

An International Learning Exchange on Global Mental Health

with Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim (UBC School of Social Work) and Dr. Grace Mwangi (Kenya Medical Training College)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:05

I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. This is the Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast highlighting community-engaged partnerships within and outside the University of British Columbia School of Social Work which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam people. This episode features Grace Mwangi, a health psychologist and addiction specialist at the Kenya Medical Training College (KMTC) in Nairobi, where she serves as Deputy Registrar of Student Affairs, supporting the college's mission to train healthcare professionals in Kenya, and Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim, an Assistant Professor at the UBC School of Social Work and a Michael Smith Health Research Scholar in British Columbia. Dr. Ibrahim's research focuses on global mental health, addiction, and psychosocial support, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Together, Mohamed and Grace reflect on their five-year partnership between the University of British Columbia and Kenya Medical Training College. They discuss their global mental health course, which includes an interdisciplinary learning exchange with students from various community health fields, highlighting how transnational cooperation is advancing mental health education and practice locally and internationally.

Dr. Grace Mwangi

1:30

My name is Grace Mwangi. I am health psychologist. That's my profession and also an addiction specialist. And I work at the Kenya Medical Training College, which is situated in Nairobi, Kenya where I serve, I'm deployed as a Deputy Registrar Student Affairs who takes care of all the welfare issues of students in KMTC. Just to give a brief of what Kenya Medical Training College is, which we abbreviate as KMTC, a middle-level training college where we train about all cadres in health care provision except the medical doctors, and we train at certificate level diploma and high diploma level. We also do conduct short courses based on the needs as raised by the communities that we serve.

And we are the main training arm of the Ministry of Health Kenya so we do a lot of need-driven training programs. So, in a nutshell, that is me. Yes, also collaborating with Professor Mohamed and UBC in the area of global mental health, and we're looking forward to more and more collaboration. So, I'll have our Professor maybe introduce himself and start our story, then we'll tell it together.

Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim

2:40

Thank you. Thank you, Grace. It's always good to follow you once you start the conversation for us. And so, my name is Mohamed. I'm an Assistant Professor at the School of Social Work, the University of British Columbia. I'm also a past Clinical Addiction Fellow at the British Columbia

Center for Substance Use. And I'm also currently one of the Michael Smith Scholar at UBC. I'm also the chair for the International Committee at UBC School of Social Work.

3:08

As Grace has mentioned, over the last few years, we have been, UBC School of Social Work together with ORICE, which is the Office for Regional and International Engagement at UBC, have been collaborating with Kenya Medical Training College in our global mental health course and that has been also in partnership with community organizations here in Kenya, primarily working in the areas of mental health, but also in informal settlements, and also in some of the county, government healthcare facilities as well.

3:42

So, this is a collaboration that has been going on for now five years together and growing strong. And it's been just a wonderful learning opportunity coming from Canada with my students who are not only from the School of Social Work, but also from other faculties across Arts and Health, and coming to Kenya and learning with Kenya Medical Training College students, you know, which is also interdisciplinary in many ways: clinical medicine, nursing, social work, occupational therapy, and many other cadres. So it's been just a wonderful learning opportunity for both institutions and their students, and myself, and also and also Grace.

4:27

How it started was in 2019, while it's still a fairly new at UBC, the Director at that time was Dr. Miu, we had a conversation about starting an international course. A global health course. And we had that conversation. He told me, "you know what, go ahead. You know, I will fully support you." So, we decided to look into mental health, given that mental health is becoming such a global health issue. It's not addressed as much as the other areas like infectious diseases. So, we thought this would be appropriate considering that in the Canadian context, mental health is also becoming a such a burden of disease as well as in the Global South. So that's how we brainstormed at the beginning in 2019. Then luckily there was a funding call from Faculty of Arts called Arts Research Abroad, and I reached out to the Office for Regional and International Cooperation at UBC.

5:25

Tamara, who is the Director there and had that conversation, say, "Hey, Tamara, your department is the one that handles international learning. You bring a lot of experience. Why don't we partner?" She is like, "yeah, let's do it." So, we applied. We got the grant and we started off in 2020, laid the groundwork in Kenya, and selected the students who will be traveling to Kenya at that time in 2020. I think we had a good number. We had about 16 or 17 in total at the beginning. But, unfortunately, Covid came and, you know, there was a lockdown globally and instead of cancelling the whole thing, we decided let's do it virtual. Let's maintain our relationship with our community partners in Kenya and do as long as we can until we are able to travel and have that in-person learning activities.

6:24

So, for 2020 and 2021, we engaged and collaborated with community-based organizations in Kenya, and we had the online class and we had guest speakers coming from community organizations in Kenya who are able to share their expertise and experience. And so we did that for the first two years. And then after that in 2022, when the world opened up again, we approached KMTC and say that, “hey, you know, we have been doing this for the last two years virtually. Now that the world has opened up, we would love to partner with you guys,” and, and they didn't waste time. They say quickly, “let's join hands. Let's do it together.” And quickly organized and hosted us at their beautiful campus at Nairobi, the Kenya Medical Training Campus. And ever since, that's what has been going on. And from the word go, Grace was my partner, and also a Professor at Kenya Medical Training College, who we were co-teaching this course together.

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You know, when it comes to the logistics and how to manage things at KMTC level, she made sure everything has gone well. So yeah, from 2022, when we started these in-person lectures at Kenya Medical Training College, until now and going to 2025, we still have funding for next year. And guess what? We have 17 students coming from UBC for next year so it's quite a big crowd. The beauty of this program is that it's quite interdisciplinary. For UBC, we have majority of them coming from the School of Social Work, but we have students coming from Kinesiology. We have students coming from Education. We have students coming from other programs in Arts, Occupational Therapy so it's quite interdisciplinary from UBC side, but also Kenya Medical Training College. So, we have clinical medicine, which in the Canadian context would be physician assistants. Then we have student nurses. We have those who are social workers, those who are doing occupational therapy so it brings together a diverse set of students from both ends, from Canada and from Kenya.

8:50

And so much learning takes place just between the students. So that's something that's really, you know, in terms of the learning exchange and the students exchange notes. Really, you know, they are both in academic institutions. They are both in health-oriented. They are doing their practicums. They are in healthcare system of their respective countries that are vastly different. The Canadian health care system is way different than the Kenyan health system. We understand that we have pressures and challenges with the Canadian health system so is the Kenyan health system as well. So they get to hear about those challenges from each other. They get to hear about the opportunities they get to hear about the innovations that are taking place so it's not just a classroom learning from professors, but actually students learning together.

Dr. Grace Mwangi**9:44**

It was very exciting to have Professor Mohamed come around with the students and also to get our students also join the class. At the beginning, we picked students from different disciplines because you realize that mental health is a very multidisciplinary field. Yes, so it was it was a thrill to get to pick students from across the disciplines. We had nursing students, occupational therapy students, students from social work, students from physiotherapy, clinical medicine and any

student who has some exposure to mental health. UBC came with this opportunity to get to also realize what we have in Kenya.

10:29

We had two thrilling years. But for me, the best year was this year where we had students taking one discipline in Kenya called higher diploma in family health. Why did we choose family health? Because family health graduates will interact with everyone – not just in the health facilities but at the family-level, at the homestead-level, so we thought, “let's let us also get them, have an experience of global mental health, the community mental health practice, the traditional practices that we have in Kenya that we may not have”. And that experience, because ordinarily, we teach one level of students in one class, but this class, we are having students taking diploma course, course students taking high diploma courses, students taking Bachelor's programs, Master's program, all interacting in one classroom, and you could actually see that everyone was enjoying that exposure, which again, gets me to think, then must we have students in one class at one level exposed to each other only at that level.

11:34

For me, that was a new challenge for all students that you can work with any student, any of your colleagues at anyone at any level as long as you have similar or common learning objectives and you're seeking the same competencies. The other thing that has been very outstanding in this experience is that students get to have a feel of the multidisciplinary exposure so that in the traditional teaching, you're just having, probably you'll have the social work students on their own interacting with other social workers, but in real life practice, they're interacting with doctors, they're interacting with psychologists, they have occupational therapists in one classroom. Each student would benefit.

Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim

12:18

The other thing that's unique about this program is that a lot of them are coming back to school. So they have done their initial training, like clinical medicine, they have worked in the field. Some of them have been RNs and they're coming back as psych nurses, which is a specialization of RN in Kenya. While at UBC, we have students who have done their BSW and now their MSW as well so they're bringing a lot of experience from the field. So they get to share about what their experience was, what their work was. The other thing I will probably mention that's unique with this cause is that most of their lectures are actually provided by community partners. So we have a number of community partners where the students go for field place learning, working in mental health, working in with refugee organizations, and those are international organizations, but also working with government healthcare system here in Kenya. So, these community partners are the ones who provide lectures, and they have innovative programs here in Kenya.

13:25

And so they get to hear from leading experts here in Kenya who are doing the work, not necessarily me and Grace who are in the academic field. So that's the other unique thing. The other thing that is unique is that some of the programs have actually far-reaching impact in Canada as well. For example, we were at one of the organizations that work with refugees and they have this



partnership with a provisional government in Canada where health workers who have been displaced from their home countries and who are refugees in Kenya are actually resettled in Canada as healthcare workers to support the, you know, the human research challenges in the Canadian healthcare system. So living, you know, moving from here in Kenya to Canada, working in the healthcare system, and it's a win-win situation where they get to be resettled in a country because they have been displaced from their countries like South Sudan or Somalia or other places, and they have been in limbo in Kenya, but they go to Canada to support the health care system because they are trained health care workers.

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So, really looking, really seeing this unique international partnership and collaboration that is going on between, you know, organizations in Kenya and the Kenyan government and also in Canada as well. The other thing was also to have first time experience of international organizations that resettle government assisted refugees in Canada. So at one point, UBC students were able to go and be part of a process where, you know, there were refugees who were going to Canada directly, and they were going to Vancouver, and they were being hosted by a resettlement organization in Vancouver, and I had some of the students who came here to Kenya and experienced that going back to Canada and straight working for those organizations, knowing what the process looks like. So, really making it a full circle where Canadian students, social workers who, you know, working with new immigrants and refugees now get to see what the process looks like.

15:47

When they go to hosting countries, refugee hosting countries like Kenya, Kenya hosts over a million refugees and some of them have been here for 30 years or even more and seeing what the process is, seeing the challenges and looking at how refugees are being prepared to resettle in Canada and what that looks like in terms of the education system, in terms of the housing, in terms of the schooling system, in terms of the healthcare system, and our students from UBC are like, "wow, I'm glad we're here that we're able to learn all this," from this end and that they will be able to relate to these new Canadians who are coming as refugees when they move to Vancouver or anywhere else in Canada. So that is another powerful way of learning that probably will never happen if they were just going to a classroom in Vancouver at UBC. So that's another unique thing that is with this program.

16:46

So yeah, that's kind of the essence of this program is. It started, you know, during a difficult time during COVID with community partners in Kenya, um, and now it has really grown to you know, a more productive and profound kind of learning exchange between these two programs, KMTC and UBC, and also partners from the community. It has been really encouraging to see that and we see that growth going more and more. You know, this year, we had presented some of our work at an international conference at the Africa Global Mental Health Conference. And there's been a lot of interest in terms of more egalitarian kind of Global North, Global South, learning together. Because we really try to make sure that it's not a one-way kind of opportunity for UBC, but it's two-way.



17:41

With a little funding we had, we made sure that KMTC students had equal opportunity with UBC students as well. But also, because of the success of this program, we have been approached by the Africa Union, which is a continental body, the Center for Disease Control for Africa, to partner with us to provide a training for 14 African countries on mental health leadership and advocacy which is actually starting next year, so, which is really impressive. And that's going to happen at Kenya Medical Training College from next year. So, it's really growing lips and bound in terms of what this partnership is, and other institutions, specifically the U. S., have shown interest in terms of, hey, you know, "can we also partner and, and see how our students can join?". And we had some discussions going on around that. And we are like, "yes, that's welcome. That's welcome." You know, the more diverse body of students and faculty members and community, the better. So, yeah, that's how it has been going on.

18:45

And the other good thing is that one of the community partners actually won the Social Development Fellowship this year, and that is a community organization that provides the largest mental health community mental health program in Kenya. And so, with that fellowship, they will be able to come and share their knowledge and expertise, and come to UBC next year. So it's not only that it's UBC and KMTC, but also the community partners are now part of this larger learning network as well. And in order for us to strengthen this collaboration going on, we have also applied for a number of grants to see that this can be ongoing for the next few years. Hopefully it will be successful.

19:34

We may be able to have more resources for the coming years to see how we can expand in terms of the community learning because this course is community centered. It's not a classroom center. It's a community center so the learning is happening mostly in field placements, at community organizations and the lecturers are coming from the community as well. So coming from different parts of Kenya. So, we have guest speakers coming from five hours of drive or even more, so we just want to make sure that it's a knowledge exchange that is beyond the classroom and beyond one continent. So, North America and East Africa and also community partners just to be to be that community center and to be true to that as well. So, yeah, that's kind of the gist of what has been going on for the last few years. And hopefully it continues.

Dr. Grace Mwangi**20:28**

Thank you. It's opening a new field for us – research, collaborative research together. We are also going to host the Africa CDC Mental Health Leadership and Advocacy short course thanks to this collaboration.

[Outro Theme Music]**Dr. Barbara Lee****20:43**

Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded

by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu and Qian Zhou is the podcast producer and editor. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu. Podcast music is open source, called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!

