

Integrating a psychosocial perspective into poverty reduction: the case of a resettlement project in northern Sri Lanka

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This article is about the growing interest in combining the traditionally separate objectives of poverty reduction and psychosocial support provision. It cites this development within the broader trends in the psychosocial field globally, and locally. It utilizes data from Sri Lanka to illustrate the interaction between psychosocial suffering and poverty in conflict zones. This article describes this new generation of interventions, implemented as combination projects, and explores the rationales and practices associated with them. It also illustrates the challenges inherent in such an approach through a case study.

Keywords: poverty reduction, resettlement, psychosocial intervention

Introduction

In an earlier publication, Galappatti & Salih (2003), highlighted the fact that a number of conventional poverty reduction programmes in Sri Lanka had begun to include psychosocial support provision within the scope of their activities. The authors felt that this trend had not yet received the level of scrutiny that should be afforded to the merging of traditionally distinct fields of intervention. In this article, the authors describe interventions implemented as combined projects. It examines the rationales and practices associated with these projects. This article also illustrates and explores the tensions and benefits

that may be encountered when psychosocial support and poverty reduction are integrated in practice through a case study.¹

Linking poverty reduction with psychosocial support

The earliest programmes in Sri Lanka (mid-1980s) focused directly on providing services of a purely psychological orientation – mainly through activities such as client-centred counselling for ‘trauma’ and related problems. As the profile of psychosocial impacts of war gained prominence both globally (Ager, 1999; Pupavac, 2001) and locally in Sri Lanka (Galappatti, 1999, 2003; Psychosocial Working Group [PWG], 2001; Samarasinghe, 2002) over the past decade, increasing numbers of organizations have chosen to develop programmes to respond to these problems. While some have continued to focus solely on the psychological dimensions of people’s experiences, there has also been growing emphasis given to the interaction of these internal psychological processes within the social and material realities of people’s lives during conflict. UNICEF has developed a popular definition of this latter, and most commonly articulated, perspective (UNICEF, 1997; see Box 1).

It is important to note the definition’s grudging extension of social effects to include

Box 1: A popular definition of the term 'psychosocial', originating from a conference in Cape Town, 30 April 1997 (UNICEF, 1997)

The term 'psychosocial' underlines the close relationship between the psychological and social effects of armed conflict, the one type of effect continually influencing the other. By 'psychological effects' is meant those experiences that affect emotions, behaviour, thoughts, memory and learning ability and how a situation may be perceived and understood. By 'social effects' is meant how the diverse experiences of war alter people's relationships to each other, in that such experiences change people, but also through death, separation, estrangement and other losses. 'Social' may be extended to include an economic dimension, many individuals and families becoming destitute through the material and economic devastation of war, thus losing their social status and place in their familiar social network. (author's emphasis)

economic impacts. On the basis of the authors' experience in Sri Lanka, this common definition does not go far enough. Most importantly, it fails to describe material deprivation² as being an actual threat to survival and a serious stressor *in addition* to its impact on one's status within social networks. Research carried out in Sri Lanka has clearly demonstrated the significance of poverty in mediating, and sometimes framing, the psychosocial suffering of men, women and children in conflict zones. Studies among communities affected by war carried out in the Northern Jaffna peninsula have emphasized the role of poverty as a major stressor. This role has a prevalence rate often far higher than stressors such as detention, assault, torture or experiences of bombing, shelling or gunfire (Somasundaram, 2000a,b). In one study, by Somasundaram and Sivayokan (1994, reported in Somasundaram, 2000b), participants from a general population sample reported economic difficulties as the most common stressor (77,6%), with displacement (70,4%), lack of food (56,1%), loss of property (45,9%), and unemployment (44,9%) following close behind. Violence to individuals was reported as a far less common source of stress, yet this same population was seen as suffering from a significant incidence of psychosocial problems.

These studies emphasize the prevalence of economic stressors in the war-affected population of the Jaffna peninsula. Furthermore, research with women-heads of households affected by the 'Southern' violence of the late 1980s and early 1990s has demonstrated the potential of poverty to mitigate against psychosocial wellbeing. Gameela Samarasinghe's mid-1990s research on the coping strategies of women in Moneragala and Hambantota suggests that in the aftermath of violence, their primary concerns revolved around financial difficulties, (emotional dimensions of) the loss of their spouses, and struggles to 'bring up their children well' (Samarasinghe, 1999a). Over 80 of the 100 women interviewed said that they currently had difficulties meeting their basic requirements, and roughly half of them stated that their economic situation made raising and educating their children very difficult. These material hardships persisted, although many of the women had been employing a range of coping strategies; daily labouring, applying for compensation from the state, taking their children out of school, or remarriage for financial security (Samarasinghe, 1999b). Seventy-six of the women showed visible distress during the interview, and many used words such as 'hopeless', 'despairing' and 'sorrowful' to describe how they felt.

Samarasinghe noted that there was a 'striking lack of optimism about the future.' However, it was also apparent that among the few women who had relatively better financial positions (often linked to receipt of their spouses' salaries or support from relatives) there were a proportionately higher number who were more positive about their futures and the challenges in their lives (Samarasinghe, unpublished data).

Analysis of narratives from a psychosocial survey carried out in Vavuniya and Moneragala also provides support to the idea that persons experiencing distress do not necessarily view this in psychological terms, but rather through notions of socio-economic deprivation (Samarasinghe & Galappatti, unpublished). Peppered throughout the narratives are accounts such as the following:

*'I suffered greatly. . . I get up very early with sunrise, wash my face and go to the chilli garden. If I come in the evening with money only will the children have some kanji [porridge]. Till then they watch the path I come on. Then I distribute the kanji and after some time, water to drink. I have a burning stomach for 3 days. I go to do cooli work and brought up the children. Undergoing untold difficulties all the time. There isn't a trouble I haven't undergone. . . Why did God make me so?'
'The whole time the same worry, mental worry. . . there's no clothes for this child, no means for this child to go to school. The other child will say I have no clothes. . .'*

Respondents often characterized their difficulties in terms of the lack of stability in their basic income, sometimes due to security restrictions, few options for employment, or opportunities to earn a livelihood. However, some of the informants in this survey did have a greater insight into the connection between their material and psychological well-being.

One displaced woman in Vavuniya made the following statement:

'By now we have consoled ourselves when thinking of the situation. Because we can't all afford to become mentally sick. We tell mother "if you mention our house and cry, could you have borne the loss if you had lost one of us? Lands and houses you can earn if you are alive". We scold her by saying this and try to quiet her, even though deep inside we also feel the loss. We try to act as if we are not interested in these things now. But we are also in pain when we think that we will have to get clothes from others.'

Yet another informant in Moneragala put it more pithily:

'The financial needs are so many. Receiving financial aid brings a certain amount of mental relief.'

This evidence echoes that presented by Deepa Narayan and colleagues (2000) in the study *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* This study recounts similar sentiments on the impacts of material deprivation on psychosocial well-being in other parts of the world affected specifically by poverty. Their analysis of respondents' accounts indicate that for many people, material deprivation was associated with feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, dependency, shame and humiliation. These feelings are very similar to those experiencing psychosocial distress in conflict zones. It also appears that the experience of poverty, with its accompanying restrictions on a person's ability to exercise choice and agency, may have similar effects as that experienced in the aftermath of violence and war-experiences. The study also notes the sense of social isolation and marginalization that many people experience as a result of poverty.

'When I don't have (any food to bring my family), I borrow, mainly from neighbours and friends. I feel ashamed standing before my children when I have nothing to feed the family. I'm not well when I am unemployed. It's terrible.' (Informant from Guinea-Bissau, 1994; Narayan, 2000).

'When one is poor, she has no say in public and feels inferior.' (Informant from Uganda, 1998; Narayan, 2000).

'During the past two years we have not celebrated any holidays with others. We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house, and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. This lack of contact leaves one feeling depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low self-esteem.' (Informant from Latvia, 1998; Narayan, 2000).

With such increasing evidence from around the world, there had to be an acknowledgement that poverty, material and economic hardships can maintain, or even play a primary role in, the psychosocial suffering of persons living in conflict zones and elsewhere. It is important to repeat: material deprivation can be an actual threat to survival and a serious stressor *in addition* to impacting on one's status and place within social networks.

The recent work of the Psychosocial Working Group³ (PWG, 2003) on articulating a dynamic framework to guide psychosocial programming in the context of violent conflict provides for a broader conceptualization of the nature of suffering. This moves beyond the UNICEF definition. The PWG approach explicitly acknowledges the cultural, social, and psychological influences on well-being within the context of economic, environmental and physical resources. These different influences and contexts have been depicted as overlapping domains, which can be identified as: 'human capacity', 'social ecology', and 'culture and

values', respectively (PWG, 2003; Strang & Ager, 2003).

Although the emphasis on the material and economic impact on well-being is not particularly accentuated in the PWG psychosocial framework, Sri Lankan personnel engaged in the psychosocial sector have consistently identified this as significant. The *Directory of Psychosocial Initiatives 2003* in Sri Lanka reveals a number of psychosocial initiatives aimed at improving the material conditions of people's lives, in recognition of their potential benefits (Psychosocial Support Programme, 2003). Indeed, adaptations of the PWG framework that have highlighted the role of material circumstances as a key mediator of wellbeing have been enthusiastically accepted by psychosocial workers in Sri Lanka (Galappatti, 2003; Armstrong, Boyden, Galappatti, & Hart 2004).

A broad psychosocial framework, such as that of the PWG, offers a more comprehensive way to conceptualize people's responses to armed conflict and violence. It also widens the potential repertoire of interventions in conflict zones that may have psychosocially beneficial outcomes, or impacts. Such interventions may include micro-credit schemes, savings groups, educational initiatives, reconstruction of infrastructure, or human rights awareness programmes.

Given this broader understanding of psychosocial well-being and suffering, there is an emerging argument that development initiatives may be an effective and relevant means to provide support services for those in psychosocial distress in conflict zones.

Humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and development initiatives engage a large proportion of people living in conflict zones. These initiatives objectives of providing material and structural assistance may offer either a vehicle for the provision of generalized psychosocial support services, or be

instrumental in promoting psychosocial well-being, if implemented in a psychosocially sensitive manner.

Poverty reduction interventions are particularly significant among the range of development projects implemented in conflict zones because of their direct relevance to the previously stated concerns about material and socio-economic well-being. They attempt to mitigate the very conditions that often prolong the suffering of those in conflict zones. Therefore, they are ideally positioned to benefit the psychosocial well-being of people in the aftermath of conflict and displacement. Poverty reduction interventions fulfilling these objectives can also help to create conditions that are protective of the psychosocial well-being of people affected by conflict.

Including poverty reduction in psychosocial support projects

Psychosocial programmes have been traditionally slow to acknowledge and incorporate responses to the material factors mediating psychological suffering. The traditional approaches within the psychosocial sector in Sri Lanka was to claim that people didn't understand their own psychosocial problems and were in need of edification. However, now it appears that there is a greater acceptance that perhaps people do understand their problems after all! For example, people may not recognize sleeplessness or intrusive thoughts as *psychological* problems, but they usually have some knowledge of what issues are of greatest concern and are causing distress – such as whether they will find work tomorrow, or how they are going to provide their child with an adequate education when they can't afford the books. Within the earlier more proselytizing approach, programmes may have been too preoccupied with their own frameworks of psychological symptoms and emotions,

and were unable to see how these were mediated by a client's material concerns.

Now, after years of field experience, many psychosocial support providers are willing to acknowledge that their clients often seek psychosocial support in relation to economic issues. In one case, a young man who had been detained by the state armed forces lost touch completely with his family and community as a result of the displacements that had occurred during his detainment. On release, he was without any financial or social support, and was also unable to undertake heavy manual labour as a result of the torture he had experienced in prison. Despite his distressing experiences and social isolation, his immediate concern and source of distress was the lack of financial security. He was heavily dependent on his relatives and friends for the fulfilment of his most basic needs and could not see how he would rebuild an independent and fulfilling life for himself, and his future family. His main request to the psychosocial worker was to be given a loan for an income-generating activity that would provide him with a sense of hope for the achievement of his ambitions.

In another case, an older woman who was completely financially dependent on her second son-in-law, was in despair when he moved to another part of the country and discontinued his financial support. She developed intense feelings of isolation and abandonment due to the lack of communication and help from her family. This subsequently led to self-harming behaviour. In discussing her situation with the psychosocial worker, she stressed the need to find a way of helping her gain financial independence while re-establishing contact with her family. She mainly wanted help to become skilled in an activity that would enable her to support herself in the future. As a result of many such cases, psychosocial support personnel

have been compelled to liaise with other organizations that have programmes with intended socio-economic benefits, so that these clients can then be directed towards these venues. Others, in a more cynical bid to woo clients unsatisfied with 'talking-treatments' for what they perceive as material problems, have added on financial assistance to their counselling activities. Apart from such *ad hoc* or knee-jerk measures, psychological programming has broadened its scope as a result of insights and experiences derived from local field experience and a growing international literature. This includes moving from conventional client-centred counselling to more community-based interventions that recognize and respond to the social aspects of suffering.

Some programmes were prompted to include provision for financial or material assistance within their projects. Financial assistance was offered either directly or through other interventions such as organizing income-generating activities, providing technical skills training, or setting up credit and savings schemes in conjunction with support services.

Including psychosocial support in poverty reduction projects

While psychosocial programmes have, for some time, attempted to address issues of poverty through inclusion of such activities as those described above, it is only recently that poverty reduction initiatives have sought to include psychosocial support provision within the scope of their work. However, it seems that the stated rationales for combining these two strands of humanitarian work within the poverty interventions are very different from those espoused by psychosocial projects. Psychosocial projects, on the one hand, engage in socio-economic support to promote psychosocial wellbeing. However,

those with a primary focus on poverty tend to see provision of psychosocial support as a means to improve the effectiveness of poverty reduction strategies. Psychosocial impacts of conflict are often perceived to be responsible for the poor achievements of poverty reduction or economic 'empowerment' targets.

Recently, a project proposal to include psychosocial support within a rehabilitation and social and economic mobilization programme claimed that:

'The level of mental distress among conflict-affected persons varies from mild to severely traumatised levels. This distress, or the traumatised condition, negatively affects the mental and physical growth of children, economic output of individual families and collective action within villages.' (unpublished proposal, 2001)

It also argued that: 'frustration and loss of confidence of... economically active categories can become a serious threat to economic rehabilitation programmes.'

Such projects are often quite frank about their reasons for taking on the psychosocial support provision – to improve relatively unsuccessful poverty-reduction programmes. However, it is still unclear how the relationship between the identified 'traumatic condition' of the population and poor economic outputs was determined. Indeed, given the lack of research or even a plausible theoretical explanation, it seems that the link is made more on an artificial or intuitive basis.

How objectives of psychosocial support may clash with those of poverty reduction

Like most other programmes, even those that are psychosocial in nature, adequate supervision is rarely provided for the field workers. Many of the management personnel who are the decision-makers do not gain

an understanding of the nature of psychosocial support provision. Sometimes, a few additional changes are made to the programme, to accommodate the nature of new responsibilities assigned to workers providing support services. All these factors compromise the quality of support provided, and often result in the 'bending' or violation of the ethics of care. Some of the ways in which the objectives of psychosocial and poverty-reduction may clash in the field are outlined below.

In one instance, a client confided in a psychosocial worker that she was planning to use a loan from the support organization to perform a ritual for her daughter, rather than for the income-generating purpose she was going to officially state. This situation caused a great degree of difficulty for the worker, since she was torn between protecting her client's confidence and her organization's expectation that she would protect it from making 'bad' loans. The lack of a sympathetic understanding of the ethics of the relationship between the client and the psychosocial worker meant that her managers required the worker to choose between loyalty to the organization and her privileged relationship with the client. The psychosocial support worker was threatened with loss of her job for failing to report that the client had used the finances given for an income-generating project for a non-approved use (e.g. having the rituals associated with attaining age for her child). This was in spite of the fact that the performance of these rituals would almost certainly be significant for the long-term psychosocial well-being of the client and her daughter.

Field staff that are expected to combine both the roles of psychosocial support personnel and monitors of loan repayment or income generation often face ethical difficulties. Sadly, many often fail to even recognize the

potential conflict that may arise between these two roles.

Even where the burden of regulating, or determining suitability for economic support, is taken away from the psychosocial worker, the procedures can often work counter to psychosocial objectives. At one organization, the process of scrutiny by administrative staff was conducted in such a demeaning and suspicious manner that it may have been, in itself, a distressing experience for the client. Claims that, 'it is difficult to know whether people come with complaints to receive counselling support or whether it is to receive the material benefits,' pave the way for clients having to prove they have been violated in order to secure socio-economic support (Psychosocial Policy Project Material, C63, unpublished).

How poverty reduction interventions risk psychosocial wellbeing

Poverty reduction interventions have sometimes been criticised for the way they frame, and interact with, vulnerable persons living in conflict zones (Galappatti, 1999; Narayan, 2000, p. 139; Galappatti & Salih, 2002, p. 220). Development workers often give scant recognition to the capacities and coping mechanisms of those who have endured the distressing and challenging circumstances and conditions of war. There is a tendency to view survivors as weak and ineffective. They may also contribute to generating disempowering identities by identifying and targeting individuals with labels such as 'war victims' or 'the poor'. These views tend to inform the rationales and working practices within the different interventions undertaken by development personnel. The result is that few initiatives attempt to invest in developing the personal resources of those they engage with by providing the necessary

opportunities and support to 'beneficiaries' in regaining power and control over their own lives. The lack of emphasis on building personal resources and developing a greater sense of agency and control amongst the beneficiaries of poverty reduction initiatives sadly endangers the sustainability of these projects. This occurs through creation of dependency amongst already vulnerable people.

There are elements of poverty-reduction strategies that are – in their own right – potential sources of worry and hardship for beneficiaries. The most common method of measuring success of two of the poverty reduction interventions, revolving loan fund schemes and micro-finance projects, is the repayment of loans. When describing the success of their work, organizational personnel often quote the percentage of loans fully recovered. This practice in some cases is also endorsed by most funding agencies, which assess the success of these projects in the same manner. Organizations inadvertently transfer the pressure of ensuring repayment to the beneficiaries, often by having strict regulations when clients default on loan repayments, or by having strict 'policing' of repayment.

Psychosocial support personnel have reported that some of their clients, who are beneficiaries of such schemes, when pressed by the organization, have chosen to repay their loans. This is sometimes done by pawning their material assets such as jewellery and household items, or by loaning money from a third party (such as relatives, commercial banks or local money-lenders). In some cases, this has placed the client in more distressing circumstances (e.g. not having recourse to the assets previously owned/ having pawned jewellery with sentimental or symbolic value) or even created more difficult circumstances (where the money loaned

from a third party may have a higher interest rate than the original loan). Extreme cases of organizational representatives breaking into a beneficiary's house to reclaim a savings book, or promptly taking loan defaulters to courts, help underline the general levels of pressure and enforcement involved in many loan schemes.

Another problematic condition comes from the heavy emphasis of such projects on the poverty of women. Much evidence and literature are available on the disparities of socio-economic sufficiency between men and women. When it comes to grassroots level poverty reduction projects, it is far more 'donor-savvy' to target women as the main beneficiaries of the loan schemes, the vocational training courses, and the micro-finance projects. Donor organizations have been known to reward organizations having high percentage of women beneficiaries, as this is seen to be an especially vulnerable group. When queried, organizations often yield figures between 75 and 98% to women beneficiaries, citing the reasons that women are 'poorer' and that 'they are more likely to pay back loans than men'.

Given the gender roles in local rural communities, it is easy to recognize that the women that take on the responsibility of managing an income-generating activity project, or repaying a loan, are most often doubly burdened. In most cases, the woman continues her role as caregiver and household manager, as well as taking on the responsibilities of loan repayment and the management of the economic venture she has undertaken. Yet, for these reasons, also often failing to have real control over the money she has loaned (Kottegoda, 1999).

The 'blind' targeting of women as beneficiaries can also have the result of further alienating the men from the traditional role they

have played in the household without providing them with a satisfactory alternative. Since many men derive a sense of identity from their job and role as provider, the loss of employment has caused men to experience distress (manifested sometimes in publicly lamented behaviour such as alcohol abuse). The practice of giving loans exclusively to women may have the consequence of further alienating the men from meaningful and accepted social activity. This is a problem, especially when this social activity may have the potential of contributing to their psychosocial well-being and a more productive role within the family.

A third aspect of poverty reduction interventions is the greater emphasis on narrow socio-economic indicators of poverty rather than an assessment of the general circumstances of people's lives. The definition of poverty used by many of the poverty-reduction interventions is still linked to conventional measures such as income and material assets. Apart from such measures, many poverty-reduction interventions do not assess significant psychosocial factors associated with material deprivation that may mediate the experience of poverty, as well as the effectiveness of poverty-reduction interventions. Factors such as the level of vulnerability and the density of social networks and relationships are rarely taken into consideration. This singular perspective at grassroots level poverty-reduction interventions can mean that the impact of these projects on the quality of life of the person is rarely measured, or assessed. Additionally, this approach commonly limits the scope of intervention to that of raising income levels alone, and as a result often fails to address poverty in more meaningful and transformative ways. Poverty-reduction interventions may also be insensitive to adverse impacts of the project on other dimensions. Prolonged debt or struggles to

repay loans may increase stress. In situations of vulnerability this stress may overwhelm their coping mechanisms as well.

On one level, it is clear that transformation of poverty-reduction interventions may prove a far more beneficial and feasible approach than the current proliferation of programmes that offer conventional (and often poor quality) counselling services to persons in distress. It is also equally necessary that poverty-reduction initiatives involving psychosocially vulnerable populations should reform many of the psychosocially detrimental practices being used today. The PWG (2003) argue that the psychosocial approach offers a *way of working* with individuals and communities affected by violence rather than the description of a set of concrete activities. Imbuing poverty-reduction initiatives with psychosocial wellbeing may overcome many of the stated limitations of poverty-reduction initiatives.

The case of a resettlement project

Poverty-alleviation interventions have attempted to integrate poverty reduction with psychosocial support in two main ways. Firstly, by employing a person or persons trained in psychosocial work, usually with a heavy emphasis on counselling, to provide psychosocial support services should someone be identified as requiring it. Secondly, by training field workers already employed in the organization, through skills building in counselling and supportive listening. These workers are then expected to provide support services while in the field. Currently, an increasing number of poverty-reduction initiatives are attempting to provide both psychosocial and poverty-reduction services in Sri Lanka. While many of them have approached this by providing side-by-side counselling services for the 'beneficiaries',

others have chosen to attempt the integration in a more sophisticated manner. One such attempt has been made in northern Sri Lanka, where psychosocial workers involved in a project transformed some of the practices and structures of service delivery, imbuing them with greater psychosocial sensitivity. A revolving loan fund for income-generating activities by resettled women heads of households is integrated with both a conventional counselling service and a more complex community social-work approach. This section provides a case study of this initiative, relating particularly to some of the benefits and challenges of integrating psychosocial support into poverty-reduction efforts.

Background to the project

The project described here was initiated in 1999, and involved the selection and relocation of 65 households living in a refugee camp to a selected site in the same district. The project orientation was very much aimed towards community development, with a strong emphasis on the economic and social development of the relocated community members.

The rationale of the project centred on three concerns, all of which were seen to be contributing to, and maintaining, the economic and social *status quo* of people living in refugee camps. First, there was concern with the lack of mobility in camps; most people were required to obtain permits to leave the camp each day, whether for work or school, and were required to return by six in the evening of the same day. It was surmised that the lack of mobility tended to limit people's knowledge, ability, and experience thereby disabling them from utilizing various available opportunities for economic development. There was also concern over the lack of independence, with interference from camp

authorities into how people managed their daily lives. The lack of independence also extended to economic independence, where people were forced to make difficult choices in their day-to-day economic management of the household. It was seen that the lack of independence tended to emphasize short-term perspectives over long-term ones, thereby impinging on the way people planned and carried out their actions. Not only was such a perspective evident in the planning and implementation of expenditure, but also in the way social relationships were acted out.

A third concern had to do with the lack of privacy in people's lives when living in a refugee camp. Given the cramped conditions of the camp, most people did not have much privacy in managing their lives or making decisions. This was seen to have significance for both economic and social development. As a result of the lack of privacy, there is little autonomy, as many family situations become public knowledge within the social realm of the camp. This was seen to have negative impacts on people's initiative and planning behaviour.

For these reasons, the project decided to engage in a relocation exercise, with the aim of developing the community both economically and socially. The selection process was initiated in 1999, involving numerous discussions and activities with the selected members for over a year. The discussions and activities were designed to build trust, social relations and community participation prior to the relocation of the community members. Roads and temporary sheds for the community members were built before their actual relocation, which took place in 2000. The approach used by the project management and personnel tended to be highly participatory, with objectives for community development, the work-schedule

and time-plan set by the community members through a series of discussions and participatory tools. In order to continue the participatory and consultative nature of the project, as well as to facilitate future handing over processes at the termination of the process, groups were formed comprised of one member from each household, which then elected group representatives.

Project activities aimed towards community development began almost as soon as the relocation took place, with home-gardening and sanitation efforts given the most priority. Income-generating activities began in June 2001, and involved the establishment of revolving loan funds within the groups, savings schemes, and training opportunities on enterprise management. This was also accompanied by the construction of wells both for domestic and agricultural consumption.

In the year 2002, social development activities gained further prominence as educational tours for group representatives and other social events commenced. At the end of 2002, financial management of loans was handed over to the group leadership on a pre-designed system. The phasing out process began at the end of 2002, and continued towards the end of 2004, with occasional monitoring and support.

Psychosocial support service provision in the project

In June 2001, two psychosocial workers were invited to join the project. Their main responsibilities involved facilitating the savings and loans groups, providing support for individual and family interactions and, where necessary, facilitating the building of social relations within, and between families/households. Their main tasks involved facilitating the group meetings, engaging in home visits and the occasional private meeting, on request.

The psychosocial workers were part of the team of field workers providing community development services in the village. Their relationship to this team was less clearly defined, but given their role in the facilitation of group meetings (where savings and loans were discussed and approved) and their subsequent home visits, the psychosocial workers had to establish that they were not in a monitoring and supervising role. The psychosocial workers were directly responsible to the team leader. In some cases, they had the authority to approach the director of the organization directly.

The management of the project had felt the need for a psychosocial perspective from the very beginning of the project. As was stated by the director of the organization:

‘The social development process would not work out, as people felt that just talking was not useful – they needed and wanted land, (and other things) in order to go on with their lives. At the same time, in social or economic development, it is important to enhance the attitude within the community to help each other. Only by talking to people, can you build the relationship. Without discussion or dialogue, the community finds it difficult to help or support one another.’

Speaking at a more practical level, one of the project field officers stated:

‘The mother got frustrated with us for interfering in her strict child-discipline. Therefore, we tried to change the situation/environment in such a way that makes it possible for the mother and child to relate to each other differently.’

Psychosocial work in action: facilitation of group meetings

The psychosocial support personnel who were integrated in the project reported being horrified by the generally unsupportive and

sometimes downright hostile climate in which the group members carried out their meetings. Many of the issues that were brought up regarding repayment of loans and the use of resources in the project spilled out of the meeting into village life, resulting in the vilification of some community members. The staff members who facilitated the meetings were often unable to contain and mediate conflicts within the meetings. Individual members privately confessed that they were finding the meetings in some instances unbearably stressful, but that regular attendance at these meetings was a compulsory condition of the loan scheme. One member stated that she dreaded going to the next meeting because, *'they are going to scold me about my brother staying with me.'* His stay with her was seen by the group to be detrimental to regular loan repayment as he had a greater control over the way the income from her income-generating activity was spent.

In the process of integrating psychosocial work within the project, the psychosocial personnel were required to train staff members in managing group processes and dynamics within the beneficiary groups, help the group members to develop skills in problem-solving, help them to identify the sorts of problems which they as a group were equipped to handle and to identify alternate resources for managing the ones they were unable to handle, help the members and the staff of the project to re-negotiate the functions of the group, and assist the group to establish group rules and norms that helped the meeting to take place in a more supportive environment. These interventions took place in conjunction with services and activities that helped individual members of the groups to strengthen their sources of support within the village, to articulate their problems and to describe

the sorts of solutions and support they were expecting from the group.

The psychosocial workers worked actively with the group representative and with the group members in facilitating individual and group discussions on the mandate and scope of the group. They were able to point towards ways in which the unclear group mandate meant that the group objectives were never clearly met. Although this did not entirely remove discussions from going towards people's private lives, it raised greater awareness and sensitivity towards the issue of people's privacy being violated. However, the pressing problems of distinguishing and negotiating between common or social problems, and people's individual lifestyle choices, continue.

Apart from these activities, the psychosocial workers were also called upon to advocate on behalf of the more vulnerable group members. The common notion of 'community' as a homogenous group promoted the idea that the 'community' will make decisions that will benefit all its members. It fails to reveal that people in a community do not share the same difficulties in the same way; neither do they share values of social justice and democratic decision-making. Some sections of people in the village are likely to have been, or be, exploiting others.

The psychosocial workers' role within these groups was very much aimed at raising awareness and greater sensitivity to those group members who were more vulnerable than others. Criteria such as loan repayment rates and time-schedules were less possible for some members of the community to meet than for others, because of factors such as: household composition, intra-household dynamics, greater social isolation or political alienation. Although group members did not want to state many of these factors as reasons for their greater vulnerability,

because it would involve a loss of social status within the community, it nonetheless impacted on their ability to perform at the same level as others in terms of repayment rates and schedules. The psychosocial workers would coach these members on how they would like to present these concerns to the group, if they chose to do so. In other cases, with the permission of the group members, these issues were brought up anonymously at the group meetings and at project level on behalf of those members.

Thus, psychosocial workers emphasize the need to respect people's differences and their ability to make different choices, increase their available options and enhance their sense of control over their identities, experiences and situations. They also provide multiple perspectives when designing and implementing strategies either at group or project level. This not only contributed to people gaining greater autonomy, as they were able to choose different options catering to their specific situations in savings and loans group activities, but also they were less distressed or burdened as a result of the planned interventions. The psychosocial workers recognized that transformative changes within people's lives do not necessarily happen as a result of one empowering incident. An integral process where each person's narrative is considered within its entirety provided a far more supportive way of designing poverty reduction interventions so that the person is not called upon to prioritize one issue over the other (e.g. social status over economic security). A range of options for repayments criteria gave greater recognition to the priorities and experiences of the people involved. It also would give them greater control over their own lives by allowing them to make the relevant choices to transform their current situations.

Psychosocial work in action: home visits and private meetings

The intentional fostering of supportive networks amongst the people in this project contributed towards, and enhanced, their psychosocial well-being by impacting almost directly on their own feelings of competence, their sense of being supported and the development of their skills in problem-solving and management. Sadly, in many poverty-reduction projects, the main external resources for the beneficiaries are with project personnel who have a predominantly monitoring role. Although the supportive function of groups is often recognized, staff often lack the training to adequately manage the process and to foster the necessary conditions for mutual support and caring within the group. Consequently, such groups within poverty-reduction projects tend to function primarily as monitoring or controlling forces that have in some cases isolated, and further distressed, beneficiaries.

In conducting home visits and private meetings, the psychosocial workers were careful to ensure that they were not perceived as coming to monitor the economic activities of the household for loan repayment purposes. Rather, the psychosocial workers enquired generally about how family members were doing and what were the current concerns and situation of different family members. This reassured the community members that their well-being and quality of life was of significant concern to the project, and especially the psychosocial workers. The psychosocial workers' interest was seen to extend beyond simply a project-related one, to a real interest in people's lives. This involved broader concerns about what are the general expenses of the family at the current time, who had the time or not to look after the home-garden, the physical and

emotional status of children or elderly in the family, etc. As a result, community members felt freer to bring up and share their difficulties in repaying loans, were able to discuss different options on how to address the situation, negotiate either with their group members or the project personnel, and look for ways to supplement their income. In some cases, they were helped to extend their social contacts, re-establish relations with long-distance relatives or others with whom they had lost contact during the displacement.

The psychosocial workers were also able, in some cases, to utilize their counselling skills to provide individual support when personal crises occurred in families. Sometimes, this was in the realm of intra-family conflicts, at other times these involved neighbour disputes or greater community relations. At such times, the psychosocial workers provided a private space where people could discuss, explore and expand their options and strategies at a personal level. This can lead to greater support and enhancement of fair and open decision-making processes within and between families. Individual members in more vulnerable positions in the family, due to age or gender, were supported in expressing their personal aspirations or concerns to the authoritative person in the family.

Conventional training of persons to do entrepreneurial initiatives do not usually cover development of the personal resources that help people to continue despite setbacks, nor is the development or strengthening of problem solving skills covered. Often, there is also a lack of ongoing organizational support and trouble-shooting advice for those who engage in such initiatives after short training programmes. While development practice has to change structurally for greater responsibility and discretionary power to be permitted to its 'beneficiaries',

these reforms must ensure that excessive burdens are not imposed upon them. A process of transition towards increased involvement and responsibility must take into account the long-standing disempowerment and often beleaguered psychosocial status of people who have endured the violence of conflict. It may be that some who have been subjected to cumulative and chronic conditions of stress and uncertainty need additional support in utilizing available resources to fulfil their own requirements.⁴ It is, therefore, important that development initiatives acknowledge this factor as a condition of implementation, rather than a constraint to their work.

Challenges to the project in combining psychosocial support with poverty reduction

Many difficulties in this project arose because of the ways in which different stakeholders: project 'beneficiaries', field workers, psychosocial workers and management, felt that psychosocial work should be incorporated into the project in practice. There was certainly resentment among some field workers towards the psychosocial workers because of their close and seemingly privileged relationship with community members. This was present even in cases where field workers explicitly acknowledged that the psychosocial workers played an important role in the project. They also found it difficult to manage their development work objectives in line with the concessions requested by psychosocial workers on behalf of some community members.

One field worker shared her opinion on combining psychosocial support with poverty reduction in the following way:

'Sometimes psychosocial work helped development but sometimes it also impacted on the development work. If a person or family has problems,

then the psychosocial worker knows why this person or family is not participating or is marginalized. But the person or family does not want to share this with the development workers. This creates conflicts between the staff members unless we trust and respect each other. Also the development work gets delayed.

The same field worker also noted that:

I come to know through monitoring that the person has not paid, and the person does not tell me why (because I am the field officer). By involving the psychosocial worker, they try to find an option together. Sometimes they discuss it with the management committee. I try to listen to and understand them (the community member and the psychosocial worker). Then I can support their decision.

Psychosocial workers sometimes were placed in awkward positions because the community members complained about heavy-handed techniques used by other field workers to carry out and reach the development objectives defined by the project. Psychosocial workers had to respond diplomatically in such cases, taking care not to increase resentment or frustration of the community member against the field worker, nor to impact on the standing of the field worker in the community, while at the same time, not to delegitimize the concerns of the community member.

Psychosocial workers were also forced to try and understand the pressures under which field workers and other project personnel worked. They had specific deadlines to meet and were often subject to having to explain to team leaders or management why a particular deadline could not be met. Thus, psychosocial workers were also asked on occasion to mediate a discussion between field workers and management personnel.

This placed greater burdens on the psychosocial workers as they slowly, additionally became more responsible for staff well-being within the organization.

Other challenges included the renegotiation of development objectives and work-plan set out by the community and the project when it became clear that this could not be met at the stipulated times for all community members. For example, some members were able to complete their income-generating projects and use the proceedings to build permanent houses as planned, where as others found this less possible. At the same time, as community differences became apparent, exceptions to set criteria regulating repayments also had to be introduced. The psychosocial workers and field workers presented these cases to the project management, so that the necessary negotiations with the donor agencies could take place.

The role of the management in combining psychosocial support with poverty reduction

The management of the organization was extremely supportive towards the psychosocial workers, probably because there had been an explicit recognition of their intended role from the very beginning. They were open to mediating conflicts between field workers and psychosocial workers without taking sides between the two, or sidelining one group's concern over another. They also provided a broader perspective to project personnel, showing how overall objectives of economic and social development were more important than any specific development objective. It was here that the management validated psychosocial work as a *way* of working rather than as being some specified set of activities that took place. The responsiveness shown by management to some of the issues that came up were

particularly helpful for the psychosocial workers and field workers to retain the community's trust in the project staff and motives. It must be noted that the development organization from which the case study was drawn is one that is highly committed to a holistic vision of development that incorporates both social and economic dimensions of development. In this particular case, the overall values and philosophy of the organization guided its response and approach to addressing the issues that emerged during its attempt to combine psychosocial support with economic development.

Conclusion

From a psychosocial perspective, it seems imperative that services involving vulnerable populations should reform many of the psychosocially detrimental practices currently employed in mainstream development and humanitarian intervention. Despite improvements in project implementation methodologies and theory, there has not yet been adequate movement beyond cosmetic paeans to community participation dogma. Despite effective use of terminology, administrative concerns and achievement of end 'outcomes' are still prioritized over process. Re-orienting project focus on achieving broader transformations in people's lives, rather than on the narrow dimensions of income and repayment rate, will offer a far more meaningful understanding of the real impact of poverty-reduction activities.

A crucial dimension to the provision of psychosocial support through poverty-reduction activities is clearly that of communication and interpersonal relations between field workers and 'beneficiaries'. Despite the utilization of 'community consultations' and actual community involvement in activities, hierarchical underpinnings to relationships between development

workers and 'their people' often divest apparently supportive activities of any empowering potential. The power differentials of these relationships hinge upon individuals' perceived social status and, in particular, the very real differences in their ability to control resources. These are factors that greatly affect the potential of development as a means of empowerment, but are often under-acknowledged, and sometimes ignored. These must be offset through the training of workers, especially those in positions of authority, to reflect on interpersonal interactions and develop sensitivity in communication. An enhanced awareness of the implications of interpersonal contact may help transform the restrictions that procedural structures place upon their relationships with others. It is important that staff members be skilled in conflict mediation skills, group dynamics, and problem management. Regular reviews and ongoing dialogue between all project members are also an important means by which personnel can develop an integrated comprehensive service for beneficiaries. Without such adjustments to the overall organizational culture and project management style, the desired psychosocial benefits from combined projects may not materialize. In fact, they may cause more harm than good as psychosocial interventions enable unregulated access to beneficiaries' private lives but may fail to deliver effective and ethical services that empower people.

There may have to be choices made about strategies for service delivery. Rather than leaving the tension between the ethics of psychosocial care and financial regulation to be negotiated by individual workers, it makes more sense to separate the processes within institutions while, at the same time, building adequate checks and balances to ensure good practice. It may be necessary

to review practices related to poverty reduction interventions for compatibility with psychosocial support and alter or abandon those that do not harmonize. It may also be necessary to develop new ways of understanding and monitoring the impact of poverty-intervention strategies – moving away from loan repayment rates to measures of improvements in quality of life for beneficiaries.

Project management strategies need to be sensitive to the constraints limiting the ‘performance’ of different participants in programmes of development, and must also make efforts to encourage and foster their self-monitoring skills. Workers certainly should not censure, reject, attack or sue individuals who are unable to meet externally determined deadlines and goals for legitimate psychosocial reasons. While management strategies must avoid being patronizing, overly-cosseting or open to abuse, they still should not be damaging to potentially distressed persons.⁵ It is recommended that where projects combine psychosocial care with poverty-reduction strategies, the links between the different sets of services are clearly articulated and shown to be conceptually and practically coherent as well as ethically sound. This can be a starting point towards ensuring that personnel both at management and administration, and at service provision, understand the rationale for the integration of these services. They should also have guidance in adhering to consistent practice in delivering and monitoring their services.

The documentation of the project discussed above suggests that effective combining of poverty reduction with psychosocial support requires implementing personnel to develop a broad understanding of psychosocial well-being and commit to a holistic view of development. This includes those responsible at

different stages of project development, implementation and evaluation, including: donors, managers, administrative staff, and non-psychosocial development workers, as all these actors tend to bring specific pressures to bear upon the processes of project implementation.

In light of the issues discussed above, we wish to caution against hasty attempts at integration, arguing that to combine psychosocial support with poverty-reduction interventions demands that an organization’s workers, management and donors possess both a clear vision of what such integration entails, and the capacity to follow through on the consequences of such a merger. Failure to adequately prepare for such a venture would likely lead to profound difficulties for both the project and its ‘beneficiaries’.

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Sri Lanka's coastal regions. The issues discussed in relation to conflict situations in this article are, however, all too relevant to the post-Tsunami context.

² While material deprivation can broadly refer to the situation where people lack those items which they deem necessary for their physical and social functioning, the context in which material deprivation is discussed here refers to chronic deficits in income, assets and livelihood necessary to meet the basic requirements. People in this context talked about difficulty meeting their needs for adequate amount of food, clothing, water and shelter.

³ The PWG is comprised of five academic partners and five humanitarian agencies. Further information on the PWG is available at www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial and www.qmuc.ac.uk/cihs.

⁴ Development and humanitarian workers have often noted, with exasperation, that persons

affected by conflict are inconsistent in their capacity to keep appointments or access services, even when these fulfil their personally defined needs.

⁵ Often the decisions and procedures engaged in by the support organization for the withdrawal of support and assistance do not take into account the psychosocial vulnerability of persons.

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