

NIHR Global Health Research Group on Promoting Children's and Adolescent's Mental Wellbeing in Sub-Saharan Africa Project

1 INTRODUCTION

With £2.88 million in funding from the National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR), the University of Aberdeen, the University of Rwanda and Addis Ababa University are working together on a four-year project to design, deliver and evaluate the impact of a mindfulness intervention in schools on child and adolescent mental wellbeing in sub-Saharan Africa.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends preventative mental health interventions in schools. When children and adolescents focus on being mindful, they slow down, take their time, and focus on an activity or image in a way that is relaxing and stress-free. Practising mindfulness makes children and adolescents happier. It improves their attention span, helps them manage stress, increases their sense of well-being, and improves their communication skills. It also improves their school performance. However, most previous studies have been done in schools in Europe and North America. We do not know if mindfulness improves the well-being of children and adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa. There is a need to know if it does so and if it would be a good use of government resources. We have designed a project which will help answer these questions.

WHERE WE WILL DELIVER THE PROJECT, AND WHO WILL DO IT

We are delivering the project between 2022 and 2026 in Rwanda and Ethiopia, which are two of the poorest countries in the world. The wellbeing of children is poor in both countries, and school attainment is low. In Rwanda, we will work in Burera District in Northern Province, which has a high rural population, high rates of poverty, illiteracy and substance abuse, and cross-border migration (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2021; National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2022). In Ethiopia, we are working in Addis Ketema, one of the poorest sub-cities in Addis Ababa, which has high rates of overcrowding and poor

sanitation, high rates of substance abuse, violence, and crime (Engdawork et al., publication forthcoming).

WHAT WE'RE DOING

We are researching ways of providing an affordable and acceptable mindfulness intervention that improves children's and adolescents' wellbeing. We first consulted with policymakers in both countries when applying for funding. We are now working with parents and policymakers to agree on delivering and testing it. Teacher-educators working with primary school teachers are developing a culturally appropriate mindfulness intervention, using the Warrior Programme (© The Sanctuary) as a foundation, and adapting it to the local contexts, using local stories and traditions. The mindfulness intervention will be integrated within the school day. The community will be consulted on the intervention at the design and intervention stages. Teachers involved in developing the intervention will train other teachers in their schools. Teachers will deliver the intervention as part of the primary school curriculum so that it reaches all children.

We will test the intervention with the community to provide policymakers with high-quality evidence on how well it works. We will also look at the cost and benefits of delivering it in all schools.

The testing will include talking to children and adolescents, their teachers, and parents about their experiences of the intervention through interviews and focus group discussions. We will also test children's and adolescents' mental wellbeing before and after we deliver the intervention to see what improvement it makes. We will also compare children who received the mindfulness training with similar children who did not. This will control for the effects of other changes in children's lives which may be going on at the same time.

We will provide feedback on all our findings to policymakers in Rwanda and Ethiopia through workshops and briefings. Key individuals at national level in Rwanda and Ethiopia are also involved in the project's academic team and International Advisory Board. This will include the findings from an 'economic model' showing the potential cost savings and benefits of introducing mindfulness practices in all schools.

We will tell international organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund about our findings. We will disseminate the findings through our website and social media in English and French. We will invite relevant organisations from across Sub-Saharan Africa to regular webinars disseminating information about the project.

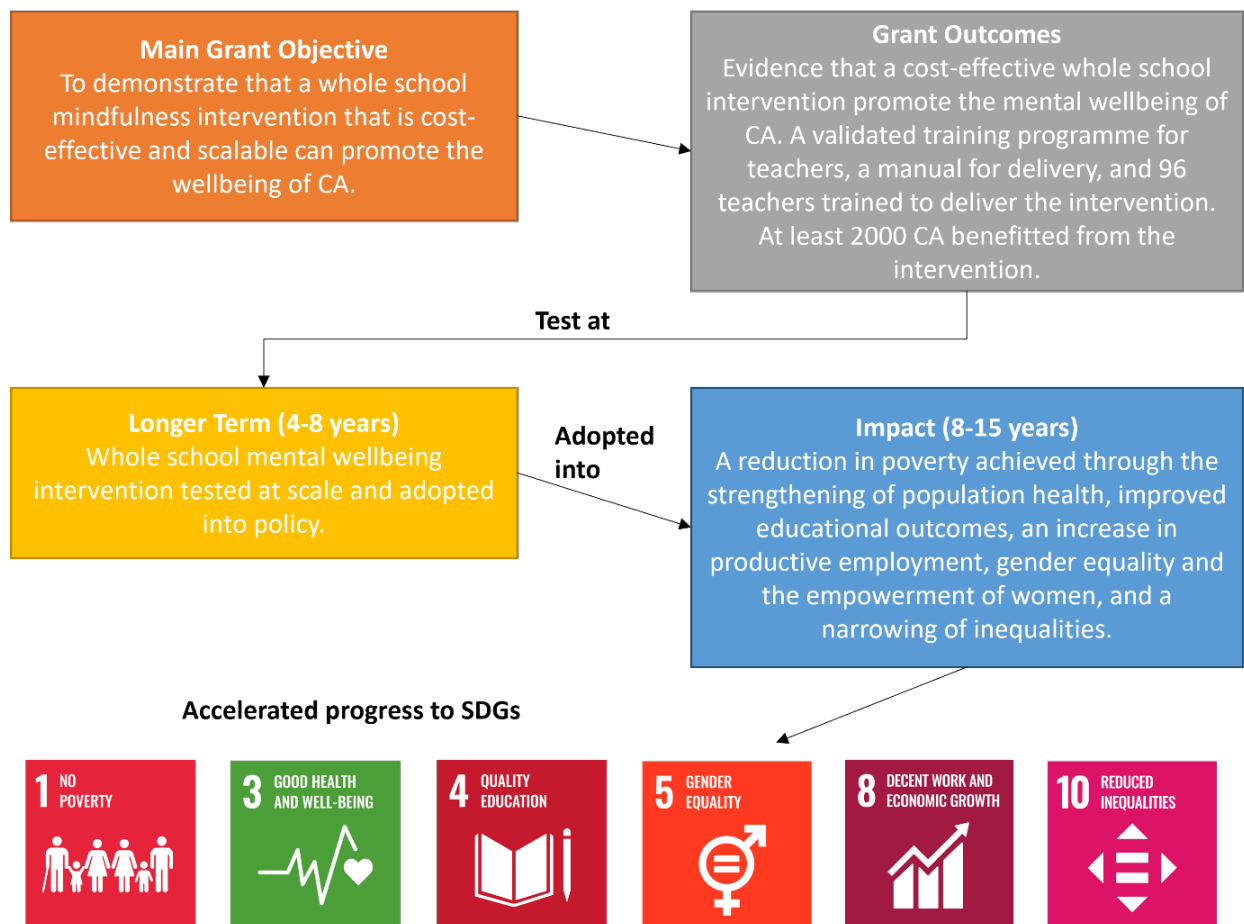
Our mindfulness intervention and research-related training materials and recordings are being published online open access at www.abdn.ac.uk/nih-camw

WHY THIS RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT

What happens during childhood has a strong influence on children's future mental health. Improving children's and adolescents' wellbeing will enable them to enjoy their childhood and develop to their full potential. It will also improve their lives as adults, making them happier, less likely to develop mental and physical illnesses and better able to play a full role in society. It also reduces healthcare expenditure.

2 IMPACT

Our impact pathway shows how we will go from the main grant objective of demonstrating the effectiveness and scalability of a mindfulness intervention on CA mental wellbeing, to the accelerated progress of the Sustainable Development Goals.



3 KEY PUBLICATIONS TO DATE

1. Abbott, P., D'Ambruoso, L., Yared, M., McNamee, P., Hailu, T. and Nzabaliwra, W. (2023) '**Study protocol for a Critical Realist pilot cluster-randomised controlled trial of a whole-school-based mindfulness intervention (SMBI) promoting child and adolescent mental wellbeing in Rwanda and Ethiopia**', *medRxiv*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2023.05.10.23289769> (Accessed 07th June 2023).
2. Abbott, P., Stanley, I., Nixon G., and D'Ambruoso, L. (2024) '**A protocol for a systematic critical realist synthesis of school mindfulness interventions designed to promote pupils' mental wellbeing**', *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol 11-2023. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1309649> (Accessed 08th February 2024).
3. Abbott, P., Shanks, R, Stanley, I., and D'Ambruoso, L. (2023). '**A protocol for a critical realist systematic synthesis of school climate change interventions designed to promote pupils' wellbeing in Low- and Middle-Income Countries**', *medRxiv*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2023.05.18.23290176> (Accessed 07th June 2023).

4 REFERENCES

Engdawork, K., Yared, M., Hailu, T. and Sebsibe, E. (publication forthcoming) **Context of Children and Adolescent Mental Health in Ethiopia. A political economy analysis (PEA)**.

National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), **Rwanda Household Survey 2019/2020 report**, March 2021. Available at: <https://statistics.gov.rw/publication/rwanda-household-survey-20192020> (Accessed 08th February 2024).

National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), **Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2019-2020, District profile, Northern Province**, February 2022. Available at: <https://statistics.gov.rw/publication/1781> (Accessed 08th February 2024).

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Contact details:

Project central inbox: nihrcmw@abdn.ac.uk

Joint-PIs Professor Pamela Abbott: p.abbott@abdn.ac.uk and Professor Wenceslas Nzabaliwra: wenzabaliwra@gmail.com

