

Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines for mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings

Margriet Blaauw, MD*

Psychological and social suffering caused by armed conflicts and disasters can have a serious impact on the well-being and recovery of the affected populations. Protecting and improving mental health and psychosocial well-being should have a priority in emergency settings, however, the field is relatively new, and guidelines on good practices were lacking until recently.

The September 2007 launch of the “Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings” by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is an important milestone. Developed through consultation with UN organisations, NGOs and universities representing different regions and disciplines, the Guidelines aim to strengthen the humanitarian response in the field of mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings.

The Guidelines have been developed for all actors doing humanitarian relief work, including local organisations. The Guidelines address mental health problems and the psychosocial impact of emergencies and the people at risk, including torture survivors. They also focus on the resilience of affected

populations and the importance of: recognising skills and resources of people affected by emergencies, inclusion of the affected population in the emergency response, and building on existing ways to deal with difficulties. Though not directly targeted at those working with torture survivors, the Guidelines can be an important tool for rehabilitation centres operating in emergency situations.

Twenty-five action sheets are included with the Guidelines which cover, among other topics, minimum responses related to coordination of the establishment of inter-sectoral mental health and psychosocial support, assessment, monitoring and evaluation, human resources, community mobilisation, health services and education. For each action sheet additional resource material is recommended.

The IASC was established in 1992 to strengthen coordination of humanitarian assistance. It consists of UN- and non-UN humanitarian organisations. Other IASC Guidelines include “Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters” and “Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings”.

The Guidelines can be downloaded in English, French, Spanish and Arabic on the following website: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/subsidi/tf_mhps/default.asp?bodyID=5&publish=0

*) Head of Programme Unit
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims
Denmark
irct@irct.org