



“Recovery is Possible:” One Man’s Triumph over Mental Illness in South Sudan

War drove Labon Doka at the age of 20 to abandon his home in Sudan for a refugee camp in Ethiopia. It was in the refugee camp that his behavior started to change, subtly at first and then more drastically. He eventually stopped going to the school where he was a teacher and it was not long before he could no longer support himself.

In 2013, he joined his father, who was living in Maban, a county in South Sudan not far from the Sudanese border. Labon’s mental health continued to deteriorate. They tried traditional healers, but nothing seemed to work.

Then, in October 2013, they learned about mental health care services provided by International Medical Corps to refugees living in Maban.

“A community health worker who lives in our neighborhood informed us about the mental health treatment and services available at the facility,” Labon’s father said. “He gave us a referral paper and the health facility staff treated us very well.”

The International Medical Corps health care providers evaluated Labon and diagnosed him with schizophrenia. He was enrolled in International Medical Corps’ mental health care program and was provided with medication. Within the first few weeks of treatment, Labon’s condition began to improve.

“It was exciting to see my son properly communicating and socializing with others as well as taking good care of his own personal hygiene after such a long period of time,” his father said.

Today, Labon’s symptoms are fully controlled by medication and he continues to receive regular follow-up with International Medical Corps’ mental health team. A few months into his recovery, Labon applied to be a community health worker with International Medical Corps. It was a very competitive hiring process, but Labon stood out and was selected.

As a community health worker, Labon shares mental health messages with individuals and families in the community and connects them with services for further care if needed—just as a community health worker had done for him one year ago.

“Now I [am able] to work and I will always share my experience of mental illness and recovery with the community, families and patients,” Labon said.

Labon also got married and supports his family through his work as a community health worker.

His father, having seen the transformation in his son, said, “I personally referred three individuals with mental illness similar to my son’s condition to International Medical Corps’ health facility for treatment. I also encouraged my son, Labon, to talk openly to the community as everyone in the community is witnessing [that] recovery from mental illness is possible with proper treatment.”



International Medical Corps has been working in South Sudan since the mid-1990s, nearly 20 years before a national referendum in 2011 led the southern-most states of Sudan becoming an independent South Sudan later that same year. Tensions within the new country broke into armed conflict in December 2013, claiming tens of thousands of lives before a fragile peace agreement took hold in the summer of 2015. Hostility continues to simmer, hampering efforts to improve public health standards.

Today, there are more than 1.5 million people internally displaced in South Sudan. International Medical Corps is among the few humanitarian organizations—and also the lead organization—providing comprehensive mental health services in South Sudan. With grant support from USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, the organization has provided mental health and psychosocial support in five different locations (Juba, Akobo County, Malakal, Awerial and Maban) over 18 months.

International Medical Corps’ services are integrated with general health services and available to an estimated 306,251 beneficiaries across five sites. Such integrated services are less stigmatizing and more accessible to the affected population. International Medical Corps’ team trains national and local staff in mental health using the WHO mhGAP-Intervention Guide and national guidelines. Trained staff also receive on the job support supervision and refresher trainings.

Since its inception more than 30 years ago, International Medical Corps’ mission has been consistent: relieve the suffering of those impacted by war, natural disaster and disease, by delivering vital health care services that focus on training. This approach of helping people help themselves is critical to returning devastated populations to self-reliance. International Medical Corps has delivered more than \$2.4 billion in humanitarian relief and training in 75 countries since 1984. Today its global staff of more than 7,000 provides assistance to devastated communities in the world’s hardest-hit areas, from Syria to Sierra Leone, Iraq to Afghanistan. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Medium.