

RETHINKING PSYCHOSOCIAL PROGRAMMING IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan civil war began in July 1983 between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist militant organisation which fought for an independent Tamil state, Tamil Eelam. In May 2009 the Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE bringing an end to the 30 year war. Many positive changes took place after this victory. People living in the South have access to the North and East. In the North and East security has been relaxed to some extent, roads and bridges are being repaired, schools and hospitals are being renovated and communities in more distant places have greater access to some of their basic necessities such as health care and schooling. The Government has launched massive development projects in the provinces where the main focus is on mobility and access. The purpose is to improve the lives of people through better infrastructure and the increased production of goods and services.

However, the Government's development and reconstruction initiatives in the North and East of the country are contributing to minority fears and alienation. Listening to the grievances of the affected communities, alleviating their suffering was not a priority in the aftermath of the end of the war.

Many organisations continued to provide psychosocial support to communities affected by the war even though they were often under scrutiny on the grounds that they were often donor driven, not always sensitive to the needs of the local populations and not long-term or sustainable. These interventions were perceived by the Government as potential threats to the victory discourse, as they collected evidence on "other" impacts of the war. Victims became "a permanent testimony" to the actual post-war environment. As a result, the political-security environment in contemporary Sri Lanka has forced psychosocial programmes to continue their efforts under the guise of other activities.

The objectives of this case study were to determine whether different conceptualizations of trauma lead to different types of interventions; whether these interventions make a difference in terms of peace building and development, or more broadly social transformation.

Given the post-war environment where psychosocial interventions are perceived as operating against national interest, the paper investigates how these interventions manage to provide services through innovative strategies in order to support the groups they work with.

The main research questions are:

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1. How do independent/non-politicized groups address the psychosocial needs of war-affected populations in the North and East of Sri Lanka within an insecure, volatile, politically inhospitable environment?
2. What are the challenges they face, and how do they overcome them?
3. What innovative practices have evolved – how do they work, and can they be applied to other post-war environments?

METHODOLOGY

The study used semi-structured interviews and responses at focus group discussions (FGDs) of managers of psychosocial programmes who were involved in the conceptualization of the psychosocial intervention (one or two per location – the total being 8 persons) and direct service providers (one or two per psychosocial programme – the total being 8 persons) and a few key informants (i.e. lawyers, counsellors, a district counsellor – the total being 5). In the focus group discussions, the participants were asked whether they felt that there was a contextual difference after the end of the war and what were, according to them the factors that contributed to the shifting context.

The individual interviews of key informants and managers and staff of psychosocial programmes were semi-structured with guiding questions to find out about the work they are engaged in, their thoughts on the changed situation of the country, the difficulties they face in doing their work and how they think their activities impact on social transformation. The data analysis methods were qualitative. The narratives were analysed and the findings were grouped according to themes related to the research questions. The research was conducted in Mannar, Jaffna, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala. The sample consisted of four psychosocial programmes, one from each location, involved in mental health and psychosocial activities and community-developmental programmes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The psychosocial interventions conducted in Anuradhapura, Mannar, Kurunegala and Jaffna mainly consisted of individual, group and family counselling. Counselling is perceived by these programmes as the most effective intervention for individuals distressed by the war. The individual is treated as part of a group or a family but he/she is the focus of the intervention. The psychosocial interventions are conceptualized with the objective of reducing the impact of trauma in the people affected by war or any other situation of violence.

The contextual change of the ground situation has not necessarily led to the reconceptualising of the psychosocial intervention either by the State or by other service providers. All four psychosocial organisations have had to face the change in context either directly or indirectly when providing psychosocial interventions to beneficiaries and through this grapple with the need for a methodological change.

During the study, due to the State of Emergency, the PTF and the reluctance to acknowledge the loss of human life at the end of the war, people of the North could not openly grieve and service providers were unable to deal with this huge loss on an individual basis. It was not possible to use the usual methodologies to deal with the kind of mass loss and trauma that was felt at the end of the war. However while a different method was used in this instance, counselling after the grieving ceremony returned to an individual focused intervention.

The organizations developed hands on approaches to their psychosocial programming as they were faced with having to deal with different types of issues such as the caste issue in the North returning into practice, the increase of rape and teenage pregnancies, easy access to other parts of the country resulting in increased needs, more disabled soldiers or loss of the sense of community for people who have resettled. These changes in contexts and the change in methodologies showed that psychosocial interventions could not follow a single pronged approach. There was also an increased awareness to broader issues like Human Rights, Patriarchy, Peace and Reconciliation.

These organisations have had to work against the ‘concept’ of justice in order to take care of the victims’ immediate needs, such as safety and security. There was an awareness to ensure that the beneficiaries’ rights are protected, but also of the risks the intervention would involve for the beneficiary i.e. the political and military connections of the abuser when trying to seek legal justice for the beneficiary. Fighting for justice was not one of the aims of the interventions. They were concerned about social justice, human rights and gender equality, but dealt with each case separately.

The individualistic nature of most interventions and the relatively short term in which service providers work with beneficiaries poses a challenge to building long lasting peace initiatives or even initiating such measures. However in certain cases these organisations through other project programmes have integrated these beneficiaries into various peace and reconciliatory actions.

There was a need to advocate towards the rights of the victims if there is to be a long term solution. Advocacy, lobbying and questions on inequalities at a broader level were important aspects of psychosocial intervention.

CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

Many psychosocial programmes operating in war-affected areas in Sri Lanka resort to counselling as the intervention to meet the psychosocial needs of their beneficiaries. Even though the interventions were very individualistic in nature, these programmes responded to broader issues such as human rights, reconciliation, peace building on a one on one basis, taking each case separately. The mission of the programmes did not envisage a need for a larger impact or had not thought about their potential to have an impact on social transformation. These programmes were very much concerned about their own survival and how they could sustain psychosocial support to their beneficiaries. The PTF was indeed a threat to the continuation of their work as it restricted the implementation of the psychosocial components of their programmes.

A programme which would include socio-economic components, a rights framework, justice and reconciliation should be developed by the Government in consultation with the different organisations providing psychosocial services. The role of the Government would be crucial in ensuring the sustainability of the services while the NGOs would be able to share their knowledge of the lives and experiences of people to develop meaningful and culturally appropriate interventions. There is a need to review the Mental Health Policy of Sri Lanka through a consultative process to ensure that it reflects the current post-war context. These interventions should ideally strive to make a difference in terms of peace building and development, or more broadly social transformation

Sri Lanka at the time of the study was “celebrating” the victory over the LTTE. Stories of losses, violence, abuses of human rights and power, alcoholism, corruption are testimonies of the experiences people have undergone and the situation of the country. By listening to the grievances of the people and studying their coping mechanisms, psychosocial programmes would

be able to design interventions that would help them respond to the post-war environment. It is important that the Government hears what people think of how they can be assisted to improve their wellbeing. This initiative would acknowledge people's ability to identify their needs and suggest ways of responding to these needs that would be meaningful to them. Of course in doing this would mean recognizing one's own vulnerability - that those in power do not necessarily know better than the victims and what is best for them.

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