

7. Voluntary work inside schools

The importance of restoring 'natural resources'

In the chapter 3 we mentioned the importance of the social network for coping and healing processes in children affected by war. In war-related circumstances the natural social network is impoverished, or lost. Volunteers represent the possibility of an enlargement and enrichment of the affected social network. They can contribute in various ways to the empowerment and wellbeing of children affected by war, and of refugee children. This chapter describes the introduction of volunteers into the school. When we want to help children to restore the conditions for a normal psychological development, the most effective method may be to restore 'natural resources', such as a supportive social network. This is true, even when some children may need additional therapeutic attention.

It took many years before the majority of mental health workers to recognise the meaning and importance of a 'natural resource', within the broader social network and social context, for the rehabilitation of people affected by war and exile. Therapy, or counselling, aimed at overcoming traumatic experience is not the only answer to the psychological problems of people affected by armed conflict.

The psychosocial function and healing tools of volunteers

A variety of people can work as volunteers and offer support to teachers working with children affected by armed conflict. How volunteers can offer help to refugee children is shown in Table 3. (below), listing

volunteers' activities and their impact on the life and psychosocial well being of refugee children from Bosnia and Herzegovina, living in Slovenia (1992-1995).

In chapter 3 we already mentioned the requirements for successful psychosocial assistance: a positive relationship between the helper and the helped person, the ability of the helper to make a positive change in the life situation of the helped person, and specialised professional knowledge.

Lay volunteers possess the listed requirements in different proportions from those of mental health workers. Many people, who have no professional training, are gifted with extraordinary sensitivity and understanding of psychological problems, and have inborn capacities for psychosocial help.

In creating an interpersonal relationship between the helper and the helped, the volunteer is often better placed than a professional. The volunteer is more accessible socially and emotionally, has more time, and often more energy to spend with individuals in need as he/she is not usually responsible for a large number of clients. A volunteer can provide benefits stemming from a good social relationship, such as warmth, security, support, empowerment and motivation, which can be more intense than those provided by mental health professionals.

The second requirement for successful psychosocial assistance is the capacity to change the life situation of the receiving person and to provide practical help. In the case of children, this could be helping the

Table 3 How volunteers can help refugee children

Stress of refugee children	Help of volunteers
Loss of domestic social network	Creation of new social network
Bad experiences with people, disappointment, emotional harm	Kindness, friendship, the experience 'there are still good people'
Social isolation, life in a ghetto	Volunteers bridging the refugee community and the hosting community
Exclusion, xenophobia, rejection	The message ' <i>we do care about what is happening to you, we want to help you</i> ', counteracting prejudices and xenophobia
Deprivation concerning normal leisure pursuits and other activities	Organisation of various leisure time activities for children
Not speaking the language of the asylum country and related difficulties	Teaching the language through befriending, playing and through instructions
School and learning difficulties	Learning assistance
Difficulties in integration in the new environment due to not being familiar with patterns and rules of social behaviour	Host country volunteers teach children characteristic patterns of behaviour, volunteers help children to acquire social orientation and to adapt to the new environment
General impoverishment, deprivation, multiple adversities	Enrichment of life, better quality of life
Psychological traumatising due to war-related trauma and loss	Volunteers work as psychosocial helpers, contributing to the psychological healing and rehabilitation of children, empowering children to cope better

child move from a position of failure to one of achievement in the classroom (for example through additional coaching on a subject). This then, influences the self-esteem of the child and therefore his/her capacity to cope. The inclusion of children by volunteers in various sports, games and cultural activities enriches their lives, improves their quality of life, and broadens their interests and horizons. All of these factors have a healing influence on traumatised and depressed children.

Specialised mental health knowledge in lay workers is very limited. Yet, volunteers can acquire this knowledge step by step through reflections of their experience during training or supervision.

Volunteering is not just one-way traffic either. It is important for one's own personal development and aides in developing a wide range of abilities. For young people, being a volunteer has an important protective impact on their psychosocial development, because they become involved in pro-social activities. This helps to prevent delinquency and drug abuse by endowing the young with a sense of purpose and dignity. Voluntary work enriches the life of young volunteers; it adds new meaning to life, new satisfactions, and new joys. Volunteers learn to become socially responsible citizens. They develop a set of pro-social values such as solidarity and a moral obligation to actively participate in problem solv-

ing. They become sensitised to social processes in their communities, especially those linked to poverty and social exclusion. They experience for themselves that the impact of these processes can be reduced by the activation of civil society. They acquire new practical knowledge, know-how and skills (for example: in communication, in supporting people in need, or in advocacy for deprived groups). Receiving recognition for their social activities increases their self-esteem. They no longer see themselves as the helpless victims of evil and social adversities. On the contrary, they see themselves as active creators of their own life-situation and the situation of their communities. Voluntary work provides opportunities for children and youth who are at the receiving side of help to in turn, become help givers to others. This has a positive effect on their self-esteem and their personality, in general.

Volunteers in different war-related situations

During a *war-related emergency* we do not envisage planned psychosocial activities on the part of volunteers. Psychosocial help is somehow supposed to be spontaneously integrated into other practical activities, such as the distribution of food, and logistics of care for the sick and wounded.

Like other disasters, war-related circumstances evoke a huge amount of spontaneous solidarity in people directly affected by the tragedy. People provide mutual help within the framework of their groups and communities. But their ability to help their fellow human beings is mostly limited, and is generally devoted primarily to, the care of family members and other loved ones.

In *long-lasting situations of armed conflicts* many psychosocial programmes run by volunteers can be developed, for example in *exile*

situations. As well as providing practical assistance, psychosocial, educational and other kinds of support, volunteers have a positive influence on the public attitudes and behaviour of the host country. They bridge both communities – the community of refugees on one side and the community of the exile country on the other side. Volunteers often act as a pressure group lobbying in favour of refugees in political decisions made the asylum country.

Prolonged situations of exile are characterised by general dependency, passivity and depression. Motivating displaced people and refugees to volunteer in the interest of their community, and facilitating such activities, provides multiple practical, social and psychological benefits for the refugees, as well as for those volunteering.

The *post-war situation* is of crucial importance for the recovery process. Human resources available in post-war circumstances are reduced. Humanitarian organisations, foreign volunteers and other 'imported resources' leave the country quickly. The mentality of the population after war undergoes a change. The solidarity that characterised the war situation vanishes. After war, everyone becomes more self-centred. However, war traumas have not yet healed and new social problems emerge. People experience many disappointments and numerous expectations are not fulfilled. In the regions of former Yugoslavia affected by war, a multitude of social problems emerged: poverty, unemployment, and injustice. The state institutions and services for health-care, social welfare, etc., were dysfunctional and corrupt. In such a situation, there are enormous quantities of needs that go unmet.

For instance, to mention just one, returnee children often have often great difficulty integrating back into their native schools

due to social and emotional reasons, one of which can be because they have been studying a different curriculum and often have language difficulties.

Volunteers can be invaluable helpers to different groups in need, especially children. They can also compensate for family deprivation and parental dysfunction to some extent. Parents are more affected than their children by loss of family members and property. The atmosphere of the family is depressive. Numerous parents have no energy or the emotional capacity to support their children. A volunteer who is not burdened by distress and sadness can bring positive emotions, humour, joy, positive dreaming, etc. into the life of the child.

In a post-war situation, as well as being a human energy, 'here and now' resource to people in need, volunteering represents an important moral value for the community. It acts as a counterweight to the morality of the market economy, which is certainly not based on solidarity or care for one's fellow man. The organised activities of volunteers enrich the social tissue of post-war communities and provide socially deprived individuals with an increased sense of security.

The development of new forms of post-war, community-based voluntary work can result in a sustainable local, or regional culture of voluntarism, with the social responsibility of every citizen to improve the quality of life of the most deprived and vulnerable. In fact, it can improve the quality of life of the whole community, as all of the above have an influence on the individual and collective healing process.

The post-war period should also be a time of reconciliation. The process of reconciliation is affected mainly through common activities, by uniting all sides involved in the conflict. Involving volunteers from dif-

ferent ethnic and religious groups in common pro-social activities is an important means of working towards social reconstruction and reconciliation in the community. The volunteers' network contributes to the development of tolerance, confidence building, and conviviality in the community.

Developing a volunteer program in a school

How children and the school benefit. In school, the school director and the teachers must be motivated to support the ideas of, and believe in, the advantages of voluntary work. Volunteers can be recruited from the community, parents, or other interested people, as well as from inside school. Children can be a great help in supporting their (mostly) younger fellow pupils.

All children can benefit from volunteers' activities. But, volunteers may become very important especially for physically handicapped children, sick children, children with psychosocial problems or disorders, socially deprived children, children suffering from trauma-related complaints and symptoms, and children from dysfunctional families. The contact with volunteers can protect deprived children from allowing the impact to worsen, and to stimulate healthy psychological development. It can improve the psychosocial quality of their lives by involving them in various social activities that bring joy and happiness, and thus countering the process of social exclusion. It can advance their social functioning, because the volunteers can serve as role models. It can help them to develop new interests, and it can contribute to an improvement of their school achievement. It may also give them corrective experience with 'good' people that helps compensate for painful experiences and thus give the children a more positive outlook of humanity.

The school as a whole benefits from the work of volunteers because it promotes a good reputation in the community as a caring institution.

A local partner NGO could develop this sort of volunteer program. The schools must of course be willing to cooperate. Teachers from schools included in the program can be mentors for the volunteers. Parents have to consent to their children becoming volunteers, or that their children are helped by volunteers. Local trainers run workshops for mentors and supervise the volunteers' programme.

Training mentors. When voluntary work is part of a psychosocial intervention, the organisers need to start with training mentors. These mentors will monitor and supervise the work of the volunteers. Volunteers should be prepared for their work; they should have regular group encounters with opportunities to discuss problems and their own difficulties and dilemmas. Volunteers should be supported, but organisers and supervisors should not devote the bulk of their time and energy to volunteers' problems. There is a danger that the volunteers' group becomes centred on its own problems, so that the war-affected community are no longer the main beneficiaries.

There are situations when volunteers should be protected; for instance, from unjust accusations by refugees. The organiser must be aware that volunteers who dedicate their time and energy to war-affected people can be very vulnerable to such harassment. In addition, volunteers may have unrealistic and idealised images of the war-affected population.

Their own community may regard domestic volunteers who offer aid to refugees in the host country with suspicion, especially

if this is unfriendly towards refugees, or by negatively minded refugee camp managers. On the other hand, volunteers often reflect a positive image of refugees back to their family, or institutional environments.

Selection of volunteers. When engaging volunteers, the organisers must pay attention to the selection process. Some people who wish to be volunteers in situations related to armed conflict do not have adequate skills for coping with the difficulties they are likely to encounter. Their volunteering can cause harm to themselves, or to people with whom they work.

Volunteers with a patronising attitude towards victims of war and refugees can be harmful. It shows lack of respect for the coping capacities of the local people. On the other hand, it can push more vulnerable people into a position of helpless victim, thus preventing the mobilisation of their own coping energies and efforts. Volunteers should act in partnership with those they wish to support and their behaviour should be culturally appropriate.

Sensitisation of the community. Other people working with children, like doctors, social workers, etc., can be informed about the services volunteers are willing to provide in their communities. Initiating voluntary work is a social innovation, which needs adequate preparation, acceptance, and the sympathy of the environment. Therefore ample time and energy should be invested in informing and explaining the concepts and practicalities of voluntary work to all parties involved.

Starting to work as a volunteer. Volunteers, who participate in a program aimed at strengthening the protective role of a school, are brought in contact with a 'client'. They meet this client once a week throughout the whole academic year. The people receiving help can be elderly people, dis-

abled people, or other people in need. Most frequently young volunteers help children. Volunteers can be very efficient assisting children with learning difficulties. This aid can be provided by peers, by children from higher classes, by secondary school students, and by university students. Befriending, and being a role model, is another important function of volunteers working with children with emotional and psychosocial problems, disabled children, and children with special needs.

The mentor is responsible for the implementation of the program, for its quality, and for the respect of ethical standards. Mentors are prepared for their role and activities by attending a training session before starting their work with volunteers. The initial step in involvement for young volunteers is the organisation of a workshop run by the mentors. The purpose of the workshop is to acquaint vol-

unteers with the aims and values of volunteering, to prepare them for practical work according to the defined tasks and beneficiaries (for instance, how to help elderly people, how to help children with learning difficulties, etc.), to acquaint volunteers with their obligations, and with the support which will be provided to them by mentors and organisers. The mentors meet biweekly with groups of volunteers working in the same field (for instance, the group of volunteers helping elderly people). Those meetings include monitoring of volunteers' activities, supervision, discussing problems and their solutions. If volunteers work in institutions (for instance, in a home for handicapped children), the mentor is cooperating with such institution on regular basis. The task of the mentor is also to acknowledge volunteers and give them opportunities to present their work in the public, and through the media.