

Position Paper

on the

UNDP Guidance Note *Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Peacebuilding*

of May 2022

Key Implications for Practice

The gap that MHPSS services are meant to fill in peacebuilding interventions needs to be conceptualized in terms of Peace and Conflict. The full potential of MHPSS services can only be accessed if the peacebuilding sector does not outsource the conceptualization of ‘inner/ internal/ intrapersonal peace’ or ‘peace of mind’ to the health sector.

Theory of change and definitions in the Guidance Note

A recent Guidance Note on the integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into peacebuilding published by UNDP (2022) is aimed at peacebuilders around the world who are seeking to integrate MHPSS into their work. The Guidance Note (UNDP 2022, 8) is based on the **theory of change** that

integrating MHPSS into peacebuilding leads to improved well-being, which in turn enables people to resist violence and build agency, ultimately leading to sustainable peace.

The Guidance Note (UNDP 2022, 9) embraces the definition of **peacebuilding and sustaining peace** provided by the UN General Assembly, that is as

a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development.

The definition of **MHPSS** is adopted from the 2007 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for MHPSS in Emergency Settings (UNDP 2022, 9), that is as

any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorder.

The Guidance Note (UNDP 2022, 9) defines **integration** in this particular case

as the intentional bringing together of components of MHPSS and peacebuilding practice, from the outset to the conclusion of the programmatic intervention.

According to the Guidance Note (UNDP 2022, 28), ‘definitions of peace vary from context to context’, while

definitions relating to MHPSS are globally recognized and a widely accepted monitoring and evaluation framework for humanitarian settings has been developed. Although a common set of MHPSS definitions is generally used and accepted around the world, this does not discount the centrality of context-specific experiences, terminologies and local idioms and signs of distress. These local concepts will need their own indicators vis-à-vis their contribution to an integrated approach.

A ‘western’ conceptualization of mental health in the Guidance Note

The Guidance Note makes an effort to give room to ‘local concepts’ but ultimately adopts a ‘western’ conceptualization of mental health as promoted by the WHO in the shape of an International Classification of Diseases designed for worldwide use (WHO 2022). Mental suffering which is caused by psychosocial stressors such as violent conflict, for example, and goes beyond limits defined by cultural norms, is understood in the biomedical sense as a malfunction of the mind that leads to a mental disorder. According to this conceptualization of mental suffering, the disorder impairs the ability of the patient to contribute to, and benefit from, peacebuilding efforts. Psychological remediation of the disorder is understood as an expert task that does not allow for an integration of MHPSS and Peacebuilding beyond the ‘informed partnerships’ promoted by the Guidance Note (UNDP 2022, 11). As a result, violent conflict as a social ill can be addressed by peacebuilding interventions, while the patient’s reaction to violent conflict as a psychosocial stressor in our example is medicalized and thus privatized as a personal failure to cope. This can create stigma and put an additional burden on the patient-person.

While the WHO approach to MHPSS is the dominant one in mainstream peacebuilding, it is not as uncontested as the Guidance Note suggests¹. Not only definitions of peace vary from context to context, but also conceptualizations of mental health². Some of them are more conducive to peacebuilding than others³. Ipso (International Psychosocial Organisation), for example, specializes in a short-term psychodynamic intervention that aims to improve the sense of coherence and self-efficacy of clients in the course of a non-directive but carefully structured conversation⁴. Psychosocial services are based on the idea that human beings have an inherent need to lead a meaningful life. *Meaning* in this context is understood as a concept that is subjective and depends on personal, family and social values which are developed and adapted in the course of a lifetime. Instead of pathologizing clinical symptoms underlying intrapsychic or interpersonal conflicts, traumatic experiences, a disruptive social environment, or difficult life transitions, Ipso takes a salutogenic⁵ approach to psychosocial wellbeing. The symptoms are understood as reactions to psychosocial stressors which stem from an individual vulnerability and can be overcome if conceptualized in a meaningful way. This

¹ Compare, for example, Horwitz (2012); Rathod et al. (2018).

² Compare, for example, Hwang (2010); McCann (2016); Richter & Dixon (2022).

³ Compare, for example, Schininà & Tankink (2018); Flaherty et al. (2020).

⁴ For references see the section on Ipso below.

⁵ For the term see Mittelmark et al. (2022).

human potential for self-development can not only be used to facilitate self-healing, it also plays an important role in a bottom-up peacebuilding process which involves change at the internal level (personal beliefs and attitudes) and at the interpersonal level (practices and behaviors within interpersonal relationships). The role of psychosocial support is to improve psychosocial competence required to peacefully negotiate social change. This includes a capacity for empathetic perspective-taking.

Integration or Outsourcing?

The title 'No peace without peace of mind: the impact of violent conflicts on individuals and society' of a recent publication on trauma (Tankink, Sliep & Bubenzer 2021) illustrates the need for peacebuilders to conceptualize mental health in their own terms and to define the role that peace of mind, or 'inner/ internal/ intrapersonal' peace, plays for conceptualizations of positive and negative peace⁶. Ipso welcomes the Guidance Note as an initiative which strives to create synergies between efforts to promote peace, and efforts to promote mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. We take the position that the potential of an integration of MHPSS into peacebuilding can only be fully accessed if the peacebuilding sector does not outsource the conceptualization of 'inner/ internal/ intrapersonal peace', 'peace of mind' etc. to the health sector. Peacebuilders need to define the gap that MHPSS interventions are meant to fill within their own conceptual frameworks of interpersonal peace and conflict instead of adopting a western pathogenic approach to mental health/ illness/ disorder and associated risks of doing harm and creating mental-health related stigma. This will change the theory of change presented in the Guidance Note along the lines of

Integrating the aspect of [inner/ internal/ intrapersonal peace/ of mind...] into interpersonal peacebuilding leads to improved well-being, which in turn enables people to resist violence and build agency, ultimately leading to sustainable peace.

Once peacebuilders have created Terms of Reference for the outsourcing of services specific to the promotion of their holistic conceptualization of interpersonal peace, it will be possible to negotiate these with providers of MHPSS services.

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⁶ For the terms see UNDP (2022) 11.

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Ipsos GmbH – International Psychosocial Organisation

Ipsos is a humanitarian not-for-profit organization based in Germany and Afghanistan specializing in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) and in sociocultural empowerment at the community level to promote peace and social cohesion. At the individual level, Psychosocial Counselors trained by Ipsos provide culturally sensitive Value Based Counseling (VBC). The service is currently available in more than 20 languages in face-to-face sessions as well as online.

Projects aimed at sociocultural empowerment at the community level have been implemented by Ipsos in Afghanistan since 2013. A Mental Health and Psychosocial Center in Kabul provides services to Afghans who suffer from a high mental health burden and high level of stress in their daily lives, and provides immediate trauma care after exposure to potentially traumatizing events. The Center provides individual face-to-face and online psychosocial counseling to adolescent and adult beneficiaries, runs a day care center and offers outpatient psychiatric assessment and treatment. Psychosocial counselors provide online counseling to clients across the country, many of whom require access given at care points which Ipsos currently runs in the capitals of 16 provinces.

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