

9. Preventing difficulties

Every program runs into difficulties or must cope with difficult situations. These can vary from conflicts with staff members of the partner organisation, to the inability of participants to cross military checkpoints, or even engine trouble with the buses bringing the participants. There are some preventative measures that could prove useful:

The main basic condition for the realisation of the program is a good and reliable partner organisation. Usually, the organisation will be a local NGO, either an already existing one or a new one started for the purpose of implementing the program. The local organisation should be continuously supported in a variety of ways: financially, with expertise and morally. This is essential in order to develop identification with the program and to maintain momentum. It is expected that within the process, the partner organisation may go through a crisis in which special support is needed.

Local trainers should be well prepared for their roles. Often a problem appears when academic trainers, such as university teachers, are involved. They can have severe difficulties moving from highly abstract and sophisticated academic presentations into more interactive ones using concepts and terminology closer to the teachers' level.

International trainers running the program should internalise the philosophy of the program. It is not unusual for mental health professionals to use the vocabulary of community based psychosocial programs, but without changing their clinical approach. This is then reflected in their work.

Psychosocial programs require a special sensitivity for cultural, religious and other community specific concepts. It is possible for participants to be offended due to a small mistake on the part of the international trainers, or due to a linguistically caused misunderstanding. For example: a group of local trainers was unsatisfied because religion was placed at the bottom of the list of protective factors. In another example: a group of local trainers in another country were offended when the international trainer mentioned that children with Attention Deficit and Hyperkinetic Disorders (ADHD) have frequently been involved in dangerous situations, also sometimes, in war. The sharp response to this comment was that their young, national heroes were not disturbed people.

International trainers, as well as local trainers, can become emotionally exhausted from the overwhelming multitude of sad stories and atrocities. I have, in the past, protected myself by not listening to all stories presented during group discussions and role-play. So, in this way I have only taken in the number of stories that I felt was in my range to cope.

Frustration and feelings of helplessness can demoralise international trainers, and can often stem from an awareness that so little can be done to change the conditions of life and the amount of suffering of the served population. I often asked myself: does it make sense, does it mean anything to the school in the village where 60 civilians were killed in one day, to be included in a psychosocial program? These questions are

best answered within discussions with local participants.

The success of any program depends upon the invested energy and social wisdom of those who are responsible for it. Professional mental health knowledge is only one, small ingredient in the package of required qualities.

Sometimes the program is reproached for being logistically too luxurious; *'why do you bring the teachers to a hotel? You could let them travel in every day, that would be cheaper!'* Teachers are hard workers and in areas of armed conflict, or former armed conflict, living and working in the most unfavourable circumstances. Introducing them into a nice environment acts on many levels to enhance their motivation and cooperation, as well as a sign of respect and a small social reward. Any money invested in providing comfort and some small pleasure to teachers is very well invested.

Shortage of water, electricity and other logistical problems are a rule rather than an exception, and organisers should not be too distressed when they occur. Lectures and workshops can be run without water and electricity if needed.

In order to help prevent difficult situations arising, contact with relevant local authorities should be established early and courtesy visits paid to school authorities, community leaders, and others deemed essential.

Security problems should be handled with caution. Sometimes participants are willing to attend seminars, even under insecure conditions. The issue should be discussed with partner NGO's, trainers, and of course, with teachers. Frequently an argument put forward by local people, in favour of the continuation of the program despite security risks which may influence their motivation and cooperation is; *we live in dan-*

ger all time, so why stop coming to the seminar?

Another difficult question is when programs can be started. When are conflicts deemed to be over and when are they still present? The answer is not easy, but some examples might prove helpful. Similar programs run in Bosnia during the war, have also been run in Iraq, despite continuing violence and terrorist attacks. However, without question, the program should be adapted to current, local circumstances.

In the described program, evaluation is always deficient. The main reason for this lack is probably due to fatigue and time constraints on both international and local people running such programs. Often, they are so involved in fieldwork and coping with the reality on the ground that they have no energy to invest in the evaluation. Therefore, direct interactions with participants of the program enhance the estimation that the program is helpful and worthwhile. As a local trainer and colleague said; *'I do not need any scientific evaluation when I visit a school in the mountain village and speak with teachers, I can recognise the value of the program.'*

In circumstances where ethnic groups in conflict live in communities together, the question of inter-ethnic seminars is often raised. Of course, inter-ethnic seminars could contribute to tolerance and peace building. But be forewarned, in my experience, it can be risky to start with inter-ethnic seminars. This not only creates difficulties in introducing the innovative approach, you will have to struggle with inter-ethnic tensions. This can surface in the most basic elements of the program, such as translating lectures and group discussions. That said, if the organisers have enough courage and energy, and if the circumstances allow it, it is still worth a try.

10. References

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