



Ember Impact Evaluation

**Report of results of the
2020-2021 evaluation**

January 2022

The Ember Impact Report: Key Messages

Ember Mental Health is a collaboration between the SHM Foundation and the Mental Health Innovation Network (MHIN) that supports and invests in community-based mental health (MH) initiatives in low-resource settings so that they can grow and thrive.

For the SHM Foundation, the need for a platform that improved the visibility and funding opportunities for community-based MH initiatives became clear as a result of their own experiences developing and attempting to scale the Zumbido Health Model.

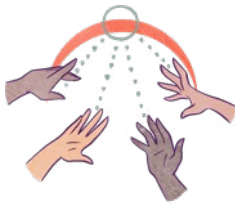
Zumbido Health is an innovation that facilitates peer-to-peer psychosocial support groups via mobile phone. The challenges that the model faced in generating evidence of impact, obtaining funding and establishing credibility brought the SHM Foundation into partnership with MHIN, whose advocacy work centres around these issues in the Global Mental Health field. Thus, Ember was born out of this collaboration to help community-based MH initiatives to grow, become more sustainable and maximise their impact.



In 2020, we partnered with 12 initiatives based in a broad range of contexts around the world.

Through a series of conversations, we identified the main challenges they were facing and developed a 12-month programme of tailored support to address these. During the course of the partnership, we continued to explore the needs of these initiatives and evaluated the impact of our programme. This evaluation consisted of semi-structured interviews with each of the initiatives that we partnered with, conducted at a minimum of two time points during the partnership (towards the beginning and at the end). Data was transcribed verbatim and analysed by three researchers with extensive experience in qualitative research.

Here is what we learned.



1 Community-based MH initiatives play an essential role in providing appropriate, meaningful and sustainable mental health care to their communities

- The experiences of people living with MH conditions are complex, and vary across cultures and geographies - they therefore require responses that are tailored to context.
- Community-based MH initiatives are uniquely equipped to address local needs and overcome local barriers - such as stigma - and engage people in ways that are culturally-sensitive and sustainable.
- Given their embeddedness in communities, they understand local needs and are trusted by those who require support.
- Expertise and resources on the ground also allow for timely and relevant responses to mental health needs in times of crisis, such as during a pandemic or natural disaster.

2 Community-based MH initiatives want more supportive infrastructures around them to increase their visibility, funding and networks

- MH initiatives need long-term and flexible funding - short funding cycles do not allow for the strategic thinking necessary for their initiatives to grow, and restricted funding forces initiatives to exhaust resources working to meet funders' priorities rather than those most relevant to their communities.
- MH initiatives want to communicate their work to a broader audience in order to raise awareness of their work and attract support, as well as form new networks and collaborations - initiatives feel the need to belong to a community where knowledge is shared and exchanged transparently.
- Members of MH initiatives benefit from an approach that places the wellbeing of their team front and centre - only then can they provide the best care for their communities.



3 Ember aims to strengthen community-based MH initiatives by:

- Attracting funding and investment in MH initiatives
- Providing tailored support which is relevant and responsive to organisation's needs
- Enabling access to a network of experts in different areas who can help provide advice, build teams' skills and bring added value to an organisation
- Creating a community by bringing together initiatives that can learn from each other and exchange experiences
- Ensuring the wellbeing of organisation members is cared for
- Recognising the valuable work and contributions of community-based MH initiatives

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Ember is valuable to community-based MH initiatives and has helped them grow

- Ember was described as enabling a space for pause and reflection, which initiatives feel often unable to take the time to do given high workloads and limited resources.
- The support and mentorship provided by Ember was described as inclusive, responsive, and meaningful - Ember listened and understood the organisation's needs and responded with tailored strategies.
- Ember contributed to building the skills of the teams in a wide range of areas, including branding, networking, communications, research and others.
- Outputs from the partnership included new brand identities, websites, fundraising strategies, ground prospecting databases, monitoring & evaluation systems, network databases, and networking strategies.
- MH initiatives felt empowered and more confident to continue growing their work - Ember helped them recognise a range of possibilities and opportunities for the sustainability of their work.
- MH initiatives widened their networks and contacts - through an improved social media presence, initiatives linked with potential funders, took part in global webinars and were contacted by potential collaborators.



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Further support, investment and action are needed

- MH initiatives identified a need to receive support for a longer period of time, - these first 12 months were useful to come up with strategic plans that now need to be put in place.
- Many of the community-based MH initiatives we partnered with are still lacking secure and long-term funding- current funding systems still seek to support “safer” initiatives with “clear paths for sustainability”. However, with many funders taking this approach, community-based MH initiatives are left with near to no options and many difficulties to continue providing care for their communities.
- There is a clear need for funders that take a flexible and caring approach to invest in this field - funders need to understand the needs of MH initiatives, to provide meaningful support and ensure they and the MH of communities around the world can thrive.
- Political will to support MH initiatives is still absent. Greater commitment from governments to improve mental health will be necessary to ensure needed financial, human and other resources are available at the community level.



Introduction

Why are community-based MH initiatives essential mental health care providers?

Mental distress is rooted in the social and economic systems and structures that govern people's lives⁽¹⁾. There is strong evidence that indicates that sociocultural issues (e.g. discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation or race) and inequalities (e.g. in income or education) are associated with poorer mental health outcomes^(2, 3). While structural responses are needed (e.g. policies that ensure the human rights protection of vulnerable populations or policies and systems that tackle poverty)^(4, 5), community-based MH initiatives that form local systems of care play an essential role in ensuring the wellbeing of populations⁽⁶⁾. Moreover, as the experiences of people living with mental health conditions are complex and vary across cultures and geographies^(7, 8), they require responses that are tailored to their context. Community-based initiatives are well-positioned to understand the needs and priorities of their localities and uniquely equipped to respond with relevant, culturally sensitive, and sustainable strategies⁽⁶⁾. Given their embeddedness in communities, they are also trusted by those who require support. Expertise and resources on the ground also allow for timely responses to mental health needs in times of crisis, such as during a pandemic or natural disaster⁽⁹⁾.

Community-based MH initiatives have demonstrated the importance of providing care and support outside of health facilities, with approaches that are caring and humane, particularly when responding to mental health distress arising from social issues^(10, 11). In demonstrating this, they can also contribute to the creation of social movements that advocate for structural changes necessary to fully improve the lives of populations. Empowering communities, enabling them to implement initiatives based

on local solutions and to advocate for change needs to be at the centre of action for global mental health^(6, 12). Engaging with community-based initiatives is also essential to strengthen health systems, achieve universal health coverage and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁽¹³⁾.

However, community-based initiatives, particularly from small and local organisations, are regularly threatened by austerity policies, limited availability of funding for global mental health work, restrictive and short-term funding mechanisms and the high administrative burden involved in accessing funds^(6, 14). By 2017, only 0.4% of overseas development assistance for health was allocated to mental health (132 USD million)⁽¹⁵⁾, and this is likely to have decreased recently due to cuts to the UK's official development assistance⁽¹⁶⁾. Meanwhile, median government expenditure on mental health ranges from just 0.02 USD per capita in low-income countries to 2.62 USD in upper middle-income⁽¹⁷⁾.

Many community-based initiatives are also operating in isolation, with limited access to valuable networks and resources—a perilous situation that leaves many otherwise promising mental health programmes struggling to access funding, improve credibility, access knowledge exchange opportunities and establish pathways to scale or replication.

How is Ember building partnerships to ensure community-based MH initiatives can thrive?

Ember was initiated through a collaboration between the SHM Foundation (a charitable foundation registered in the UK) and the Mental Health Innovation Network (MHIN, a collaboration between the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the World Health Organisation) community-based MH initiatives. For the SHM Foundation, the need for a platform that improved the visibility and funding opportunities for community based mental health organisations was clear as a result of their own experiences developing and attempting to scale the Zumbido Model. Zumbido is an innovation that facilitates peer-to-peer psychosocial support groups via mobile phone. The model was developed in Mexico in 2008, and has been replicated in Guatemala, the UK, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia. The challenges that the model faced in generating evidence of impact, obtaining funding and establishing credibility brought them into partnership with MHIN, who were advocating about these issues in the Global Mental Health field. Together, they sought to establish an initiative to support community-based MH initiatives grow and thrive. There is not a single vision for all initiatives: for some of them the end goal is to scale up, but for others it is to replicate their work in a different setting or achieve sustainability.

Over the course of 2018 and 2019 we set out to pilot Ember and worked with four initiatives¹, which were reaching marginalised communities with no other access to mental health services. We conducted an external evaluation of the pilot⁽¹⁸⁾, which helped us draw three key findings:

1. There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to mental health. Interventions and care systems must be designed around particular contexts.
2. Community-based initiatives are uniquely equipped to provide mental health care, but they face major barriers to sustaining and scaling up their work such as lack of resources, know-how and networks.
3. Overcoming the challenges of mental health care provision requires an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates the voices of those affected by these issues, not just “experts”.

These findings informed the selection criteria of the community-based MH initiatives with which Ember partnered in its second round, which started in January 2020 and finalised in February 2021. Initiatives eligible to partner with Ember need to be developed to address the needs of local communities, be culturally relevant, and want support to sustain, replicate or scale their work. Further, based on our experiences in the pilot, we made the following refinements to the Ember approach:

- Our support initially focused on helping initiatives in their transition to scale. However, not all initiatives in the pilot were suited to be scaled up. For most, achieving sustainability or replication was a more appropriate outcome. Therefore, in this second phase we aim to support initiatives to achieve sustainability, replication or scale-up, as appropriate in each individual case.
- Ember provided support through a series of tools that were meant to be applied as a package. We learnt that not all initiatives benefited from the same set of tools and therefore we needed to provide a tailored tool package to meet initiatives’ needs. In this second phase, tools are chosen based on an initial assessment of the initiatives’ status.
- We identified improvements in storytelling as a key starting point to provide support. This consists in identifying the history of the initiative and clarifying its vision. Once this is defined, a concrete action plan that addresses the aims of the initiative can be developed.

What are the steps followed by Ember when establishing a partnership with community-based MH initiatives?

1. First, during the selection process, we assess needs through the Innovations Health Check tool. This tool assesses the status of a community-based MH initiatives in eight different areas (see figure 1). These areas were identified as relevant by a group of experts with a diverse skill set including mental health researchers, members of non-governmental organisations, business managers and experts in communication and design.
2. In the first three months we spend more time understanding the needs of an initiative, mapping their model, and establishing a medium-term strategic action plan for the initiative. We then set objectives for the partnership along with a well-defined timeline and output plan. This action plan is also guided by the eight areas covered in the Innovations Health Check tool.
3. We spend the remaining time during the partnership putting in action the bespoke action plan for each initiative, linking with relevant experts for skill-building workshops and promoting knowledge exchange between the different innovators.

All initiatives receive a stipend. During the 2020-2021 cycle, partners also received a Wellbeing Fund to address arising needs during the pandemic. Additionally, some initiative received a Transformation Fund, which aimed to help them adapt to challenges brought up by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Core to Ember is the belief that community-based MH initiatives are the key to mainstreaming mental health in primary care, ensuring service provision is person-centred, service-user voices are heard and communities remain systemically engaged. Ember aims to ensure that initiatives are connected with each other, with experts and with funders in order to build a lasting and supportive network that allows them to overcome the challenges they face (see our expected pathway to change in Appendix 1).

Area	Areas of focus
Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distinguishing the model's principles - Preparing for future adaptations - Building financial infrastructure for scale-up
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modelling an effective M&E framework - Communicating impact effectively - Publishing the initiative's findings
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defining a vision for the initiative - Developing an action plan to achieve the defined vision
Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a cohesive brand identity, across various media platforms - Developing communication strategies and design training
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linking with experts to identify the necessary skills for growth - Creating training models that can be implemented independently
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sourcing essential legal support - Obtaining regulation and governance documents
Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultivating sustainable global collaborations - Connecting initiatives to Ember's extensive network of researchers, funders, and policy partners
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporting their pre-existing financial systems - Developing knowledge of auditing

Figure 1. Areas of assessment of the Innovations Health Check tool

Methods: How (and why) did we evaluate Ember's work?

Aims of the evaluation

The aim of the current evaluation was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to understand the needs of the initiatives taking part in the Ember partnership, to understand areas of support to prioritise and gain an insight into the needs of community-based MH initiatives operating in low-resource settings more generally. Secondly, this evaluation aimed to assess the impact of the 2020-2021 Ember partnership in addressing these needs and supporting initiatives to sustain, replicate or scale their work.

Specifically, the following research questions drove this work:

1. What were the needs of community-based MH initiatives seeking to achieve sustainability, replication or implementation at scale?
2. What were the expectations of community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember?
3. What were the key achievements identified by community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember?
4. What were the areas of improvement identified by community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember?

Study design

We conducted a longitudinal qualitative study⁽¹⁹⁾, as qualitative research is a preferred approach to investigate “how” and “why” type of questions⁽²⁰⁾. In this case, we aimed to understand if the partnerships between Ember and community-based MH initiatives led to improvements and how these improvements were achieved. A longitudinal design was used to understand how changes occurred overtime⁽²¹⁾, i.e. how the perceptions of people involved in the partnerships changed across different points during this process.

Sample

A total of 11 community-based MH initiatives took part in the current evaluation. Only one programme did not agree to take part in the evaluation due to internet and time constraints. Interviews were conducted at two or three different time points with all participating programmes. The general characteristics of these programmes can be found in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Project	Country	Region	Type	Target Population
Burans	India	South Asia	Promotion and Intervention	Disadvantaged communities, people with common and severe mental health problems
Centre for Mental Health and Counselling	Nepal	South Asia	Intervention- psychosocial support	People with all mental health problems
Children, Adolescent and Family Services	Sri Lanka	Southeast Asia	Intervention	Children and adolescents
Community-Based Mental Health Project	Afghanistan	South Asia	Promotion and intervention	Disadvantaged communities, women
Green String Network	Various	East Africa	Intervention	People or communities who have experienced social or collective trauma
Huertomanías	Ecuador	Central America and the Caribbean	Livelihood	People with severe mental health problems
Mental Health Service Users Association	Ethiopia	Africa	Advocacy	People with severe mental health problems
Mental Health and Wellbeing on Campus	Kenya	Africa	Promotion and awareness	University students and university staff
Punto de Encuentro	Argentina	South America	Livelihood	Women who have experienced or are at risk of intimate partner violence
Quan Tam Network	Vietnam	Southeast Asia	Intervention	People with severe mental health problems
Society for Pre and Post Natal Services	Zimbabwe	Africa	Promotion and awareness	Mothers and fathers of newborn children

Table 1. Characteristics of the community-based MH initiatives included in the evaluation

Data collection

Data was collected from March 2020 to March 2021 through semi-structured interviews conducted at two or three different time points. The first interview was conducted three months after the start of the partnerships. It was originally planned to conduct initial interviews before the start of the partnerships, however, we experienced delays in obtaining ethics approval. The second interview was conducted around 3-4 months after the first interview with a subsample of six initiatives. The last interview was conducted around a year after the start of the partnerships. At this point the activities originally planned with all initiatives had been completed. Interviews covered the four following domains:

1. Initiative needs and expectations about how the partnership could address these
2. Skills-building needs of initiative members
3. Highlights and challenges of the partnership
4. Key achievements and remaining areas of work

Interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consent by two researchers experienced in qualitative interviewing and with a background in health research. Consent was sought to audio record interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim for analyses.



Figure 2. Location of the 11 initiatives included in the evaluation.

Data analysis

We used a framework analysis approach as described by Gale and colleagues⁽²²⁾.

We followed a process of

- Data familiarization,
- Coding,
- Development of an analytical framework,
- Double coding of 80% of the data using the developed analytical framework,
- Identification and discussion of emerging themes.

All data was analysed in the language in which it was originally collected (i.e. in either English or Spanish) by bilingual researchers with extensive experience conducting qualitative work. All analyses were conducted using Dedoose Version 8.3.45.

Funding

Ember and the current evaluation were funded by the non-profit organisation CBM, SHM Foundation and Vitol Foundation.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's Research Ethics Committee (reference number 21665). Participants were required to provide written informed consent prior to the start of the interview. Through the informed consent, project members were explained the aim and relevance of the present evaluation. They were also informed that participation was voluntary, could be stopped at any moment and that all information provided was confidential and would be fully anonymized for its analysis and dissemination. Researchers emphasized that participation was voluntary and would have no repercussions in their partnership with Ember.

Results

What are the needs of community-based MH initiatives seeking to achieve sustainability, replication or implementation at scale?

Securing necessary funding and resources

Securing necessary funding was frequently reported as an urgent and high priority need among members of community-based MH initiatives. Funding was considered essential to conduct the initiative's activities and to have the sufficient resources or infrastructure needed for this. A frequent concern was having sufficient funds to cover for the salaries of all needed staff. Many projects relied on voluntary unpaid workers or underpaid workers. Initiative members expressed worries about their staff not earning sufficient income to cover for their basic expenses:

"The highest priority probably will go to funding part of it because you find for any activities which we plan to implement we always need that funding. That can be coupled with retention of human resource that would need funding also, because you find [that] when we get these volunteers to assist in our activities they need some livelihood which we need to support."

L3, Midline

Participants mentioned that funding was an ongoing challenge due to relatively short funding cycles and the scarcity of resources available for mental health. When asked about thoughts related to the future of the initiative, a participant reported the following:

"I'm a little bit scared. Simply because of the funding challenge because we get funded every year. And every year we go looking for funders and funding and things like that. So I am little nervous about whether we will be able to keep this going year after year in the same way."

P4, Endline

A couple of priorities were to find funding that was sustainable, for example due to the above mentioned challenges, and unrestricted, so that it would allow them to do the work relevant to their communities rather than to funders:

"We were only going to be able to grow [...] when we had an economic autonomy that would break our dependence on government contracts. Without economic autonomy you cannot move forward, you are always limited by whoever is going to grant you funding. When working with the government sometimes contracts are very restricted. They are defined by a particular model that can coincide or not with what you do."

L6, Baseline

Some initiatives mentioned needing support to build a business model that would allow them to generate sufficient income, rather than obtaining funds from donors. Building a robust and sustainable business model was seen as particularly beyond the skillset of grassroots mental health initiative members or managers.

Increasing visibility and broadening networks

Increasing visibility and broadening networks was the second most reported need among initiative members and managers. Most participants mentioned wanting to increase their online visibility through the creation of websites or by effectively using social media platforms. Many teams perceived they lacked the skills to use online platforms:

“When we reached Ember we knew very clearly that at an organisational level we were lacking the capacity to show what was being done. [...] We had an impossibility to enter the social network world and from there share the work that was being done.”

L6, Baseline

An online presence was considered key to broaden networks, to form collaborations with others doing similar work, and to make initiatives known to donors or funders:

“The Ember team once indicated that they would assist us in coming up with website which I believe is very essential. Especially in our visibility and accessibility of our organisation’s activities by other interested parties.”

L3, Midline

Strengthening identity and storytelling & defining a strategic vision

Strengthening the identity of a initiative and improving its storytelling were closely linked to the initiatives’ ability to increase visibility. Initiative members and managers believed they needed a clear and compelling narrative to explain who they were, what they had achieved and why their work was important to attract attention and support:

“[...] how to write real story that can be [shared] with many people, with many funders of the well-wishers, so that we can raise the funds for the project activities here for the people’s here with the lived experience [...] we do write those stories for the donors, but [we want to learn] how we

can write the story in an attractive way so that the people here can really listen, they can know, they [see how important] mental health workers and low and middle income countries [are].”

L2, midline

Having a clearly defined identity was particularly spoken about by initiatives who, due to funding restrictions, had ended up expanding and diversifying their goals and activities:

“Because we have annual funding cycles, we have a different funder usually for different aspects of our projects and we have funding requirements every year. We look out for funding every year, we have quite a flexible yet stressful model. So because of which we do so many things, and I think it was time for us to sort of get grounded in what our true identity is as an organisation working specifically on mental health but with so many other cross cutting things, so many other social determinants that we are working on as well. We needed [to] also ground our identity and you know think about our values”

P4, Baseline

As mentioned by this same participant, setting an identity or narrowing down the focus of a initiative was seen as highly relevant for storytelling but also to improve a initiative’s strategic planning:

“[...] we had thought of and discussed values, we had thought of and discussed strategic planning and, you know, the big picture, we talked about planning for the next five years, what is our identity [...] to sort of solidify whatever it that we are doing but also with focus on the next five years ahead.”

P4, Baseline

A few initiatives expressed the need to define a strategic vision, as well as to set up medium or long-term plans to achieve this vision.

Measuring or disseminating impact

Initiative members and managers frequently mentioned the need to review or set up monitoring and evaluation systems of their projects. Generating data related to the impact of the project was seen as a relevant component of storytelling and as a tool that would enable them to access funding.

A few participants also mentioned having limited skills and knowledge to conduct their own research projects:

“[we are] less experienced in terms of writing, understanding the concept of research, understanding the usage of different tools, databases or systems for analysing data.”
L5, Endline

They also mentioned wanting guidance and support to be able to do their own research or to disseminate the research findings of projects already conducted in academic journals or through more accessible platforms to non-academic audiences:

“I noticed that we’ve been implementing so much, but the only way we document is through reports, we don’t really have much with regards to blogs, or, you know, doing blogs or articles that really portray these results, the figures that we’re getting from the project.”

L4, Baseline

What were the expectations of community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember? Securing necessary funding and resources

Many participants mentioned not fully knowing what to expect when they initially applied to partner with Ember. Some expressed never encountering a similar project before and some others mentioned having limited experience with international collaborators. However, once initiative members and managers started working with Ember, they reported expecting mentorship or guidance in the areas where they

had identified having more pressing needs, e.g. developing funding plans and gaining access to new funding opportunities, strengthening the initiative’s storytelling, increasing their visibility in online platforms, and developing strategic plans.

It is notable that many of these needs were related to the organisational management of their initiatives. Participants highlighted that while they were experts in conducting mental health work, liaising with communities, or implementing community-based initiatives, they were lacking skills like branding, social media managing, fundraising or other organisational related skills. Most initiatives Ember partnered with rely on small teams and work with limited budgets, therefore it is not surprising that initiatives like Ember can be useful to overcome gaps in the teams’ skill sets.

Areas where initiatives expected to get mentorship or guidance

The area where most participants reported wanting support was in defining their identity and strengthening their storytelling skills. Being able to define their values, identity and model to then be able to communicate it clearly was an expectation shared by many participants. When asked about their expectations, a participant shared the following:

“Having a proper well-thought through plan. How we sustain [the organisation], what our model actually looks like when we are selling it, we have been talking to people, cause I that was one thing we realized because [the organisation] has so many moving components and sometimes when we are trying to simply explain what it is we get carried away and we realize that for somebody who has absolutely no idea about [the organisation], it could get confusing. [...] So definitely designing and defining that as well by the end of the partnership.”

P1, Baseline

Clear communication alongside increased visibility were perceived as key needs to broaden their networks and to appeal to potential funders:

“[...] defining the model and what we have at the moment here, that’s the one, and another through the storytelling because it should be more captured, when we go there outside to the funding agencies and to the government, we [are] obviously interested in extending the mental health and psychosocial perspectives. So, it is the more support we are thinking for the storytelling and also about how we can demonstrate [...] the impact, and of course, the extending the network.”

L2, Baseline

To increase their visibility, initiative members and managers expected to receive support in creating a website, a logo or branding for the initiative:

“I think that we can make the project visibility and maybe after the logo we can go to start to work on the website and what are the components of the website because I think the website it just mean means that we can contact with more people.”

L6, Baseline

Importantly, besides support to develop specific outputs, initiative members and managers wanted themselves or their teams to develop skills to continue working independently once the partnership with Ember concluded.

Being able to demonstrate impact was also an area where initiative members and managers expected support. This was seen as a necessary component of effective storytelling to persuade funders or donors to support a initiative:

“[...] for us to grow we definitely need potential funders or donors or a strong network where we can then be able to get sustainable funding. [...] we also [need to] be able to carry out our own research so that we’ll be able then to justify our case.”

L3, Baseline

Initiative members and managers also mentioned wanting support in the design of medium and long-term strategic plans. The plans were considered necessary to define what would be the focus of organisations in the future and ensure that funds and resources are available to put these plans in place. The following was shared by two participants when asked about their expectations:

“We were hoping that the partnership would provide some sort of mentoring with thinking along lines of strategic planning and big picture things like that. As I was starting as a new team leader, I think we also thought that it will be great to get some sort of mentorship from Ember. Again this whole strategic planning everything, this is something I will be expected to work on the next five years.”

P4, Baseline

“[We are] thinking about all of our main objectives, about drafting some one-pagers for funding. Thinking of how we actually sell the organization to get more funding. And that’s one thing that we were really struggling with and again why we reached out to Ember was, are we doing the best that we can to actually look for funding to sustain the organization”

P1, Baseline

What were the key achievements identified by community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember, and what enabled these achievements?

Created a space for reflection

Overarching all positive comments, initiative members described an appreciation of the Ember partnership as a space to pause and reflect on their work, in a way they had not previously been able to prioritise due to more immediate commitments. The Ember partnership enabled them to step back and think more efficiently about the journey to follow with their organisation.

Initiative members particularly mentioned that the consistent nature of the weekly timeslot dedicated to brainstorming and reflection with the Ember team was “an anchoring activity every week” (P4, End-line). One initiative member said:

“Having that fixed allocated time that you do need to sort or sit and work on things. I mean because otherwise we get so used to that whole rat race and we keep on postponing things [...] And [now] we are sitting and really thinking through different aspects of the organization. Which I don't think we would have done, if it was left on our own”

P1, Baseline

Provided side-by-side support and mentorship

Across all interviews, initiative members shared that they had felt “accompanied” (L1, End-line) by Ember throughout the past year, whom they considered “[...] more than a mentor. Ember's been a buddy, like a friend” (P4, Endline). The relationship with Ember was described by participants as:

- Caring
- Empathetic
- Inclusive
- Responsive
- Flexible
- Productive
- Respectful
- Meaningful

Ember was perceived as both being part “an extended team” (P1, Endline) of the organisations it supported, but also a critical, external eye that could provide honest, practical support to enable reflection and growth:

“Ember helps you gain insight, gain awareness, see your programme from a different perspective, you know, how it will look like externally.”

L4, End-line

By providing this novel insight into organisations' work, participants explained that the partnership was able to set in motion processes that had been latent for some time:

“We're amazed [laughs] because things are being resolved that were stuck, you know? And it's that importance of when someone comes in with a new perspective, and [...] they untangle things that were [...] just going round, as my colleague says, in circles”

P6, Baseline

Initiative members highlighted Ember's capacity to actively listen and create an atmosphere where MH grassroots organisations could be “open” (P4, Baseline) and “transparent” (L1, End-line) and where collaboration was possible:

“I feel that I have a right to choose [...], for me that is a true partnership you know, you are on equal footing”

P3, Baseline

Enabled by this meaningful engagement, participants mentioned that Ember was able to provide them with a bespoke package of support, tailored to each organisation's needs and flexible with regards to the organisation's availability and resources.

One participant summarised this well:

“I think you could describe [Ember] as an organization that really cares about improving and strengthening the organisations it supports, based on the resources they already have and focusing on what their real challenges are, you know? But I think [Ember] does not come with a recipe, but rather, from a place of respect and care, they are willing to listen to what we have [to say] as organisations and work from there”

L1, End-line

Enabled access to expertise and skills-strengthening in a wide range of fields

Underlining this tailored support, initiative members described Ember as a multi-disciplinary pool of experts that organisations were able to draw from throughout the partnership based on their needs. One participant explained it as:

“[Ember has] a pool of many professionals [which] are used according to what are perceived as gaps within the organizations with which [Ember is] working, in order to strengthen them, right? I think this is the most important thing about Ember”

P6, Endline

Further to the expertise perceived within the Ember team, initiative members emphasised the benefit of the wider network of “experts around the world” (L5, Endline) that they had access to by being part of the Ember cohort.

All initiative members also shared that the Ember partnership had helped them acquire and strengthen a wide range of knowledge and skills, “with these sessions we have there’s always learning, there’s always progression” (L4, Midline). Specific areas in which organisations mentioned the partnership had supported them included:

- Writing skills
- Website development
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Developing resources to communicate with stakeholders

- Conducting research
- Ensuring staff wellbeing
- Using mental health jargon
- Communicating with potential funders
- Developing a theory of change
- Branding

Fostered a sense of empowerment and possibility

Linking across previous themes, many initiative members explained that the partnership with Ember had had an impact on the confidence of organisations’ teams, motivating them to believe more in their model and think bigger and with more conviction about future avenues of work. Various elements were described as leading to this, including:

- Gaining confidence through learning and strengthening of skills during the partnership:

“we can see the fruits of what we have learnt from that year, because then now we can be able to push from different avenues, you know, if it’s the matter of replication, if it’s the matter of internal funding, if it’s the matter of selling the model up there so that we are able to actually get the funds as an organisation without relying on external funding”

L4, Endline

- Having time to reflect on the value of the project and the team’s inherent strengths and worth:

“We are really grateful about how it has changed how we view ourselves as well, you know. It may not mean a lot for an external person, but [...] being recognised as partners and as legitimate people with a collective voice and having such visibility etc., it has boosted our self-esteem individually as well as a group. And this is really a very lasting impact on us.”

P3, COVID19

- Being motivated by Ember to work on outputs, think ambitiously and plan for the future:

“I think that we would have never imagined that we needed to work on how to pitch ourselves to [that] sector and now here we are doing it, and we are actually doing it I think which will be very successful. It has been really helpful and very targeted support that they have given us.”

P5, Endline

- Feeling inspired by the stories of other organisations within the Ember network:

“You look at how you are making us work together, [...] for us, for them, to get feedback from their fellow innovators from a different end of the world, you know, for whatever we are doing, it’s really empowering to do.”

L4, Endline

A means to broaden networks and access new opportunities

One of the most common achievements mentioned by participants was that of the partnership opening up opportunities for their organisations. Participants appreciated having worked with Ember to develop resources that could help them connect with a larger audience, for example developing pitch documents, or a website:

“[...] the website, it is also a vehicle now for us then to be noticed by potential donors, individuals. So yeah, [to] keep on our visibility. I think it is something that will definitely help us to sustain our project.”

L3, Endline

As well as this, a few participants mentioned that being mentioned by on Ember’s social media outputs had also been beneficial to their organisations:

“When Ember even on Facebook or on Internet or on Twitter or wherever, puts out “hey, these are our partners doing mental health”, it also helps highlight that we are

a mental health organisation.” [...] global recognition in that way that up until now we’ve never had.”

P5, Baseline

Initiative members spoke widely about feeling connected through the Ember network to other organisations like them and explained it had provided some relief realising that other MH grassroots organisations faced similar challenges to theirs:

“We can have a meeting together and share our experience [...] and leave out that lie, like “oh not only me” like working in that area and feel like “oh I feel so lonely”, but actually there are so many people around you and they are working yeah really hard. So like I was inspired by the energy”

L6, Midline

Finally, initiative members perceived that the wide range of contacts that they had been put in touch with through Ember’s wider network, including potential funders, webinars to take part in, or showcasing their profile on the Mental Health Innovation Network’s page, had been important to increase the organisation’s visibility:

“What Ember has allowed us to do is expand our vision, directly being able to appreciate more what was being done at a local level but at the same time open us up to the fact that there are other ways to get funding and connecting us to others, and at the same time this thing of exchanging with other people”P6, Baseline

Ensuring team's wellbeing through Ember's focus on care

Initiative members frequently highlighted the attention paid by Ember team to ensuring the wellbeing of their organisations' teams and taking a caring approach to the support offered. Participants expressed their gratitude for the pots of funding received from Ember throughout the year, which had allowed their organisations to sustain their work and feel looked after particularly in light of the challenges generated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

"But, while we started to work, the pandemic happened, and we were left there like if we had had a heart attack in front of a supervisor or someone. But it was nothing further from the truth, because the entire Ember team dedicated itself to taking care of us, those of us that were disoriented. [And] not only of us, we know that the rest of the innovations also [were taken care of], with some gesture: I don't know, for example, a fund to give ourselves a treat, [...] some pampering, some support"

P6, Endline

Beyond this financial relief, participants spoke frequently about how Ember had helped them realise the importance of looking after the team's wellbeing and had facilitated opportunities to prioritise this within the team. Namely, initiative members highlighted Ember's partnership with the organisation Body & Soul and team-building sessions that had taken place during the partnership. One participant, when speaking about these sessions, said:

"I don't think we've had a session where we have sort of known each other in that way, you know we work together, we eat together, we go to the field together but to have a team come together and just share and open up, that was... that's one thing that we have been able to achieve through Ember"

L4, COVID19

Participants mentioned that seemingly simple acts, such as Ember asking the team how they felt, or how things were progressing had gone a long way, making them feel:

"looked after [...] I felt like I had somebody to lean on and that, for me personally, that was such a huge support and I think that was great."

P1, Endline

Helped develop a clear vision and a path to achieve it

A commonly recurring achievement described was that of the partnership having supported their organisations to provide clarity around their identity as a team and organisation, and develop compelling ways to articulate this to others:

"I think what we have understood better over the last few months working with Ember is our identity of who we are as a team as of now."

P4, Endline

The mere process of having to speak to Ember about their work played a role in this *"the exercise of having to explain to Ember in detail the complex entity that our organisation is has been really great"* (L1, Endline), however a varied range of activities were mentioned as helping providing clarity, including: the mood board exercise conducted at the start of the partnership where organisation's strengths and challenges were discussed, working on a communications strategy and pitch documents, developing the organisation's branding, partaking in theory of change workshops and defining systems for monitoring and evaluation.

Initiative members explained that working with Ember had helped them understand the areas of work to prioritise moving forward:

“I think it is really around how do we describe ourselves, how do we talk about ourselves, how do we do the work that we need to do. Some of our biggest pieces has not been in the development or the content of our work, it has been in how do we make sure that we have a sustainable funding stream that is coming in, and Ember has been extremely helpful in helping us throughout the year, even during the initial pitches of Covid and other things, helping us actually continue to rethink that and really think about what our model is and how we shape that.”

P5, Endline

In line with this, many participants spoke about how working on this with Ember had also helped solidify the vision of the organisation and lay out a feasible path to attain their goals:

“So, it has provided the opportunities here to think boldly eh, from ourselves also about how the destinations here, how to go, where to go, and what is our present strength”

L2, Midline

When asked if their vision had changed over the previous year, almost all organisations said their vision had not changed but that they were more secure in their belief that they could make it happen:

“I think the vision is the same, but it’s now in like HD, right? [laughs] Now one can see it better, because like, there’s so many things that I feel that are now clear, really”

L1, Midline

What were the areas of improvement identified by community-based MH initiatives from their partnerships with Ember?

Challenges throughout the partnership

Although all initiative members and managers who took part in the interviews reported that their expectations had been met or exceeded, various challenges related to the partnerships were described. A few people reported language barriers, particularly when not all members of a team spoke English and therefore could not get involved in all activities:

“It has been nice for me to learn. There’s a language barrier that has not made it possible for my team mates to participate. It is something that I wouldn’t know how to solve, but learning from other experiences has been nice”

L1, Midline

Scheduling challenges were also reported when meetings needed to be coordinated between people based in very different time zones. This occasionally meant that some initiative members or managers could not get involved in group activities. A couple of participants also mentioned that there were certain activities that felt urgent but due to the capacity of the Ember team, had to be delayed, e.g. in the initiative’s rebranding work and production of a website.

Suggestions for improvement of the partnership

Participants identified three areas in which the partnerships could be improved:

1. Scheduling site visits- it was acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic was the sole reason why site visits could not take place, however many participants agreed that these would have been beneficial for the better understanding of the work conducted by initiatives as well as the context where this is conducted. Participants also felt that this would have allowed their whole teams to get to know the Ember team and be more involved in the partnerships:

“If you could extend this by another year we would definitely do that. It’s just seeing how this model really works in the sense because [the Ember team] are people who know the bigger picture and they’re outside of our setting. [...] One thing that I think would have helped [is if the Ember team] could have visited our teams and seen the work on the ground and actually seen each of our teammates as well like because we are a large team of people working. So it was only us in the core team, only we were involved in this whole process.”

P4, Endline

2. Further exchange and collaboration with other MH initiatives partnering with Ember- even though ‘huddles’ (Zoom meetings among all organisations where experiences could be shared around a chosen theme) were considered a good opportunity to interact with other Ember partners, participants felt that the richness and experience of the group of grassroot MH initiatives that Ember brought together could have been further leveraged. Participants suggested increasing the number of huddles or creating new platforms where all initiative members and managers could interact and exchange knowledge and ideas.

3. Increasing the duration of the partnerships- participants considered that one year was not sufficient to enable them to perform all necessary changes to achieve sustainability. They acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic caused delays and agreed that despite this, there were considerable achievements. However, participants considered that most of the work done had been useful to set the foundations for them to take the next steps and that the support from Ember while they took these next steps in their strategic plans would have been extremely valuable:

“[...] there is so much learning from these other innovators that could be done virtually that I think could have great meaning and would be so interesting. [...] I would love to listen to the innovators from across the world explain their work and how they do it. [...] I just think that a deep dive into these partners would be so fantastic. And, would really help people understand the new reaches of global mental health and how wide and how diverse it is.”

L5, Endline

Initiative members and managers mentioned that they were still in the process of executing changes or making use of the resources they developed during the partnership. Many participants mentioned that obtaining funding was a remaining need that was still threatening their capacity to be sustainable:

“[...] as an organisation, we’re still left in a very deep crisis, considering that, a very honest view, I think we completely agree [that] for these initiatives to function, definitely we need [to be] sustainable. [...] we need some collaborations with some of this potential donors, so that we are able then to function.”

L3, Endline

Some participants mentioned that Ember could support enabling connections with funders or providing training on grant proposal writing, to further strengthen the work done during the first year of the partnership:

“One of our activities is to connect and to link us with potential funders and I was expecting a more concrete linkage in that perspective. [...] I thought that we would be linked directly to potential funders and we will have some support in proposal writing skills, and then we can plan for actual, bigger activities because what we have been doing is really preparatory work.”

P3, Endline

Discussion

The current study evaluated the impact of the partnerships with Ember during the year 2020-2021. Ember supported 12 community-based MH initiatives working in low-resource settings to grow and thrive, through a tailored package of support that harnesses the intrinsic knowledge and innovation used by local communities to provide community-based MH care in their contexts.

Key takeaways

The stark difficulties faced by small-scale, community-based MH initiatives in navigating the current GMH funding landscape emerged clearly from this evaluation. The majority of participants reported needing to urgently overcome the critical funding situation threatening the sustainability of their initiative. This was reportedly driven by difficulties such as being unable to maintain employee salaries, secure long-term funding cycles, afford and retain the necessary infrastructure to run the initiative, or needing to diversify their activities to attract additional pots of funding. Such reports resonate with other accounts of GMH projects operating in low-resource settings²³ and highlight the strain that the current underinvestment in mental health, a widely recognised issue since the field's early days²⁴, is placing upon those working on the ground. Emphasising this, most other needs reported by participants related to the end-goal of accessing further financial resources. In light of the urgent need to engage new partners, initiative members reported requiring support to increase their online presence to advance their visibility and expand their network, develop a compelling narrative around the identity and value of their initiative, strengthen their long-term vision, and generate data to demonstrate the impact of their organisation. These findings exemplify the broad range of areas initiative members feel they must be competent in, in order to acquire funding. However, due to limited resources, initiatives are often unable to invest in

professional development or in expanding the team to diversify the team's skillset, resulting in an inescapable vicious cycle. An expansion of investment into community-based MH initiatives across contexts²⁵, must be accompanied by a diversification of the mechanisms by which funding pots are currently granted. These must be more accessible at the grassroots level, for example through an increased flexibility in the format and requirements of applications and reporting processes to funding bodies that account for limited resources - not limited impact - on the ground.

Logically, the areas in which initiative members expected the Ember partnership to support them largely reflected their perceived needs and centred around support accessing funding opportunities and building their team's skills in each of the highlighted areas. Defining their initiatives values, identity and model in order to communicate their initiative to others clearly and effectively was the most frequently reported expectation, followed by building skills around their online presence, branding, and research. Importantly however, when first probed about expectations, initiative members reported not knowing what to expect from the partnership as they had never encountered a similar concept, demonstrating the innovative nature of the mentorship initiative offered by Ember.

The large volume of positive experiences reported by participants points to an overall success of the Ember partnership. The majority of themes that emerged in this respect, centred around a sense of connectedness such as descriptions of Ember as a comfortable space to reflect and share, feeling accompanied by a supportive partner, or reports of leaving the partnership with a greater sense of empowerment. Interestingly, most initiative members highlighted that participating in Ember had allowed them to take the time to brainstorm as a team, something that they had previously been unable to do due to large volumes of day-to-day work. These findings elucidate the isolation and high levels of pressure within which many community-based MH initiatives operate in low-resource settings^{23, 26}, coupled with chronic under-resourcing of their initiatives. It was unsurprising therefore that initiative members also emphasised gratitude towards the relationships forged with other organisations from the Ember cohort or gaining access to the broader GMH landscape. Fostering collaboration within this field, including creating opportunities for meaningful participation and knowledge exchange between organisations operating in similar contexts, must be an immediate priority for the field in order to support initiatives at the grassroots to thrive. Indeed, although throughout the Ember partnership ‘huddles’ were organised, participants fed back that they would have liked these relationships to have been further leveraged throughout the year. Setting a more comprehensive agenda from the inception of the partnership and designing new platforms for communication among initiatives, e.g., a shared database of contacts or organising more webinars in ‘show and tell’ format, are potential ideas to take forward.

Across accounts, two elements were consistently highlighted as positive by initiative members: the horizontality of their relationship with the Ember team and the flexible, tailored format of the support provided. It is recognised that power imbalances and centralised decision-making are a significant barrier and deterrent for community-based initiatives across many sectors to engage in partnerships¹². The results of this evaluation demonstrate that fostering eco-systems of

collaboration and partnership based on trust and conversation, and facilitating south-to-south learning through providing online platforms that enable knowledge transfer, have the potential to cultivate long-term, sustainable partnerships. These can both help strengthen and empower community-based MH initiatives operating in contexts with high need, as well as enable south-to-north learning that could complement and enhance Western systems of care. Indeed, successful examples of south-to-north learning of mental health initiatives are already emerging such as the Friendship Bench, which began in Zimbabwe and is now being implemented in New York²⁷. Further, consistent with lessons from Ember’s pilot, these findings demonstrate that ensuring that support packages are carefully crafted to be appropriate to local understandings of mental health, to the mental health system structure within a particular context, and to the specific needs and vision of an organisation, are imperative to the success of the partnerships of this type.

Initiative members also spoke fondly of Ember’s caring approach to the relationship formed and expressed appreciation for the importance that had been granted to creating opportunities to enhance team wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the importance of looking after the mental health of those who care for others across healthcare fields (28–30). Although current research investigating the mental health burden of healthcare providers in different scenarios has mainly focused on medical workers, supporting the wellbeing of employees working within and outside the mental health sector is emerging as a strong driver of investment into this sector globally (31). Participants in this evaluation highlighted that having received funds specifically for spending in the area of wellbeing had been very beneficial during the pandemic – funders should be open to adapting to contextual needs in times of crises and particularly, to providing resources that can safeguard the wellbeing of those working in mental health.

Despite the pressing need to increase investment in the GMH field, funding represents one of a complex set of interlinked areas in which organisations require support in order to thrive. Participants highlighted the diversity of areas in which they had been able to develop their skills through the partnership, elucidating the value of Ember’s multidisciplinary team, with expertise in areas ranging from business, design, communication, to research and storytelling. Collaborative partnerships that foster collective learning and reciprocal support can help overcome insecurities faced by initiative members, redefining the meaning of ‘expertise’ which is often Western and academia-driven, and promote the sustainability of initiatives through skills-strengthening of team members in their preferred areas. Nonetheless, participants’ comments on remaining needs or the desire for the partnership to have been longer, exemplifies the need to have open conversations about timeframes and management of expectations, and careful consideration of exit strategies.

Limitations of the evaluation

A few limitations have to be taken in consideration. In the process of collecting and analysing qualitative data, there is always a risk of introducing observer bias, both in terms of skewing the interviewee’s answers towards certain themes or in the way data is analysed and interpreted. To counteract this, all interviews were second coded and disagreements between coders were discussed with another researcher.

Respondent bias is also a common risk of qualitative research. It is possible that some participants will associate researchers to the Ember team and therefore provide either overly positive feedback of their experience with Ember (to satisfy their partners) or provide socially desirable answers (to seem skilled, competent or just generally doing a good job). To counteract this, interviewees were reminded at different stages that all the information they provided would be anonymised prior to dissemination.

Conclusion

Although it is often discussed in the field of global mental health that further innovation is needed to address the rising burden of disease attributed to mental health conditions, a rich ecosystem of community-based MH initiatives is already working in unique and impactful ways to address the needs of their communities. In light of this, Ember was developed to support the needs of these community-based MH initiatives to help them thrive. Through establishing open, collaborative partnerships which aim to counteract more top-down, traditional funder-grantee relationships, Ember delivers a 12-month package of active learning and funding tailored to the initiatives' needs in a diverse range of areas.

This evaluation explored the needs, expectations, achievements, and challenges of community-based MH initiatives during the 2020-2021 Ember partnership. Findings bring to light the diversity of areas in which initiatives would like to be supported in, and the unique offering of Ember in response to these. Results highlight the broad success of the partnership. Feedback received on areas of improvement will be taken forward to strengthen subsequent Ember partnerships.



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