

Strengthening Southeast Asian Mental Health

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Mental health is a global crisis that costs the world economy an estimated USD 2.5 trillion a year in reduced economic productivity and physical ill-health (Bloom et al., 2011). Every year suicide alone accounts for 1 out of every 100 deaths (World Health Organization, 2018). Current healthcare systems are not equipped to address the growing burden of mental disorders. Southeast Asia is a case in point: In 2022, 13.2% of the total population in Southeast Asia, or 260 million people, are estimated to be living with some mental health condition (World Health Organization, 2022). Yet there are only 0.63 psychiatric beds in Vietnam for every 100,000 people and 0.32 psychiatrists per 100,000 people (World Health Organization, 2014). In Cambodia, too, there are around 60 trained psychiatrists serving a country of 16.7 million (Parry et al. 2020).

Critical to tackling this rising mental health burden is task-sharing, or the transfer of tasks customarily performed by specialized health professionals to general health professionals and community workers (Amarasekera et al., 2021). Yet to ensure the quality of mental health care, practice must move alongside the science of mental health. In the context of mental health research, **training resources and opportunities need to be redistributed** (i) across the disciplines rather than concentrated in public health; and (ii) away from higher education institutions towards other contexts where experts by lived experience can acquire methodological training and ownership over mental health research. At the moment, nearly all of mental health funding is made and received by actors in high-income countries with **those in low-and middle-income countries receiving only 2.4% of all global mental health investments** (Woelbert et al., 2020).

The Southeast Asian Mental Health (SEAMH) Initiative aims to shift the mental health landscape in Southeast Asia by fostering bilateral exchanges between those in Southeast Asia and those in the diaspora communities and empowering these young scholars to conduct rigorous, collaborative research that can translate locally grounded science into real-world solutions. With support from the Foundation for Psychocultural Research and Culture Mind Brain Network, Drs. Seinenu Thein, Elena Lesley, and I launched SEAMH in June of this year. Through the support of our Southeast Asian assistants, collaborators, and partners, our Facebook page has attracted over 800 followers in three short months, and our website has 300 unique visitors daily. Over 450 people registered for our September virtual conference. These numbers underscore the growing but inadequately addressed need for mental health training in Southeast Asia.

We are excited for the future of SEAMH and would like to invite anyone interested in the conference or in the larger initiative of strengthening MHPSS infrastructure in Southeast Asia to sign up for the SEAMH listserv (<https://seamentalhealth.com/contact/>) and register for the conference (<https://seamentalhealth.com/register-attendance/>).

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