Health Promoters' Mental Wellbeing and Agency (SHINE) project (GH 150232) in Kenya,

# How we engaged stakeholders



- We conducted stakeholder engagement at two levels:

## ***Grassroots-level***

- To build trust, we conducted separate sensitization meetings with,
  - ✓ Youth,
  - ✓ A representative Community Advisory Committee consisting of representatives of different research constituencies, and
  - ✓ Parents/Caregivers to the youth
- Objectives of the meetings were to;
  - ✓ Inform the stakeholders about the study, seek their insights about the study, including possible challenges to field implementation, and their mitigation
  - ✓ Seek their buy-in for ensuring smooth and respectful community entry and collaboration



### *Policy-level*



- We sought early engagement with the Nairobi City County Health Officials (Community Health and Mental Health Divisions) to;
  - ✓ Inform them about the study,
  - ✓ Secure their buy-in, for both legitimacy at the community level, and
  - ✓ Provide pathways for policy uptake at the end of the study

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# Our participatory model



- Shifting from consultation to co-creation, we engaged youth and Community Health Promoters (CHPs) as co-researchers, focusing on three pillars:

## **Inclusion and representation**

- We partnered with co-researchers to contextualize study tools,
  - ✓ Review,
  - ✓ Pretest, and
  - ✓ Adapt study tools to ensure cultural relevance and validity
  - ✓ Piloted the youth FGD guide and Youth Survey Questionnaire



- Trained co-researchers on;
  - ✓ Research ethics and safeguarding,
  - ✓ Community-based participatory approaches, and
  - ✓ Mixed methods research
    - Qualitative and
    - Quantitative
  - ✓ Digital data collection and management

## Partnership and ownership

- Co-researchers-led research process
  - ✓ Conducted transect walks
  - ✓ Identified study boundaries, and participants
  - ✓ Executed sampling procedures
  - ✓ Obtained informed consent
  - ✓ Conducted transect walks (15-17 and 18-24-year-olds)
  - ✓ Sketched transect walk maps and participated in a transect walk debrief discussion
  - ✓ Collected Qualitative and Quantitative data
  - ✓ Undertook preliminary co-analysis of qualitative data

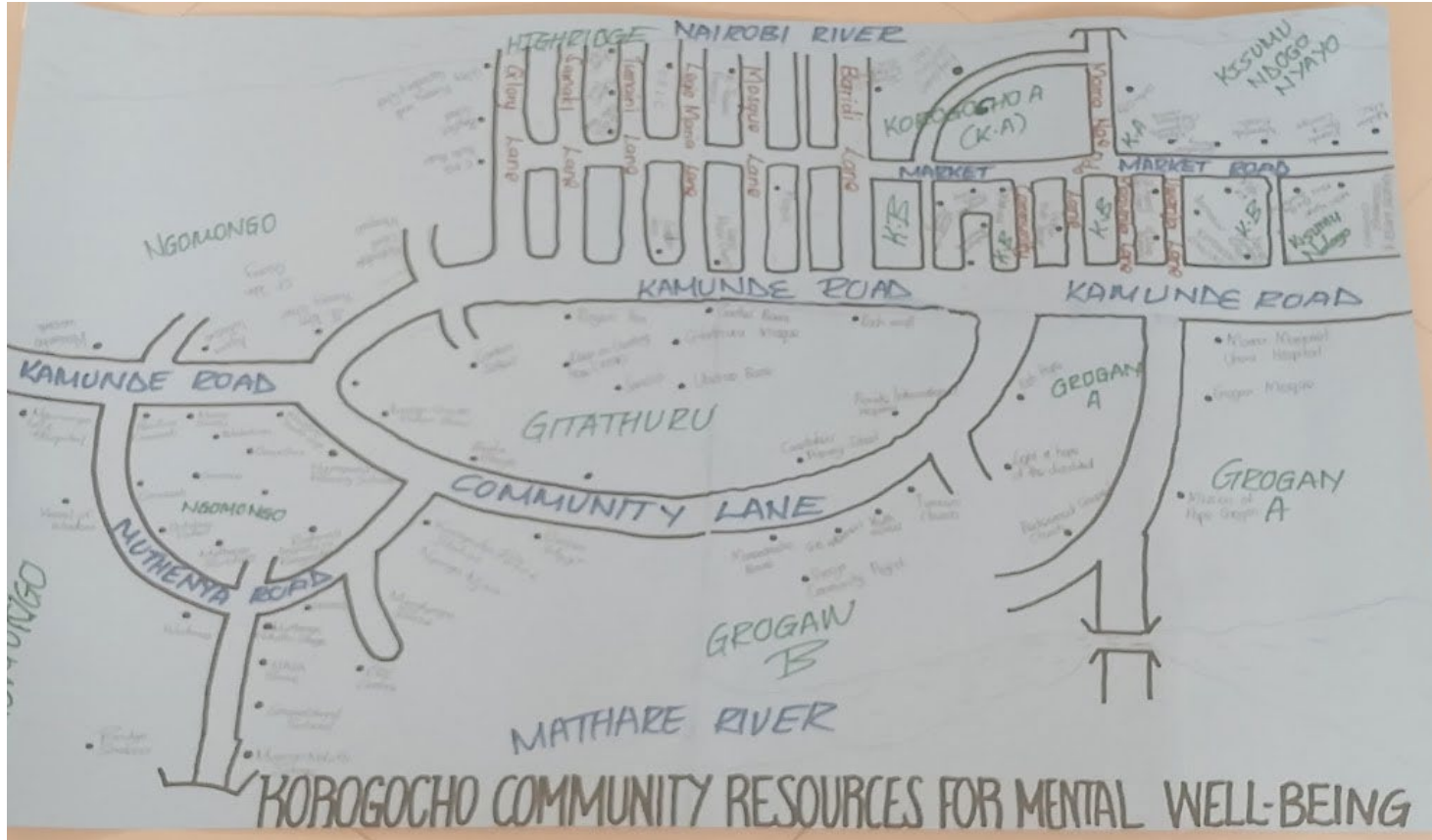


# Pathways and Impact of the CEI

Activity	Skill(s)/knowledge acquired	Whom	Achievement
Stakeholder engagement meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about the topic</li> <li>• Community's and practitioners' insights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher</li> <li>• Community members</li> <li>• Policy makers and actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 levels of engagement conducted</li> <li>• Buy-in, evidenced in the successful community entry and implementation</li> </ul>
Pretesting study tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools development and review</li> <li>• Tools translation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-researchers and research assistants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 pretest Youth FGDs conducted</li> </ul>
Training for the research assistants and co-researchers followed by; Study pilot (Phased out training by study methods)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical conduct of research,</li> <li>• Obtaining informed consent</li> <li>• Interviewing skills (Qual and Quant),</li> <li>• Knowledge about mental health and wellbeing,</li> <li>• Use of digital devices in data collection, management and transmission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-researchers and research assistants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 8 FGDs with youth, and 4 with CHPs</li> <li>✓ 22 pretest survey Questionnaires completed</li> </ul>
Transect walk and debrief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping community resources and spaces,</li> <li>• Sketching of transect walk maps</li> <li>• Taking GIS Coordinates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-researchers and research assistants</li> <li>• Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 11 IDs with persons in charge</li> <li>✓ Debrief discussion</li> <li>✓ Sketching community resources map</li> </ul>
YMWB Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying study boundaries and participants</li> <li>Executing sampling procedure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-researchers and research assistants</li> <li>• Researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ 423 Questionnaires completed, representing a 100% response rate</li> </ul>







# Lessons learned



- I. Our model demonstrates that authentic engagement is transformative, and not just methodological.
  
- I. By placing youth voices at the heart of the research process, stakeholder empowerment by building tangible research capacity and agency, especially of the targeted beneficiary/participants, improves data quality, integrity, and trustworthiness.
  
- I. Furthermore, our model assures commitment to sustainability by forging a collaborative infrastructure with community and government stakeholders.
  
- I. While we expect our findings to yield an evidence-based intervention model, our primary contribution is the proof of concept: a scalable blueprint for conducting community-led mental health research that bridges grassroots knowledge and sustainable policy action.

# Next steps



- ***Sustain participation and ownership efforts;***
  - I. Finalize IDIs with youth and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with policy makers and actors
  - I. Conclude co-analysis of data
  - I. Convening results validation workshop – community-level and county-level
  - I. Conducting co-creation workshops and developing community-based participatory intervention model – 4 separate workshops
  - I. Pretesting the co-created intervention model
  - I. ***Explore funding for piloting co-created community-based intervention model***

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