

Letter to the editor

Some notes on Ananda Galappatti: Psychosocial work in the aftermath of the Tsunami

Immediately after the Tsunami that killed almost 200.000 people in Southeast Asia and destroyed so much of life, livelihood and property, many people wanted to help. Colleagues in the field were particularly worried about how to prioritize and manage children's psychosocial and psychological needs, as well as their material ones. The governments of the countries involved moved quickly to assure that children's rights would not be violated and their immediate needs secured.

However, as Ananda Gallapatti points out so clearly in his article in *Intervention* 3.1, psychological interventions are cultural products, and their imposition can be more destructive than helpful.

In response to requests from colleagues in the field for relevant guidelines that could help mitigate the psychological consequences of the emergency on children, I have prepared two documents: a basic outline for training emergency workers in the critical elements of child protection in emergency situations, and a guide for practitioners of psychosocial programming in emergency and post-emergency contexts.

If you would like to receive these documents, please email me through intervention@wartrauma.nl mentioning the guidelines.

It is critical to insure that disaster workers know that the most important psychosocial intervention for children (especially young children) is to prevent separation from the family. Where separation from parents has already occurred, always ensure consisten-

cy of care, rapid tracing and family reunification.

Next in importance is to facilitate rapid identification of the dead and to allow children to participate with adults in mourning rituals as the culture permits. In this context it should be mentioned that, according to advice of the World Health Organisation (see <http://w3.whosea.org/en/Section23/Section1108/info-kit/WHO-Mortuary-Service.pdf>), it is possible to delay burial a few days to allow for identification and notification of family members, if the bodies of the dead were healthy before the disaster. When it is not possible to recover the dead, it is difficult for children to know whether or not they are orphans, and for families to properly grieve and to mourn according to their cultural norms.

It is also important to recreate normal activities such as some form of education. Children in an emergency school can be given messages about hygiene and nutrition, and families can begin to organise themselves around their children's education. Sometimes opportunities for age appropriate participation in community recovery can be created. For example, adolescents may be involved in identifying separated children and caring for them in the emergency schools and child centres.

In addition, emergency workers can find themselves in situations where there has been ongoing inter-group conflict. In such a situation, they should make sure that the distribution of support, material and psychosocial intervention does not favour any one group.

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