

## Importance of Psychosocial Support in the Context of Bangladesh

In 1985, the International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services (IAPRS) published the following definition of psychosocial rehabilitation as

The process of facilitating an individual's restoration to an optimal level of independent functioning in the community. While the nature of the process and the methods used differ in different settings, psychosocial rehabilitation invariably encourages persons to participate actively with others in the attainment of mental health and social competence goals. In many settings, participants are called members. The process emphasizes the wholeness and wellness of the

individual and seeks a comprehensive approach to the provision of vocational,

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residential, social/recreational, educational and personal adjustment services.' (Cnaan et al, Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal, Vol. 11, No. 4: April 1988, p.61)

Psychosocial support requires a holistic approach and incorporates many tools rather than one single intervention. There is clearly a vivid lack of understanding about the process and mechanisms of psychosocial support and many tends to view this as an individual intervention such as "counselling" which is actually an important component of this holistic approach. This lack of knowledge narrows the focus of the psychosocial support and limits its effectiveness.

As the term denotes, the psychosocial support can be described as an integrated approach to heal, recover and reintegrate an affected individual using tools of both psychological and social processes resulting in improved adaptability and healthy coping on the part of the individual. Some components of the psychosocial support also includes advocacy for mental health and social rights and mass awareness development. The philosophy of this support process is inherent in the definition of "Health" provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) which states that, Health is a positive state of physical, mental, and social well being – not simply the absence of injury or disease – that varies over time along a continuum.

Thus psychosocial supports aimed at mainly two domains of health; the "Psychological" and "Social". The psychological component includes, from directly providing support for mental health issues and problems for psychological wellbeing to advocacy and awareness. On the other hand, social component includes providing certain social skills and important life skills aiming

toward developing a well adjusted social individual. There can be debates on the scopes and boundaries of the psychosocial support but in terms of objectives this process is driven by the conviction that everyone has something to contribute and it is the responsibility of the support providers to see that they are given the skills and opportunities. The process is more towards inner healing and building of strengths rather than external healing such as improving physical wellbeing, though it is not entirely mutually exclusive. The process acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual support needs and thereby works toward developing a tailor made approach rather than developing a solution that will fit all.

The concept of psychosocial support can be considered relatively new in the context of Bangladesh comparing the development in this area in other parts of the developed world. Even India has made tremendous development in this area which can be seen by looking at the initiatives taken by Government and Non government organization and also at the sheer number of professionals involved in delivering the services. Bangladesh is also progressing, though slowly, despite many barriers and challenges which will be highlighted in the last section of this article.

In a mapping study on psychosocial support in four south Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan) published in 2003, it was reported that only a few number of organizations are involved in developing the structure to provide psychosocial support of which most are non-government organizations. Almost in all cases, it was also reported that, a holistic approach was missing. However, Social supports which have been the mainstay of many recovery and reintegration programs in the past are now slowly incorporating psychosocial components as well. In the last five years the process has seen some development and now we see many NGOs as well as Government supported institutions are employing specifically designed psychosocial support tools. Unfortunately, the number is still very few and most of these approaches still lack the holistic approach.

Now if we look more closely at what the components of psychosocial support can offer we can find there are numerous ways this process can be used which can be aimed toward

- Helping individual enabling “normal” development.
- Increasing mental health wellbeing resulting in healthy coping styles and emotional expressions.
- Developing inner strengths such as self confidence, self-image and self-esteem
- Building important social skills to enable one to successfully perform social duties and responsibilities.
- Developing certain life skills in order to function as a self reliant individual and to lead a productive life.
- Above all empowering a person to contribute for his society and nation.

#### **Psychosocial Support in Bangladesh: Achievements**

- Perhaps the biggest achievement is the acknowledgement of the fact that psychosocial support is important for healthy and holistic development for vulnerable women and children who are subject to various forms of abuse and social deprivation among both government and non government organizations. This population includes victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse, domestic violence. The impact of which can now be seen as many new programs and initiatives taken by GOs and NGOs are now incorporating psychosocial support as tools for recovery and reintegration. Many of the shelter homes for vulnerable children and women are now adopting measures to address the psychosocial support needs of their inhabitants. Acknowledging the need and providing psychosocial support for the disabled population has also now become a strong campaign.
- Recovery and reintegration programs for disaster affected population are also relying on psychosocial support realizing the need for it and the outcome it can bring. Many organizations actively attempted to provide such support in addition to routine approaches to the survivors of the cyclone “Sidr” in the coastal areas.
- Developing a common platform for psychosocial support workers to bring awareness, to realize its potentials and to develop the resources and capacity has also been possible. The vivid example of this is the creation of the “Psychosocial Support Group” which has been working since 2003. The group consists of clinical psychologists, psychologists, counsellors, social workers and other development workers. The group successfully organized a conference on psychosocial support during 2006 and is still working with this issue.
- Various workshops and training are now regularly

been organized by both GOs and NGOs in order to build capacity on the components of psychosocial support (mainly counselling) and to develop resource pool. There can be a lot of debate regarding the quality and sustainability of these programs but these are in some way also creating the demand to enhance the quality of psychosocial support.

- The development of ‘support providing centers’ that could provide individual as well as group support in many parts of the country at both GO and NGO levels.
- Some organizations are also working toward developing a holistic approach through introducing the “Case Management” system for providing unique support needs of each individual. This is a very important step in making the psychosocial approach successful.
- Initiation of school based programs to identify cases who are in need of psychosocial support and to educate in order to reduce early incidents of trauma by some NGOs.
- Recognition of the need of psychosocial support for disabled population and acid survivors and developing programs to initiate this support.
- Child and family focused special support services at some government hospitals, hospital based special program, National institutes and medical university in addition to both public and private universities.
- Some psychosocial assessment tools developed and contextualized by different actors. There are also published manuals on counselling support, which is a key component of psychosocial support, in Bengali published by different national and international organizations with specific focus such as disaster, trafficking etc. One handbook on psychosocial support has also been developed in Bengali which is in the process of publication.

#### **Gaps/ challenges:**

To achieve the full potentials of psychosocial support and to make best use of it’s process for the greater benefit of the target population we still have to go a long way as there are still many barriers and challenges. Psychosocial support workers are also facing a lot of obstacles due to a number of factors. Here we point out some of these which are based mainly on our experiences from the last 6 years and sharing of information with the key players.

- There is no clear definition of psychosocial support in our country context
- Inadequate research/ study in the field of

psychosocial care in our country

- Less importance given by the Govt. sector to psychosocial support issues.
- Traditional attitude (sometimes negative and sometimes ignorance) of the community peoples.
- Less scope to provide skill training to the peer groups who can work as Care Giver at the Community & schools setting.
- Short term project based initiative and financial limitations.
- Drop out/shortage of skill manpower in providing proper & necessary supports.
- Human resources related to psychosocial aspects are very limited in Bangladesh.
- Trained or quality human resources/ professional psychosocial care providers are very limited compared to the population.
- Mass populations are not aware on the need of psychosocial support for optimizing or regaining control their life.
- The scope of supervision of the counsellors and psychosocial helpers are limited.
- Lack of institutional support for psychosocial initiatives to develop resources.

The psychosocial counsellors are facing the following challenges:

- Ambiguous role definition and identity confusion
- Unclear job description
- Lack of resources for professional development
- Cultural barriers and negative stereotypes in addition to stigma
- Due to lack of support providers and resource limitations we cannot provide psychosocial support to all children as per demand of thana, court and other organizations.
- Long term legal procedures hamper the psychosocial development and process.
- Lack of continuation of follow up of family and individual counselling.

#### **Recommendations:**

Finally, recommendations to improve the psychosocial support structures and mechanisms have been sought and we present below those which have come out in numerous workshops and sharing of experiences.

- Clear definition of psychosocial support and what will be the major components of psychosocial care and support, needs to be determined by the key actors for developing common understanding.
- Understanding the “minimum standard of psychosocial support” and working towards to

establish such standard in the context of Bangladesh.

- Professional / certified course on psychosocial support needs to be introduced at university level.
- There is a need to continue effort in both strategic and implementation level to improve our existing psychosocial tools and methods and build capacity.
- Directory of psychosocial support resource persons can be developed.
- Strengthening individual and community resilience and making people effective actors in their own development process
- Good practices documentation, mapping on psychosocial support services needs to be done
- Indigenous practices of psychosocial care and support can be documented and promoted
- More research / study , evaluation needed and documentary on psychosocial care and support can be produced by different key actors
- Needs to be generated by evidence based knowledge in this area
- Psychosocial support must be extended for not only to the victims / beneficiaries but also to our care givers/ service providers as well as the volunteers.
- Psychosocial support must be integrated to our national development plan
- To promote community based psychosocial protection mechanisms in all over Bangladesh.
- To develop a pool of resources to facilitate the counseling and related psychological services for the mass people.
- Counseling services must be installed to ensure support for less severe mental health problems.
- Case management system should be installed for institutional care to provide best possible services to the children and young people.
- Media involvement is essential to disseminate information on psychosocial issues specially related to children and young people.
- Instantiate specific awareness, advocacy and capacity building actions widely at local and national level on the importance of psychosocial supports.
- Need strong and effective coordination and joint programs between all service oriented organizations relating to psychosocial supports.
- Initiate a process for setting at least a care giver/ social worker/ counselor/ service provider in all academic institutions.
- Start some academic course may be 3/6 months/ 1 year at private, public university, NGO, Hospitals jointly or individually.
- Do a baseline of academic course at national and

regional level.

- Initiate a Resource & Knowledge management Center in respect of psychosocial supports.
- Make sure effective follow up of previous initiatives and utilization of lessons learning to step ahead.
- Extended the program on psychosocial issue at all level for basic knowledge and importance
- Incorporate psychosocial activity in the community level program
- Incorporate the theme of psychosocial issue in educational curriculum and teacher training, police, doctor, lawyers, judge, and local govt. training module

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Article Prepared by: • **Kamal U. A. Chowdhury**, Associate Professor, Dept. of Clinical Psychology, Dhaka University. Email: kachowdhury@yahoo.com

• **Selina Ahmed**, National Program Officer, ILO.

- ❖ প্রতিটি মানুষের জন্য, মানসিক স্বাস্থ্যসেবা নিশ্চিত করা প্রয়োজন
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