EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“INTORE NTIBYARWA, IRARERWA”

‘A leader is not born; a leader is nurtured. ‘ (Rwanda)



UBUNTU IN ACTION

Youth-Led Policy Recommendations for

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN EASTERN AFRICA

Across Eastern Africa, young people are already leading the response to the region’s youth mental health challenges. Creating peer support groups, delivering therapy, making films to fight stigma, running school programmes, building digital platforms, advocating for policy change, and reaching communities that formal systems rarely reach.

Across 2025 and 2026, the Sawa Project brought together 29 of these leaders from Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. As psychologists, artists, community organisers, filmmakers, and advocates, they were already supporting youth mental health where services are scarce. Through mentorship, training, network building and seed funding, the Sawa leaders designed and delivered ten youth-focused mental health initiatives, reaching over 2,900 people directly and thousands more online.

"When young people are given the space, mentorship and resources to lead, they don't just participate in change,they drive it. The time to invest in youth leadership is now."

Peter Ogoi, Sawa leader, Kenya

ABOUT THE SAWA PROJECT

The Sawa Project is a 21-month initiative by the Kofi Annan Foundation in partnership with MCW Global and the Africa Alliance of YMCAs. Sawa invested in young mental health leaders, aged 25-35, already working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people across Eastern Africa. The project provided leadership development, mentorship, advocacy training, network building and seed funding.

This paper brings together youth mental health policy recommendations from the Sawa leaders. Drawing on their professional and frontline experience, lived experiences, cultural knowledge and the solutions they created through the Sawa Project.

WE ARE CALLING FOR:

- ☐ Policies that arrive in communities, co-designed with young people from the start.
- ☐ Funding that is accessible to youth-led organisations and strengthens their capacity to sustain the work beyond any single grant.
- ☐ Research that includes young people and communities as partners in creating knowledge.
- ☐ Networks that share power and support the wellbeing of young practitioners.
- ☐ Youth-centric mental health support where young people already are.
- ☐ Ethical storytelling approaches that fight stigma and turn communities into places of support for young people.

The full report shares the Sawa leaders' stories, proverbs, examples and recommendations; showing what is possible when young people are trusted and resourced to lead.

Access the full report: kofiannanfoundation.org/ubuntuinaction

Kofi Annan Foundation · MCW · YMCA Africa Alliance

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