

1. The importance of good people

The design and composition of a psychosocial program is determined by many factors. One factor of a practical nature is the circumstances under which the program will be run. Definitions of circumstances can include both the needs of the population where the programme will take place, but must also include a thorough understanding of the local facilities available. For example: you can't rely on video equipment or a PowerPoint presentation as a feature of training when local availability of electricity may be erratic. Similarly, you cannot accommodate teachers in a hotel if there is no hotel. Also, an awareness of the educational level of local trainers and teachers is essential to adapt the program for local conditions.

The design of a program also is dependent on ideas developed from the professional and private background of the designer. Often ideas originating from personal life experiences are just as, or perhaps more, important than theoretical concepts. Therefore, it is apt that I begin with a personal experience of my own.

I was eight years old in the winter of 1943. My parents had just joined Marshall Tito's partisan army. During a fascist offensive I hid with peasants in the village. They saved my life by telling the fascist soldiers that I was a relative, risking their own lives to do so. In the midst of such horror and evil, people such as those peasants greatly influenced my view of humanity; I perceived the world as a place in which there are very bad people, but even more who are good.

At the time, German soldiers who were perceived as an evil-force occupied the country

where I lived. Yet, one day a German soldier saw me walking in 'shoes' made of straw wrapped around my feet with a cord. As it happens, he was a shoemaker and a good person, so he made me a pair of shoes with wooden soles. That man changed my vision of the Germans. Because of him, I was able to recognise that all Germans were not evil people, among them were also good people.

These are some of my life experiences that have shaped my views on what can be done to empower children affected by wars and social adversities, as well as what can be done to stimulate the healing process. The simple deeds of good people can make an enormous difference. Any positive experiences can help to counterbalance the experienced, and the perceived, evil. When that happens, the opportunities to overcome harm and heal scars increase significantly.

It is very important that the 'good' is generated from environments outside the family circle. In war related and other socially conditioned adversities, it is not the family, which creates the evil. It is humanity in the larger sense of the word. The 'they' in this case is perceived to be those outside of the family, even though the harm is felt within it and impacts on the healthy functioning of it. Yet, for the child it is essential to meet 'they' who are agents for good; teachers, volunteers, international helpers, good soldiers and other representatives of humanity who can bring moral, emotional and practical goods in the child's life. People involved in psychosocial programs are, or can be, representatives of good forces in the world. I also learnt that winter that the quality of

everyday life significantly determines a child's ability to cope. The material quality of my life at eight years old, surviving a bitterly cold winter, increased significantly when I received a proper pair of shoes. The material quality of life in war affects children as much, if not more than the adults around them. For the majority of children in post war circumstances the quality of life is generally bad, with extremes of deprivation.

While material help is necessary, sometimes little can be offered. Emotional 'goods' such as; empathy, support, safety, routine, and opportunities for joyful activities, for learning, and for positive interpersonal experiences are also important for the quality of everyday life. Psychosocial programs can provide these 'goods' and thus can tangibly improve the moral, emotional, interpersonal and social quality of a child's life. They can strengthen the coping mechanisms of

children to deal with loss and traumatic experience, as well as with social and material adversities.

A good, caring school and teachers with sufficient energy can create a life space of quality. In that way, teachers can have a protective function in the development of children affected by war and social deprivation. Many other activities occurring in the normal everyday life of the child, can work in the same way.

As the school is the most universal, and most important, institution in the child's life as well as the most important life space for children outside the family, I invested my energy mostly within that environment. My goals were aimed at ameliorating the school environment in terms of humanisation, empowerment and mobilisation of social capital. All processes from which all members of the system can benefit: children, families and teachers.