

Media Release

For Immediate Release

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Nigerian youth lead the world in addressing mental health

Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative announced as Civil Society Organisation Category Winner of the 2017 Nelson Mandela-Graça Machel Innovation Awards

Around the globe, a mix of ignorance and stigma continues to keep mental health issues – and those dealing with them – in the shadows. In countries like Nigeria, this is made worse by challenging socio-economic conditions and a culture that doesn't always enable honest conversations.

But one initiative, Mentally Aware Nigeria (MANI), is on a mission to change the face of mental health for a generation of young Nigerians – and has just been named winners of the coveted Nelson Mandela-Graça Machel Innovation Award for 2017 in the category of Civil Society Organisation.

MANI was selected from some 300 nominations from across the globe. The organisation will be honoured at a ceremony on 7 December in Suva, Fiji as part of International Civil Society Week.

For the first time this year, the Awards have been run in collaboration with The Elders – a group of independent leaders working together for peace, justice and human rights, founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007. Specifically, the Awards form part of the #WalkTogether campaign, catalysed by The Elders with civil society partner networks. #WalkTogether seeks to celebrate 'sparks of hope' like the Award winners, who are inspiring hope, compassion and empathy at a time when the dark forces of fear, xenophobia and hate speech represent a profound threat to global freedoms and unity.

Ban Ki-moon, the newest member of The Elders and former Secretary General of the United Nations, congratulated the organisation: "We commend the work of the Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative for opening the space to improve the lives of young Nigerians living with mental illness, which is too often stigmatized and the cause of great suffering for many people."

On being told about the award, Victor Ugo, founder of MANI, responded: "This is a very auspicious moment for us and we want to dedicate it to every Nigerian youth coping with mental illness."

The Awards recognize outstanding efforts in four categories: Youth Activist, Individual Activist, Civil Society Organisation and Brave Philanthropy.

Despite limited funding and significant obstacles, MANI has quickly become the country's largest and most active mental health organisation. They have used social media to build an online community of almost 20,000, where young Nigerians can share openly about their stories and challenges, and find acceptance and support. The organisation also runs a 24-hour suicide and distress hotline, and holds monthly events, which include visits to prisons, secondary schools, neuropsychiatric hospitals.

“We are motivated to keep up the discussion and hope that our voice will continue to resonate both within and beyond our borders”, Mr. Ugo explained.

Other award winners include a young Guyanese change-maker, an Egyptian journalist and activist, and a German-based philanthropic organization.

The Nelson Mandela-Graça Machel Innovation Awards are led by global civil society alliance, CIVICUS, through the Civic Space Initiative. Together with CIVICUS’ [SPEAK!](#) campaign, the Awards seek to celebrate, promote, and defend the voices of ordinary citizens in ensuring a more just and sustainable future for all.

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