Psychosocial Program
Improving Well-being in Sri Lanka

Though the end of a three-decade long war has brought in economic resurgence and enhanced physical mobility for communities in its immediate aftermath, psychological scars and social issues continue to affect thousands, especially in conflict-affected regions in Sri Lanka. Psychosocial ailments like depression, unexplained somatic complaints, and a breakdown of social relationships and traditional family structures—especially in the hardest hit regions in the North and the East—continue to pose grave threats to the wellbeing of communities. The limited provision of mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) is compounded by the fact that social stigma prevents vulnerable and trauma-affected individuals from seeking professional help.

In 2005, The Asia Foundation launched the Psychosocial Program (PSP) to help Sri Lankan communities overcome the lasting effects of conflict-related violence. PSP, a partnership with NGOs and the state managed MHPSS, has been implemented by two local NGOs providing psychosocial support services to survivors of war, conflict, trauma, and torture—the Family Rehabilitation Centre (FRC) and Shanthiham Association for Health and Counseling. Combined these agencies have served more than 11,600 clients, by December 2013, operating from both office and mobile clinics.

Through NGO partnerships, our PSP program works to treat the lasting effects of trauma by providing services such as counseling and medical support (including physiotherapy), yoga and relaxation techniques, befriending, and referrals to established government services and programs of other NGOs. Family members of clients also access the support services provided by the PSP program. Working alongside existing government services such as those provided by Medical Officers in Mental Health (MOMHs), PSP plays a unique social service role with its holistic, long-term approach to individual and community wellbeing. The MOMHs are a cadre position introduced by the government in 2004 to improve the mental health sector in the country.

One example of those affected by the war in need of psychosocial support include a mother of eight who lost six children during the war. She herself sustained injuries and was unable to work. When she first came to FRC she had symptoms of fear, sadness, anger, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt. In addition she had somatic complaints such as pain in her hands, which prevented her from engaging in work. A psychosocial worker (PSW) at the FRC used the “The Life Line” technique to help identify her problems. The FRC services she received also included medical and physiotherapy sessions for her physical complaints as well as a referral to the general hospital for further medical treatment. She received 12 counseling sessions from the PSW at FRC enabling her to engage in religious and social activities enthusiastically.

SRI LANKA

The Psychosocial Program helps Sri Lankan communities overcome the lasting effects of conflict-related violence.

PSP services are available in seven districts in the North and East regions, including Jaffna, Vavuniya, Mannar, Anuradhapura, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara.
In another case, a 30-year-old male from the North who had suffered a traumatic incident was reluctant to seek support and only agreed to meet with the Shanthiham counsellor due to his wife’s prodding. His wife had come to know of this service through a community volunteer in the village. Initially he did not talk much, but as counseling sessions progressed he opened up with his story. The counsellor was able to work with him to build trust in people and engage him in the recovery process.

FRC and Shanthiham’s clinics provide clients with quality treatment without the fear of being stigmatized. Often clients do not wish to be singled out and identified as survivors. In the words of the FRC physiotherapist in Mannar:

“I have been working with FRC for the past 13 years and during my tenure I have come to see the importance of this work. [Generally] people who have been severely affected due to the conflict do not wish to go to a hospital for treatment due to associated stigma. They are also at times not aware of the physiotherapy clinic available at the hospital. The physiotherapy clinic we run at FRC is remarkable, as the improvements the clients make through the exercises given are visible within a short span of time.”

With support from USAID and the European Commission, PSP has helped Tamils, Sinhalese, and Muslims, including war widows, bomb blast survivors, trauma survivors (including victims of torture), internally displaced persons, and persons who have been relocated to new districts. PSP is building on the lessons and experience from working with FRC and Shanthiham, to improve the capacity of the public health system to deliver similar psychosocial services to ensure accessible and sustainable service provision throughout the country.

The program has forged effective partnerships with leading national-level ministries and institutions to enhance outreach of activities. PSP supported the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) to revise the Diploma in Counselling and Social Work and develop a Higher Diploma in Counselling, the first in the country. Following the collaboration with NISD, the Ministry of Social Services approached The Asia Foundation for support in developing a three-month course on “Post Conflict Community Care and Basic Counseling Skills” for 150 local government officers in Kilinochchi, Mulaithivu, and Mannar Districts, to better serve the needs of people in these districts that were at the epicenter of the war.

The PSP program also engaged with the ministries of Social Services and Child Development and Women’s Affairs to conduct mapping studies on the capacity and scope of the counseling assistants at the ministries. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the College of Psychiatrists, the Foundation also conducted Continuing Professional Development programs for MOMHs in three provinces in the country.

In Sri Lanka, the Psychosocial project is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) (previously in collaboration with the European Union until 2009) and then solely by USAID.