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Special 10th Anniversary Issue 1: Voices from the field

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From the editor... *Voices from the field: celebrating 10 years of 'Intervention'*

Peter Ventevogel

This is the first of two Special 10th Anniversary issues, the second will follow in March 2013.

In January 2003, the very first issue of *'Intervention'* was published. Appropriately, it began as a local initiative by the Sri Lankan organisation *Shantiham*, 'the house of peace' in Jaffna, North Sri Lanka, with the combined efforts of the founding editors Guus van der Veer, S. Sivayokan and Ananda Galappatti. Their aim was simple, but with a brand new perspective in academic publication; to create a platform for those involved in the provision of mental health and psychosocial support and to enable practitioners in the field, especially those from low income countries, to share their insights and learn from, and with, colleagues around the globe.

Many academic publications, such as journals and textbooks, remain inaccessible for field workers in low resource settings, due to access restrictions, high subscription rates, and prohibitive slow or costly electronic download speeds. Additionally, a heavy linguistic reliance on a sort of scholastic *shorthand* or *jargon*, found in many academic journals, can often form an impenetrable obstacle to understanding of the content for those not schooled in these specific scientific languages.

Therefore, *'Intervention'* was conceived to serve as a working link between prac-

tioners in the field, policy makers and academics. This ground-breaking, multi-levelled approach worked, and proved to be indispensable to the newly emerging, multidisciplinary field of mental health and psychosocial support in (post) conflict areas.

In fact, as the journal has grown and matured over the past decade, so has the field. The makers of *'Intervention'*, are justifiably proud to have been, and continue to be, an integral part of this professionalisation, by publishing key articles, documenting and initiating debates around hot topics, documenting and disseminating good practices examples and contributing to the creation of an evidence base for psychosocial work in the aftermath of armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies.

Over the past decade *'Intervention'* has published over 3000 pages, by authors from all corners of the globe, writing on a large variety of topics, including conceptual and polemic, as well as descriptive and reflective papers on the concrete experiences of practitioners in the field. What was started as a local initiative, has become a persistent and respected voice, illustrated by some of the statistics below:

- The website of the publisher is visited on average 66 times per day, and is consulted by almost 10,000 unique visitors a year.
- The journal is accessible through 1,668 academic libraries and research institutes, around the world.
- *'Intervention'* is part of the HINARI initiative of the World Health Organization that enables researchers, from low and middle income countries, to consult academic journals at no, or strongly reduced, costs.
- By 2012, the journal was indexed in scientific databases, such as PsycInfo (for psychologists), PILOTS (for literature on trauma), CINAHL and BNI (for

- nurses), and more general databases, such as Global Health and Human Security.
- Copies of the journal are now distributed to addresses in 88 countries, with around 350 organisations in low and middle income countries receiving complimentary issues.

It seems entirely appropriate that, as we take stock at the end of our first decade, and look forward to the next, that we should recall our small, local beginnings and turn our focus to that which makes *Intervention* so unique in the world: our inclusion of the perspectives of those working locally, in the field. *Intervention* is therefore proud to present an issue of field reports and personal reflections from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Many of the authors included in this issue have never published their experiences before. Therefore, it is with great pride that *Intervention* is able to provide the space for these ‘voices from the field’ in this, the first of our two 10th Anniversary Special Issues.

Learning from practice

The issue opens with an article by the American anthropologist, *Patricia Omidian*. She lived in Afghanistan and Pakistan for more than 12 years, dedicating her working life to improving the lives of ordinary Afghans. She describes in this field report how a decade ago, about the time that *Intervention* was first published, she set out to train Afghan teachers who lived as refugees in Pakistan. She documents her efforts to improve community mental health through psychosocial wellness training. The article beautifully describes how she was able to introduce new ideas and new methods, while at the same time ensuring that the participants remained ‘in the driving seat’. Omidian was able, by building on

existing strengths and using the cultural heritage of the participants, to provide new ways of encouraging mental health care and psychosocial wellbeing that did not feel imposed by western ideals. In the training she combined ideas from modern psychology with cultural material from the Afghan participants themselves, such as story telling and poetry. The author is fully aware that there are often attitudes or behaviours ‘that should be stopped, or at least modified’, but this should not be perceived as attempts by outsiders to change local practices. As Omidian concludes, ‘if people feel their norms and values are under attack, they will refuse to listen to something they might actually want to learn.’

The second field report, by *Tamara Takhokhova* and *Tatyana Chshieva*, is also about working with teachers, in this case in North Ossetia on the Southern flank of the Russian Republic, in the North of the Caucasus. North Ossetia is perhaps best known for the tragic consequences of the hostage taking in a school in Beslan. During the shootings that occurred in the violent liberation action by the government, hundreds of children died and many more were wounded. This act, as well as several others that were less widely publicised, has created many challenges for teachers and parents who often find it difficult to deal with children affected by the collective violence. The authors, both trained as teachers and involved in a local nongovernmental organisation, describe how acknowledging the impact of trauma and the limitations it may create with the educational professionals themselves, helps the teachers to understand the signs and improve their skills to deal with children suffering in difficult circumstances.

In a similar way, *Anne van den Ouwelant* reports on the work of a Brazilian

nongovernmental organisation working with residents of the slums in Rio de Janeiro. It may surprise some readers that *'Intervention'* has included a field report from Brazil, a country that is not usually listed as an *'area of armed conflict'*. However, when reading van de Ouwelant's paper, it is very quickly clear that the situation in some of the Brazilian slums shares many aspects and impacts found in a war zone. The paper focuses on the consequences of the ongoing violence on the local social educators who work with children and young adults in these gang controlled, slum neighbourhoods run by drug lords. These workers have themselves lived amidst this daily violence, and while this may provide them with a good understanding of what their clients go through, it may also sometimes interfere with their ability to assist others. It is good to learn how a local nongovernmental organisation tries to assist these social educators, and *'Intervention'* is already looking forward to the next report on the results of this interesting project.

The fourth field report is from a group of psychosocial specialists working in Mali, *Diarra Sekou, Dembele Alou, Diarra Tiecoro, Keita Fatoumata, Pehe Celine, Virginia Perez, Sow Boubacary, Sow Daouda, Traore Bedo, Traore Yaya & Emmanuel Streel*. Their brief contribution is truly a voice from the field. It reports on the very first initiatives, taken within the past few months, by local and international agencies to develop psychosocial support activities in the midst of an unfolding, armed conflict and humanitarian crisis in Mali. As *'Intervention'* goes to press, the situation in Mali is rapidly developing and shifting. The authors highlight the importance of building on local expertise in order to develop appropriate and sustainable mental health and psychosocial support services in response to the current crisis.

Personal reflections

This issue also has three personal stories that show how personal experiences and professional activities in mental health and psychosocial support may be closely intertwined. In a moving account, the Congolese teacher *Feza Penge* tells her life story. She has faced terrible adversity due to the violence in her home country, and as a refugee. She became involved in psychosocial work and discovered the healing power of working within the community. Her account embodies what *'resilience'* can be, and is a testament to the courage of people in horrifying circumstances. The author was able to overcome the challenges she continues to face, and become a skilful helper to others.

Another moving account is from *Sabah Jaafar* from Baghdad, in Iraq. During the civil war in her country she was kidnapped, her husband was tortured and eventually killed. Her deep grief is palpable throughout her story. Yet, this too is a story of finding courage and strength in the midst of adversity. Mrs. Jaafar is now coordinator of a project for the empowerment of female and youth headed households, and she offers practical and emotional support to violence-affected widows.

The third account is from *Jibril Handuleh*, a young doctor from Somaliland. His description missed that personal touch in the life stories of Penge and Jaafar, but here too we see how strong personal commitments to change can make a difference. During his medical training in Somaliland, the author became interested in psychiatry, at a time when there was no training available in the country, and patients were still chained or neglected. However, Dr Handulah saw for himself the destruction caused by neglecting severe mental health disorders, and as a result, he and his colleagues started mental

health services in the remote town of Borama, in Somaliland. Within slightly more than a year, they had set up an inpatient psychiatric unit, an outpatient department and community mental health outreach. Factors that contributed to this remarkable achievement *'against the odds'* were his strong personal commitment, and the intensive mobilisation of community support.

'Intervention' also presents three book reviews in this special issue: *Athena Madan*, a PhD student in Canada reviews the book *'Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration'*; *Nino Makashvili*, a psychiatrist from Georgia reviews *'Contemporary Topics in Women's Mental Health'*; and *Peter Ventevogel* reviews *'Stones left unturned'*, a book on the transitional justice process, or rather the lack thereof, in Burundi.

Support our colleagues from Syria

Finally I would like to focus your attention on the *Letter to the editor* from a Syrian psychologist and a Syrian psychiatrist. The editors have decided to withhold their names, in order to protect their, and their families', safety. Both authors have fled to Jordan and are now mobilising support to address the mental health needs of Syrian refugees. Their call for support should not be ignored, and we hope that some of the readers of *'Intervention'* will have ways help these colleagues in need.

Peter Ventevogel, psychiatrist, is the Editor in chief of Intervention.

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Thank you to all of you!