

# Enabling youth to lead mental health advocacy: the case of the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

The paper presents a case of a civil society initiative that enables youth to lead advocacy campaigns to strengthen mental health governance in the Philippines. It begins by presenting how youth in the Philippines are affected by mental health issues and a quick review of government policies. It then shares the experience of and lessons from PRO-Health, a civil society health rights initiative, which is collaborating with the largest student organization in the country, the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), to organize youth to lead advocacies to improve mental health governance. Particularly, it shows why and how young people should lead mental health advocacy, focusing on the kind of evidence that can be generated, how the capacities of youth can be enhanced, and the importance of multi-level and multi-sectoral linkages in youth organizing for accountability. The paper ends by discussing the Youth on Mental Health Assemblies being convened that have formulated a youth-led and youth-centered mental health agenda.

**Keywords:** Youth, mental health, advocacy, governance, social organizations, coalition-building, public policies

## Abstract in Español at the end of the article

## INTRODUCTION

Mental health is one of the major contemporary issues affecting young people, especially students. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community”. Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm [1]. While mental health constitutes a broad spectrum of issues, the rising cases of suicide indicate a crisis situation.

In 2015, WHO reported that 16.8 percent of students in the Philippines aged 13-17 had attempted suicide at least once [2]. The national Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS5) also found that in 2021, 17%

of young Filipinos aged 15-24 had thought of committing suicide, one third of them more than once [3]. The Department of Education recorded 404 students committing suicide and 2,143 attempting suicide in 2021, yet there is an acute shortage of guidance counselors in schools [4].

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the mental health situation with young people experiencing moderate-to-severe stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms with gender, age, school load and discrimination being key factors [5].

Female young adults are more prone to moderate to severe depression, which is more likely affecting those who have less education, reside in urban areas and with marital problems [6]. The increasing number of Filipino adolescents engaged in illicit drug use adds to the mental health crisis that could be addressed by parental and

peer support and drug education [7].

As early as 2001, the Department of Health (DOH) set in place policies addressing mental health in the country. However, most of the policies passed were focused on hospital- and specialty-based approaches to mental health and the views of the youth were not represented in relevant decision-making processes [8]. One study underscores the need for “multifaceted, strategic responses... [to] pave the way for an inclusive mental health system that adequately addresses the exigencies of its younger demographic” [9].

This paper inquires and presents whether and how the youth can be enabled to lead advocacies to strengthen mental health governance in the Philippines based on the experience of the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP) in PRO-Health.

### Study setting

As a response to the above-described situation, Promoting Rights Organizing for Health (PRO-Health) identified mental health as one of its focus programs. PRO-Health is a national civil society initiative organized by Government Watch (G-Watch) and Accountability Research Center (ARC) in partnership with other social organizations and local governments in the Philippines. PRO-Health aims to strengthen public health governance in coming up with pro-people and bottom-up solutions to systemic barriers and hurdles to reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health services.

G-Watch invited SCAP to be part of PRO-Health. SCAP is the largest federation of university and senior high school student councils and organizations in the country. Three member-organizations of SCAP from Mindanao became involved: Union of Students for the Advancement of Democracy (USAD) of Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro, Alliance of Students for Alternative Politics (ASAP) of Mindanao State University in General Santos city, and Ateneans for Governance, Innovation, Leadership and Service (AGILAS) of Ateneo de Davao University in Davao city.

Mental health was identified as one of the most pressing critical health issues confronting the country, especially by members of SCAP. PRO-Health’s baseline research also showed many gaps in mental health governance in the country, including the absence of youth involvement in it [10].

The authors are all involved in PRO-Health and systematized the lessons from the whole experience of SCAP in PRO-Health in this piece, specifically the lessons discussed in nine sharing sessions with 143 volunteer-monitors and ten problem-solving sessions attended by 117 duty-bearers. They featured in this paper interviews with the two main local youth leaders of PRO-Health. They also reviewed related secondary materials to answer whether and how youth can be enabled to lead advocacies to improve mental health governance. Advocacies are collective efforts of civil society to influence public policies; and mental health governance

refers to public decision-making processes and systems governing mental health.

## EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS

To come up with people-centered systemic solutions to pressing and enduring barriers to access to reproductive, maternal, newborn, children and adolescent health, PRO-Health built a multi-level coalition of civil society groups and local government allies to conduct a participatory monitoring of 257 community health units in 19 cities and municipalities all over the country.

Two hundred ninety-two (292) volunteer-monitors from six G-Watch local core groups and two partner organizations—SCAP and *Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pamilyang Pantawid (SNPP)*—conducted a total of 434 visits to community health units and interviewed a total of 1,364 citizens and 794 public health workers. SCAP volunteer-monitors covered ten community health units.

The result of the monitoring was discussed and reflected upon at the city/ municipal and national levels through sharing sessions with volunteer-monitors and problem-solving sessions with duty-bearers or those in government and civil society who can respond to monitoring findings [10]. Through these multi-level participatory processes, a set of reform agendas were agreed upon by the PRO-Health network that has since served as the anchor of its advocacy campaigns. One of these advocacies is the strengthening of mental health governance by enabling youth-led engagement. The findings and lessons from SCAP’s experience in PRO-Health are presented below.

### Youth can be organized to address mental health by building their capacity to monitor public health services

The lack of youth and student representation in mental health policy-making spaces is a missed opportunity in ensuring responsive and effective mental health governance. Since the youth comprise a huge percentage of the population and are the ones most affected, they are crucial in undertaking a pro-people strategic response to the problem.

Through the PRO-Health initiative, SCAP volunteer-monitors were able to help generate and systematize ground-level evidence to help bolster their earlier claim that there is a need for better implementation of mental health services in the country [11]. This was achieved by introducing them to participatory monitoring.

SCAP, through PRO-Health monitoring, found that even with the passage of the Philippine Mental Health Act in 2018, mental health services in both rural and urban *barangays* (communities) and schools were either non-existent, or that very few people were aware of them, which validates their earlier statement [12].

The monitoring revealed that services such as consultations and talk therapies, as well as mental health-related medications, were not always available at *barangay* health units. Patients were instead sometimes

referred to rural health units which are fewer and located in the center of town. Basic information and promotion on mental health was also found to be lacking and were limited to what's being provided in the few seminars or fora organized by the government or civil society. Local governments have little-to-no budget allocation for mental health services which was evidently affecting the implementation of these services.

The situation was similar in schools. Although schools remain as frontliners for mental health services, a lot of educational institutions complained about the lack of mental health facilities and resources. In many schools, the standard of one registered guidance counselor for every 500 students was not being met, preventing the implementation of needed mental health assistance.

### **Youth can be enabled to lead mental health advocacy through learning-in-action on strategic citizens' collective action for health governance accountability**

PRO-Health provided an opportunity for SCAP's leaders and members to deepen their knowledge and skills regarding mental health advocacies, with a focus on transparency, participation, and accountability. SCAP's participation in PRO-Health allowed them to strengthen their organization and capacitate more youth in engaging governments and public policy-making on health. Such capacities are common gaps in youth-led advocacies.

Currently, SCAP is campaigning for student representation in Local School Boards (LSBs), Local Health Boards (LHBs) and other local special bodies tackling adolescent health. It has recently started a signature campaign to call on the government to adopt the said proposed policy. SCAP has also met with the secretariat of the Philippine Council for Mental Health (PCMH) to lobby for youth representation in the Council, which was positively received by the PCMH secretariat.

At the local level, SCAP members are also taking the lead in pushing for better access and quality of health, especially mental health, services from the government.

In an online interview with Emman Mayor of SCAP Cagayan De Oro (February 23, 2024), he reflected that his involvement in monitoring and exposure to the struggles of community health centers highlighted that "health issues are not isolated but systemic."

This realization can be traced to the way PRO-Health capacity-building was designed. It started with a collective analysis of the national political and governance situation and a discussion on basic social accountability, followed by a structural analysis of health issues and a deep immersion in the community as part of a multi-level monitoring in a learning-by-doing mode [13]. A structural analysis is important, especially on the discussion of mental health, an issue that is commonly pinned on an individual's mental resiliency and capacity, overlooking the gaps in service delivery by government, especially since the passage of the Mental Health Act.

SCAP leaders also learned to engage and manage working with officials at different levels of governance. SCAP was oriented by G-Watch on the framework of 'vertical integration,' where advocates are organized at different levels of governance to secure responses from government [14]. This strategy allows citizen-monitors, in this case students, to conduct a strategic accountability campaign and increase the pressure on government to respond to monitoring findings and recommendations. Applying this approach, for instance, volunteer-monitors from Cagayan de Oro were not constrained by the inaction of the mayor to their request, but instead they pursued their direct engagement with the *barangays* that allowed them to conduct monitoring and advocacy activities (Mayor, online interview, February 23, 2024).

The training proved valuable for Gellie Davalos, who headed SCAP's PRO-Health work in General Santos City (online interview, February 23, 2024) as she was able to engage with local leaders and rural health units that improved her "ability in advocating for quality and accessible mental health." Apart from the usual seminars on mental health to young people, which puts the burden of good mental well-being solely on their self-management, the integration of transparency, participation, and accountability in the youth's mental health advocacy puts the emphasis on the government to undertake systemic solutions with youth participation.

The core teams of SCAP Cagayan de Oro and General Santos City were also able to organize problem-solving sessions and generate commitments from the duty-bearers to address the issues revealed by the PRO-Health monitoring. According to Gellie Davalos (online interview, February 23, 2024), the *Sangguniang Kabataan* (SK or Youth Council) Federation of General Santos City agreed to come up with an information and education campaign on mental health and committed to provide copies to the volunteers for mass distribution. They were also committed to acting on the suggested programs and projects on mental health and having continuous discussions about mental health.

### **Youth-led advocacy on mental health can be strengthened through links with different sectors at different levels of governance**

Through PRO-Health, SCAP was able to address a common challenge to youth-led advocacies, which is how to build their clout. This was addressed through multi-level and multi-sectoral engagement.

Through PRO-Health, SCAP leaders became more involved in their communities, opening their eyes to what is happening on the ground. They also now understand health governance better and have identified ways to improve mental health services. Emman Mayor (SCAP Cagayan De Oro) shared that "PRO-Health has served as the ideal avenue to raise awareness to persistent problems, especially those left unseen" (online interview, February 23, 2024).

At the same time, Gellie Davalos expressed that



through PRO-Health, they learned how to establish links with diverse networks spanning different localities to collectively identify necessary improvements in public health services. SCAP leaders also learned how to connect with like-minded individuals from other sectors who want to make improvements on governance beyond health (online interview, February 23, 2024).

The project also helped SCAP engage more student leaders in its mental health advocacy. Through PRO-Health and G-Watch, SCAP expanded its network in Palawan by partnering with Multiply-Ed. In 2023, Multiply-Ed Palawan helped pass a mental health ordinance in Puerto Princesa. SCAP also collaborated with Multiply-Ed volunteers to learn from the success of their advocacy and recruit new student councils.

### Conclusion and on-going developments

SCAP's involvement in PRO-Health shows that the youth can be enabled to lead mental health advocacy, which is needed given the country's worsening mental health crisis. The PRO-Health experience shows how multi-level and multi-sectoral monitoring and advocacy helped address common hurdles in youth-led advocacy, such as the lack of systematic ground evidence, gaps in governance and policy capacities and limited clout.

However, the initiative needs to be sustained for it to make a dent in mental health governance.

To further broaden the youth and student advocacy and campaign network on mental health, PRO-Health, in cooperation with Multiply-Ed, is co-convening a series of Youth Assembly for Mental Health.

Multiply-Ed is an initiative of the Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN), G-Watch and SCAP that aims to improve accountability in various levels of education governance. The centrality of mental health as a core problem for many students emerged clearly from the result of the monitoring of Multiply-Ed of the learning continuity plan of the Department of Education [9], particularly for marginalized students, whose mental health is even more vulnerable because of the threat of discrimination.

The Youth Assembly for Mental Health aims to strengthen youth leadership in tackling the mental health crisis and develop a youth-led advocacy strategy to advance a mental health agenda. It reviews government programs and policies to help participants assess the crisis' causes and effects, as well as the strengths and gaps in the government's response.

The first Assembly in June 2024 in Davao city launched a youth-led national coalition to spearhead a nationwide campaign to mobilize the youth and concerned duty-bearers around mental health issues. It was attended by more than 100 young leaders from Mindanao. In addition to the inputs from Mindanaoan students, the Visayan leg of the Youth Assembly for Mental Health was held in November 2024 in Talisay, Negros Occidental.

Aside from developing a youth-led mental health agenda, the new Youth Assembly for Mental Health has identified advocacy, communication and engagement actions that target duty-bearers to push for its reform proposals, utilizing online and offline platforms to further enhance awareness and involvement of the youth on mental health. It is hoped that there will be more assemblies taking place in other parts of the country.

Finally, the paper validates the findings of related studies that actions involving the youth are more responsive to what the youth needs and are more effective in organizing youth-centered interventions when co-designed and co-implemented with the youth and when conducted with accompanying trust-building and solidarity [15,16]. SCAP has been involved from agenda-setting, planning, data processing, policy formulation to advocacies and knowledge development of PRO-Health. PRO-Health processes provided not only support to SCAP, but also a safe space for them. SCAP's experience in PRO-Health shows that such is valuable in coming up with an initiative that resonate with the youth, and that the youth themselves value and appreciate. Furthermore, the involvement of SCAP leaders in drawing lessons from the experience systematized in this paper has been key in linking practice and ideas and theory and action.

## DECLARATIONS

### AI utilization

AI was not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

### Competing interests

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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### Author contributions

JA, KPG, MVM gathered and processed the data and drafted the first draft. JA revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the article.

### Data availability

PRO-Health monitoring results can be accessed from G-Watch website: <https://g-watch.org>

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### ORCIDs

## ABSTRACT IN SPANISH

### Permitir que los jóvenes lideren la defensa de la salud mental: el caso de Filipinas

El artículo presenta el caso de una iniciativa de la sociedad civil que permite a los jóvenes liderar campañas de incidencia para fortalecer la gobernanza de la salud mental en Filipinas. Comienza mostrando cómo los jóvenes en Filipinas se ven afectados por problemas de salud mental y ofrece una revisión rápida de las políticas gubernamentales. Luego comparte la experiencia y las lecciones de PRO Health, una iniciativa de la sociedad civil enfocada en los derechos en salud, que colabora con la organización estudiantil más grande del país, la Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), para organizar a la juventud y apoyarla en el liderazgo de acciones de incidencia para mejorar la gobernanza de la salud mental.

En particular, muestra por qué y cómo los jóvenes deben liderar la defensa de la salud mental, con énfasis en el tipo de evidencia que puede generarse, en cómo pueden fortalecerse las capacidades juveniles y en la importancia de los vínculos multinivel y multisectoriales en la organización juvenil orientada a la rendición de cuentas. El artículo concluye con una discusión sobre las Asambleas de Juventud por la Salud Mental que se están convocando y que han formulado una agenda de salud mental dirigida y centrada en los jóvenes.

**Palabras clave:** Juventud, salud mental, incidencia, gobernanza, organizaciones sociales, construcción de coaliciones, políticas públicas.

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