

CONTINUOUS TRAINING DURING COVID-19: THE USE OF WHATSAPP IN RWANDA & SIERRA LEONE

KATHARINE JOURNEY, URSULA KAJANI, JORDAN FARRAR, THERESA S. BETANCOURT

The RPCA

The Boston College School of Social Work Research Program on Children and Adversity (RPCA) conducts research in mental health, early childhood development, and implementation science in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and New England. The goal of the RPCA is not only to test the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions, but to ensure that these interventions are sustainable for long term implementation. This requires cultural adaptation, buy-in from stakeholders, and strong local partnerships.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the success of the RPCA research projects. With the repatriation of Boston College staff (typically based in Rwanda & Sierra Leone) and connectivity challenges facing local partners, the ability to have consistent communication was limited. Project activities that would be typically hosted in-person were no longer feasible. Furthermore, commonly used platforms such as Zoom were not accessible to those with inconsistent access to high-speed internet.

WhatsApp

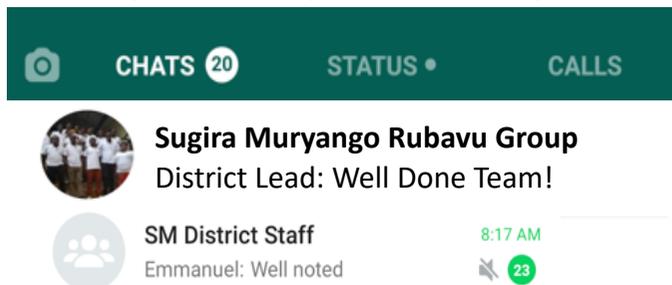
The messaging app WhatsApp is widely used in both Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Not only is it culturally acceptable, it is highly functional when used with limited access to internet or cellular data. This made it the ideal platform for the RPCA to transition many research activities from in-person to group messaging via WhatsApp.

Rwanda

In Rwanda, the RPCA works with FXB Rwanda, the University of Rwanda Center of Mental Health, and the Government of Rwanda to implement *Sugira Muryango*, a home visiting, early childhood development and violence prevention program. Based on the success of a recently completed effectiveness trial, the RPCA has expanded *Sugira Muryango* to all Ubudehe 1 (most extreme level of poverty) households in 3 rural districts, reaching up to 10,000 children.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rwanda has taken strict measures to limit the spread of the virus within the country. At the time, the program had recently hired 38 program staff geographically dispersed across the three districts of operation. Due to COVID prevention measures, the newly hired staff were unable to continue to participate in program activities including continuous training for program implementation.

To continue the training process, remote work plans were developed leveraging the existing WhatsApp group chats, initially used for community building and knowledge sharing, as well as creating individual groups for each program staff member for personalized engagement. Through these platforms, staff were engaged on module content, case studies, and program protocol based trainings facilitated by the district leads with support from the national level staff. The process was constantly evolving with various engagement strategies utilized, and a post-test delivered at the end of Phase 1 of training to assess comprehension of the training materials and plan Phase 2 trainings.



Sierra Leone

With partnership from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the RPCA established Youth Functioning and Organizational Success for West African Regional Development (Youth FORWARD) Hub with a dual mission to scale up innovative and sustainable delivery of evidence-based mental health interventions for youth exposed to adversity; and to serve as a global hub for capacity building in mental health services research on children, youth and families facing adversity. Capacity Building efforts are conducted in collaboration with the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS). Due to COVID-19, all in-person events after March were cancelled.

On May 4, 2020, the Youth FORWARD team identified several COMAHS students interested in learning about research. The group began using WhatsApp to disseminate trainings related to research fundamentals, grant writing and administration, career trajectories, etc. Beyond sharing trainings, the group is asked to participate in a follow-up activity to practice skills and gauge uptake of knowledge. Lastly, the group is given the opportunity to discuss the topic and ask questions for consistent support from both our Youth FORWARD Team and peers involved in the group. The group has grown from 15 students to over 100 participants.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic had the potential to significantly delay RPCA implementation science research projects. The creative use of WhatsApp as a culturally acceptable and accessible communication platform ensured consistent engagement for staff and continued research capacity building efforts. This is an innovation that can be used to promote an alternative delivery for continuous training when in-person meetings are not possible.