

Rise and Thrive: Building Resilient Communities through Inclusive Mental Health

OUR APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH IN THE PHILIPPINES AND FIJI

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates that more than one billion people live with a mental health condition. Anxiety and depression impose significant human and economic costs and are among the leading causes of long term disability. Suicide is a devastating outcome associated with poor mental health and remains a leading cause of death among young people. Like many countries around the world, mental health in the Philippines and Fiji remains an overlooked and under resourced aspect of development. While each country has made important progress through national mental health legislation and policy frameworks, government expenditure on mental health remains low and commitments have not yet translated into accessible, community-based services.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE PHILIPPINES AND FIJI

Across both countries:

- **Mental health services are scarce and centralised**, with most government mental health funding still directed to mental health institutions rather than community-level support. In Fiji, for example, 98% of government mental health expenditure in 2020 went to mental health institutions, while in the Philippines the figure was 87%. **Mental health institutions are often associated with human rights abuses and can separate people from their family and primary support networks.**
- The mental health workforce is under-resourced, and there is a **limited understanding of rights-based and recovery-oriented approaches.** As a result, there are few community-based approaches offering alternatives to institutions and non-medical interventions.

Program: Rise and Thrive: Building Resilient Communities through Inclusive Mental Health

Location: Philippines and Fiji

Duration: April 2024 – June 2028

Implementing partners:

- Philippines: Ateneo Center for Research and Innovation (ACRI) and Balik Kalipay Centre for Psychosocial Support (BKC).
- Fiji: the Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA), the national organisation representing people with psychosocial disabilities.

Funder: CBM Australia with support from the Australian Government through the Partnerships for a Healthy Region initiative.

- Community mental health literacy is low, and **stigma around mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities remains a major barrier** to seeking help.
- **People with psychosocial disabilities remain among the most marginalised groups**, often excluded from decision-making, employment opportunities and social protection programs.
- **Crises and climate-related disasters contribute to the increased incidence of mental health conditions** and puts further strain on systems already unable to meet rising mental health needs.

These gaps lead to delayed care, isolation, and human-rights risks for people with mental health conditions. Women, girls, and people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics’ (SOGIESC) are disproportionately affected, experiencing higher rates of mental health conditions and an increased risk of disability and poverty.

ABOUT THE RISE AND THRIVE PROGRAM

CBM Australia's Rise and Thrive: Building Resilient Communities through Inclusive Mental Health program is implemented in the Philippines and Fiji from 2024–2028 with support from the Australian Government through Partnerships for a Healthy Region initiative. The initiative supports partner countries in the Pacific and Southeast Asia to build resilient and equitable health systems, reduce disease risks and burdens, and respond effectively to health emergencies.

Rise and Thrive aims to develop an effective model of community-based mental health support that improves the wellbeing of people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities. The program strengthens awareness and understanding of mental health and suicide prevention among governments, communities, and people with psychosocial disabilities, while improving access to mental health services that are rights-based, equitable, effective and resilient.

Across the Philippines and Fiji, the program focuses on four interconnected focus areas:

Strengthening the voices of people with psychosocial disabilities:

Rise and Thrive amplifies the leadership, advocacy, and decision-making power of people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities - particularly women, girls, and people of diverse SOGIESC.

By strengthening confidence, building capacity and expanding opportunities, the program enables people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities, along with their families, carers, Self-Help Groups and Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs), to advocate for inclusion, disability rights, and improved community-based mental health services and support.

In the Philippines, this includes supporting the establishment of Local Mental Health Councils to advocate for community-based mental health initiatives, as well as strengthening informal peer groups so they can evolve into representative OPDs that actively engage with these Councils. In Fiji, it includes strengthening the Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA) – the national OPD representing people with psychosocial disabilities – to advocate for amendments to legislation and policies so they better align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), as well as for increased budget allocation to community-based person-centred services.

Right: Community-based workers raise awareness and connect people to services.



People-centred systems:

Rise and Thrive strengthens people-centred mental healthcare systems by advocating for stronger rights-based policies, legislation and financing for inclusive mental health services. This includes encouraging increased government budget allocation for mental health services, supporting deinstitutionalisation, and promoting the integration of mental health into community health systems.

The program works with governments and service providers to ensure that mental health systems are responsive to the needs, dignity and rights of people with psychosocial disabilities.

Community inclusion:

Rise and Thrive promotes inclusive, community-level approaches that increase acceptance and support recovery for people with psychosocial disabilities. The program fosters meaningful engagement between decision makers and people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities by facilitating dialogue and ensuring their active participation in the planning, consultation, and governance of community-based mental health services.

It also increases community understanding of mental health, disability, and suicide prevention through awareness campaigns, arts-based activities, media partnerships and anti-stigma initiatives.

Resilient communities:

Communities in the project areas are increasingly affected by climate related hazards such as typhoons, droughts, flooding, sea level rise, and landslides, with significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

To strengthen preparedness, response, and recovery, Rise and Thrive works with local partners and OPDs to build more resilient, rights-based health systems and community-based mental health services. The program strengthens capacity among government officials, community leaders, health workers, mental health service providers, and community volunteers to understand the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and apply inclusive rights-based approaches to mental health support.

Inclusive, culturally appropriate, and gender responsive suicide prevention, Psychological First Aid and broader Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) are integrated across communities, health centres, and emergency response systems. Primary health centres are supported to develop service continuity plans and engage people with lived experience of mental health and psychosocial disability in local disaster risk reduction committees, ensuring that mental health considerations inform community emergency planning and response.

The program also strengthens community-based psychosocial supports, including peer support groups and family networks, and provides inclusive and accessible information on disability management and mental health. People with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities, along with their families, are supported to access social protection and livelihood opportunities, strengthening economic security and resilience to future shocks.

By strengthening the leadership of people with lived experience and the systems that serve them, Rise and Thrive drives change from the ground up while transforming the structures that enable long-term wellbeing. This dual approach ensures that inclusive, rights-based mental health services are shaped by the people who use them and embedded within communities and health systems for lasting impact.

Above: Introducing the Ka-Ginhawa project to community members in General Luna.



RISE AND THRIVE: “KA-GINHAWA” – BRINGING HOPE FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN THE PHILIPPINES

Through CBM Australia’s Rise and Thrive: Building Resilient Communities through Inclusive Mental Health program, hope is growing for people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities in the Philippines. Known locally as Ka-ginhawa, the project addresses critical gaps in mental health care by strengthening community support, improving access to services, and promoting inclusive, rights-based approaches.

Led by Dr Dinah from CBM partner the Ateneo Center for Research and Innovation (ACRI), the project responds to long-standing challenges in the mental health system.

“Mental health is contributory to national development. We recognise several needs in the gaps in mental health in the Philippines. We hope that this project will address some of these gaps.”

For many participants, Ka-ginhawa provides support they have never had before.

“It’s good that there is Ka-ginhawa. No one was helping us before.”

- Project participant

Local disability leaders also recognise the program’s unique contribution:

“Ka-ginhawa is the only project available for psychosocial or mental illness [that is] inclusive or for everyone.”

- OPD President

The project not only improves services – it empowers communities themselves.

As Dr. Dinah explains:

“The community is actually a big support... They’re not just receivers, but they’re also supporters.”

The vision is clear: a future where inclusive mental health care is a right enjoyed by all, supported by communities, and strengthened by responsive systems.

“We hope that we will influence the government and systems to be able to change for providing better services that are rights-based and recovery oriented.”

- Dr Dinah

Right: Dr Dinah, who spoke to CBM Australia about the importance of inclusive mental health.



RISE AND THRIVE : QUALITYRIGHTS TRANSFORMING MENTAL HEALTH IN FIJI

In Fiji, CBM works with the PSA to strengthen leadership, advocacy, and community based mental health support, with the PSA playing a central role in promoting the rights, voices, and lived experience of people with mental health conditions.

A key element of this work is CBM's QualityRights Masters Training project, developed in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Red Cross Red Crescent. This initiative ensures QualityRights capacity-building activities are locally facilitated, contextualised, and co-delivered with people with lived experience - placing human rights, dignity, and recovery at the centre of mental health care.

For PSA staff and members, this training is transformative. It brings together people with lived experience, service providers, and policy actors to build a shared understanding of rights based, person centred mental health systems. It strengthens confidence, deepens understanding of legal capacity and supported decision making, and reinforces the importance of listening to people's preferences and choices.

One PSA leader reflects that the training has reshaped how the organisation engages with its members - prioritising recovery planning led by individuals themselves, rather than decisions made on their behalf.



“Now I have a different image altogether, how I really want to prioritise working with the members, their advanced planning, their recovery plan, how they want it to be, not how I think it should be, how their voices are very important. PSA may be the leading psychosocial disability organisation, but we do not have the right... we [need to] give them all the information, but you do not make decision for them...”

- Sera, PSA

Government participants also report shifts in perspective. Ministry of Health representatives note that QualityRights is influencing how mental health is framed in policy and suicide prevention work, reinforcing dignity, cultural respect, and compassionate person-centred care.

By bringing people with lived experience into the centre of systems reform, Rise and Thrive helps lay the foundations for a re-imagined mental health system in Fiji - one grounded in rights, shaped by communities, and better equipped to support wellbeing, recovery, and resilience for the future.

Above: Sera at the QualityRights Training of Trainers workshop in Indonesia.