ADVOCACY & MESSAGING BRIEF

Safeguarding Children's Mental Well-being in Mombasa

August 2024

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PURPOSE & STRATEGIC INTENT

This Advocacy and Messaging Brief synthesizes high-level insights from the Multisectoral Roundtable on Mental Well-being Support Mechanisms for Children in Mombasa, organized by the Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA) on 23rd of August 2024, on the Google Meet Platform. Drawing on evidence and multisectoral perspectives, the brief serves as a strategic advocacy tool to advance policy reform, system strengthening, and coordinated investment, while reinforcing CEFRESA's mission to champion community healing, child-centered interventions, and sustainable solutions.

The brief seeks to:

- Position children's mental well-being as a rights-based, preventive, and development-critical priority
- Translate multisectoral insights into clear advocacy messages and policy asks
- Influence county and national decision-making across education, health, social protection, and child protection systems
- Shift public and institutional narratives from crisis response to early, sustained, and system-wide action
- Mobilize shared responsibility among government, civil society, communities, and development partners

CONTEXTUAL IMPERATIVES

Children in Mombasa are growing up amid intersecting pressures shaped by urban poverty, insecurity, substance use, family stress, digital exposure, and the erosion of community safety nets. These dynamics increasingly manifest emotional distress, behavioral challenges, school disengagement, and heightened protection risks, often first detected in schools and community spaces that lack the mandate, tools, and coordination to respond effectively.

Kenya's policy and legal architecture is progressive. The Constitution (2010), the Children Act (2022), the National Mental Health Policy, and the School Health and Child Protection Guidelines provide a strong foundation for action. The critical challenge, however, lies in implementation.

Current responses to children's mental well-being remain:

- Predominantly reactive rather than preventive
- Fragmented across sectors and actors
- Under-resourced and inconsistently coordinated
- Reliant on individual goodwill rather than institutionalized systems

It is within this context that the Multisectoral Roundtable emerged as a rare and intentional space, bringing together educators, child protection practitioners, community-based organizations, psychosocial professionals, human rights defenders, and county actors to collectively interrogate these gaps and articulate what must change to protect children at scale.

ADVOCACY FRAME

Children's mental well-being is not an optional social service.

It is a foundational condition for learning, protection, participation, dignity, and long-term development.

Failure to act early and systemically constitutes not only a service delivery gap, but a rights failure, with long-term social, economic, and civic consequences for Mombasa and the nation.

CORE ADVOCACY MESSAGE

These messages represent the shared advocacy position emerging from the Multisectoral Roundtable and are intended to guide policy dialogue, systems reform, and coordinated action across sectors.

Prevention is protection.

Early, sustained investment in children's mental well-being prevents harm, reduces public costs, and limits reliance on crisis response.

Schools are frontline protection systems.

Educators are often the first to identify distress, but effective response requires institutional mandates, resourcing, and clear referral pathways, not individual effort alone.

Children reach peers before systems.

Peer support must be intentionally designed, safeguarded, and mentored within formal child protection and psychosocial frameworks.

Communities must be strengthened, not substituted.

Grassroots spaces foster care and resilience, but require child-centered design, capacity strengthening, and formal linkage to public systems to ensure safety and sustainability.

Policy without implementation is a rights failure.

Legal and policy commitments must be translated into coordinated, adequately resourced action, informed by continuous, disaggregated data.

STRATEGIC AUDIENCES AND PRIORITY ADVOCACY ASKS

Why Government Leadership Matters

Government institutions hold the constitutional and statutory mandate for policy formulation, public financing, coordination, and system-wide implementation. Sustainable progress on children's mental well-being is not possible without deliberate government leadership and institutionalization.

Strategic Advocacy Position for Government

Children's mental well-being must be institutionalized as a core public function, embedded within education, health, and child protection systems, rather than treated as an auxiliary, project-based, or discretionary intervention.

Priority Advocacy Asks:

Government is called upon to:

- Integrate mental well-being into school governance, inspection, and quality assurance frameworks.
- Strengthen & operationalize referral pathways linking schools, community health promoters, health facilities, and social protection services.
- Allocate predictable and adequate resources to preventive and age-appropriate psychosocial interventions.
- Support routine generation and use of data, including disaggregated child mental well-being indicators, for planning and accountability
- Enable joint planning, coordination, and sustained partnerships with civil society and community-based actors.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL INFLUENCERS

Why Civil Society Leadership Matters

Civil society organizations and social influencers play a critical role in shaping social norms, building community trust, reducing stigma, and extending reach beyond formal institutions. Their proximity to children, families, and communities positions them as essential actors in translating policy intent into lived impact.

Strategic Advocacy Position for Civil Society

Civil society organizations and social influencers serve as vital bridges between children's lived realities and public systems, uniquely positioned to normalize help-seeking, amplify child-centered narratives, and strengthen community-level accountability for children's mental well-being.

Priority Advocacy Asks

Civil society and influencers are called upon

- Intentionally integrate children's mental well-being into organizational programming, campaigns, and advocacy agendas
- Apply rights-based, inclusive, and age-appropriate approaches across interventions and communications
- Use platforms and influence to shift public discourse from silence and stigma toward care, prevention, and early support
- Partner with schools and county systems to strengthen referral pathways and continuity of care

EDUCATORS AND LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Why Education System Leadership Matters

Schools and learning institutions are often the first and most consistent spaces where children's emotional distress, behavioral changes, and protection concerns are observed. As trusted environments in children's daily lives, education systems play a pivotal role in early identification, prevention, and referral, provided they are institutionally supported to do so.

Strategic Advocacy Position for Educators

Educators are not expected to be therapists; however, learning institutions must function as protective ecosystems, with clear mandates, protocols, and partnerships that enable the safe identification, response, and referral of children experiencing mental well-being challenges.

Priority Advocacy Asks

Education systems and learning institutions are called upon to:

- Designate school-based mental well-being focal persons and establish clear response and referral protocols
- Integrate psychosocial support and mental well-being into school governance, child protection structures, and safeguarding policies
- Strengthen referral linkages with community-based services, health facilities, and social protection actors
- Advocate for institutional, not individual, responsibility and resourcing for children's mental well-being within education systems

DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS AND PHILANTHROPIC ACTORS

Why Development Partner Leadership Matters

Development partners and philanthropic actors play a critical role in enabling scale, innovation, learning, and sustainability. Their investments shape priorities, influence system design, and determine whether promising approaches remain fragmented pilots or evolve into coordinated, long-term solutions for children's mental well-being.

Strategic Advocacy Position for Development Partners

Investments in children's mental well-being represent high-impact, preventive, and system-strengthening opportunities, yielding long-term social, economic, and developmental returns. Strategic financing must prioritize prevention, coordination, and institutionalization over short-term, crisis-driven interventions.

Priority Advocacy Asks

Development partners and philanthropic actors are called upon to:

- Prioritize funding for preventive and systems-building approaches, not only emergency or crisis response.

- Support multisectoral coordination, learning, and alignment across education, health, and child protection systems
- Invest in locally rooted, child-centered innovations with potential for scale and sustainability
- Resource evidence generation, learning, and adaptive programming to inform policy and practice

EVIDENCE, LEARNING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Multisectoral Roundtable reaffirmed the urgent need for continuous, disaggregated, and context-specific evidence on children's mental well-being in Mombasa to inform effective planning, resource allocation, and system accountability.

CEFRESA positions this convening as a foundational step in an evidence-informed advocacy agenda, linking research, dialogue, and action. As part of this commitment, CEFRESA will undertake a Rapid Assessment on the Status of School Mental Health Promotion in Mombasa, with findings to be shared through a participatory dissemination process that engages policymakers, practitioners, communities, and children.

Evidence is a strategic tool for accountability, learning, and better decision-making, ensuring that policies, investments, and interventions respond to children's lives and deliver measurable impact.

CALL FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

CEFRESA calls upon all stakeholders to move decisively from shared concern to shared responsibility, recognizing that protecting children's mental well-being is both a rights obligation and a development imperative.

This collective action requires stakeholders to:

- Prioritize children's mental well-being as a foundational condition for learning, protection, participation, and dignity.
- Invest in preventive, coordinated, and child-centered systems that act early, reduce harm, and strengthen resilience.
- Strengthen collaboration across education, health, community, and civil society sectors to ensure continuity of care and system-wide impact.
- Listen intentionally to children's lived realities and respond with urgency, accountability, and care.

Protecting children's mental well-being today is not only an act of care for the present. It is a strategic investment in Mombasa's social cohesion, economic resilience, and civic future.