

For further details or enquiries, please contact:

The Psychosocial Working Group
Institute for International Health & Development
Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh
Edinburgh EH12 8TS, United Kingdom

Tel: + 44 131 317 3491
Fax: + 44 131 317 3494
Email: ewright@qmuc.ac.uk

Considerations in Planning Psychosocial Programs

This document forms part of a series of Working Papers produced by the Psychosocial Working Group. The papers present a conceptual framework for psychosocial intervention in regions affected by conflict and seek to apply this framework to issues of practice. They are available on the following website: www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial.



Queen Margaret University College
EDINBURGH



Refugee Studies Centre



MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
ARTSEN ZONDER GRENZEN



IRC



Mercy Corps



Christian Children's Fund



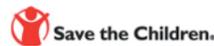
Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma



Solomon Asch Center



MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Columbia University



Save the Children

Who are the PWG?

The membership of the Psychosocial Working Group comprises five academic partners (Institute for International Health & Development, 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/iidh.

1. Preparations

Outside intervention may not be necessary in each emergency situation. In deciding whether and how to intervene, the following considerations warrant attention:

- Adequate emergency support often requires outside resources.
- Donor priorities and requests for proposals often drive decisions about whether and how to intervene. Being aware of this, outsider agencies should be careful to guide their decisions according to the community needs and gaps that exist in service provision.
- Stand-alone psychosocial programs may be premature if local people have no means of meeting basic needs for items such as food, shelter and health care.
- Communities differ in their definition of 'psychosocial' and of how

to provide psychosocial support. Imposition of outside ideas and methods may result in cultural bias, the marginalization of local approaches and cultural imperialism. At the same time, no cultural system is complete, and outside approaches can add value to local approaches. Intervention should be initiated in a spirit of mutual learning.

- To intervene is to enter a local system in which particular people and groups hold power and privilege. Well-intentioned interventions can inadvertently reinforce existent inequities and amplify local conflicts. Power mapping should be used to inform decisions about whether and how to intervene.

2. Critical perspective

Psychosocial interventions, although well intended, can have unintended consequences that violate the fundamental principle of 'Do no harm.' To reduce this problem, it is vital to view one's work critically and to consider who benefits from the work. Programs should address the following points:

- Since outsider programs may create dependency, strong emphasis should be placed on local empowerment, engagement, and capacity building as a counterbalance.
- Psychological labels can stigmatise local populations as 'traumatised' or mentally ill.
- Emphasizing the psychosocial needs of war-affected people can create a deficit focus that obscures local coping resources and sources of resilience that need to be strengthened.

- Although most humanitarian organisations seek neutrality, presence in a war zone is a political act. Entry into a country may require government approval, which can raise questions in the minds of opposition group members about neutrality. Similarly, if a program assists one group but not another due to security concerns, the intervention may be perceived as politically biased.
- Short-term interventions can pick open people's wounds, leaving them more vulnerable and without access to ongoing support.
- Photographs and public media portrayals can endanger people and can subtly exploit people at a moment when they most need support.
- Differences in concepts of ethics or good practices at community level should be addressed through open dialogue and group reflection.

3. Assessment

Although assessment is essential for guiding programs and policies, it can subtly impose outsider models, silence local understandings, and create unrealistic expectations among local people. High quality assessments of psychosocial programs are those that:

- Are linked to the rapid provision of effective support and services.
- Collect information on how local people understand their situation and experiences; how they have coped with their difficulties; and how they want to move forward.
- Analyse how psychosocial impacts and access to support vary according to gender, age, ethnicity, and related variables.
- Identify not only deficits and needs but also the people, groups

(e.g., women's groups and youth groups), and practices that support coping and serve as important resources for program delivery and support.

- Are ongoing processes that analyse the situation and the program approach and activities in progressively greater depth.
- Map local power structures in order to discern who is most vulnerable; which groups may be invisible and not included in 'community' discussions, and who benefits from programs.
- Recognize that Western concepts and tools may not apply in the local context, and that spirituality often plays a larger role in developing countries than in wealthy, highly industrialized countries.

4. Participation

Participation of local people is a vital component of effective program design and implementation. Participation itself is psychologically beneficial since it helps to restore people's dignity and sense of control following overwhelming experiences. Effective programs should:

- Build a sense of local ownership, which enhances sustainability.
- Enable collective planning and action that includes the participation of highly vulnerable people.
- Include beneficiary perspectives in defining positive and negative outcomes of interventions.
- Reinforce children's participation and agency.

5. Capacity Building

Too often, international NGOs bypass or engage minimally with key local stakeholders such as government ministries. Outside interventions are of most benefit when they work in a manner that increases the capacity of local people to meet their own needs on a sustained basis. Recognizing that excessive reliance on outside support robs people of their dignity and blunts local initiative, psychosocial programs should:

- Build a spirit of self-reliance.
- Strengthen the local skills, social institutions, and values that

enable local communities and government to meet psychosocial needs without outside support.

- Develop effective exit strategies at the outset that progressively reduce the local influence of, and engagement with outside agencies.
- Hire and develop local staff in management as well as lower-level positions.
- Collaborate with local government in assessments, program design, and program implementation and evaluation.

6. Peace-building and Social Justice

Psychosocial interventions often aim to heal the emotional and social wounds of armed conflict. Equal emphasis, however, needs to be on prevention of further conflict, which requires attention to peace building and to coordinating psychosocial programs with wider programs of societal reconstruction. In a post-conflict setting, it may be inappropriate for psychosocial programs to aim to restore the pre-conflict, 'normal' conditions, which may have included social injustices that produced the armed conflict. Programs should:

- Include prevention components on topics such as peace education, non-violent conflict resolution, and tolerance, adapted to the local context.
- Conceptualise clearly how they will advance the wider process of building peace with social justice.
- Appraise critically how their work may tacitly amplify conflict or inequities within the local context.
- Improve relations between groups in conflict.
- Challenge, when appropriate, the sources of aid or how it is being used.

7. Human Rights and Protection

Increasingly, protection is viewed as a collective responsibility in the humanitarian enterprise. Psychosocial programs have much to contribute since some of the main protection risks are emotional and social as well as physical. Quality programs should:

- Make explicit links between rights protection and psychosocial well-being.

- Identify and address key protection issues.
- Support advocacy efforts to establish effective protection mechanisms locally.
- Help humanitarian agencies locally to understand how their work can be improved by paying attention to psychosocial and protection issues.

8. Evaluation and Knowledge Improvement

Psychosocial intervention is a relatively new area that needs to be systematized and strengthened through proper documentation and research on measurement of program effectiveness and impact assessment. In the field, however, the capacity for learning and exchange are limited by isolation and inter-agency competition. Effective programs should:

- Take steps to evaluate program effectiveness systematically against well-defined objectives and benchmarks.

- Use participatory approaches to program evaluation.
- Use evaluation data to guide program improvements and to build the capacities of local partners.
- Exchange materials and findings from assessments and evaluations with other agencies, creating a culture of transparency.
- Contribute to published literature or at least to grey literature.
- Identify significant program-related questions that warrant additional research.

9. Training

Psychosocial programs often work through paraprofessional staff who may have had only one or two weeks of psychosocial training yet are asked to handle difficult situations and cases. In addition, training can impose outside ideas and tools in ways that silence local understandings and fail to learn from local culture, practices, and resources. Effective programs should:

- Regard training as an ongoing process that includes regular follow-up support or clinical supervision.

- Help trainees to understand the limits of their knowledge and to seek assistance in handling particularly complex situations.
- Tailor the amount and kind of training to match the responsibilities and situations the staff will be required to handle following training.
- Create spaces for mutual learning in which open dialogue can occur about strengths, weaknesses, and the potential for blending Western and local approaches.

10. Individual, Social, and Cultural Linkages

The Western focus on individual well-being is very limited in its application in most developing societies, where individual well-being can be viewed as inextricably interconnected with social relationships and with local culture and values. Effective interventions should:

- Consider the value of interventions at multiple social levels such as individual, household, and group levels.
- Seek to understand what local people regard as appropriate emotional and social functioning and well-being.
- Use, where appropriate, local social and cultural resources (e.g., rituals, healers) to provide support for vulnerable people.

For more information on the Psychosocial Working Group please contact the Secretariat: ewright@qmuc.ac.uk

Reference

Mary B. Anderson 'Do no harm; how aid can support peace – or war', Lynne Rienner Press, 1999