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## **Building a Conceptual Framework for Psychosocial Intervention in Complex Emergencies: Reporting on the work of the Psychosocial Working Group**

(A Joint Academic-Humanitarian Agency Initiative regarding response to the Psychosocial Needs of Refugees and War-affected Populations)

### **Perspectives**

During the past two to three decades there has been an increasing awareness of the psychological and social needs of refugees and displaced populations, in addition to their physical needs. Heightened international concern has resulted in greater funding available to support psychosocial programmes. Thus there has been a corresponding increase in the number and scale of programmes addressing these issues.

This burgeoning of activity has led to a wide diversity of approaches. For example, the umbrella label of 'psychosocial' has been applied to programmes that seek to promote human rights and justice. Equally the term has been embraced by those initiatives with a community development focus. In addition, programmes providing therapeutic treatment for individuals demonstrating symptoms of mental illness are seen as contributing to psychosocial support.

The activities of each of these programmes vary enormously, as do the types of resource and expertise that they employ. Underlying these superficial differences, however, are some more fundamental differences in understanding the nature of the problem that they are tackling, and the nature of appropriate solutions (Bracken, 1998). Programmes with a fundamentally medical model define the problem as illness or dysfunction that needs healing by the application of treatment (e.g. Losi, 2000). A development model understands issues more in terms of disruption and looks to facilitation and empowerment as a means of achieving restoration and development (e.g. Boothby, 1996). Human rights approaches are focused on issues of justice and violation (eg. International Committee of the Red Cross, 2001).

The enriching influence of such diversity can be undermined by misunderstandings that develop. For example, where the term 'psychosocial' is used loosely, confusion arises in defining goals and outcomes, which in turn inhibits effective monitoring and evaluation. Without clarity it is difficult to identify good practice and support appropriate priorities. Misunderstandings and lack of co-ordination can arise at all levels, from the field through to the funding agencies.

### **Setting up the psychosocial working group**

Practitioners and academics working in the field have been gathering experience and expertise over the last few decades, but as yet this remains diffused. It is increasingly recognised that there is a need to explore these differences in approach, to identify areas of common ground and to establish a framework within which psychosocial support can be understood. It is in

response to this need that the Andrew Mellon Foundation is supporting the 'Psychosocial Working Group' (PWG). The group comprises a consortium of organisations including both practitioners and academics in the field of psychosocial programming in complex emergencies:

Centre for International Health Studies, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh  
Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford  
Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma  
Program on Health Consequences of Forced Migration, Columbia School of Public Health  
International Rescue Committee  
Save the Children Federation - USA  
Christian Children's Fund  
Medecins sans Frontieres - Holland

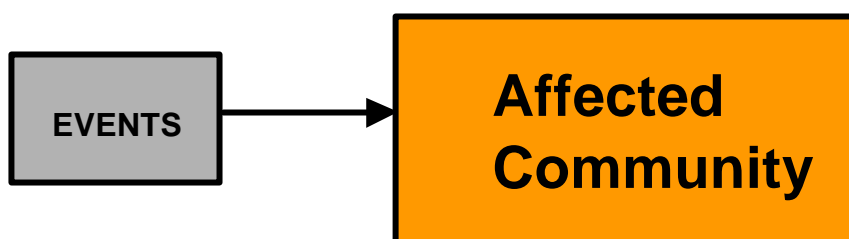
The PWG has initially set itself the task of developing a Conceptual Framework for psychosocial intervention in complex emergencies. This would be elaborated by making available relevant, but hitherto, unpublished literature exploring the issues. Clarifying the conceptual framework will itself facilitate the identification of a research agenda for the field. As part of the initial project, members of the PWG are also undertaking a number of small-scale research and development projects to test out models for collaborative working.

### **An emerging conceptual framework**

This paper will introduce the emerging conceptual framework and explore some of the issues raised by its development.

The PWG set itself the task of identifying the factors considered by those working in the field to influence the psychosocial 'well-being' of a community, and of exploring the relationships between those factors. A definition of 'psychosocial programmes' might be expected at this point. However, as Fred Ahearne notes in his attempts to define psychosocial well-being, there is little agreement in the field, and different emphases tend to push the concept towards particular perspectives (Ahearne, 2000). It has become apparent that in a project concerned to embrace the widest possible range of perspectives and activities, a clear definition with consensus support will be the end point rather than the starting point of the work. So the approach has been to draw together from a breadth of experience the issues considered relevant in the field. There is, of course, no end to the list of influential factors. Therefore the task has been to distil the complexity and achieve simplicity without becoming simplistic.

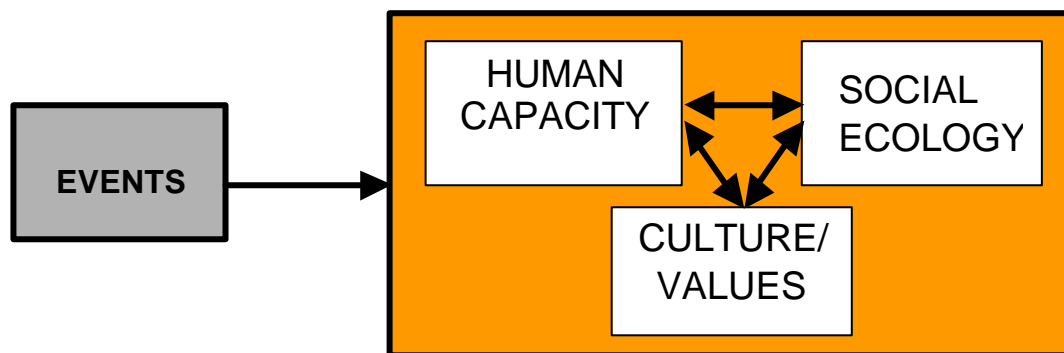
At the most rudimentary level the conceptualisation starts with a community that has been exposed to traumatic events:



It is acknowledged that in the context of international aid, attention is usually focused on a community as a result of some 'event' or 'events' that have impacted it, such as conflict, natural disaster and so on. The nature of these events can be very diverse; they can be catastrophic or cumulative, often continuing to impact the community over many years (thus forming a continuum from 'events' through to 'circumstances'). Their common feature, however, is that they challenge the community by disrupting or diminishing the resources of that community in some manner. In order to understand the nature of this disruption we suggest that it is helpful to distinguish between different aspects of a community's resources: to view it through different "lenses".

### The domains of community resource

The framework considers three major 'domains' with respect to which such community resources can be usefully mapped.



**Human capacity.** Events can lead to a loss of 'human capacity' within the community. This domain is taken to constitute such resources as the health and well-being (both mental and physical) of community members, the skills and knowledge of people, their household livelihoods etc. (All of which may be referred to as the 'human capital' of the community; Colletta & Cullen, 2000)

**Social ecology.** Events also frequently lead to a 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. (All of which may be referred to as the 'social capital' of the community; Colletta & Cullen, 2000)

**Culture and values.** Events may also disrupt the 'culture and values' of a community, leading to a sense of violation; challenging human rights; and undermining cultural values, beliefs and practices. (All of which may be referred to as the 'cultural capital' of the community; Colletta & Cullen, 2000)

The domains suggested by the model are interdependent, constituting different ways of describing interrelated phenomena. For example, good mental health conditions will support effective social networks and promote more effective utilisation of skills and capacities. Similarly, where for example, a woman is raped, she may not only be physically and emotionally wounded, but also her personal and cultural values may be violated. In some cases she will no longer be accepted in her own society, thus disrupting her place in the social

ecology and in turn depriving that community of her personal resources and skills. To view a community through these various "lenses" thus helps to unpack the nature and degree of the impact that various events and circumstances have on it.

### **The dynamic community**

Thus far the model is simply of 'community' and should be equally applicable to any community under any circumstances. All communities are constantly effected by events and circumstances, and are continually adjusting to them. The understanding that communities are dynamic, always adjusting and changing is fundamental to this conceptualisation. It can be seen as a process of engagement leading to transformation involving new relationships between the capacities, linkages and values of that community.

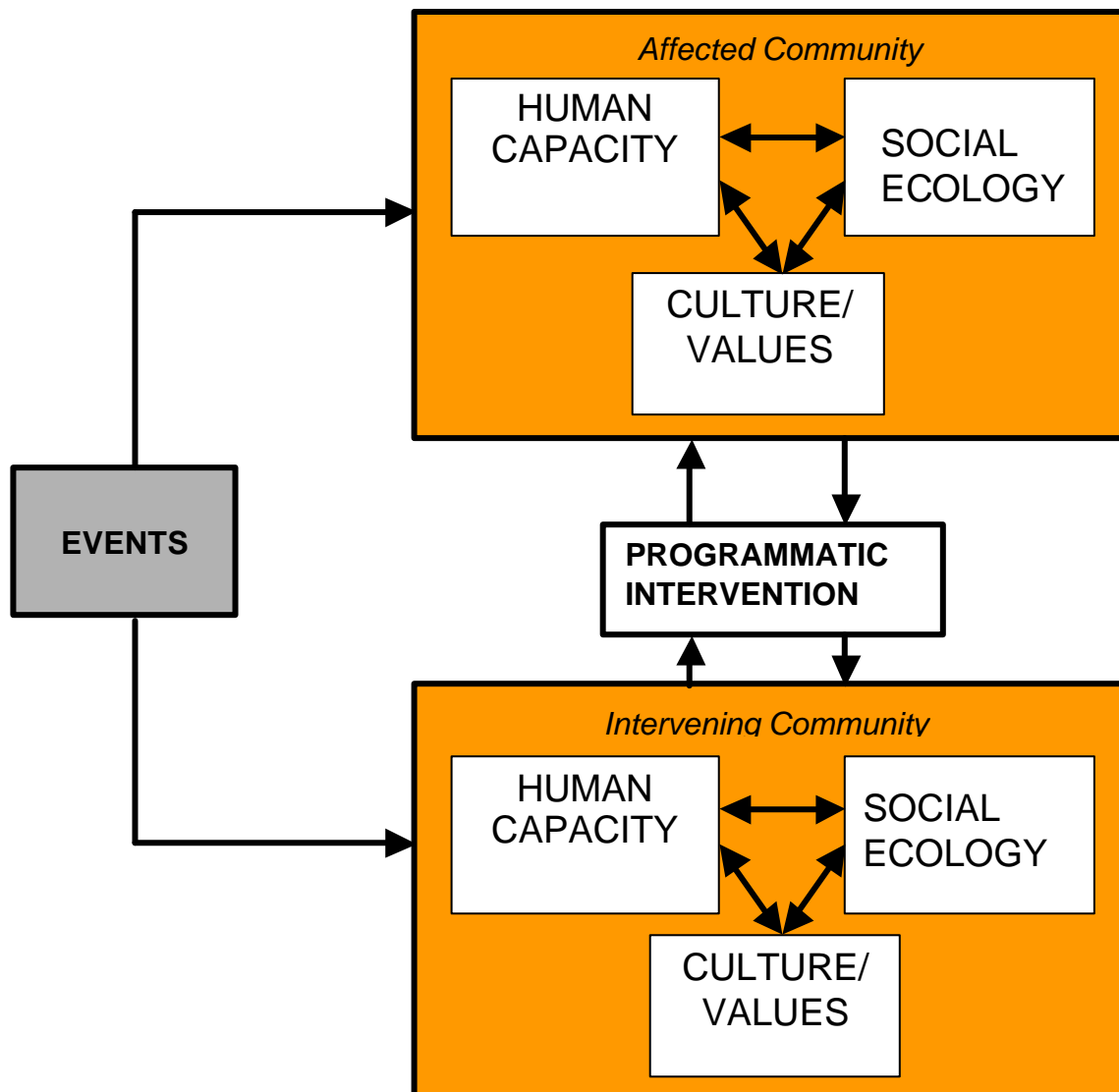
The impact of events on a community can be understood in terms of the effect on resources as elaborated by the domains. Resources can be disrupted and depleted, but also strengthened, by events. Social bonding may for example, have been strengthened as the community unites against the common enemy. In some circumstances however, the threat may bring fear and mistrust within the community, weakening its social bonds. It is not the events themselves, but the way a community has experienced those events which is the true indicator of trauma. The model suggests a way of evaluating the impact of events by looking directly at the effect on the resource domains.

It should be recognised that just as events can have a positive or negative effect on the resources available to a community; the resources themselves can be deployed positively or negatively. For example, social linkage can be used to exclude other groups, whilst cultural beliefs can lead to abuse of sectors of the population.

Thus we have described the process by which a community responds to and engages with the disruption caused by the events experienced. This engagement involves interaction between the domains highlighted. Each of these domains 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. 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.

### **Involvement of the international aid community**

Programmatic intervention by external agencies is essentially predicated upon the judgement that there are insufficient resources within an affected community to sustain appropriate engagement with the challenges created by experienced events. This could be described as some kind of 'resilience factor' that is not considered to be adequate. This prompts the external community of humanitarian agencies to consider offering support. A programmatic intervention will evolve through the interaction between the affected community and an external community.



It is explicit in this model that while the external community offers potential support through the deployment of additional resources, the operation of the external community is itself also influenced by its own (often complex) social ecology and the culture and values of its agencies. In addition, it is acknowledged that events also impact the functions of this external community (e.g. security situation influencing program implementation) as well as the 'impacted' community.

### Issues raised by the model

#### *Indicators of trauma*

Humanitarian agencies face the challenge of evaluating and describing the trauma experienced by a community. Often statistics about numbers of traumatic events have been used to communicate the severity of a crisis. Yet communities can be differently affected by events which may look the same. Just as, for example, an experience that may undermine the mental health of one person may lead to a strengthening of resolve in another. The impact of a particular event will partly depend on the cumulative effect of disruption.

This model indicates a way forward in evaluating trauma. It suggests that trauma can be assessed in terms of the depletion and disruption of resource domains. The PWG is currently working on the elaboration of those domains with a view to providing recommendations for their measurement

### *Goals of Intervention*

This model presents community as dynamic, constantly adjusting to events and circumstances. This implies that there is no 'normal' state for a community to return to, post-conflict. Thus the goal of any external intervention should not be to 'restore' the community to its former state. Instead the external support should be seeking to enhance the community's ability to deploy resources to 'transform' itself in response to its changing circumstances. The long-term goal would be that the community would be able to continue to meet these challenges independently without the need for external support.

However, the model also acknowledges the reality that programmatic intervention emerges through the interaction between the affected community and the external aid community. Both have their own ecology and values. As humanitarian agencies seek to support a community in pursuing its own goals there may be conflicts in values. They may consider that resources are not being mobilised in such a way as to benefit the whole community. They may consider that human rights are not being respected. A humanitarian agency providing support in a complex emergency will do so in such a way as to protect the integrity of its own organisational values.

### **Future developments**

This paper has introduced a theoretical model. It is intended that once fully elaborated the model should contribute to understanding and communication in the field. The priorities will be to stimulate debate and collaboration; facilitate strategic research and development work; and to promote the creation of practical tools and training materials. The PWG will shortly be launching its own web site, and the electronic literature resource will become live during the coming year.

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