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Catalyzing Community-Based Mental Health Solutions: The Erasmus+ Exchange and Incubator Journey

Introduction

The Erasmus+ exchange program, implemented by On The Move e.V., fosters social innovation in mental health by equipping students and professionals from Kenya, Ghana, and Germany with the skills to design and implement community-based interventions. In collaboration with Maseno University and Uzima University, the program has engaged over 50 participants to date, providing hands-on training in Design Thinking and cross-sectoral collaboration to address mental health challenges in diverse contexts.

Methods

Participants applied Design Thinking methodologies to develop innovative mental health interventions tailored to their local contexts. The program emphasized human-centered problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, and iterative prototyping. To ensure sustainability, On The Move e.V., in partnership with StradMed Innovations and Ashesi University in Ghana, launched the Mental Health Venture Incubator (MHVI), a 12-week program offering mentorship, seed funding, and capacity-building support for project implementation.

Results

Participants developed and piloted several community-based mental health projects, including:

- *Tujumiize*: a youth-centered intervention in urban Kisumu, Kenya, addressing the rising use of cannabis among high school students aged 14–18. The project combines peer pressure resistance training, mental health education, and structured links to care through schools and community networks. It involves students, teachers, parents, and health providers, aiming to reduce cannabis-related school dropouts and behavioral issues by promoting informed choices and accessible support systems.
- *Inuka Against Chang'aa Initiative (IACI)*: a proposed community-based intervention targeting Western Kenyan men aged 36–45 who consume chang'aa. Rooted in Design Thinking, IACI aims to address the underlying issues of idleness, poverty, and lack of purpose by offering vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and recreational activities. The goals are to reduce chang'aa consumption, promote mental and physical health, foster social responsibility, and empower participants economically.
- *Maseno University Mental Health Policy*: this project aimed to develop a culturally tailored mental health strategy at Maseno University in Kenya using a bottom-up, participatory Design Thinking approach. Through ten workshops and interviews with students, staff, and leadership, the team identified key mental health stressors (e.g., financial strain, sexual harassment, substance use), evaluated existing support systems, and co-designed targeted interventions.

Conclusion

This model demonstrates how international collaboration and experiential learning can drive scalable mental health interventions. Lessons learned from the program highlight the importance of participatory approaches, stakeholder engagement, and the integration of social innovation in mental health care. The MHVI ensures that these projects transition from concept to sustainable, community-driven solutions.

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