Maternal health research in sub-Saharan Africa: time for more attention to community engagement – a scoping review

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1 Centuries of not asking community members what they need

- Historically too little involvement of the local community during North-South collaborations[1] → effect on research outcomes → erroneous interventions
- Relatively worse in maternal health (MH) research, as women are structurally excluded from decisions on their health in L(M)ICs[2,3]
- Causal relation or not: disproportionately high maternal mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and current decline not on track for the MH Sustainable Development Goal[4,5]
- Community engagement (CE) has the potential to improve MH in SSA

2 Defining community engagement is complex

- Study objective: to identify different CE approaches used in MH research in SSA through a scoping review
- Further interpretation through narrative synthesis with strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis
- Obstacle during screening: no universal definition of CE in literature[6]
  → Decision to take CE as overarching term and use definition of CE from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

"the process of working collaboratively with groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations with respect to issues affecting their well-being"(CDC, 1997)[7]

3 From screening to inductive analysis

- Search terms: synonyms of CE, MH and SSA
- Searched five academic and two grey literature-oriented databases to also detect local reports
- 1381 entries Title/Abstract screened for CE in any type of MH research in SSA → 287 Full-Text → 141 inclusions
- Data analysis: narrative synthesis in an inductive manner, i.e. identifying and categorizing approaches bottom-up

4 14 CE approaches within interventional MH research

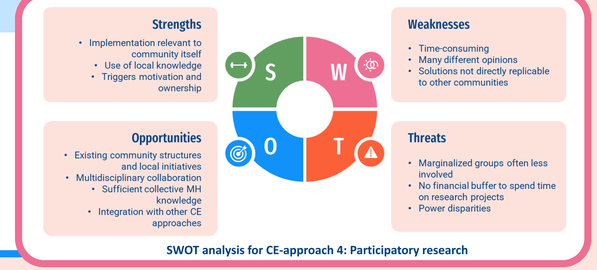
- Unexpected finding: nearly all eligible papers studied CE in MH **interventions:** either interventional participatory research projects or reports about CE in MH programs
  - Potential explanation: interventional research more ethical in L(M)ICs as it directly benefits the community
- Most studies: CE aided success of MH interventions

Fourteen CE approaches resulting from narrative synthesis (highest → lowest occurence):

1. *Awareness campaigns*
2. *Community-based evaluation*
3. *Community consultation*
4. *Participatory research*
5. *Male involvement*
6. *Community health workers*
7. *Task shifting*
8. *Community mobilization*
9. *Capacity building*
10. *Community leader endorsement*
11. *Community-based drug distribution*
12. *Community-based mortality registration*
13. *Community-based transportation*
14. *Social accountability initiatives*

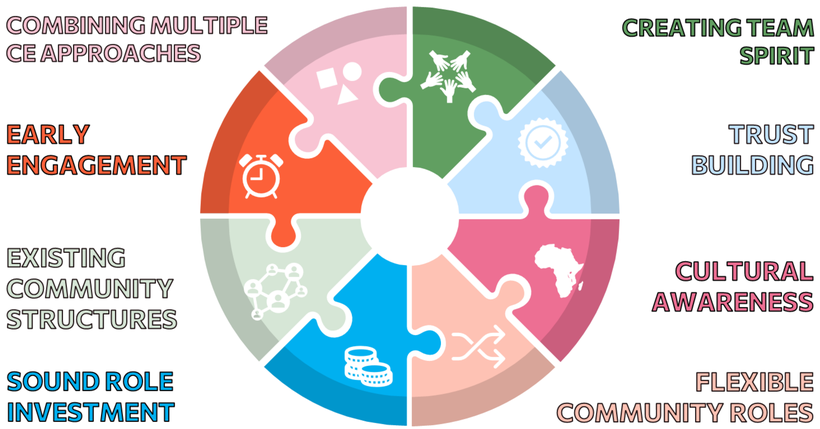
5 SWOT analysis

- SWOT analysis: facilitating and impeding internal and external factors
  → performed for all fourteen CE approaches
- Further analysis of relationships in the data → eight main components/conditions for successful CE (see 6)



SWOT analysis for CE-approach 4: Participatory research

6 Eight main themes for successful CE



7 Key take-away messages

- **CE is important for ethical and successful implementation of MH interventions and interventional research**
- **There is a lack of knowledge on CE approaches for non-interventional MH research**
- **The eight themes resulting from this review affect the effectivity of CE in MH interventions**
- **Local context determines which of the eight themes are most important and beneficial in that particular setting**

8 Limitations

- Broad research question made it possible to explore existing data and obtain an overview of the evidence
  → But also led to complex and heterogeneous data that was difficult to analyze and categorize
- Unclear terminology of CE-related terms in literature
  → High chance of missing synonyms in the search string
- Papers only reporting on the performed CE in the discussion section
  → Missed eligible inclusions due to search in Title/Abstract

9 What's next?

- Plan for 2024: set up a research agenda for hypertensive disorders of pregnancy in Ghana, in collaboration with Action on Preeclampsia (APEC) Ghana, a CE expert through years of patient advocacy work
- Use the outcomes of this review for designing an inclusive and engaging process
- Side project: analyze and report on the CE activities of APEC Ghana

➔ **please help us learn**: what is your experience with CE in research in L(M)ICs? Which components were most important? Which did not have the envisioned effect?

Call to action: *in the future, please plan how you will perform CE during your research projects and report on it afterwards, so that we can fill this knowledge gap.*

ACTION ON PREECLAMPSIA GHANA

More information on https://apecghana.org/

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