Mental Health Data Prize – Africa: Igniting innovation for enhanced mental health

In 2024, the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), in collaboration with Wellcome, is launching the Mental Health Data Prize – Africa initiative. The goal is to bridge knowledge gaps in anxiety, depression, and psychosis while enhancing evidence-based decision-making in Africa.

Source: 123RF.

This transformative journey leverages existing data and data-driven insights to fuel innovation, addressing mental health challenges and bolstering the continent's data capabilities.

Under the initiative, multidisciplinary teams will be set up to generate scalable innovations and data-driven insights that can contribute to our understanding of anxiety, depression and psychosis in Africa.

The Wellcome-funded prize is the first of its kind and is open to innovators, researchers and startups, whose initiatives will be competing for five to 10 awards, each valued at £200,000 that come with funding over 12 months.

As part of this initiative, interested individuals can sign up for a free capacity-building programme over five months. This is meant to help them unlock the full potential of data science, advanced statistical analysis and machine-learning algorithms tailored for mental-health applications on the continent.

APHRC will assist in forming multidisciplinary teams, match-making individuals, and providing access to identified data sources.

Inspiring unity and innovation across Africa

"The prize is a clarion call to the entire mental-health fraternity across Africa to unite in the fight against anxiety, depression and psychosis, which are the most prevalent disorders in the region and globally.

"This prize exists to drive excellence and innovation in harnessing data to solve some of our biggest mental-health challenges by bringing together the best minds in mental-health research and data analytics from across the continent," said Catherine Kyobutungi, the executive director at APHRC.

> " *Howcan sleep impact mental health?*
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> *Listen to our 'When Science Finds a Way' podcast to hear from clinical psychologist @ProfDFreeeman about the importance of sleep and its potential in fighting the global mental health crisis* ��☐*https://t.co/uvKuD0XhUB— Wellcome (@wellcometrust) December 27, 2023* "

Kyobutungi noted that significant gaps exist in data on mental health in Africa, limiting the understanding of the scale of the challenge as well as available evidence to inform interventions against anxiety, depression and psychosis, challenges that the prize seeks to address.

Ekin Bolukbasi, the Data Prize manager at Wellcome said, "This ground-breaking prize demonstrates our commitment to help create a world where no-one is held back by mental health problems.

"It aims to advance mental-health science by transforming its ability to address existing challenges on the continent through prevention, management and treatment. Together, we have the opportunity to improve our understanding of the trajectory and resolution of common mental disorders for a better and more resilient future for all."

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Ayenat Mersie 18 Nov 2022

The World Health Organization estimates that 116 million people in Africa were living with a mental condition before the Covid-19 pandemic. The high prevalence of mental-health conditions has been driven by challenges of daily living, widespread conflict, public health emergencies and other factors.

This has taken a heavy toll on the lives of people, disrupting their ability to function and thrive and leading to lost productivity, great suffering and emotional pain for individuals, their families and communities.

However, access to quality mental-health care on the continent is limited, primarily attributed to inadequate investment in prevention-, treatment- and rehabilitation services. Comprehensive, up-to-date data can help provide insights into anxiety, depression and psychosis, assess access to mental-health services, and identify effective interventions.

This serves as the foundation of targeted strategies to address existing challenges in mental health in Africa.