

To what extent does supporting Self-Help Groups for longer lead to more effective groups?

Introduction

This study was an assessment of functionality, performance, and engagement with government agencies between Self-Help Groups supported for one year versus those supported for up to three years. It was conducted by BasicNeeds-Ghana, a consortium partner of Ghana Somubi Dwumadie (Ghana Participation Programme).

This study looked at mental health Self-Help groups in the Northern, Northeast, Savannah, Upper East, and Greater Accra regions. The study aimed to:

- Assess the functionality of Self-Help Groups supported for only one year and Self-Help Groups supported for more than one year;
- Assess the level of engagement and collaboration between the Self-Help Groups and key external agencies' departments, and how this support contributes to reaching the objectives of the Self-Help Groups;
- Learn what works and what can be improved for effective and gender-inclusive operations of Self-Help Groups

Why this study is important

Governmental and non-governmental organisations are increasingly employing Self-Help groups to deliver development efforts. This study provides evidence to improve the formation and operations of Self-Help Groups for people with mental health conditions.

Background

Self-Help Groups are unofficial associations of people that meet regularly to discuss issues in common. Participating in groups helps people with mental health conditions and their families find solutions to challenges, develop strengths, and improve their quality of life.

BasicNeeds-Ghana, a mental health and development advocacy organisation, implements and supports programs to improve the lives of people with mental health

conditions by supporting their access to integrated social, economic, and health services in local communities around Ghana. They also provide support to build skills in advocacy and rights, and in financial training, and link groups to Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, health service institutions, social welfare and community development groups.

Before the coronavirus disease of 2019 restrictions in Ghana, members of Self-Help Groups met regularly to share experiences, provide peer support to improve wellbeing, undertake livelihood activities, and engage key government stakeholders. However, following the government's directive on public assembly, their regular meetings stopped. In June 2020, Ghana Somubi Dwumadie developed plans to support the resumption of Self-Help Group meetings and 272 Self-Help Groups resumed services, reaching 4,366 members in Northern, Northeast, Savannah, Upper East, Upper West, Bono, Bono East, Ahafo and Greater Accra Regions. A selection of the groups received further capacity building support for two more years.



Study methodology

The methods used to undertake this study included:

- 132 surveys of Self-Help Groups that received support for one year only
- 220 surveys of Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year
- Focus group discussions involving 48 participants
- Checklist to collect evidence of what Self-Help Groups claimed to have done
- In-depth interviews with 20 Self-Help Group leaders
- In-depth interviews with six stakeholders in socio-economic and health care systems for people with mental illness and disability

Eleven indicators were assessed to measure the performance and functionality of the groups:

- Purpose of forming the group
- Homogeneity and cohesion
- Regularity of meetings
- Attendance at meetings
- Participation of members in decision making
- Rules and regulations
- Periodic elections of leaders
- Book-keeping and documentation
- Regular paying of dues
- Funds
- Provision and disbursement of funds to members

To assess the level of engagement and collaboration between the Self-Help Groups and key agencies, departments and groups, and how this support contributes to

reaching the objectives of the Self-Help Groups, a further ten indicators were measured:

- Participation of members in decision making
- Total number of engagement meetings with Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, National Health Insurance Scheme and other governmental and non-governmental organisations since June 2021
- Number of engagements held with different stakeholders
- Number of different stakeholders' engagement and collaboration activities
- Number of Self-Help Group members who participated in the engagement meetings disaggregated by gender
- Action points of engagement and collaborative activities
- Outcome of action points
- Effectiveness or impact of the engagement on the welfare of members
- Plan for future engagement
- Diversity in the areas of engagement

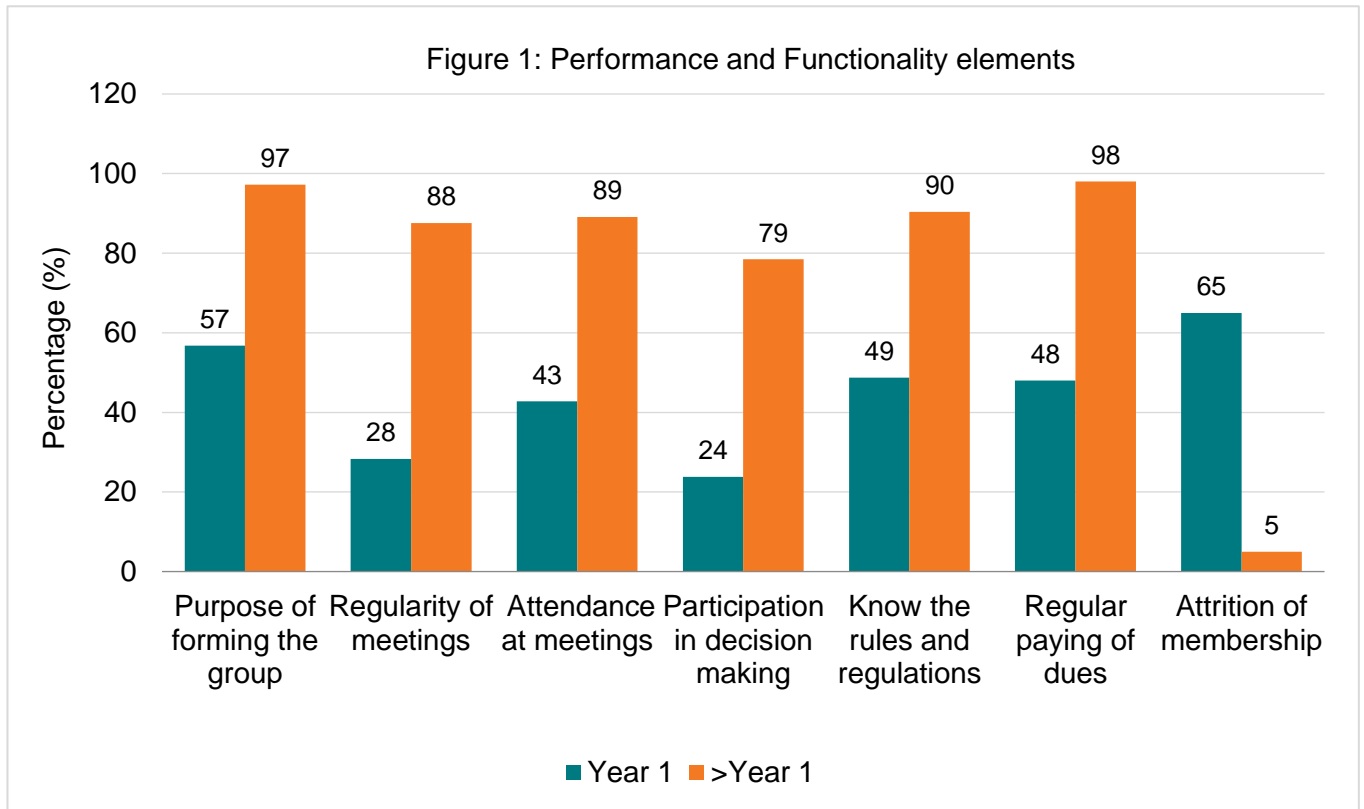


Key Results

The study concluded that Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year were more functionally effective and performed better than those who received support for one year only. The groups with additional support had more regular engagements with governmental organisations and community members than those who received support for only one year. This was largely due to the capacity building training that they received from BasicNeeds-Ghana. Those who received support for more than one year had increased membership, more regular meetings and higher attendance. Conversely, Self-Help Groups that received support for one year only had decreasing membership and fewer meetings.

The benefits of the increased effectiveness of Self-Help Groups included:

- more effective engagements with stakeholders
- increased capacity of Self-Help Group members to negotiate and advocate for their engagement with governmental organisations
- regular engagements with governmental agencies, which in turn further motivated Self-Help Groups members to attend meetings
- increased confidence in Self-Help Groups members to participate and engage with governmental agencies and their community
- potential for reduced stigma and discrimination of people with mental health conditions, as a result of the increased engagement with government institutions and community
- an understanding that active participation and engagement is an inalienable right that should be protected to ensure fair representation in decision-making



The report also found that external factors that were not the focus of this study also impacted the group's functionality. These included:

- professional assistance and training
- public awareness of mental illnesses, stigma and discrimination, which still requires addressing on a large scale
- social and financial support by the government, private sector, and non-governmental organisations; and
- access to psychotropic medicines



Further learnings from the results

Membership and regular attendance

Stable and active membership is critical to the survival of all Self-Help Groups.

The Self-Help Groups that received support for only one year reported a decrease in their membership between re-opening and the study period, whereas those that received support for more than one year reported an increase in their membership. Leaders of Self-Help Groups that received support for just one year lamented the attrition of members and poor attendance at meetings.

‘Our membership keeps reducing and people do not come for meetings regularly. So sometimes we, the leaders even do not want to organise the meetings’ Leader, North East, one year only

‘Sometimes it is difficult to converge them at the meeting place. I have to move from house to house to remind them about our meetings, but some are not interested. The enthusiasm was there when we were receiving support but now it is a challenge’ Leader, Greater Accra, one year only

‘Our membership rose to 70 plus and as at now we have reduced to 40 plus as some people have stopped coming for meeting because of the lack of financial and training support’ Member, Savannah, one year only

The cost of travelling to attend meetings emerged as a barrier, which had led to some groups becoming inactive.

‘I can say that our meeting once in every month but the participation is not all that good because in my group like this not everyone in the Tebibianor district comes to the meetings those who are a bit far away like Spintex find it difficult to come because of money issues, it is not a walking distance whereby they can walk to meetings and so they are asking for financial support to help them come to meeting regularly’ Leader, Greater Accra

The more stable memberships in Self-Help Groups who received additional support from the programme were attributable to the additional capacity building training in negotiation and leadership, and the increased engagement with stakeholders (detailed below) that resulted in positive outcomes for individuals and the group. Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year held regular monthly meetings, responsive to members’ needs.

‘We used to meet every Thursday but it wasn’t favouring the majority at a point and so we changed the meeting days to last Thursday of every month and the members participate a lot during meetings’ Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

It is notable that issues beyond the remit of this study also impacted the attendance of all Self-Help Groups. These included:

- limited access to medicine, which resulted in the relapse and subsequent attrition of members across all Self-Help Groups, which in turn negatively impacts the groups themselves
- stigma and discrimination, especially during the formation of the groups, and carrying out of activities

‘Some of our members do not want to go out because of the stigma against people with mental illness in this community. This is one of the reasons some people refuse to attend meeting. So, you call for the meeting and just a few people come. So, it is discouraging’ Member, North East

In contrast to this, a member of a Self-Help Group that received support for more than one year revealed that they organised community sensitisation activities which contributed to the reducing stigmatisation of people with mental health conditions. In

a focus group discussion with Self-Help Group members who received support for more than one year, this was an important intervention.

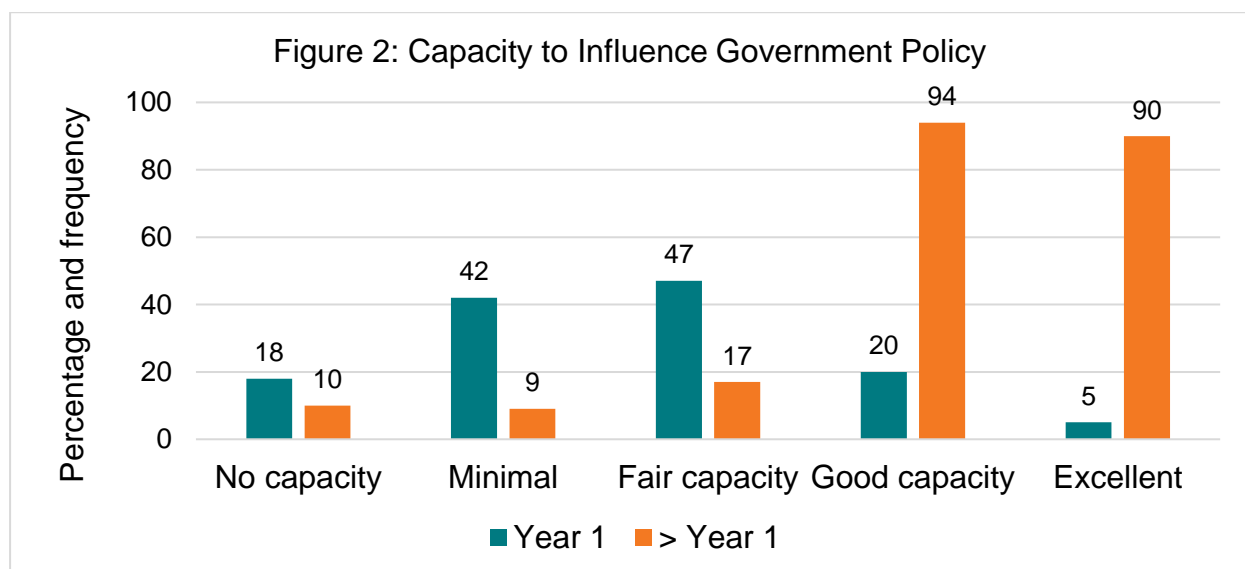
‘We organise community durbars in the community and educate people about mental health conditions. At first, people had the belief that mental illness was spiritual and when you come close or in contact with people with the condition, you can become infected’ Member, Upper East, more than one year

Effective engagement with stakeholders and policy

Self-Help Group engagement with governmental agencies is not only critical in promoting the health and social wellbeing of members but provides an opportunity to positively influence policy that can improve people’s lives. Both Self-Help Groups that had support for one year and those who received support beyond this indicated some level of policy engagement, but the study revealed that this engagement was only taking place occasionally for Self-Help Groups with only one year of support.

Supplementary training on leadership and negotiation skills that was provided to Self-Help Groups resulted in more confident members who were better positioned to negotiate with government institutions.

Study participants were asked to rate their ability to influence policy on a scale of one to nine, where one equalled no capacity and nine equalled excellent capacity. The results showed that most of those who received support for more than one year ranked their capacity as ‘good’ and ‘excellent’.



‘Yes, we collaborate with District Assembly, Social Welfare, and National Health Insurance because there are times our health insurance will expire, and health insurance would let us gather all the cards and they will help renew it for us at no cost and this has happened twice and I’m a witness. Also, with Social Welfare, I witnessed one person in this group who was helped’ Member, North East, more than one year

‘We have been meeting with Social Welfare Department to discuss the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty. It delayed and some of members only rely on that for livelihood. During the meeting we were assured that government had approved for payment so it would ready soon’ Member, Greater Accra, one year only

The results of the study showed that Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year had more engagements with diverse stakeholders than those who were supported for just one year. They were also able to build stronger relations with each other, as well as with government agencies, and they had greater motivation to attend meetings because of the engagement with government agencies.

‘BasicNeeds-Ghana was able to support us to engage Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies and the Social Welfare Department. So, we now have a well-established and stronger relationship with these institutions. Our members are also happy anytime we have such meeting. So, it is making the group stronger’ Member, Savannah, one year only

‘...we have a stronger relation among group members and the government institutions. So, when you hear of upcoming meeting that you think has something to do with people with mental illness, we call them to include us in invited guest list. This is making our group stronger. Members feel they are important, that is why we are invited to participate in such meetings. The motivation to attend meetings or engagement with government agencies is high among our group members’ Member, Greater Accra, more than one year

Self-Help Group members of groups supported for more than one year, indicated that the leadership training they received improved their advocacy skills and techniques. This led to better engagement with governmental institutions such as the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, Social Welfare Department and health institutions. Participants also revealed that the training has built their confidence to be able to engage effectively.

Only 30.4% of members of Self-Help Groups that received support for one year only, indicated that they needed support in negotiation skills. Conversely, 73.6% of Self-Help Group members who received support for more than one year wanted this additional support because they were more aware of the importance and benefit of negotiation skills.

‘We had training on leadership and advocacy. This has therefore empowered us to able to negotiate very well. When you attend meetings and show good leadership qualities in your contribution, next time they will invite you’ Leader, Upper East, more than one year

‘Now when we participate in meetings we have the confidence to advocate for the rights of our members. This is very important benefit we got from the support we received from BasicNeeds [Ghana]’ Leader, North East, more than one year

This study showed that Self-Help Groups who received support for more than one year were engaged in more consultative meetings, processes and events with government agencies: 58.2% of members of Self-Help Groups supported for more than one year participated in consultative process with government agencies on mental health and disability in the last twelve months compared to 27.3% of those who received support for one year only.

In addition, more members of the Self-Help Groups supported for more than one year had participated in community activities such as community health advocacy, community durbars, and meetings with Department of Social Welfare to discuss issues related to the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty program. Approximately 71% of members of Self-Help Groups that received support for more than a year were actively engaged in meeting with government institutions such as Department of Social Welfare/Community Development. In contrast, 55.3% of Self-Help Groups that received support for only one year were actively engaged in meetings with government agencies.

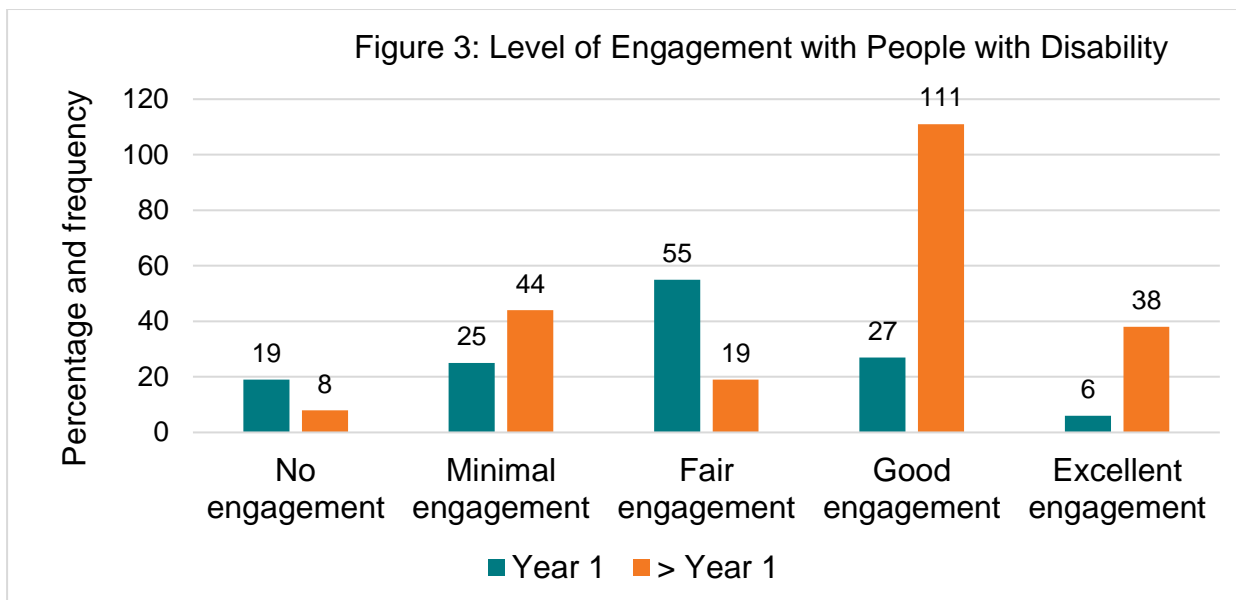
There were additional benefits to the greater engagement with stakeholders. Engaging people with a mental health conditions in community activities had positive psychosocial effects and reduced stigmatisation. In focus group discussions, members were unanimous in expressing delight about how engaging in community activities has contributed to creating a sense of belonging, contribution and interaction. Leaders of Self-Help Groups emphasised that engaging members of Self-Help Groups in community activities was instrumental in community acceptance of people with mental health conditions and disabilities, and reducing the stigma associated with mental health conditions and disabilities.

‘We are happy when we involve in community activities... when people involve us in their activities, and it has helped us to now socialise with people in the community more unlike before when we were introverts, and we can’t come around or associate with people. It also reduces stigmatisation of our group members’ Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

‘Some of the benefits of health campaign we organised has created the awareness to people who think their condition is spiritual to now believe that mental health condition can be manage through medical treatment and now they have become well’ Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

Engagement in the rights of people with disabilities

Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year had predominantly good engagement activity with the district-level leadership of the Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations. As a result, understanding of the rights with people with disabilities was higher.



‘In Ghana, people think engaging people with mental illness and disability in decision making is a privilege, but it is our right. This has clearly stated in Ghana’s Disability Act’ Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

‘Ghana is signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, but the country is not able to implement the requirements. Institutions and government agencies sometimes do not engage us in decision making. It is disappointing’ Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

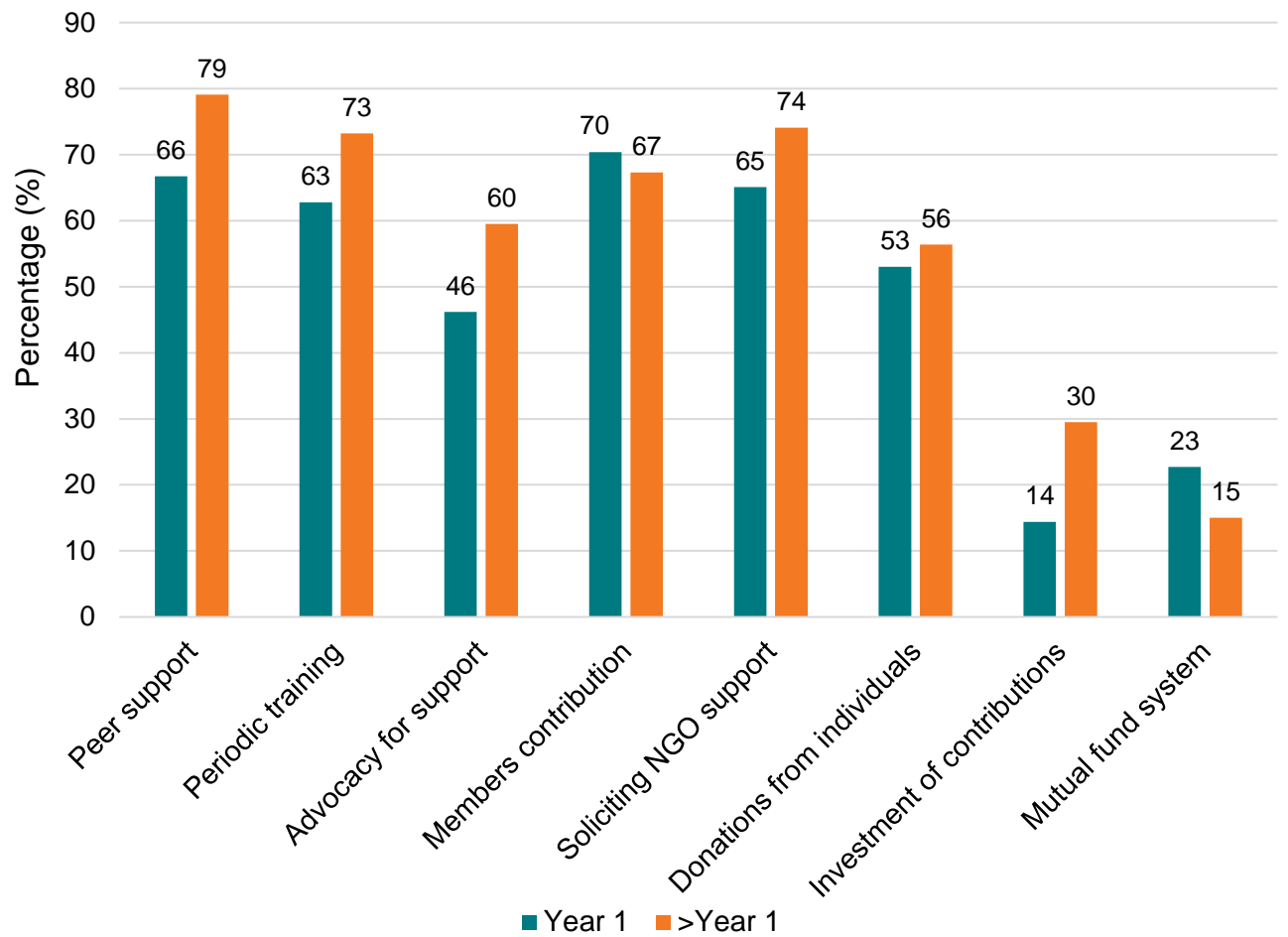
‘People with mental illness and disability are a critical mass in Ghana and should be engaged in decision making and policy formulation. Our constitution and the Disability Act require fair representation in decision making’ Municipal Coordinating Director, Greater Accra

Sustainability of support and activities

The study showed that the additional support received after year one contributed to the sustainability of the groups. Those who did not receive the additional support relied on contributions from members to sustain the group’s activities.

Participants suggested several measures to ensure sustainability of Self-Help Groups and their activities in the community. Participants of Self-Help Groups that received support for more than one year suggested that peer support, support from non-governmental organisations and periodic training as the most effective ways of sustaining their activities. Self-Help Groups with only one year of support emphasised the need for contribution from members above peer support, and soliciting support from non-governmental organisations.

Figure 4: Sustainability Measures



‘We don’t receive support frequently, support come when we meet with non-governmental organisations. Sometimes we get funds from a benevolent lady who pays some of our members’ hospital bills when they go to health facilities and their medications’ Leader, Greater Accra Region

‘The last time we received support was early this year from an individual benevolent person who gave two of our members funds to start trade and BasicNeeds also gave us funds and an individual woman called Ann gave us money during the Ramadan festival’ Leader, North East

‘Where we usually get support from is, sometimes, within this group. We usually contribute money any time we meet and it has helped me, I have people here who can testify that when BasicNeeds-Ghana came and gave us preventive stuff [Nose mask, hand sanitiser] and it got finished we used the money we had in our account to continue buying the sanitisers and the hand wash, so anytime we have met before we sit for the meeting we wash our hands first’ Member, North East

‘Initially we used to contribute little money like 50 pesewas and 1 cedi and give it to one person to start business with and later that person pays it

back to us and we will give the payment to another person to also trade with it.' Leader, Greater Accra, more than one year

Supporting members to engage in trading was suggested during focus group discussions. One participant shared her experience:

'After my husband rejected me and my children, I didn't relent in my effort by looking somewhere for support but invested the little I have into petty trading [selling of cooking ingredients] from house to house every morning till evening. I have now extended the selling to the suburbs of the community. Today I acquired a building plot and am able to put four bedrooms that I'm occupying with my children. The children are now grown and working. I made a garden in my house and that one alone gives us some income' Member, Savannah

Focus group discussions with Self-Help Groups that received support for only one year revealed that because it was no longer receiving regular support, members had to be encouraged to contribute to monthly dues to support the group's activities.

'Our group members met and decided to start a monthly contribution to support ourselves. Support from non-governmental organisations and individuals is not regular. So instead of waiting for support, we decided to do something for ourselves' Member, Greater Accra, more than one year

Several challenges to sustainability were listed by all Self-Help Groups regardless of length of support, and are summarised below:

Challenges		Suggested solutions	
		Programme Level	Policy Level
Financial	Financial support to start trading. Skilled trading and provision of start-up capital Skills and vocational training (and equipment to maintain skills or trade)		Inclusion of people with mental health conditions in District Assemblies Common Fund Commitment to prioritise vocational training
Access to medicines	Registration on National Health Insurance Scheme		Inclusion of psychotropic medicines on National Health Insurance Scheme
Transportation to meeting ground	Support to attend meetings Reducing the frequency of meetings Creating smaller sub-groups in communities		
Stigma and discrimination	Community sensitisation on mental health conditions Health education		

Recommendations

Based on this study, the following recommendations seek to increase the effectiveness of Self-Help Groups:

- Examine the potential to provide greater, continued and sustained support as well as refresher leadership and negotiation training to existing Self-Help Groups through buddy systems with international non-governmental organisation partners, governments and other organisations with capacity
- Create pathways for strategic support and capacity-building as soon as Self-Help Groups are established. The Self-Help Groups could be linked to local government structures to ensure regular interaction in their activities
- Self-Help Groups' support systems could be embedded into the local government ecosystem and not be the sole responsibility of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, who may have precarious funding
- The Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies must ensure that people with mental health conditions are fairly and effectively engaged in the local governance system by including specific indicators in the District Performance Assessment Tool to monitor level of engagement.
- The government should provide or facilitate training for Self-Help Group members to integrate the groups into the local government decision making processes
- Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations should continue to advocate for the inclusion of psychotropic medication into the National Health Insurance Scheme
- Further investment in addressing stigma should be made, including supporting people with mental health conditions to lead community sensitisation activities



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A full report of the study and methodologies used in this study is available from Ghana Somubi Dwumadie on request.



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