

Rethinking Psychosocial Programming in Post-war Sri Lanka: The Role of the Psychosocial Sector in Reconciliation Initiatives

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This case study on Sri Lanka is part of an international research project that focused on psychosocial perspectives on peacebuilding. The main objectives of the project were to determine whether different conceptualisations of trauma lead to different types of interventions; whether these interventions made a difference in terms of peacebuilding and development, or more broadly social transformation. The Sri Lanka case study questioned how affected populations continued to receive meaningful and culturally appropriate psychosocial care in an environment that continued to minimise the suffering of the people who survived the war. In doing so, the study presented the innovative strategies used by the programmes and discussed their broader impacts on peacebuilding and reconciliation within a highly constricted environment. Indeed, non-governmental organizations had to register in the Presidential Task Force and inform what activities they were involved in. Many psychosocial organizations were not given authorization to continue their work with victims as victims were perceived as “a permanent testimony” to the actual post-war environment. The sample consisted of four programmes that continued to function in spite of this situation. Focus group discussions with managers of programmes and semi-structured interviews with managers and direct service providers were conducted. The research results showed that, even though the interventions were mostly individualistic in nature, they responded to broader issues such as human rights, reconciliation, peacebuilding on a one on one basis, taking each case separately. Most of the programmes did not in their mission envisage a need for a larger impact or had not thought about their potential of having an impact on social transformation. They resorted to intuitive changes in conceptualization of their psychosocial programmes and a hands-on approach to programming. Since January 2015, there is recognition that people have suffered and need someone to listen to their narratives. The findings show that the psychosocial sector has some capacity to engage more actively in future reconciliation and peacebuilding processes and therefore needs to include reconciliation and peacebuilding strategies when conceptualizing programmes.

* This paper is based on findings from research undertaken for The International Conflict Institute (INCORE), University of Ulster and funded by the International Research Development Centre (IRDC). The author wishes to acknowledge and thank INCORE and IDRC. The author also wishes to thank Priya Thangarajah for drafting sections of the paper, collecting and analysing the data and editing the paper, and also Geethika Dharmasinghe and Chamathka Devasirrie for their assistance in collecting and analysing data. She also thanks the managers and staff of the organisations who participated in the research.