Can Coaching Help Families Adapt to Displacement Following a Natural Disaster? Pilot Evidence from Ghana



Houses flooded by the Akosombo Dam spillage in 2023. **Credit:** Ghana Business News

Abstract

In Ghana, researchers worked with the National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO), mental health experts from the Ghana Health Service, and IPA Ghana to conduct a randomized pilot of a government-led Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based coaching program in the wake of the 2023 Akosombo Dam spillage. The evaluation tested whether psychological support and information influenced how displaced households rebuilt their livelihoods, understood available government services, and made recovery decisions. Group information sessions—which provided guidance on best practices during displacement, information on how to access government services, and a single mental health counseling session—did not substantially improve mental health or economic outcomes. Adding individualized mental health- and service access-coaching to the group sessions showed more positive, though still modest, effects on households' economic behavior and well-being. These findings highlight the potential value of tailored support in displacement settings where households face diverse information and support needs.

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SECTOR

Peace & Recovery

STUDY TYPE

Pilot

COUNTRY

Ghana

Findings

- **Group information sessions did not appear to improve overall mental health outcomes, while individual coaching showed modest improvements in overall mental health,** though the estimates are imprecise.
- **Mental health improvements were almost twice as large among participants who reported poor mental health before the start of the program**, suggesting that a more targeted coaching program may deliver larger benefits.
- **Neither approach showed clear changes in several economic outcomes.**
- **Group information sessions increased households' efforts to seek government assistance, but did not increase the likelihood of receiving aid.** This gap may reflect reduced availability of aid programs following national budget cuts. **Individual coaching may help households form more realistic expectations about the availability of government support,** resulting in fewer unsuccessful attempts to access aid.
- **Agricultural activity fell among households that received group information sessions.** These drops were not observed for those who received individual coaching.
- **Strong demand for guidance and psychosocial support was found among displaced households,** even though measurable economic or mental health impacts remained modest in the short run: about 85–90 percent of participants described the group or individual sessions as highly satisfying.



Mepe Holy Christ Camp in 2024. Religious organization-built camp. **Credits:** IPA Ghana.

In Ghana, the 2023 spillage of the Akosombo Dam triggered severe flooding that displaced thousands of families, many of whom remained in temporary settlements. These households faced uncertainty about rebuilding livelihoods, accessing government support, and coping with the stress associated with displacement.

While disaster-response programs typically prioritize immediate humanitarian relief such as shelter, food, and financial assistance, much less is known about how displaced households adapt psychologically and make recovery-related decisions during prolonged displacement. Mental stress, uncertainty, and limited information about available institutional support may hinder households' ability to navigate recovery effectively.

Evidence is needed on whether psychosocial and informational interventions can support displaced families in adapting to disaster shocks.

The Challenge

Natural disasters such as floods, storms, and droughts displace millions of people each year, and climate change is expected to increase the severity of these events. In low-income countries, where institutional capacity and social safety nets are often limited, displacement can lead to prolonged economic and psychological hardship for affected households.

The Evaluation

This study evaluated whether a government-led, structured CBT-based coaching program could strengthen resilience, raise awareness of available government support, and improve recovery decision-making among households displaced by flooding in southern Ghana.

The intervention involved 377 displaced households across 15 flood-affected communities.

To identify the impact of the CBT-based coaching, researchers implemented a two-stage randomized pilot.

First, communities were randomly assigned to receive group-based information sessions providing guidance on best practices during displacement, information on how to access government services, and general mental health counseling.

Second, within communities assigned to the information intervention, a subset of participants was randomly selected to receive individualized CBT-based coaching delivered through home visits. Trained officers from Ghana's National Disaster Management Organisation delivered both interventions, in partnership with a senior psychologist from the Ghana Health Service at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital and other experts.

Follow-up surveys were conducted with each group approximately three months after the end of the program, allowing researchers to separately estimate the effects of group-level information and a more intensive, individualized coaching add-on.

Results

The program had limited impacts on mental health

The program may have had limited impact on mental health because respondents already reported high psychological well-being before the study, despite the challenges associated with displacement.

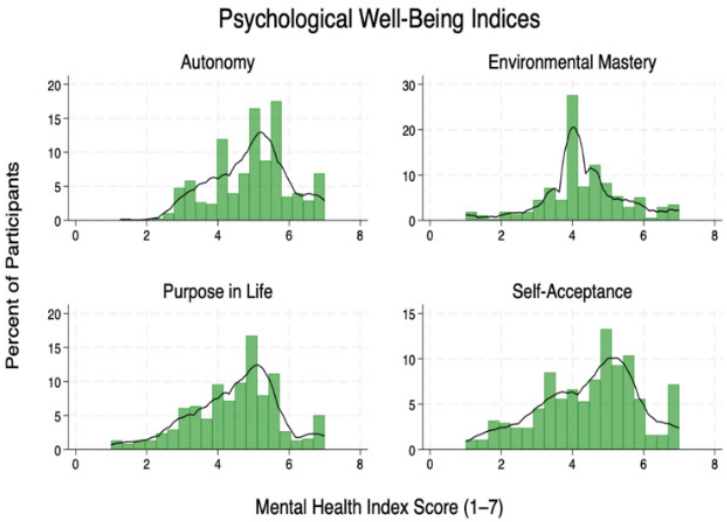


Agbetikpo Camp in 2024. A school being temporarily used as a shelter. **Credits:** IPA Ghana.

Many participants reported strong feelings of autonomy and purpose: 77 percent of participants strongly agreed that they enjoy planning ahead, while 56 percent strongly agreed that they feel in charge of their lives, with only a small share reporting strong disagreement.

Across several dimensions of psychological well-being, including autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, positive responses substantially outnumbered negative ones, possibly reflecting strong family or communal support systems.

Positive impacts emerged for those with poor mental health



Pre-Intervention Mental Health Indicators. These indices show relatively high levels of psychological well-being among participants before the intervention. Each of the four indices above summarizes responses to survey questions on the respective well-being dimension, scaled from 1 (lowest well-being) to 7 (highest well-being).

These findings suggest that many displaced households in this population may already exhibit considerable resilience, leaving limited room for improvement through short-term interventions.

For those with lower levels of mental health at the start of the study, the individualized coaching intervention was associated with mental health improvements almost twice as large as the average effect.

This suggests that targeted psychosocial support may be particularly valuable for those experiencing greater psychological distress.

Farming activity and aid-seeking behavior changed together

Some households may have viewed potential aid and agricultural investment as substitutes. Households that received group information sessions were more likely to seek government assistance, although they were 16 percentage points more likely to be denied aid, and actual aid receipt increased by only one percentage point.

This may reflect the fact that several aid channels had been shut down during the study period. At the same time, those who received group information sessions reduced crop planting by nine percentage points during the major season. This could also reflect the fact that those who received group information sessions may feel less in charge of their situation, according to one mental health measure.

In contrast, individualized coaching was associated with fewer unsuccessful attempts to seek aid and modest increases in farming activity. One reason may be that one-on-one coaching helped participants form more realistic expectations about aid availability, while also producing a modest, though statistically insignificant, improvement in mental health. This may in turn have supported greater investments in farming.

Strong demand for guidance and psychosocial support was found among displaced households

Even though measurable economic or mental health impacts remained modest in the short run, about 85–90 percent of respondents described the group or individual sessions as highly satisfying.



Aveyime Cluster of Displacement Camps in 2024. Government-built camp. **Credits:** IPA Ghana.

Policy Implications

Information frictions may affect displaced populations' decisions to seek aid. The increase in aid-seeking among those who received group information sessions suggests that many households were previously unaware of support programs, indicating that information campaigns or outreach efforts may help connect displaced populations with government assistance in settings where aid programs remain operational.

Individualized coaching and mental health support may have a moderate ability to improve mental health and decision-making in the short run. Participants who received individualized coaching had more time with a coach, which may have led to greater gains in mental health outcomes and farming activity. They also made fewer unsuccessful attempts to seek aid, which may speak to their more realistic expectations about aid availability.

Untargeted, group-based information interventions may have a limited ability to improve mental health or economic outcomes in the short run. This finding is consistent with evidence from other contexts showing that broad information dissemination can hinder learning (Banerjee et al. 2024; Barnett-Howell et al. 2026; Chandrasekhar et al. 2022). The limited intervention duration (a single group session) may have restricted the amount of useful information provided. These findings are limited given the scale of this pilot and do not rule out benefits of group-based mental health interventions in humanitarian settings.

Targeted psychosocial support may be most valuable for those in the greatest distress. Individualized coaching nearly doubled the mental health gains of participants with high baseline distress, compared with the average participant.

Future research should assess the value of individualized coaching at a larger scale and in contexts with greater scope for connecting participants to government programs actively serving their needs.

Sources

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Mepe Displacement Camp 2 in 2024. Tents provided by UNHCR. **Credits:** IPA Ghana.