

Call for members of a Steering Committee to guide the research study: Faith-sensitive Mental Health and Psychosocial Programming with children in fragile settings (PaRD Health work-stream)

Humanitarian agencies have long advocated for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to be provided to people affected by conflict and displacement. The number of interventions in this area, especially those targeted at children and youth, continues to grow at a rapid rate (Jordans et al, 2016). The IASC MHPSS Guidelines (IASC, 2007) argue for an approach that is contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive in order to ensure that the MHPSS interventions do not undermine local strategies for healing and supporting recovery. Faith and religion are recognised in the Guidelines as forming part of such a culturally appropriate response. However, the majority of the MHPSS interventions developed and implemented for children by agencies operate without any reference to faith, adopting entirely secular psychological and psychiatric approaches to trauma and distress.

While the faith component of MHPSS work with children is largely ignored by the main INGO actors and agencies working in emergency settings, a range of faith-based organisations (FBOs) have been actively supporting children in recovery processes for decades, at times using spiritual and religious elements as part of their interventions. Often these are local faith actors who engage with children in an MHPSS as well as faith-related activities, but who many not necessarily have any technical training in MHPSS and may not make use of established good practice in the MHPSS field. There is great variation in the types of initiatives currently using a faith-sensitive MHPSS approach with children, with some using a 'soft-touch' spiritual approach, others making faith central to their interventions and differences in how children themselves are able to participate, lead and actively shape these types of interventions. There is currently also very limited documentation and evidence for the effectiveness and/or potential problems with these different approaches.

A nuanced analysis is needed of how various aspects such as age, gender, race, faith, ethnicity, socio-economic status, (dis)ability as well as other factors influence the types of faith-sensitive approaches to MHPSS interventions that are made available to children and young people, as well as to how young people engage with these. Research shows that both, age and gender, as well as other factors affect vulnerability, risk, resilience and coping strategies within complex emergency settings (Pat-Horenczyk *et al.*, 2014). It is therefore crucial to use an intersectional approach in order to develop a differentiated understanding of how faith-based approaches to MHPSS take these two factors into account.

The recent crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 is likely to increase the need for MHPSS work. The outbreak has made work for responders more difficult as well as resulted in different issues for children's wellbeing. The study will therefore also examine the new situation caused by the recent crisis as well as the challenges and responses of faith-based initiatives to children and their families as they are affected by the current situation.

The goal of this study is to produce faith-sensitive guidance for MHPSS which will improve children's wellbeing in conflict zones. In order to achieve this, there is a need to identify evidence for good practice in this area. The first step is therefore to produce evidence on faith based MHPSS work with children that:

- a) Establishes effectiveness of different types of faith- based approaches to MHPSS (i.e. what works where, with whom, why and how?)
- b) Provides an overview of the gaps in knowledge, skills and technical support that both secular and FBO need in regard to faith literacy and/or MHPSS expertise

- c) Provides secular MHPSS programmes with faith literacy tools to understand and facilitate the engagement with local faith approaches
- d) Provides local faith actors with guidance and tools to engage in safe and appropriate faith-and evidence-based MHPSS approaches
- e) Examines new developments and needs caused by the recent COVID-19 crisis in relation to children's wellbeing and the ability of faith-sensitive programmes to respond to these

This study will only address the first of the above aims through:

- 1) Scoping the existing evidence for good practice in the field of faith-led MHPSS through
 - a) reviewing grey and published literature/documents and b) identifying a typology of existing kinds of faith-led MHPSS interventions, taking an intersectional approach
- 2) Conducting an in-depth analysis of exemplar interventions from each type/category of faith-led MHPSS interventions in order to identify factors that contribute to their effectiveness

The study speaks to the remit of the mental health focus of the health work-stream of PaRD which aims to foster partnerships and engagement between faith actors and MHPSS experts in the field of humanitarian and development settings. PaRD seeks to foster learning across the different sectors with the aim of increasing understanding and exchange of knowledge and expertise and thus stands to benefit both PaRD members as well as faith actors and MHPSS experts. We are therefore putting out a call for individuals or representatives to join the steering group for this research study:

Composition:

Ideally, we would like at least half of the group to be from the Global South. We are looking for:

- 3-4 representatives from diverse religious networks or NGOs
- 1 governmental agency
- 1 multilateral organisation
- Other – interest in the area of faith sensitive MHPSS

Role: We envisage the role of the steering group to include:

- Make recommendations to the research team on decision-making about focus/emphasis for the study
- Advise the research team in terms of key individuals/organisations to contact for study
- Provide input on direction for the development of a larger research proposal for Phase II of study

Criteria for joining the steering group:

- Have knowledge of MHPSS interventions in faith contexts
- Be able to meet time commitments outlined below

Time Commitment:

- 3-4 meetings (1 hour) to meet with the research team during the 4-5 months duration of Phase I of this study
- Read the outputs of the study and provide feedback to research team (outputs: scoping study & report on key informant interviews).

Please contact Carola Eyber on ceyber@qmu.ac.uk if you may be interested in joining this steering group by 18th December 2020. The first meeting will be organised for mid-January 2021. Thank you for your time and commitment.