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Psychosocial Intervention in Complex Emergencies: A Framework for Practice

Why do we need a common framework for psychosocial interventions?

Confusion exists about what psychosocial interventions are and what they are not, about whether they achieve their goals, whether they do harm rather than good and about what principles should guide good practice of agencies. There have been many debates about these and other issues amongst practitioners in the field as well amongst academics who are involved in developing and evaluating psychosocial interventions. The confusion has been increased through the existence of countless projects and interventions that describe themselves as doing psychosocial work, yet have little in common with one another. The absence of a common framework

that agencies can refer to when they want to initiate psychosocial interventions has meant that agencies often find themselves alone in their decision-making. In order to gain clarity on some of these questions and to help agencies who want to work in the field the Psychosocial Working Group (PWG) was formed in 2000. The group has set about the task of developing a common framework that summarises key knowledge in the field and provides agencies with some 'tools' for making decisions about the type of interventions they can implement. This document is a short account of the framework that the PWG is proposing.

Who are the PWG?

The membership of the Psychosocial Working Group comprises five academic partners (Centre for International Health Studies, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh; Columbia University, Program on Forced Migration & Health; Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma, Solomon Asch Centre for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict and University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre) and five humanitarian agencies (Christian Children's Fund; International Rescue Committee, Program for Children Affected by Armed Conflict; Medecins sans Frontieres - Holland; Mercy Corps and Save the Children Federation). The work of the group has been supported by a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Further details at: www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial and www.qmuc.ac.uk/cihs.



What is psychosocial well-being?

The term 'psychosocial' is used to emphasise the close connection between psychological aspects of our experience (our thoughts, emotions and behaviour) and our wider social experience (our relationships, traditions and culture). These two aspects are so closely inter-twined in the context of complex emergencies that the concept of 'psychosocial well-being' is probably more useful for humanitarian agencies than narrower

concepts such as 'mental health'. Interventions focusing narrowly on mental health concepts such as psychological trauma run the risk of ignoring aspects of the social context that are vital to well-being. The psychosocial emphasis on social as well as psychological aspects of well-being also ensures that the family and community are fully brought into the picture in assessing needs.

How does the PWG framework understand psychosocial well-being?

The PWG framework therefore focuses not only on individuals but sees them as part of bigger social units such as families, households and communities. The psychosocial well-being of individuals and of the larger social units is seen to be affected by three key issues: *human capacity*, *social ecology* and *culture & values*. *Human capacity* includes the physical and mental health of a person, as well as his or her knowledge and skills. *Social ecology* refers to the social connections and support that people share and that form an important part of psychosocial well-being. The third issue, *culture & values*, points to the specific context and culture of communities that influence how people experience, understand and respond to events. These three areas are all inter-related and changes in one area will affect the other areas as well as the overall well-being of people.



Photo: A. Panochi/Child Fund Afghanistan

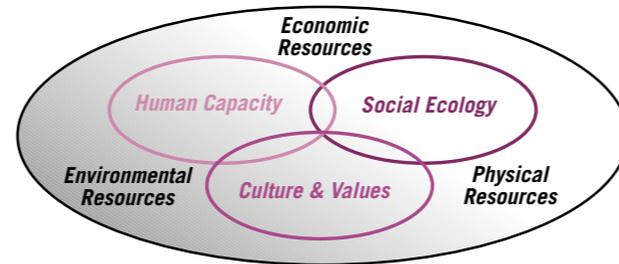
How is psychosocial well-being affected in complex emergencies?

Complex emergencies are linked with a range of differing events, including armed conflict and displacement. Communities can continue to feel the effects of such events for many years after they have occurred as they can bring about physical, material and economic losses. The common feature of these events is that they challenge communities by disrupting or depleting their resources.

Psychosocial well-being can be affected by war and displacement in a number of different ways. The Psychosocial Working Group has, as shown above, identified three key domains through which these effects can be understood. Firstly, human capacity may be reduced when people become depressed, withdraw from social life or become physically disabled. The deaths of people usually lead to a loss of skilled labour in household and communities. Even the feeling of having less control over events and circumstances may contribute to people feeling less able to meet the challenges they face. Secondly, wars and natural disasters also often lead to a disruption of the social ecology of a community, where relations between families and peers change, or where religious and civic organisations find it difficult to function. Thirdly, the culture and values of communities may also be disrupted when common values are challenged and human rights are violated. It may

become more difficult for people to follow cultural traditions that have previously provided a sense of unity and identity to communities. Conflict may also increase or reinforce negative images of other political, religious or ethnic groups which may lead to an escalation of violence and hatred.

The issues outlined above are not the only factors that impact on well-being in complex emergencies. The loss of material and economic resources of households, the disruption of infrastructure on communal and regional levels, and the degradation of the environment all have an important impact on psychological well-being. Such issues form part of the broader context within which individuals, families and communities begin to engage with the events that have affected their lives.



What are psychosocial interventions?

The term psychosocial intervention has come to refer to any programme that aims to improve the psychosocial well-being of people. Since there are so many different approaches to understanding psychosocial well-being this has meant that anything from peace-building and conflict-resolution to individual psychotherapy to advocacy projects for human rights can be described as psychosocial programmes. Given that there is such a wide range of interventions, how can agencies make decisions about what approach they should take?

One of the aims of the PWG framework is to provide some reference points against which the appropriateness of such diverse interventions can be evaluated. The question that the framework poses is: does the intervention promote human capacity or the social ecology of a community or contribute to people's efforts to re-establish culture and values in some way? If yes, then the intervention can be described as contributing to the psychosocial well-being of communities. In these terms a wide range of interventions may be seen to have psychosocial benefits.

A core programming principle: people and communities have resources

All communities respond to the events that affect them in some way. This is captured by the term 'resilience' which refers to the ability of people and communities to 'bounce back' and deal with the difficulties they face. They do this by drawing on the skills and knowledge available in the communities, as well as on social networks and support and common values to rebuild their lives. The extent to which communities are able to draw on resources is an indication of their resilience.

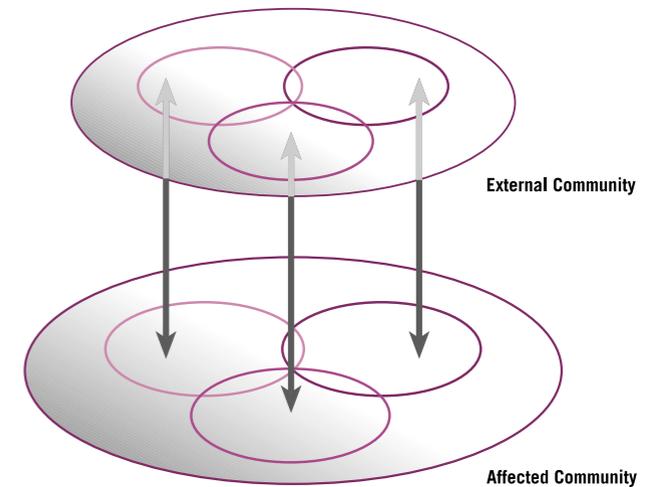
Often people do not want to re-establish the same social order and conditions they had prior to the emergency situation. In places such as East Timor and Rwanda the social conditions and power relations between different groups had been a significant factor leading to the eruption of violence. Many people in those two places therefore aim to establish a different social order that will not again contribute to violence and displacement.



The role of the 'external community': humanitarian agencies

Interventions are initiated when agencies judge that communities or individuals do not have enough resources to meet the challenges they face. Often in complex emergencies this judgement is made in relation to the need for material assistance or a lack of basic health care or shelter. Sometimes agencies also decide to intervene if there are specific groups within a community who are marginalised by others and are therefore not receiving the same amount of support or resources. An example of this is when a particular ethnic or religious group is excluded from participating in decision-making or from receiving assistance within a community.

The 'external' community consists of, amongst others, the humanitarian agencies that decide to offer resources - in whatever form or capacity - to the affected communities. How well agencies are able to work in the communities depends on a number of different factors: the relationship that they establish with the communities they work in; the security situation that affects both the communities as well as the agencies, and by the particular philosophy of the organisation itself. Intervening agencies are like the communities they work with, bringing their own specific material and human resources; their own social relationships and networks; their own culture and values. All of these influence how agencies make decisions about the type of interventions they can offer.



Developing psychosocial interventions: principles of good practice

Based on the PWG framework, agencies could develop many different types of interventions in a variety of areas. Examples might include human rights promotion; programmes that help children and their parents; or health programmes - in essence any programme that helps build human capacity, promotes the social ecology or facilitates the culture and values of a community. What principles should guide agencies when making decisions about what type of intervention to initiate?

One of the principles of good practice that the framework recommends is that agencies undertake a thorough appraisal of the challenges people face in the specific emergency situation they are in, and also of the resources they possess to meet those challenges. This should be done as a first step and will allow agencies to initiate interventions that are important and relevant to the communities they want to assist.

A further principle is that agencies do not just 'impose' their intervention on a community but that they negotiate with the communities about what type of programme people would like to participate in. The success of negotiating the type of intervention which will be implemented depends on how good the communication is between communities and agencies. If communities cannot influence the planning of the intervention it is likely that the interventions will be inappropriate and fail.

Another important principle is that agencies should see

themselves in a supporting role rather than in the lead role when helping people rebuild their communities. The communities themselves will decide what areas they want to focus on and the agencies should support the initiatives that people are undertaking rather than deciding to work on a completely different aspect of communal life. Agencies must approach the challenge with a clear idea of their own capacity, expertise and value added. In this way psychosocial interventions are a form of collaboration with a common goal. An example of this is when a community decides that its priority is to focus on promoting peace and social justice, and agencies contribute to this with programmes that support this agenda.

As mentioned above, communities do not always seek to restore and re-establish conditions as they were prior to the conflict as these conditions may have contributed to the violence in the first place. Another important principle of practice is therefore that agencies be aware and supportive of the transformation that communities undergo as they seek to change relationships and ways of living together. Agencies should not assume that communities are always looking towards the past as many are orientated towards the present situation and their future, seeking new ways of being. Agencies may be able to assist them with this in various ways.