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.

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.
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 build human capacity; the social ecology of a community; or initiatives that help individuals and families to rebuild their lives. The common feature of these interventions 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 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 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.

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