

MOMBASA COUNTY

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH STRONGMINDS

KENYA



SCALING COMMUNITY-BASED MENTAL HEALTHCARE

COLLABORATORS



STRONGMINDS®

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Kenya, the Mombasa County government is driving a multi-sector initiative to transform mental healthcare from solely facility-based services to community-driven care that touches every layer of civic life. Through a strategic partnership with StrongMinds, Mombasa County has embedded Interpersonal Group Therapy (IPT-G) into healthcare facilities, schools, prisons, and county offices, providing first-line depression intervention to thousands of people who might otherwise have no access to care.

THE CRISIS THAT SPARKED INNOVATION

The seeds of the government's vision for mental healthcare took root in 2020, when COVID-19 exposed a profound need for mental health services across Mombasa County. The county responded by elevating mental health to a public health priority, not a temporary crisis response.

By 2023, Mombasa County had made deliberate investments: five consultant psychiatrists had been trained and recruited and the Port Reitz mental health unit was being upgraded to become Kenya's second standalone public psychiatric hospital. Governor Abdulswamad Nassir and Deputy Governor Francis Thoya championed the effort, lending political will and resources to support innovation. Still, a key gap remained: mental health campaigns were raising demand for services, but many people did not present symptoms severe enough to qualify for facility-based care. A practical, community-level option for care was needed.

In 2023, the county approached StrongMinds to fill that gap. The StrongMinds' approach—group therapy led by lay providers—aligned perfectly with the county's vision to decentralize and integrate mental health into everyday community structures.

ABOUT STRONGMINDS

StrongMinds is a global nonprofit organization with a mission to democratize access to mental healthcare for people with depression, globally.

StrongMinds partners with governments to transform the way mental healthcare is delivered. integrating low-cost, evidence-based solutions into existing community-based programs and systems.

BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK: EMBEDDING THE STRONGMINDS IPT-G MODEL

The partnership between StrongMinds and Mombasa County rests on embedded technical support within existing healthcare delivery systems at the community and clinic levels, not parallel programming. StrongMinds placed a project officer within the county health system for two years to train providers, supervise quality, and integrate IPT-G into existing workflows. The goal was not to run a StrongMinds IPT-G program in Mombasa, but to build county capacity to deliver evidence-based care using the county government's own systems and staff.

"We hope this model reaches as many people as possible... We want to intervene early—before things escalate."

– Dr. Soy, Acting Director of Public Health and Disease Prevention, Mombasa County Health Department

FOUR TIERS OF MENTAL HEALTHCARE IN MOMBASA COUNTY

Tier 1 – Community *[Integrating the StrongMinds IPT-G Model]*

Setting: Households, schools, prisons, workplaces

Actors: Community Health Promoters

Functions: Screening (PHQ-4/9), psychoeducation, IPT-G

Tier 2 – Primary Care Facilities *[Integrating the StrongMinds IPT-G Model]*

Setting: Dispensaries and health centres

Actors: Nurses, clinical officers, community health promoters

Functions: Brief counseling, screening (PHQ-4/9), clinic-based IPT-G

Tier 3 – Secondary Care

Setting: Sub-county & county hospitals

Actors: Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers

Functions: Moderate-severe case management, crisis stabilization

Tier 4 – Specialized Psychiatric Referral

Setting: Port Reitz Mental Health Hospital

Actors: Specialized psychiatric teams

Functions: Inpatient care for complex cases

A MULTI-SECTOR APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH

The StrongMinds IPT-G model's distinctive strength is its adaptability to new contexts. In the case of Mombasa County, expansion emerged organically as other government departments and institutions have sought support from the health team.

Community-Based Care

Mombasa County's 2,300 Community Health Promoters (CHPs) provide front-line healthcare support at the household level, identifying health concerns and providing referrals to clinics. The IPT-G program, delivered by CHPs within their assigned communities, is intended to provide first-line depression care for people experiencing depression symptoms. CHPs are empowered to screen for depression and run therapy groups. Clear referral pathways link community-level therapy to facility-based services; CHPs escalate severe depression cases, suicidality, or reports of abuse/gender-based violence to psychologists or psychiatrists, creating a continuum from community support to specialized care within the county system.

Health System Integration

In Comprehensive Care Clinics, people living with HIV, TB, and other illnesses come together in IPT-G groups to find support. Group members work together to overcome the stigma of living with a chronic infectious disease, the fears of disclosure, and the emotional barriers that may prevent them from sticking to treatment. Integrating IPT-G into clinical health support provides gateways for emotional healing, better treatment adherence, and sustained wellbeing.

Education Transformation

Mombasa County is rolling out IPT-G in primary and vocational schools, as well as some colleges to improve classroom dynamics, student performance, and help students overcome personal challenges to reach their educational goals.

Primary schools are reporting dramatic changes, including better behavior, fewer instances of drug abuse, and less fighting among students. Teachers who have received therapy report more confidence and better interpersonal relationships, as well as improved awareness of challenges students may face at home.



Image by Karin Schermbucker.

WHAT IS IPT-G?

Group Interpersonal Therapy (IPT-G) is an evidence-based, WHO-endorsed group talk therapy model that can be effectively delivered by lay community health workers. In IPT-G therapy groups, facilitators try to create a safe space for clients to open up with peers about their worries and struggles.

Over six sessions, these lay counselors guide structured discussions to help participants identify their underlying triggers of depression. Group members work together to strategize solutions to their problems, learn coping mechanisms, practice interpersonal skills, and identify support structures to lean on after therapy ends.

"Last term [before we started IPT-G], we had serious issues with drug abuse... a lot of fighting, a lot of animosity among the learners. But now? They've been heard. They were able to pour out their stories, talk about what they were going through, and were given tools for how to handle themselves and manage their emotions."

- Gemima Mutunga, Head of Guidance and Counseling, Shimo Primary School

Corrections System

Mombasa County Remand Prison holds individuals awaiting trial or serving short sentences for non-violent offenses, creating a constant turnover of inmates and a persistent need for rapid, effective mental health care. IPT-G addresses a crucial gap, supplementing the 1:1 support offered through its counseling office so that more inmates can receive mental health support, faster. By helping incarcerated men articulate their emotions, process trauma and stress, resolve anger, reconnect with families, and reexamine their choices, Mombasa County aims to reduce recidivism, improve safety inside and outside the prison, and strengthen families and communities to which inmates return.

Workplace Mental Health

Mombasa County has also ventured into workplace wellness, starting with its own ranks. The County Department of Environment and Governance noticed high degrees of absenteeism and irritability among its 730 staff and requested support from colleagues at the County Health Department. Results of this 2025 initiative are still pending.



A mental health screening for workers from the Department of Environment and Governance. Image by Karin Schermbrucker.

“One client living with HIV had bought poison and planned to take her own life—and her children’s too. But after she joined the group and spoke with the psychologist [through our referral pathway], she began accept her diagnosis and said, ‘This isn’t a disease. It’s a lifestyle. I’m not carrying the burden anymore.’ She’s doing much better now.”

— Ahmed, Jomvu subcounty coordinator

“What amazes me is how such a simple toolkit—teaching communication, self-awareness, and basic emotional regulation—can have such a huge impact... It’s one of the most cost-effective ways to reach people.” –

Dr. Mohammed Nif, Director of Clinical Service, Mombasa County Health Department.

THE VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION

The Mombasa County government’s vision is comprehensive: mental health as a standard public service that enhances health outcomes, education performance, public safety, and economic productivity. As Mombasa County demonstrates feasibility, it provides evidence for other counties to adopt IPT-G in partnership with StrongMinds.

Mombasa County’s experience offers both inspiration and instruction. With political will, technical guidance, and community engagement, mental health can become a pillar of good governance—building healthier communities, stronger families, and more productive workplaces across Kenya and beyond.

For more information about this partnership and how to integrate mental health into government programs, contact Ambrose Kanyaryeru or Celina M. Kithinji.

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Group therapy can help incarcerated individuals resolve anger, reconnect with their families, and restore hope for the future. Image by Karin Schermbrucker.