Trauma Counseling For Student Survivors of Genocide

Rwanda

Etienne Kalisa

Organization type:
nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Budget:
< $1,000

Website:
http://www.aergnational.org

- Health care
- Mental health
- Vulnerable populations
- Youth development
- Youth leadership
- Social work
- Volunteerism

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

The project builds upon AERG's existing system of artificial families, who bring together student survivors of the 1994 genocide against Tutsi to provide a peer to peer support mechanism. This aids students, many who lack access to a familial support network because of loss of relatives, to seek emotional care and to enter a safe haven built upon shared experience.

The project will further this support by training 'artificial parents' in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Counselling, so that AERG families can extend their services to providing psycho social care for their student members and the community at large. This will be done through youth volunteering in the community and learning institutions and by establishing a 24 hour trauma hotline run by AERG trained volunteers.

About Project

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

Survivors of the 1994 genocide still require support to deal with the consequences of the violence they endured. The number and complexity of PTSD cases has been increasing over the last 17 years despite different measures taken to resolve this problem. This rise in cases and complexity of PTSD is not accompanied by an increase in the number of counsellors thus making it an epidemic. Whilst the Rwandan government has a mental health programme to tackle PTSD, the programme is overwhelmed, is only available in some health clinics and does not tackle the particular needs of students and young people. The AERG trauma counselling project would be the first of its kind to interact directly with youth in diagnosing and supporting cases of PTSD in Rwanda. Peer to peer techniques offer a novel approach to overcoming the lack of counsellors and the shared experience of peers build a sense of trust and ensure that counselling is relevant to student needs. No trauma hotline exists in Rwanda and would help not only to raise awareness of the condition and provide preliminary diagnosis of PTSD but also provide a confidential service and interim support until patients could access formal treatment under the government programme.

Impact: How does it Work

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

The project will run a training of trainers programme led by experienced counsellors in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) targeting artificial family representatives. These representatives will then use their knowledge to counsel members of their artificial families using PTSD techniques. Representatives of families will further provide peer to peer training in PTSD techniques to other members of artificial families in order to pass on this support through peer outreach to other community members including members of AERG who are in secondary school and to survivors in local communities who are not members of AERG. In addition to face to face counselling the project will establish a 24 hour trauma hotline, manned by AERG volunteers trained in PTSD techniques, in order to provide a well needed, free counselling service for all community members, both survivors and non survivors. This will strengthen the impact that artificial families and the project can have not just on the social welfare of AERG members but on the survivor's community at large. The project realises that overcoming trauma is as much about community integration of survivors and non survivors as counselling. Therefore family representatives will organise entertainment and sporting activities with other survivor and non-survivor student and community based organisations to encourage integration and reconciliation.
About You

Organization:
AERG (Rwandan Student Survivors Association)

About You

First Name
Etienne

Last Name
Kalisa

Twitter

Facebook Profile

About Your Organization

Organization Name
AERG (Rwandan Student Survivors Association)

Organization Phone
+250788730344

Organization Address
Inindi House, Airport Road, Kigali

Organization Country
, KV

Country where this project is creating social impact
, KV

How long has your organization been operating?
More than 5 years

Is the project that you are entering related to this organization?
Yes

The information you provide here will be used to fill in any parts of your profile that have been left blank, such as interests, organization information, and website. No contact information will be made public. Please uncheck here if you do not want this to happen.

Innovation

What stage is your project in?
Operating for more than 5 years

Tell us about the community that you engage? eg. economic conditions, political structures, norms and values, demographic trends, history, and experience with engagement efforts.

The project will target members of AERG who are student survivors in secondary and tertiary levels of education and indirectly benefit wider community members, both survivors and non-survivors.

The survivor's community is strong, as a result of shared experience and as sometimes the only source of psycho-social support available if trauma victims cannot access a government counsellor.

Nevertheless, through strong government backing, there has been an emphasis on reconciliation between survivors and non-survivors and integration of survivors back into local communities.

Post 1994 the government has supported survivor youth economically. However, the money received is for school fees only, whilst most student survivors are from low income or orphan headed households, where many are the main income earners and are expected to support several dependants. Their role as dependants adds further stress and responsibilities to young survivors studying and the burden of combining supporting a family and academic work can cause trauma to reemerge during the study period.

AERG has been involved with student survivors since 1996 to identify the needs and the solutions to the problems facing survivor youth. It has been particularly successful in identifying and working with survivor youth because the organisation itself is run by volunteer student survivors who well understand the needs of their peers.

Share the story of the founder and what inspired the founder to start this project

AERG is an association of student survivors of the Genocide created in 1996 at the National University of Rwanda. Now AERG is represented nationally at 26 Universities and institutes of higher learning and 325 secondary schools in Rwanda, with a total country-wide membership of 43,397.

Originally, AERG was founded as a support mechanism for genocide orphans studying at secondary and higher institutions. However, its role has now expanded to cover not only support systems (in the form of artificial families) and morale-boosting activities, but also to advocate for the
ongoing needs of survivors, supporting them in education (liaising with FARG – The Government of Rwanda Assistance Fund for Survivors), with economic issues and onwards towards productive life.

According to the Ministry of Health in Rwanda, around 70% of all PTSD and trauma cases are amongst youth. Due to the lack of mental health resources targeting youth, AERG as a youth organisation, identified a gap in the services being delivered to support the needs of Rwandan youth, particularly survivors. The Trauma Counselling project aims to fill this gap, not only for survivor students, but for other community actors, not just AERG members.

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**Social Impact**

**Please describe how your project has been successful and how that success is measured**

The project will build upon AERG’s ‘artificial families’ programme, a case of best practice for rebuilding the lives of young survivors. Research done at the National University of Rwanda demonstrated that the ‘Artificial Families’ formed in associations, such as AERG, increase resiliency of survivors. Success was measured according to the integration of young survivors into the university and local community activities.

Research conducted annually by AERG and MINISANTE during the commemoration period found that the number of trauma cases amongst members of artificial families was significantly less than the national average and had decreased from previous years.

Success of individual artificial families is also measured according to the improvement of academic marks within the group. This is because standard education is one of the key indicators of whether young survivors are coping with trauma. Research found that on average the grades of students improve once they are members of artificial families.

**How many people have been impacted by your project?**

More than 10,000

**How many people could be impacted by your project in the next three years?**

More than 10,000

**Winning entries present a strong plan for how they will achieve growth. Identify your six-month milestone for growing your impact**

To have trained 1444 students from artificial families in PTSD counselling techniques in order to reach 43,000 AERG members as well as non AERG members needing support to cope with PTSD.

**Task 1**

60 trainers trained in PTSD techniques and training of trainers workshop. They train 1444 student representatives from artificial families in 2 week workshops held in 18 zones across Rwanda.

**Task 2**

Trained representatives use their skills to provide basic counselling services to trauma victims in artificial families. Representatives take part in additional PTSD and training of trainers courses.

**Task 3**

Representatives train other artificial family members to ensure sustainability of counselling services in each group and to give members the skills to engage with non-AERG members suffering from PTSD.

**Identify your 12-month impact milestone**

Trained 20 AERG volunteers in PTSD techniques to man the new trauma counselling hotline which will have the capacity to receive approximately 500 calls per month from trauma victims.

**Task 1**

Secure partnerships with government institutions to raise the profile of the hotline at national level. Lobby the government and NGOs to adapt policies on trauma counselling, particularly for youth.

**Task 2**

Set up the hotline and recruit trained volunteer AERG family representatives to man the phones.

**Task 3**

Promote it through media outlets, with the support of government partners. Use this promotion to raise awareness at grass roots level of the symptoms and diagnosis process of PTSD.

**How will your project evolve over the next three years?**

The AERG students trained in PTSD and trauma counselling techniques will train other family members so as to carry on the work after they graduate from university. There will also be a focus on transmitting these techniques to non AERG community members, through youth volunteering programmes.

The project will also expand to focus on organising university events for all students in order to encourage young survivors to mix with non-survivors in order to encourage reconciliation and integration, which in turn will help them to overcome trauma.

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**Sustainability**

**What barriers might hinder the success of your project and how do you plan to overcome them?**

Experienced and trained representatives of artificial families will graduate and take their skills threatening the sustainability of counselling services...
in groups. It will be costly for AERG to keep providing training to new representatives.

To overcome this problem, family representatives will be taught training of trainers techniques and will use this to pass on their acquired knowledge to new appointed family representatives.

Some schools are far from central coordination making hard for effective follow up after trainings has been completed. Further, some families are not able to cope with very severe cases of trauma as they do not have enough knowledge to deal with these problems.

To overcome these challenges AERG, who is a partner of the government department of health at national level, will assist their representatives to build relationship with government run health centres at the local level, so that these local health centres can offer additional support and follow up to family representatives in order to improve the implementation of the programme, particularly in areas far from the AERG coordination offices.

Tell us about your partnerships

AERG is partnered with the Rwandan Ministry of Health, including the department of Mental Health. Through this partnership the department of Mental Health provides training to 150 AERG members annually in an introduction to trauma counselling.

AERG is also partnered with the Ministry of Education. They also provide trainings to around 120 student welfare officers to support their peers, particularly during the commemoration period.

Explain your selections

The Government institutions AERG is partnered with, including the Ministry of Health, Education and the National Commission against Genocide, are the the institutions who are those that are really aware of the full extent of the national epidemic of severe trauma cases, particularly amongst youth. Incidences are particularly high during the commemoration period, the annual memorial period of the 1994 genocide that runs from April to May. During this period government institutions and health centres are overwhelmed by the rapid increase in trauma cases.

As AERG is run by students for students, they are the organisation that best understands the needs of young survivors and can best assist the government institutions to develop and implement grass roots mental health programmes for youth, particularly during the commemoration period.

How do you plan to strengthen your project in the next three years?

AERG aims to increase its number of staff to monitor the effectiveness of programmes and to provide additional support and follow up to representatives of families. These staff members will also work on seeking additional funding to expand the training activities of the project as well as lobbying the government for further support to develop the mental health services offered to Rwandan youth and to make it a key aspect in the Rwandan Government’s mental health agenda.

Further AERG will work with government institutions to further promote the hotline, particularly during the commemoration period and also to use the promotion of the hotline as a basis for raising awareness about Post traumatic stress disorder and its impact upon education and daily life.

It will also provide refresher courses and advanced trainings to further improve the quality of counselling and PTSD techniques delivered to AERG family representatives and implement activities on university and higher learning institution campuses to encourage integration and reconciliation between survivor and non-survivor students.

Challenges

Which barriers to health and well-being does your innovation address?

Please select up to three in order of relevancy to your project.

PRIMARY

Lack of physical access to care/lack of facilities

SECONDARY

Lack of access to targeted health information and education

TERTIARY

Limited diagnosis/detection of diseases

Please describe how your innovation specifically tackles the barriers listed above.

The artificial families established by AERG provide an interim mechanism for students suffering from trauma to receive support to cope with their illness until they are able to access specialist care. Due to the overburden of the Rwandan mental health service, the trauma counselling project will allow representatives to offer more specialist care, which will provide interim support for severe cases and more significant support for milder cases.

Trained family representatives will help to raise awareness and increase diagnosis, within their own families and the local community by providing information on PTSD and encouraging victims of trauma to seek help.

Through national campaigns for the promotion of the hotline, AERG will increase awareness of PTSD at national level.

How are you growing the impact of your organization or initiative?

Please select up to three potential pathways in order of relevancy to you.

PRIMARY

Enhanced existing impact through addition of complementary services

SECONDARY

Influenced other organizations and institutions through the spread of best practices
Please describe which of your growth activities are current or planned for the immediate future.

Currently AERG has easy representation and access, through the artificial families mechanism, to around 43,000 students across Rwanda.

Primarily, the project will aim to build on the current services already offered by the artificial families, by developing the counseling skills of family representatives.

Through the establishment of the hotline, AERG can expand its support network beyond members to assist other survivor community members who are unable to reach sufficient mental health care.

Through the promotion of the hotline and the lobbying of AERG staff, the profile of PTSD amongst youth will be raised with government and non-government organisations to encourage institutions to engage with young survivors, using AERG’s work as best practice.

Do you collaborate with any of the following: (Check all that apply)

Government.

If yes, how have these collaborations helped your innovation to succeed?

AERG has collaborated with the Rwandan Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education in supporting the development of artificial families. Collaboration has assisted AERG to identify what needs of student survivors are not currently supported by government policy and to make sure that the services they are offer do not duplicate and are complementary with government programmes.

Further, both institutions have assisted the innovation by providing training programmes in counselling to a limited number of family representatives. Whilst this has certainly helped some artificial families to have better counselling and support services for its members, the programme does not currently have the capacity to reach out to all artificial families operational within AERG.

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