Psychosocial Intervention in Complex Emergencies:

A Conceptual Framework

The Psychosocial Working Group

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, Refugees 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.forced migration.org/psychosocial and www.qmuc.ac.uk/cihs.

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[12] The Psychosocial Working Group is a collaboration between academic institutes and humanitarian agencies established in March 2000 with grant support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

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The Value of a Conceptual Framework for Psychosocial Programming

1 The field of psychosocial intervention in complex emergencies is currently characterised by a lack of consensus on goals, strategy and best practice. [1,2]

2 The need for such interventions is now rarely disputed, however. Whether expressed in terms of increased psychological morbidity, the disruption of children's developmental progress, or the violation of human rights and dignity, such human dimensions of suffering are seen as an appropriate focus for humanitarian assistance.

3 The principles that should guide implementation, however, remain a focus of considerable debate. For many agencies the conceptualization of suffering through the idiom of psychopathology, and particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, has been dominant. This has been supported by an increasing body of evidence establishing elevated rates of symptom reportage associated with potential PTSD diagnosis in war-affected populations. [3,4]

4 Other agencies, however, have been influenced by critiques of the validity of the trauma model on the basis of its assumptions regarding the cultural expression of suffering [5] and/or the importance of the wider social and cultural (as opposed to predominantly individual) impacts of conflict on affected communities. [6] Such agencies' work has tended, in consequence, to conceptualize activity more in relation to community resources and the re-establishment of pre-existing coping strategies.

5 The situation is frequently complicated further by a lack of clear linkage between the conceptualization of need (as outlined above), and the strategies then implemented in response. For instance, while some programs utilising the concept of trauma in documenting the needs of impacted populations do adopt a clinical treatment model in their intervention, others place community mobilization strategies at the core of their response.

6 With such divergence of conceptual approach – and lack of clear linkage between idiom of assessment and means of intervention – the prospects for establishing a clear evidence-base to inform developments in the field are poor. A common framework is required with respect to which alternative formulations, strategies and, ultimately, outcomes can be compared and contested.

7 The development of such conceptual frameworks has made a valuable contribution in other areas of humanitarian assistance. [7,8] Here, a shared framework potentially provides a basis for: identifying shared assumptions in psychosocial programming [9,10,] formulating tensions inherent in alternative

approaches [1,10] and – by structuring a research agenda for the field - indicating key areas where empirical research may guide identification of effective practice. [3,11]

8 This paper – reflecting discussions within the Psychosocial Working Group [12] - proposes such a framework and indicates something of its implications for conceptual analysis, program implementation, and research and evaluation.

The Structure of the Framework

The Impact of Events and Conditions

9 The proposed framework begins with the assumption that in the context of complex emergencies the needs of individuals are generally appropriately conceptualized within the context of a family or household which, in turn, is located within an 'affected community'. [13]

10 Attention is commonly focused on this community as a result of some 'event' or 'events' that have affected it, such as conflict, mass displacement, natural disaster etc.

11 The nature of these events is very diverse, and they often contribute to broader conditions which continue to impact the community over many years. The common feature of such events and conditions is that they challenge the community and its members by disrupting or diminishing the resources of that community in some manner.

12 Such challenges typically involve physical, material and economic losses. They also potentially erode psychosocial well-being.

Psychosocial Well-Being

13 The term psychosocial well-being has come to be preferred to narrower concepts such as mental health by humanitarian agencies to the extent that it points explicitly to social and cultural (as well as psychological) influences on well-being.
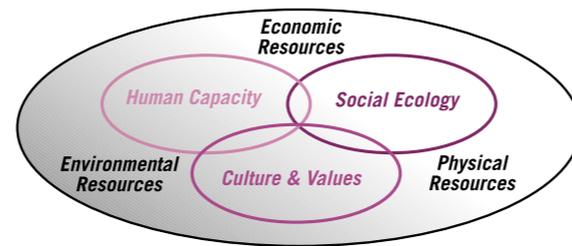

Photo: A Ager/QMUC

14 The psychosocial well-being of an individual is here defined with respect to three core domains: human capacity, social ecology and culture & values. These domains map in turn the human, social and cultural capital available to people responding to the challenges of prevailing events and conditions.

15 Human capacity is fundamentally constituted by the health (physical and mental) and knowledge and skills of an individual. In these terms, improving physical and mental health, or education and training in support of increased knowledge, enhances human capacity and thus psychosocial well-being.

16 While the importance of mental health and, particularly in work with children and adolescents, development of skills are widely accepted as a contribution to psychosocial well-being, social connection and support has increasingly been seen as an important complementary dimension of experience. There is strong empirical evidence linking mental health outcomes to the presence of effective social engagement, but wider cultural and programmatic concerns also justify the specification of social ecology as a discrete domain underpinning psychosocial well-being. [14]

17 The critiques of psychosocial programs as having failed to fully reflect the cultural construction of experience and wider rights issues are sufficiently telling to suggest that the domain of culture and values is recognised in its own right as a third key determinant of psychosocial well-being.

Photo: A Ager/QMUC

18 Whilst these domains have meaning in seeking to define the determinants of the psychosocial well-being of individuals, they also have utility and validity as discrete 'lenses' through which to consider impact on resources at the community level.

Challenges to Psychosocial Wellbeing

19 Depression, social withdrawal, physical disability, and loss of skilled labour all serve to degrade available human capacity, as do less tangible impacts such as a reduced sense of control over events and circumstances.

20 Events and conditions also frequently lead to wide disruption of the social ecology of a community, involving social relations within families, peer groups, religious and cultural institutions, links with civic and political authorities etc. Targeted disruption of such structures and networks is often the central focus of contemporary political and military conflict.[11] Impacts on the social ecology of an affected community frequently include changes in power relations between ethnic groups and shifts in gender relations. [15]

21 Events and conditions may also disrupt the culture and values of a community, challenging human rights, cultural values and mores etc. Conflict and natural disaster can each threaten cultural traditions of meaning that have served to unite and give identity to a community.[16] Conflict can also serve to reinforce hardened images of other political or ethnic groups, encouraging escalation of violence and hatred. [17]

22 Psychosocial well-being – of both individuals and of the communities of which they are members – is thus seen to be dependent upon the capacity to deploy resources from these three core domains in response to the challenge of experienced events and conditions.

23 While psychosocial well-being is appropriately defined with respect to these three core domains, other issues clearly have a significant influence on such well-being. The loss of physical and economic resources available to households, disruption to community and regional infrastructure, and degradation of the natural environment all plausibly have impact on the psychosocial well-being of communities. Such issues define the broader context within which individuals, families and communities seek to protect psychosocial well-being.

Available Resources

24 As noted, each of the three domains identified is potentially negatively impacted by 'events'. Importantly, however, each domain also represents a pool of resources that can be mobilised to respond to the demands made by those events. [2,10]

25 It is crucial to acknowledge that in some manner all affected communities respond to and engage with the disruption caused by the events experienced. In terms of this conceptual model, this engagement involves interaction between the various domains highlighted. Social networks are utilised to protect significant cultural activities. Human capacity is invested in restoring social linkage. Culture and values are drawn upon to bolster human capacity and well-being. The effectiveness of this engagement and the utilisation of resources within the community may be seen to be a measure of the 'resilience' of that community. It is tempting to think of this process of engagement as one with the goal of 'restoration' of the situation existing before the impact of events, a perspective emphasised by a number of authors. [1, 2, 10]

26 However, experience in such settings as Rwanda and East Timor, where elements of a pre-conflict situation have contributed directly to the onset of violence, suggest that in some circumstances it may be more appropriate to recognise this process as one of 'transformation', [18] involving development of new relationships between the capacities, linkages, values and resources of a community. Such transformation is a process rather than a single event.

Adjustments in human capacity, social ecology, and values may shift over many, many years. New events will further influence the trajectory of transformation.

27 Programmatic intervention by external agencies is predicted upon the judgement that there are insufficient resources within an impacted community to sustain appropriate engagement with the challenges created by experienced events.

28 This may reflect a judgement regarding the inadequacy of resources per se, or the means of engagement within the community. Resources may, for example, be being utilised to the benefit of only one group within the community e.g. social linkage can be used to exclude other groups or cultural beliefs can lead to abuse of sectors of the population.[16]

External Community

Affected Community
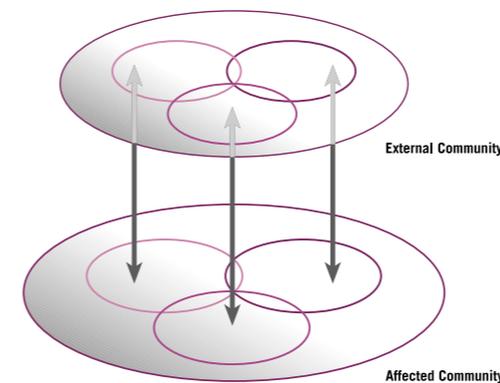
29 Whenever external resources are considered necessary to support the engagement of an affected community with the challenges it faces, the framework identifies programmatic intervention developing in response to the interaction of that community and an 'external community' of humanitarian agencies.

30 Effective programmatic response is heavily reliant upon the effectiveness of this interaction between the affected community and external agencies.

31 Events and conditions also impact the functions of this external community (e.g. security situation influencing program implementation) as well as the 'affected' community.

32 While this external community of agencies offers potential support through the deployment of additional human capacity (and, generally, physical resources), the operation of this external community is also influenced by its own (often complex) social ecology, and by the culture and values of its agencies.[19,20] The domains of human capacity, social ecology and culture & values are thus helpful for understanding the

Photo: A Ager/QMUC

process of engagement of the external community with the affected community, as well as of the affected community with prevailing events and conditions.

Developing Programmatic Response

33 The framework suggests a number of domains within the affected community with respect to which agencies may seek to define their response (e.g. human rights initiatives with respect to the domain of culture and values; mental health programs targeting enhancement of health and well-being within the domain of human capacity; restoration of social linkage to support the socialization of children).

34 These suggest a number of alternative routes to impacting the psychosocial well-being of a community and its members, though there is little research evidence to date on the relative effectiveness of such strategies. [1] The development of an evidence-base to inform decision-making on intervention strategy is thus a major priority for the field.

35 The potential range of approaches to impacting psychosocial well-being is further indicated by the interdependence of domains (e.g. the potential for a human rights initiative to impact health and well-being) and for the influence of broader contextual factors on psychosocial well-being (e.g. the positive influence of improved water and fuelwood distribution on social cohesion).

36 In such circumstances coherent appraisal of challenges - and of resources - are seen as key requirements in shaping intervention.

37 Implicit within the conceptual framework is the need for appropriate 'negotiation' of programmatic response between affected communities and outside agencies. Considerable inefficiency and ineffectiveness within program response appears to be attributable to poor communication in this area. [20]

38 Further, the framework clearly suggests that agencies should see themselves supporting the process of engagement by the affected community (rather than providing inputs unrelated to such processes). In those circumstances where community engagement is directed towards a goal of transformation, agencies' involvement will appropriately be directed towards agendas of peace, social justice and sustainable development rather than emergency assistance alone. [21]

Towards a Psychosocial Programming Research Agenda

39 As well as a guide to issues that need to be addressed in planning psychosocial interventions, the framework suggests key areas where research can illuminate judgements required such in such planning.

40 This research agenda [22] potentially includes:

- documenting (with respect to the proposed framework) the emphases of current psychosocial programming;

- identifying appropriate assessment measures of need in each of the domains identified;

- evaluating outcomes of particular intervention approaches (on non-targeted as well as targeted domains);

- examining the utilization of relevant knowledge by agencies in framing interventions; and

- considering the experience of program beneficiaries with respect to the core domains charted by the framework.