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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

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Cover photo:

Aya, 13, held a note she wrote to encourage children at risk of dropping out to stay in school as part of a community initiative at a UNICEF-supported child friendly centre in Altal city, Rural Damascus, Syria, on 21 October 2023. The note reads: "Be stronger, the future is waiting for you." © UNICEF/UNI482292/Salaas

Acknowledgements

Why social movements for mental health and psychosocial support?

> "A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution."

Martin Luther King, Jr.
American Baptist minister and civil rights activist

Social movements are the core of social change and represent joint efforts by citizens, groups and communities bound by similar goals to overcome their condition, tackle social issues together or resist domination (UNICEF, 2023). They can also be defined as "a set of people with a shared experience of injustice, who organize themselves to build their collective power and leadership", and develop a shared agenda for change, which they pursue through collective action, with some continuity over time (Batliwala, 2021).

Social movements represent more intense and visible moments in a "continuous social change process" in which the pace accelerates and the scale increases as the initial group generates more debates and rallies more people in a snowball effect nurtured by activism, dialogue, networking, mobilization and media engagement (UNICEF, 2023).

Social movements have proven highly effective in raising awareness about social injustices, challenging discriminatory legislation and social and gender norms, and demanding the redistribution of power and resources (i.e., services and control over productive assets, knowledge and capabilities) or access to opportunities (i.e., education or the labour market).

Examples of social movements for change around the world include the #MeToo movement, the #NiUnaMenos (Not one [woman] less) (Pallapothu, 2021) movement, the #IwillGoOut campaign (2017) in India, as well as the global climate change, Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ movements. Historical examples include the women's suffrage movement, the US civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movement.

The increase in social and digital media in recent years has expanded the power of – and interest in – global social movements for change which can have wide and lasting impacts on a variety of issues (UNICEF, 2023), including mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). An MHPSS example of a social movement is the Movement for Global Mental Health (MGMH), rooted in the foundational principles of relying on evidence for effective treatments and upholding the human rights of those with mental disorders. Other possible outcomes of such social movements for MHPSS include legislation changes for mental health rights, policy changes for increased MHPSS funding, and stigma reduction (Batliwala, 2021).

As this chapter outlines, Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) efforts can embrace social movements by: supporting the meaningful participation of children, adolescents, families, communities and organizations in social change; facilitating conversation, dialogue and debate on key issues among different community members, groups and decision-makers; amplifying the voices of those most affected; helping to build networks; providing accurate information on the issues; and supporting policy and systems change.

While social movements are typically neither initiated nor directed by development organizations, UNICEF and other agencies have unique and important roles, as observers, conveners, resource partners or amplifiers, in supporting them to accelerate mental health and psychosocial wellbeing for children/adolescents and caregivers.

Who should use this document?

This chapter of the SBC for MHPSS package is tailored to a global and diverse set of change-makers committed to improving MHPSS through social movements, including MHPSS practitioners, humanitarian aid workers, public health professionals, educators and policymakers. This chapter serves as a valuable resource for those seeking to support and evaluate social movements for MHPSS, including links to assessment tools and checklists with metrics that focus on a strong grassroots base, diverse leadership and communication-enabling infrastructure (Batliwala, 2021).

How should this document be used?

This chapter is designed to be accessible and practical. Readers are encouraged to make use of the guidance, case studies and resources provided that are relevant to their specific needs.

While there are no clear-cut cases that are exclusive to different types of change-makers, practitioners may use the information as guidance on how to contribute to social movements linked to MHPSS. Policymakers and decision-makers may focus more on how to create a formal space and role for social movements in the design and implementation of MHPSS activities, services and initiatives.

How was this document developed?

This chapter was developed on the basis of consultations and a survey involving MHPSS and SBC experts and practitioners, and insights from a desk review on SBC programmatic approaches for MHPSS. Furthermore, a review team comprising a diverse group of MHPSS and SBC experts provided additional technical feedback and input to the chapter, which also incorporates real-world insights and lessons learned.

Mitha, from Aceh, Indonesia, poses with a sign reading 'How are you, really?' as part of a campaign to raise awareness on World Mental Health Day 2020. © UNICEF/UNI390563

What are social movements and why are they important for MHPSS?

Social movements seek to enact change by empowering individuals and marginalized groups to use their voice, build support to address inequities, uphold the rights of individuals and communities, and mobilize stakeholders towards a common cause.

According to [Roger Hart's ladder of children's participation](#), participation in social movements exists on a continuum from co-option and manipulation at one end (where token participants are chosen without any real input or power) to collective action and citizen control at the other (where people, including children, set their own agenda) (UNICEF, 1992). Social movements are collective action efforts and reveal strengths that already exist in communities and gaps that need to be addressed.

Supporting social movements can increase the likelihood of sustainable programme outcomes and long-term programme success. For MHPSS, empowering communities and youth through engagement, participation and advocacy can lead to more open conversations, reduced stigma and improved mental health support over the long term.
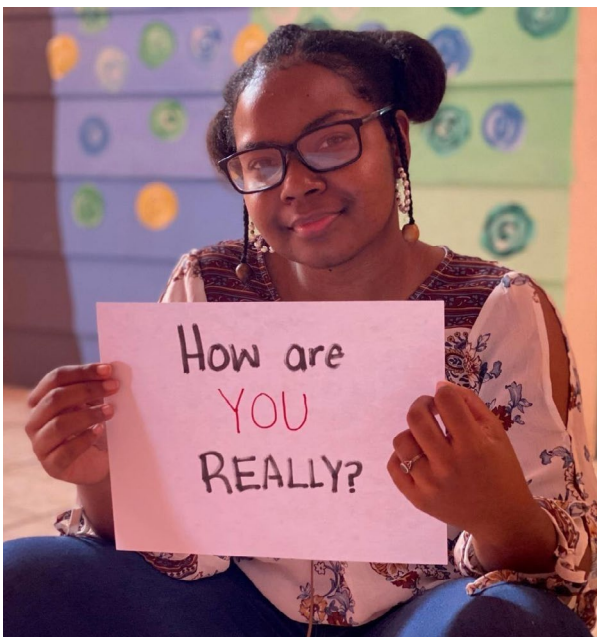
Renata, 24 from Belize, poses with a sign reading 'How are you, really?' as part of a campaign to raise awareness on World Mental Health Day 2020. © UNICEF/UNI390576/Daly

Chapter 3: Social movements for mental health and psychosocial support

MHPSS principles align with the broader goals of social movements in six ways.

1 Similar to social movements, MHPSS **emphasizes the rights of individuals and communities**, seeking to address inequities and amplify the voices of those who may be disenfranchised by political, economic, social and cultural systems.

2 **Participation** in social movements ensures that people have a say in their mental health care and input to solutions that are culturally appropriate and tailored to the local context. This allows for a diversity of voices at decision-making tables, including children, people with disabilities, all genders, and racial and ethnic minorities.

3 MHPSS principles intersect with the objectives of social movements by aiming to **challenge harmful stigma and social norms** in order to bridge gaps in programmes and policies. For instance, [efforts to combat female genital mutilation (FGM) have benefited from the influence of social movements](#) (UNICEF, 2022a), showcasing the impact that collective action can have on challenging and changing deeply entrenched practices.

Example

Prior to the 1980s, the international community did not sufficiently view violence against women and girls, including FGM, as a major issue. If violence against women and girls was recognized as an issue at all, it was seen as being under the purview of national governments, not a subject of international law. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was passed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1979. Violence against women and girls was also widely viewed as a private act or a domestic matter carried out by private individuals. A transnational movement managed to get governments to introduce legislation protecting girls and women from violence, launched programmes for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) and challenged social norms that drive GBV. They changed the narrative around GBV.

4 **Engaging a wide range of influencers**, including NGOs, community-based organizations, faith-based groups and the media, is a shared characteristic between MHPSS principles and social movements. Both recognize the importance of building alliances and partnerships across various sectors to drive change effectively.

5 The role of social networks in the growth of social movements resonates with MHPSS, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, whether in person or through virtual platforms, to foster **collective mobilization** and **community organizing**, which are integral concepts to SBC. When people come together, either in person at public events or community meetings or virtually through forums and social media, and share their views and experiences, what begins as a small cluster of individuals with shared interests grows into a broader movement, sometimes with influential and charismatic leaders.

6 Social movements strategically **connect with participants through avenues such as advocacy initiatives, social media and offline campaigns, and public education.** Social movements and MHPSS interventions share the need for engaging and consistent narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. While digital media have transformed communication, SBC theory highlights the necessity of both offline and online engagement to achieve sustainable and widespread change.

Source: UNICEF website - Ni silencio ni tabú. https://www.unicef.org/uruguay/ni-silencio-ni-tabu

Example

A recent example is NiSilencioNiTabú (Neither Silence nor Taboo), an MHPSS campaign for adolescents and young people in Uruguay designed to encourage their engagement and participation as agents of change in their communities. The campaign, which reached 14,000 adolescents and trained 1,100 first responders, includes a toolkit of materials to facilitate dialogue developed by MHPSS professionals with UNICEF's support (UNICEF, 2022b).

Other examples include:

- The youth-led Teenage Island initiative (UNICEF, 2022c), part of the UPSHIFT project, that seeks to support the mental health of adolescents amid war;

- Hope Squad, an initiative that engages youth in peer-to-peer suicide prevention campaigns and programmes;

- The Global Forum for Adolescents, which focuses on adolescent wellbeing.

Key considerations for how UNICEF can support social movements for MHPSS

The continuum approach to movement building (UNICEF, 2022a) offers multiple entry points for action: from creating safe spaces and broader enabling environments for adolescent and youth empowerment with opportunities for participation in collective action, to supporting girl, women and youth-led organizations in building coalitions to advance a social change agenda; and providing social movements with the infrastructure, resources and capacity development needed to achieve social change.

UNICEF can play four roles in social movements: as observer, convener, resource partner and amplifier.

Observer

Situational and gender assessments are necessary to understand the context (i.e., is civic space restricted or open? Are there existing coalitions and movements for MHPSS that align with UNICEF's programmatic goals? What is their capacity? What is the risk for UNICEF in engaging with coalitions and movements instead of prioritizing other programming approaches?). Not all contexts are conducive to movement building so these assessments will help to ensure that local strengths and capacities are leveraged, gaps are covered and innovative approaches are incorporated.

Convener

As convener, UNICEF can provide social networking and link movements for peer learning and mentoring, and support to: i) ensure that movement voices are heard and are connected to

key stakeholders such as donors, governments and other UN agencies; and ii) ensure the participation of movement actors at key events/moments in national, regional and global spaces to advance their agendas and goals for MHPSS. UNICEF can also empower and support girl, women and youth-led organizations by fostering coalition building, offering capacity-building opportunities and supporting the development of shared change agendas for MHPSS.

UNICEF can play a role in empowering adolescents and youth to participate in social movements through:

- Offering life skills programmes that foster adolescent and youth agency and provide them with opportunities to engage in civic action and decision-making;

- Encouraging young people to develop critical awareness and express concerns about issues that matter to them (voice);

- Providing young people with opportunities and the space for self-empowerment and engagement (participation) in their homes, schools, communities and other institutions to influence social change.

Several resources provide guidance on the meaningful participation of children and young people, including Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement (UNICEF, 2020a) and Young People's Participation and Mental Health: A protocol for practitioners (UNICEF, 2022d).

Figure 1: Five main strategies for adolescent participation and civic engagement

- ADVOCATE FOR LAWS, POLICIES PRACTICES AND BUDGETS
- ENHANCE POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS AND ATTITUDES
- BUILD THE AWARENESS, SKILLS AND CAPACITIES OF ADULTS
- BUILD THE AWARENESS, SKILLS AND CAPACITIES OF ADOLESCENTS
- CREATE AND SUSTAIN PLATFORMS FOR ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Source: UNICEF, 'Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement'.

UNICEF describes five strategies to guide youth participation and civic engagement in various areas, including health. These can be applied to the context of social movements for MHPSS in the following ways:

1   **Laws, policies, practices and budgets:** Advocacy efforts should focus on enacting laws and policies that not only ensure equitable adolescent participation in MHPSS social movements but also allocate adequate budgets for tools and techniques. This empowers adolescents to influence mental health services and support systems that cater to their specific needs, including confidential counselling and support for mental health challenges.

2   **Positive social norms and attitudes:** Engaging religious and traditional leaders to support equitable adolescent participation in MHPSS is crucial. It is equally important to include the voices of trusted sources for adolescents such as celebrities and social media influencers. Promoting intergenerational dialogues fosters mutual understanding and respect, which are essential elements in creating a supportive environment for adolescents struggling with mental health issues.

3   **Awareness, skills and capacities of adults:** Capacity-building and technical support for professionals and caregivers in the field of mental health are essential. These ensure that they are well equipped to facilitate meaningful adolescent participation in social movements for MHPSS, providing them with the necessary tools and resources to engage effectively with young individuals facing mental health challenges.

4   **Awareness, skills and capacities of adolescents:** Empowering adolescents with knowledge on MHPSS is fundamental. Equipping them with decision-making skills and the capacity for reflective thinking and self-efficacy enables them to advocate for their mental health rights and wellbeing through social movements. Additionally, providing training to adolescents to serve as peer supporters and educators on mental health matters is crucial in building a supportive community.

5   **Platforms for adolescent participation and civic engagement for mental health promotion:** Creating safe spaces for adolescents to discuss mental health concerns, both online and offline, is paramount. Establishing feedback mechanisms and advisory boards ensures ongoing dialogue between policymakers, practitioners and adolescents, influencing the development of MHPSS services and policies. Supporting adolescent-led research and advocacy initiatives enhances service delivery and policy development.

Research has shown that involving young people in decisions that affect them serves as a protective factor, ultimately enhancing their care, safety and overall wellbeing (UNICEF, 2022d). Moreover, participation fosters trust, boosts self-confidence and instils a sense of mastery and control in young individuals. These positive outcomes, therefore, not only serve as vital components in advancing social movements for MHPSS but contribute to the overall wellbeing and resilience of young people.

When engaging adolescents in social movements for MHPSS, it is important to consider their psychological safety and wellbeing. UNICEF shares guidance on implementing 'Stepping Stones' to inform and increase the planning, implementation and monitoring of the safe and meaningful participation of young people.

Figure 2: Overview of Stepping Stones
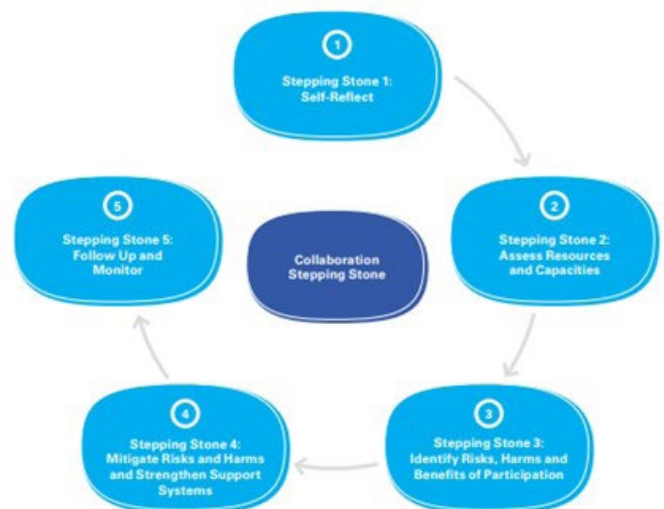
Source: UNICEF, *Young People's Participation and Mental Health: A protocol for practitioners.*

Resource partner

In this role, UNICEF can provide the following:

- Capacity-building, including movement building, leadership training, financial management, advocacy training, communications and media training and working in coalitions;

- Facilitation of connections between social movements in different countries and regions through workshops and convenings (e.g., research shows that from 1975 to the present, UN meetings on gender equality have contributed to an increase in feminist activism);

- Development and dissemination of knowledge products that enable the exchange of information, experiences and learning, including research on successful strategies in movement building.

Amplifier

UNICEF can use its global presence and access to key decision-making spaces to amplify the narratives of social movements and accelerate the pace at which movements are recognized at a global scale. Amplification of actions can include retweeting grassroots campaigns or bringing a legislative 'ask' from social movements to governments.

A manifesto for engaging with social movements for MHPSS

Once you have decided that supporting social movements is an appropriate approach to MHPSS in your context, consider the following list an ideal manifesto for engagement with social movements to make a difference for MHPSS where you work. You may not be able to conduct all 11 activities at once. Strategically selecting two or three based on the resources available and programme goals may be more realistic.

✓ Manifesto for engaging with social movements for MHPSS

☐ Map and assess relevant social movements that focus on provision of MHPSS – ideally with a focus on SBC. Assess and determine their strategic value to SBC for MHPSS action at country and regional levels and explore opportunities for collaboration if the assessment is overall positive.

☐ Leverage UNICEF's strong reputation, knowledge, resources and experience with other social movements to co-design content and strategies with children, adolescents and young people.

☐ Bring partners (such as governments, communities, civil society organizations, faith leaders, the media and people with lived experience around mental health) together on MHPSS topics and facilitate collaborations between MHPSS social movements and governmental institutions that hold governments accountable.

☐ Build capacities for young people to advocate for change on children's mental health and wellbeing, such as how to write clear advocacy asks and disseminate information at events and key places where mental health decisions are made.

☐ Provide technical, financial and practical support (e.g., safe spaces, equipment, connection to funders) for both in-person and online engagement (MHPSS MSP, 2022).

☐ Build capacity and/or provide training opportunities on how to create and sustain social movements for MHPSS and resource sharing on topics such as basic psychosocial support skills (e.g., psychological first aid, I Support My Friends (UNICEF, 2021), suicide prevention), particularly for adolescents and young people.

☐ Conduct monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of social movements for MHPSS.

☐ Integrate a collaborative and interconnected approach across sectors that considers a wide range of factors, including gender, diversity, disability and the life course, as part of comprehensive social movements for MHPSS.

☐ Harness the potential of UNICEF's youth ambassadors and local champions for mental health topics by connecting them with one another across countries and regions for co-learning, dialoguing and reflecting, in order to promote learning and a sense of togetherness and collective capacity.

☐ Co-create key messages for social movements on MHPSS topics through dialogue, reflection and negotiation based on an understanding of the terminology and idioms used to discuss MHPSS and social movements in different contexts, as well as theory and evidence.

☐ Utilize UNICEF's existing social media and communication platforms (e.g., Generation Unlimited, UPSHIFT, U-Report, Internet of Good Things) for externally developed social movements for MHPSS.

Important considerations for supporting social movements for MHPSS

There are several important elements of social movements for MHPSS that need to be carefully considered before, during the course of and after offering support.

Risks

Risk assessments, child safeguarding and 'do no harm' must be top priorities. Senior management, government officials and other stakeholders may voice concerns about engaging with externally led social movements. There may be perceived and real risks to participation that need to be carefully weighed. For example, it is important to safeguard children and young people when posting information about mental health online. Consider applying lenses of power, privilege and intersectionality in understanding the social dynamics within movements (e.g., Power Within and the inability of adolescent boys to decentre themselves/girls denied leadership opportunities).

Funding and resources

Historically, there has been very low investment in MHPSS in health budgets. Human resources are also limited. Most bilateral and multilateral funds are not allocated to social movements. Consider connecting people and resources across sectors to strengthen efforts to support social movements, including but not exclusively through digital civic action (UNICEF, 2020b).

Other UNICEF priorities

Social change takes time. UNICEF need not drive the change agendas through social movements and coalitions, but rather nurture and work alongside grassroots social movements for MHPSS. It is important to connect the support of social movements for MHPSS to broader SBC programme goals, the results framework and other institutional priorities. Messages can get diluted alongside other messages and priorities. Connect with existing initiatives whenever possible, for example tying MHPSS work with areas such as nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

It can be difficult to monitor and evaluate social movements for MHPSS when social movements are emerging, and goals and objectives are evolving in real time. Consider different M&E approaches for SBC, including the active participation of young people (UNICEF, 2019b) to document the process and impact of social movements.

You can also consider the following resources in your M&E efforts:
- The Global Fund for Women has developed an adaptable assessment tool that may be used to assess the relative strengths and challenges in social movements.
- CARE's Youth Leadership Index.
- Voice, Action, Comportment and Opportunity (VACO) checklist (2020). This checklist is an evaluation tool used to measure girls' empowerment and leadership. It links observations and participants' self-reports of skills building.

Context

Every social movement is unique and understanding the local context is critical. Remember that every topic, every population and every social movement is different. Understanding the terminology and idioms of the local context is key to the uptake of social movement messaging

The Movement for Global Mental Health case study

Social movements for MHPSS can connect with participants through advocacy initiatives, powerful campaigns and public education efforts.

The Movement for Global Mental Health is a network of individuals and organizations who aim to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of services for people living with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Two principles are fundamental to the Movement: scientific evidence and human rights.

MGMH began in 2007 with a call to action – published in the first Lancet series on global mental health – which promoted scaling up treatments for mental disorders, protecting the human rights of those affected, and increasing research in low- and middle-income countries. Its membership has grown to around 200 institutions and 10,000 people, including individuals and families affected by mental health problems, healthcare providers, activists, decision-makers and researchers.

MGMH focuses on networking, knowledge-sharing and supporting national and international campaigns. It has three working committees – for research, advocacy and fundraising – that play a crucial role in executing its strategic plan. It has organized six biennial Global Mental Health Summits, the first in Athens in September 2009, and the most recent in Chennai, India, in December 2022. Through its network, members add evidence-based resources and other content to its website, recruit new members, identify potential funders for its activities and assist with the planning and hosting of the biennial summit.

MGMH is managed by the Secretariat based at the Global Mental Health Peer Network and the International Advisory Board, who act in accordance with the Movement's Charter.

Source: Image from the Movement for Global Mental Health website

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ⓘ Resources for supporting social movements for MHPSS

The following key resources provide more information for supporting social movements for MHPSS:

1. Building Movements, Building Power: Eliminating female genital mutilation by 2030 through social movements

2. Building Resilient Organizations

3. Communication, Social Movements, and Collective Action: Toward a new research agenda in communication for development and social change

4. DIYouth Advocacy: A complete guide to mental health advocacy for young people

5. Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, UNICEF

6. How 'Good' Social Movements Can Triumph Over 'Bad' Ones

7. IASC (2020), With Us & For Us: Working with and for young people in humanitarian and protracted crises

8. IASC (2022), MHPSS Minimum Service Package: Activity 3.4 Support new and pre-existing group-based community MHPSS activities

9. International Rescue Committee Girl Shine: Practitioner Guidance: Designing girl-driven gender based violence programming in humanitarian settings

10. Oxfam Report: Shaking Up to Move Forward: Visions for stronger partnerships between youth movements and social organizations

11. SBC programme guidance

12. Save the Children, A Youth Participation Best Practice Toolkit, 2003, Part1, Part 2

13. Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) Theory and Practice Course on Agora (see in particular Module 3, Unit 2)

14. Social Movement Studies Journal

15. Social Movements in Health: An Introduction

16. UNICEF's SBC website

17. UNICEF's SBC website on social movements

18. UNICEF's #OnMyMind campaign

19. Voices of Youth digital youth community

20. We Change the World: What can we learn from global social movements for health?

21. Young People's Participation and Mental Health: A protocol for practitioners

✓ Social movements for MHPSS in action

Imagine you are asked to consider supporting a social movement for MHPSS where you work. How might you answer the following questions?

- *Who started the social movement for MHPSS and what are the specific issues it seeks to address?*

- *How does the social movement align with UNICEF's mission?*

- *How can children, adolescents and young people play a central role in the social movement?*

- *What experience and existing resources does UNICEF have in the specific topic area?*

- *Who might you connect young people to that might open doors for the mental health topics addressed in the social movement?*

- *What risks or special considerations need to be considered for this social movement?*

- *What training opportunities, technical support or M&E expertise could UNICEF lend to the social movement?*

- *How could UNICEF's existing social media and communication platforms be utilized to support the social movement?*

- *How might UNICEF's youth ambassadors and local champions support the social movement?*

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