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## From the editor

### **Peter Ventevogel**

Most of this issue examines evidence, evidence gathering and evaluation. Our opening article, while focusing on a specific form of intervention, also leaves us with a question: what evidence do we need to design better interventions?

Over the past few decades, the phenomenon of child friendly spaces (CFS) has spread widely throughout the field of humanitarian aid. CFS activities are done with and for children, usually in groups, and with strong input from the community. They aim to support resilience and the wellbeing of children affected by armed conflict. Anyone who has visited a CFS during an emergency will have intuitively felt how important and logical it is to provide such a safe environment, allowing children to *'be children again'*. The assumption is that this is particularly important within the chaotic context of an unfolding humanitarian emergency, but how do we know whether CFS really do have beneficial effects? *Alastair Ager, Janna Metzler, Marisa Vojta & Kevin Savage* scrutinised the available literature to assess the outcomes and impacts of CFS. In general, the outcomes tended to be positive, but unfortunately there were few, well designed evaluations that allow *'hard conclusions'* to be drawn. The paper by Ager et al. can be seen as an invitation to humanitarian actors to spend more time on monitoring and evaluation of the effects of our interventions. This is important, not only because we need to know how to better design our interventions, but also financial donors will continue to request them.

Ager's paper is, therefore, an excellent example of how evidence can be systemati-

cally reviewed, synthesised, and quantified (how many studies find that intervention x works, and to what extent).

However, there are different approaches to obtaining and documenting meaningful information. The short paper by *Grace Akello* is an example a different type of evidence gathering. Akello, herself a Ugandan, documented the experiences of women in northern Uganda who had been captives of armed forces and became mothers during captivity. After the hardships of being abducted, and the challenges of rehabilitation, the women faced serious challenges in their communities as mothers of children who were fathered by the enemy. Such an ethnographic approach leads to context bound information that is, to some extent, *'subjective'*.<sup>1</sup> While another researcher with another background would probably have sketched a different picture, a good ethnography can lead to a richer, deeper understanding of what really matters to the people themselves.

Discussions of research methods often puts practitioners off. It should not. In fact, systematically documenting what you do should be a priority for all of us. However, the reality is that often it is not, and psychosocial workers may find it difficult to formulate why they do what they do. An anonymous author, working in an unnamed conflict affected country, found that during an evaluation the workers in the field found it hard to formulate an explicit *'intervention logic'* for psychosocial activities they implemented, for a large part, intuitively. The anonymous field report on page 178 of this issue describes how the external evaluator was able to assist the field workers to formulate an intervention logic, through a participatory approach.

Psychosocial interventions may take a variety of forms and formats, and sometimes

unexpected ones. *Rachel Ann Cohen* describes how elements of psychological trauma treatment were woven into traditional sewing collectives for women in Ecuador. Female survivors of gender based violence came together to create colourful, traditional textiles, known as *arpilleras*, in order to help them express and process what had happened. The initial results are very promising. Apart from the more a-specific elements of group work (drawing women out of social isolation and promoting social connectedness), there also seems to be specific elements within the activity of sewing that helps to promote a safe manner to explore the distressing events in their lives.

This issue also contains field reports from two other refugee settings: *Relinde Reiffers*, *Ram Prasad Dahal*, *Suraj Koïrala*, *Renee Gerritzen*, *Nawaraj Upadhaya*, *Nagendra Luitel*, *Shaligram Bhattarai* & *Mark Jordans* report on the development of a multilayered system of psychosocial and mental health support for Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Among many things, their article shows the critical importance of involving the refugee community in designing and implementing any psychosocial interventions taking place in their communities.

The last field report in this issue is about Syria, a country that seems to dwindle into a spiral of endless violence. After all, daily we hear news about the internal conflict, but rarely anything positive. Still, *'against all odds'*, local initiatives are continuing as the field report by *Sarah Harrison*, *Riwa Dahman*, *Maha Ismail*, *Edith Saada*, *Maysaa Hassan*, *Rasha Hassan*, *Adam Musa Khalifa* & *Marian Schilperoord* highlights. Starting in 2008, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) developed an impressive programme to address the mental health and psychosocial needs of Iraqi refugees in Syria. This

programme has been previously described in a earlier issue of this journal (Quosh, 2011), and a collection of papers on this programme will be published in the next issue. In the meantime, the field report by Harrison et al. shows how activities, initially designed for Iraqi refugees and the Syrian host communities, have now opened up to include Syrian's who have been internally displaced by the conflict beginning in 2011. It is a powerful sign of the resilience of people that Iraqi refugees, who used to be *'beneficiaries'* and were trained in the programme, are now using their skills to help those Syrians in need.

This issue also includes a powerful personal reflection by *Eva Paglia*, an Italian psychologist with Médecins sans Frontières. She describes the dramatic impact of an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and what she, as an MHPSS worker could and could not do. We round off the issue with three book reviews. *Eefje Smet* reviews *'Children's rights and International Development'*, *Margaret Angucia* reviews *'Re-Member; Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reconciliation of War-Affected Children'*, and *Ryoko Honda* reviews *'Psychological capacity building in response to disaster'*.

## References

- Akello, G. (2012). The importance of the autobiographic self during research among war-time children in northern Uganda. *Medische Antropologie*, 24, 289–300.
- Quosh, C. (2011). Takamol: multiprofessional capacity building to strengthen the psychosocial and mental health sector in response to refugee crises. *Intervention*, 9, 249–263.

<sup>1</sup> See Akello (2012) for an explanation of ethnographic research as autobiographic endeavour.