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Special Issue: Evaluation of community based psychosocial programmes

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Introduction

There has been increasing interest in psychosocial and mental health interventions, both quantitatively (the number of projects) and in attempts to develop a coherent framework for the application of such interventions. These days, psychosocial initiatives are becoming a normal part of programming in the aftermath of emergencies and in post conflict situations. The recent production of guidelines and other documents, such as the IASC Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2007) and key documents, such as Baingana, Bannon & Thomas (2005) and Prince, M., Patel, V., Saxena, S., Maj, M., Maselko, J., Phillips, M. & Rahman, A. (2007) bear witness to the increased importance of mental health and psychosocial support. However, with the increased acceptance and growing professional standards in our field, we also are increasingly held accountable for our work. Good intentions and the belief that we really help other people in need are no longer a good enough argument for major institutional donors. We, as mental health and psychosocial professionals, have to demonstrate that *‘our efforts’* with *‘their money’* have the desired results.

One of the major players in our field, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), has recently commissioned a field-friendly guide to psychosocial evaluation in complex emergencies. In this *Special Issue of Intervention*, Ager, who was closely involved in the creation of this guidance document for UNICEF, describes this important development. Elsewhere in this issue, Williams and colleagues summarise the recommendations of a workshop on evaluating community based psychosocial programmes in areas affected by war and terrorism, held in 2007. Donor requirements may often be the main reason to carry out project evaluations, but, as van der Veer emphasises, there is another and perhaps even more important reason for evaluating psychosocial programs: we want to *learn lessons* from our experiences, and contribute to the rather small but expanding evidence base for psychosocial work in post conflict settings.

The logic behind doing proper evaluations is explained step by step by Ajdukovic who presents also four small case studies from the Balkans to illustrate the theory he has presented. Betancourt & Williams conducted a review of research related to mental health and psychosocial projects for children in war settings. They also describe two project evaluations in the Russian Federation and in Northern Uganda, in depth. Together with the review of the state of the art in psychosocial interventions for children in war affected areas by Kalksma-van Lith (2007) in a previous issue of *Intervention*, this is essential reading for all who want to know more about psychosocial projects with youth and children.

Although it appears that we have come to the conclusion at this point in the issue, Mikuš Kos produces a powerful counter point. In her *cry from the field* she depicts her experiences with external evaluations and research pro-

jects. Many things in the evaluation process can, and do, go wrong: cold, distant evaluators with insufficient knowledge of the local situation who are primarily interested in the production of so-called scientific knowledge and ignoring the real needs of the beneficiaries. Mikuš Kos' provocative discourse raises the question whether evaluations, in practice, inevitably have to be so terrible.

We have asked for the opinions of several practitioners in the field to contribute to this essential debate. Tol & Jordans and De Graaf, Jansveld & de Jager work for non governmental organisations and consider it one of their tasks to help build the evidence base for psychosocial interventions. They argue that, however difficult it sometimes may be, it is possible to reconcile the primary goals of project implementation with rigorous scientific evaluations methods, and they provide brief examples of their efforts. Poudyal and colleagues add their own experience on the use of a scientific design to evaluate the outcome of their activities in Indonesia. Onyango argues, effective research in social domains such as ours is more difficult and requires specific, more qualitative techniques, such as action research, something that has been advocated in an earlier issue of this journal by Hart, Galappatti, Boyden & Armstrong (2007). Kortmann, herself an evaluator of psychosocial projects for the past decade, explains how she tries to avoid the pitfalls described by Mikuš Kos. She recommends using a participative approach in evaluations, in which the visit of the external consultant is merely a step in an ongoing process.

We hope that this *Special Issue of Intervention* will contribute to the further maturation of our field. We still have a long way to go. We therefore request our readers to continue to provide us with articles that are scientifically sufficiently underpinned to contribute to on-going theory formation in our field, and

that are down-to-earth enough to also have actual influence on our daily practices.

Peter Ventevogel

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