



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

AN EVALUATION OF LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF TREE OF LIFE'S TRAUMA HEALING WORK

USAID's five-year grant for Tree of Life (ToL), a Community Health and Cohesion activity, concluded in July 2023. With this funding, ToL sought to reach more people through psychosocial awareness and pro-peace activities and enhance social engagement through increasing participants' understanding of the effects of trauma on individuals, families, and communities. The goal of this evaluation was to examine if and how program participants use what they have learned from ToL programs and if and how they and their communities continue to benefit from it. The evaluation focused on two of ToL's modalities: the Trauma Healing and Empowerment (TH&E) workshop and the Psychosocial Awareness and Coping Skills (PACS) workshops implemented by its community-based partners.

The TH&E workshop is a three-day trauma-focused, non-specialized intervention for 30–40 participants that is facilitated and supervised by trained ToL personnel. The PACS workshop is a three-day psychoeducation program for up to 150 participants, which supports family and community resilience-building and mental health and well-being awareness-raising.

This evaluation leveraged a mixed-methods design, combining desk-based research, 24 FGDs with PACS and TH&E participants, 10 KIIs with ToL staff and USAID personnel, secondary programmatic data from ToL, and an in-country quantitative survey of 800 participants. The ET conducted FGDs and collected survey responses in four sites to ensure a diverse representation of ToL beneficiaries' experiences: Bulawayo (rural/urban), Chitungwiza (urban), Epworth (peri-urban), and Goromonzi (rural).

KEY FINDINGS

An overarching goal of this evaluation was to understand if and how program participants use what they have learned from ToL programs (TH&E and PACS) and if and how they and their communities continue to benefit from these interventions. The multiple data sources leveraged for this project converged on a clear finding: participants in both types of ToL programs (TH&E and PACS) find that these programs were transformative.

ToL programs not only benefited the physical and mental health of participants but also improved individuals' lives, family dynamics, and friendships and brought together communities as a whole. Participants describe how personal changes helped them become kinder to themselves and others—leveraging individual growth into communal cohesion, forgiveness, and collective action. It was common for people not only to recommend ToL programs to those in need, but also to share their learning directly with others in their lives. Participants gave numerous examples of how ToL programs had positive add-on effects beyond the actual training. There were many examples of communities coming together to undertake collective action, such as drilling boreholes for water, building roads, starting savings groups, or engaging in mutual support. In particular, youth focus groups found that ToL programs helped address substance misuse, increased civic participation, and reduced violence among those aged 18 to 35.

“

“[The ToL programs] transformed me as a person.”

—Young woman, Epworth

”

“

“The days where [ToL was] there, it was guaranteed that you are coming back into the community from the workshop as a changed person.”

—Older man, Chitungwiza

”

Program participants describe concrete and continuous benefits from ToL programs, stating the skills they have learned have changed their lives. Uptake of skills from ToL programs were high: both TH&E and PACS participants reported currently using an average of more than five skills. There was variation in which skills were most likely to be used by men versus women or people of different ages, which speaks to the fact that participants appreciate the menu of skills offered by ToL and take a “mix-and-match” approach that works for them.

TH&E and PACS have different but complementary impacts. Beneficiaries described TH&E being more personally transformative on the healing journey, while PACS favored social reparation and cooperation. Yet both programs contributed to improved social cohesion, collective agency, and productive cooperation at the community level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 USAID/Zimbabwe should consider designing a follow-on activity to the ToL-funded activity that would build off ToL's successes increasing individual and collective well-being and community cohesion. The program should include both intensive, personalized, and longer-term care similar to TH&E, as well as wider community workshops and skills trainings like those offered in the PAC program.
- 2 Future trauma healing program designs should consider a rapid-response mechanism to help ramp up programming during elections and times of political instability and respond to shocks and stressors with targeted refresher trainings and other targeted support.
- 3 Consider adding a focus on youth and school-aged children, given the qualitative data on effectiveness of ToL for preventing substance misuse, increasing civic participation, and reducing violence among youth.
- 4 The TH&E program has shown the most sustained, individual level impact. USAID should consider funding this intervention as a successful trauma-healing intervention. PACS on the other hand is effective at advancing social reparation and cooperation and is less time and resource intensive. It supports healthy coping skills and mental well-being at a larger scale. However, for the greatest impact, these two models should be layered to promote both individual and societal transformation.
- 5 For any future program, consider actively promoting partnerships between future USAID/Zimbabwe programming in trauma healing and other USAID/Zimbabwe programs related to livelihoods and health to maximize impacts of both programs for all participants. In FGDs and KIIS, participants repeatedly emphasized the positive reinforcement that occurs when programs to improve physical and mental health are coupled with income generating training.