


Psychosocial Centre

 International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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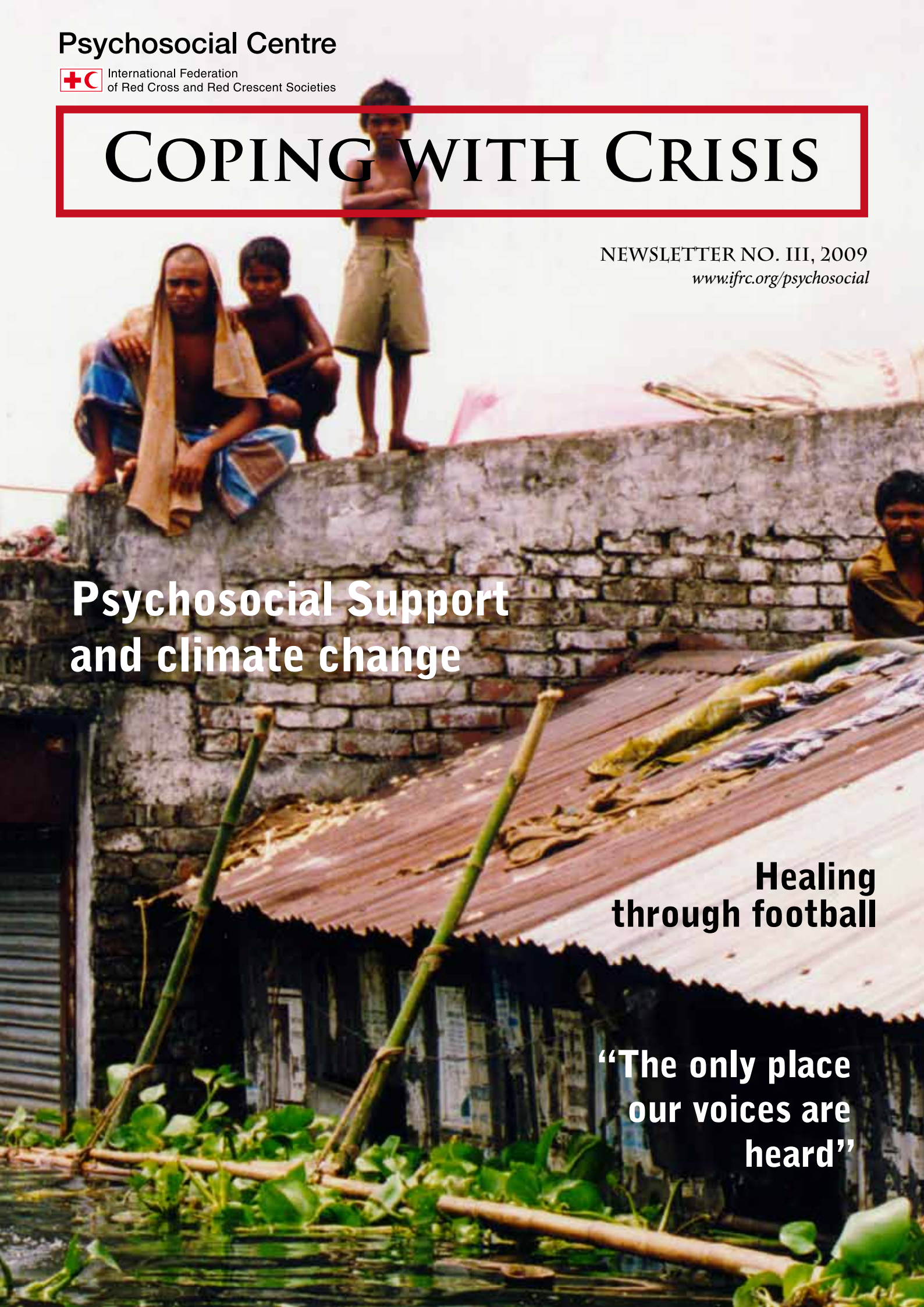
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**Psychosocial Support  
and climate change**

**Healing  
through football**

**“The only place  
our voices are  
heard”**







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### Psychosocial support expert/delegates!

If you are a newly employed psychosocial support delegate, we would like to get in touch with you! Likewise, if you know of any new psychosocial support delegates in your region, please have them contact the PS Centre for material and information! Our aim is to have an up-to-date mapping of psychosocial support delegates and PS work around the world. Please register with us to be on our contact list in order to get the latest psychosocial support announcements! E-mail us at [psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org](mailto:psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org)

Editorial board: Nana Wiedemann, Hedinn Halldorsson and Carina Sørensen

Front page photo: Floods in Bangladesh. Photo from IFRC archives.

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# Editorial

## The human impact of climate change

I believe, that many of you, just like me and my colleagues at the PS Centre, are becoming increasingly aware of the psychosocial consequences of climate changes. What will the future look like and how will the living conditions of our children be affected? Are we facing a nightmare that we cannot even imagine?

There is no doubt that the direct impacts of climate change will cause lacerations to the social fabric at local as well as global level, indirectly implying that large populations of people will become increasingly vulnerable. The future forbodes the rapid growth of internally displaced people, as a consequence of hurricanes and floods. Moreover, the increased climate variability will most likely contribute to increased violence and conflict. Populations that are already disadvantaged, will be worst hit. It is hard to imagine living in a disaster prone area, always fearing the worst, never knowing when the next disaster hits. Climate change is a threat to all of us, but it will have the most severe consequences for the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

Hundreds lost their lives in floods this summer and just a couple of weeks ago, one million people were evacuated

as Typhoon Morakot brought heavy rain to south-eastern China. The consequences of climate change are everywhere, nearly becoming an endless recital in the news. Despite the constant spotlight on climate change very few stories address the significance of the psychosocial repercussions. The mainstream debate and literature all too often focus solely on the scientific and economic consequences, overseeing the enormous social impact climate change is having. In fact, a disquieting concern is that there seems to be a void with respect to research and in the body of literature in general, with the result that psychosocial consequences of climate change are rendered as an unexplored field.

In this issue of Coping with Crisis you will find an interview with a psychosocial delegate in Gaza. "How can you rebuild your life psychologically when you cannot even rebuild it materially?" is a question the delegate poses to the reader. A piece on Iraqi refugees in Syria, where they explain why they come to the psychosocial centres, as well as an article on the concept of sport as a component in psychosocial interventions in disasters, are also to be found in this issue. Our main focus, however, is on climate change and psychosocial support. We hope our coverage



will help increase awareness and highlight the need to address how individuals and communities can take preemptive action to safeguard their wellbeing in the face of disasters. Climate change is causing an erosion of livelihoods that necessitates proactive planning. Later this year, the city of Copenhagen, Denmark, is hosting COP15, The UN Climate Change Conference. It is our hope that the human costs and psychosocial consequences will get adequate attention and that it will be on the agenda during the conference and set the precedence in the following months and years to come.

Yours sincerely,

*Nana Wiedemann*

Nana Wiedemann,  
Head, International Federation  
Reference Centre for  
Psychosocial Support

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The translation into French of Coping with Crisis has kindly been made possible by the Belgian and the French Red Cross, while MENA has graciously translated the Arabic version. Amelia Morales has kindly contributed to the Spanish translation.

# How climate change increases the ne

By **Hedinn Halldorsson**

Communications Advisor, PS Centre

Climate change has by some been called a threat multiplier because it catalyzes a chain of cause and effect; it worsens already fragile situations, puts livelihoods at risk, exacerbates social inequalities and amplifies health risks. Climate change and its consequences are already causing distress and anxiety all over the world. That anxiety may partly be addressed with psychosocial support.

Approximately 600 000 deaths occurred worldwide as a result of weather-related natural disasters in the 1990s, some 95% of which took place in developing countries. Unless adaptive measures are taken, climate change is projected to approximately double the percentage of people at risk of hunger and associated health effects by the 2050s (WHO). Thirteen of the world's 20 largest cities are located on coastlines and more than half of the world's population now lives within 60 kilometres of shorelines.

## 'A steady drum beat'

Climate change is no stand-alone issue. Bekele Geleta, the Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, refers to a "steady drum beat of climate warning – still thankfully classifiable as 'early warning'." Research in the field of health with regards to climate change is increasing, as stated in a recent WHO report, "but it is still comparatively weak in relation to the complexity of the issue and the magnitude of the health risks that may arise from inadequate or inappropriate responses". One of the fields where the consequences of global warming have not been addressed adequately is the field of mental health, although attention has been increasing.

According to the 2008 World Disasters report, more than 2 billion people have in recent years been affected by natural disasters; that is nearly one third of the Earth's human inhabitants. Accordingly, the International Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) has grown by nearly 300 per cent in the last five years. Natural disasters account for nearly 60 per cent of fund grants.

## Immense health effects

A couple of months ago, The Lancet published a report on the health effects

of climate change, based on 12 months of brainstorming and research by academics. The aim was to put climate change at the top of the global health agenda. The theoretical models of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predict an increase in global mean sea level of 18-59 cm by 2100. The predictions are highly disputed; some scientists call them conservative, others modest. The result however, of such a rise in sea levels would have unprecedented consequences and displacement for millions of people. Moreover, as the authors in The Lancet state, global warming will threaten food and water security and no country will be immune from the health effects of climate change. They call for more evidence on health effects that will generate the urgent action needed.

## Information dissemination is key

Understanding the vast psychosocial consequences, the grievances of losing livelihoods, one's home or relatives, and ways to best provide support, is key. More information on these issues in particular, is therefore needed. It includes providing people with the necessary tools, knowledge, and encouragement to instill the feeling that they can regain control of their own lives instead of simply being passive victims



of climate change. As described in the article 'Hope, despair and transformation': "When people have something to do to solve a problem, they are better able to move from despair and hopelessness to a sense of empowerment". Thus, responsible reporting and information sharing is vital, in order not to cause unnecessary distress.

## Reacting upon uncertainty

No single weather event can be linked directly to the long-term progression of global warming. However, climate change has clearly created circumstances under which powerful storms are more likely to occur. In the words of Bekele Geleta, "The disasters which climate change will trigger, potentially threaten more lives and livelihoods than any before". In 2007, there were 960 major natural disasters, in fact the highest recorded figure to-date. More than 90 percent were the result of extreme weather-related or climate-related events, accounting for



# ed for psychosocial support



Floods in Haiti. Photo from IFRC archives.

all but 5 percent of the 16,000 reported fatalities.

## The link to violence and conflict

A recurring theme in the debate, is the potential impact of climate change on conflict. Natural resources more often than not are the root of conflict. Although simplified, some have even gone as far as calling the conflict in Darfur, Sudan, the "first climate change war", meaning that the root of the conflict lies in periods of drought, causing large scale displacement of communities. A 2008 Care report, identifying the most likely humanitarian implications of climate change for the next two to three decades, states how climate change is making hazards more intense, more frequent, less predictable and/or longer lasting.

## The sufferers

The disturbing reality of how climate change affects global health, is that those who have the least access

to resources, are those who suffer the most. They are more likely to be exposed, and they are the ones who are likely to fall short when it comes to adapting to and meeting the challenge. One of the solutions is to provide people with the necessary tools to deal with the changes. Providing information to vulnerable communities needs to be increased, resources needs to be invested in disaster preparedness, and the resilience of both individuals and communities needs to be strengthened. If the most vulnerable are not to become

even more destitute, their needs must be addressed, and their communities empowered.

Nowadays it is generally accepted that psychosocial support is an integrated and crucial factor in emergency responses. The wide ranging effects of climate change, how it may fuel conflict, threaten livelihoods and displace people on a massive scale therefore poses a huge challenge in the nearest future. The challenge ahead is therefore to strongly underline the significance of psychosocial support. ■

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World Health Organisation – Climate change and human health <http://www.who.int/globalchange/en/>
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- Humanitarian Implications of Climate Change: Mapping emerging trends and risk hotspots Care/Maplecroft 2008

# “The only place our voices are heard”

## Psychosocial support to Iraqi refugees in Syria

By **Karin Eriksen**, PSP Programme Management delegate Danish Red Cross  
& **Naglaa Rashwan**, IFRC MENA Zone PSP Coordinator and the Psychosocial Support unit of Syrian Arab Red Crescent

*Laughter floods down the marble stairs from the 3rd floor, children with their school bags still slung over the shoulder run eagerly to the homework café, while four men sit in the reception area drinking tea, talking and playing backgammon. This is the scene as you enter the social centre in rural Damascus – one of the three centres Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) opened in 2008, with the support of the Danish Red Cross (DRC). Soon the source of the laughter filters down the stairs - it is ten women dressed in black burkas with only their eyes showing. They just finished their literacy class.*

### Refugees struggling

Syria today hosts over one million Iraqi refugees, that since 2003 have fled the war in Iraq. 2,000-3,000 new refugees still arrive every month in Syria, a number which by far exceeds the refugees returning to Iraq. It is estimated that 80% of the refugees reside in apartments in the poorer suburban areas of rural Damascus with the rest spread out in other main cities in Syria. The refugees now struggle with memories from the war in Iraq along with the effects of the protracted life as refugees, where resources are rapidly

dwindling and social support networks are non-existing. The Iraqi refugees are granted residency visas in Syria, but are not allowed to work. With the increasing financial constraints faced by the refugees, more and more families are sharing two-bedroom apartments and many resort to selling part of their food rations to be able to cope with the financial difficulties.

### The story of Samir

The memories of the atrocities following the war in Iraq are still vividly present to many of the refugees. Samir, a visitor to the social centre in rural Damascus, sits in the café area as he tells the story of how he was driving with his brother and his ten-year old daughter in Basra, when armed men stepped out in front of the car and opened fire through the windows. Samir has no recollection of the next 15 days whatsoever. He woke up from a coma in a hospital bed and was told that both his daughter and brother had lost

their lives in the attack. Samir fled his home country in a haste, bringing with him his family, his sister and her three children.

### The need is dire

Samir's story is not unique. 75 percent of Iraqi refugees in Syria have lost someone close, and over half of the refugees have experienced bombings, shootings, violence, and harassment, including life threats. The signs of the effects of these experiences are clearly visible. Depression, anxiety, anger, loss of hope in the future, and a rise in domestic violence are all common. As an Iraqi man tells, “When I enter the house I get nervous, I beat my wife when she forgets to wake me up, then I regret and apologise”. The women, in particular, are affected, struggling to cope with keeping their families together, supporting their children and battling with the feeling of having lost their lives. Crying, suppressing feelings, watching television to forget about the problems, simply leaving the house when the conflicts become too hard, are frequent coping strategies among the Iraqis. The need for psychosocial support to the Iraqi refugees in Syria is dire and growing, as their economic situation worsens.



Sarah, an Iraqi volunteer working in rural Damascus Social Centre, reading to the children. Photo by Dy Robin Ahrenkiel El-Tanany / Danish Red Cross.



## Syrian Arab Red Crescent response

To respond to their needs, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent supported by Danish Red Cross in 2008 started three counselling centres in rural Damascus, Aleppo in the north and Qamishli by the north-eastern border with Iraq. The centres have been a sweeping success since the day they opened their doors in October 2008. Today the centres have received more than 46,000 visits from Iraqis and Syrians in the local communities. The centres offer a wide range of activities with psychosocial support as the core - such as psycho-education support groups for women and men, life-skills training for adolescents and structured play groups for children to help them cope with their feelings and enhance their resilience. Homework cafés are open for students to help them with the Syrian school curriculum and classes in English, literacy and IT are on offer, to provide the adults with new skills and learn something meaningful. Open play areas and youth areas give children and adolescents a chance to socialise and play with peers. In the reception area volunteers provide information about services available to refugees such as free medical services and food distributions, while in the café area visitors can socialise with each other or talk to a volunteer. The centres also arrange recreational activities, where families have the opportunity to participate in social events, such as celebrations, excursions and open days for the communities. The multitude of activities, all targeting different needs and groups, ensures that families can visit the centres together, although they are working individually. This makes the centres an effective way of helping the refugees at the same time as it strengthens the social network in the Iraqi and Syrian local communities.

### 'That's why I come to the centre'

Although it is still early to see the impact of the centres, many signs are visible that they are already assisting in improving the resilience and psychosocial wellbeing of the refugees. As one of the women visiting one of the centres said, "My self-perception is better, my life has changed... Even my way of dressing has changed". The Iraqi refugee women often live in half isolation and are confined to their apartments. For many women the centres are the first



The front entrance to rural Damascus Social centre in Seiday Zaynab. The area is one of those with the highest concentrations of Iraqi refugees. The adolescents are all regular visitors. Photo by Syrian Arab Red Crescent

place where they have been able to socialise with other Iraqis outside their home. A woman explained the difference between being at home and at the centre; "At home I get nervous and stressed, but here I feel relieved and

back home in Iraq, saw dead bodies on their way to school; "My son was kidnapped and it greatly affected my daughters... I keep them at home with me, but they need help... that's why I come to the centre'.

With the support from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Danish Red Cross will expand the support to the Iraqi refugees in Syria. This autumn two additional centres will open in the Northeast region and in Damascus. The programme is currently funded until end of 2011. SARC and DRC have cooperated since 2005. Following the Lebanon crises in 2006 the main focus for the cooperation has been psychosocial support and organisational development. Syrian Arab Red Crescent also provides psychosocial support to Iraqi refugees through five Child Friendly Spaces and four multi-disciplinary teams implemented in cooperation with UNICEF.

safe". The men talk about the impact of the centres on their daily life. One of them explained that the centre makes him proud to be an Iraqi again, while another stated that he felt at home, not outside his country anymore. The concern for their children's reactions and changed behaviour is also affecting parents and the support the centres offer to the children is greatly valued. One mother talks of how her children,

### The commitment of volunteers

The centres are run by the local branches of SARC and the support activities are implemented by Iraqi and Syrian volunteers. The approach of the volunteers has been a determining factor in the success of the centre. As one visitor expressed, "The centres are the only place where our voices are heard". The volunteers daily arrange the activities in the centres, play

## Does your National Society provide psychological or psychosocial support to victims of trafficking?

One of the major humanitarian problems within Europe is the modern form of slavery labelled human trafficking. Women, children and men are sold as human slaves. They are lured by false promises of employment, marriage, and better life conditions, but are instead forced into slavery, deprived of their documents and freedom of movement, and coerced into prostitution, begging, stealing or forced to work for free.

The consequence for victims of trafficking are enormous. One is the threat to their psychosocial wellbeing. They need psychosocial support that will help them in their distress and difficult situations, and provide them with positive human relations helping to restore their sense of self-respect and ability to overcome anxiety and despair.

The IFRC Europe Zone office is working with national societies responding to the need of victims of trafficking and building up a Europe Zone wide network, and we would like to get in touch with National Societies working on the topic of trafficking or working with victims of trafficking through psychosocial activities. Please contact Lars Linderholm, the focal point for activities related to trafficking of human beings in the IFRC Europe Zone office in Budapest, at: [lars.linderholm@ifrc.org](mailto:lars.linderholm@ifrc.org) or at: +36 70 953 7729

with the children and are available to talk about daily life or the visitors's problems. Everyone is greeted with a smile and the volunteers know most of the regular visitors by their first name. The children teach the volunteers their traditional Iraqi songs and the children areas are a constant buzzing bubble of colours, songs and laughter. The commitment of volunteers in the centres are a key factor to the success, as Sarah, one of the Iraqi volunteers working in rural Damascus says; "I help, because these people are burdened with some horrible stories. The most important thing for the children is to feel safe again, but it is difficult when you have fled to a foreign country. When they talk, I don't just listen, I can also understand how they are feeling". Sarah fled from the war in Iraq with her mother and younger brother after her father was killed. The 70 Iraqi and Syrian volunteers working in the three social centres have been trained with the support of local and regional consultants in community-based psychosocial support and specialised trainings for support groups, technical supervision and management.

### Building capacity

Psychosocial support is still a new priority area for Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Building the experience and strengthening the resources of SARC volunteers to implement activities in the centres has therefore been essential. Experienced local consultants, Palestine Red Crescent Society and the IFRC MENA Zone PSP Coordinator have all contributed by sharing their experience and training both Iraqi and Syrian volunteers within their area of expertise. For Syria, with the geographical placement and traditional open

border policy in humanitarian disaster situation, preparedness to cope with future disasters is also an important element.

To enhance the capacity of SARC staff and volunteers mainly used the IFRC Community-Based Psychosocial Support Manual. The IFRC Training Kit on Community-Based Psychosocial Support equips the volunteers with up-to-date, evidence-based information and practices that help them build professional and effective support. The SARC is among the first National Societies in the world to train its volunteers with the new Training Kit, published by the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support. SARC recently trained 45 people whom are able to train both new volunteers working in the centres as well as functioning as a resource strengthening the capacity of local branches when responding to future psychosocial needs. In the coming years the capacity-building will be continued through courses, and the volunteers in the centres will receive support from the trainers and technical team leaders.

### Drinking tea

In the café area in the centre in rural Damascus Samir sits with two other visitors chatting and drinking tea. They are waiting for their children to finish with the structured play group, so they can return home for dinner. Samir lifts his cup of steaming hot tea and says, "This means more to me, than anything that can be bought for money... I need someone to talk to, otherwise it is not bearable". The Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers could not have hoped for a better appraisal to the success of their work. ■



An Iraqi girl in the rural Damascus Social Centre. Photo by Johanne Brix Jensen / PS Centre.



# Climate change and its effects on psychosocial wellbeing

By **Lina Nerlander,**

Health specialist at the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

*How does work on climate change and psychosocial support overlap, how are the two topics intertwined and why will climate change increase the need for psychosocial support? More importantly, how can climate prediction tools help and how can we limit one's feeling of helplessness? These are some of the issues raised in the following piece, by the IFRC Climate Centre's Health specialist.*

Climate change is a cross cutting issue. The psychosocial effects of natural disasters are well known and undisputed, which is why the Red Cross Red Crescent does a lot of work in this area. Climate change will result in an increased frequency and intensity of extreme events, and when National Societies are planning to manage the effects of these disasters, psychosocial needs should be taken into account.

## From 'denial to despair'?

The effects of climate change will fall disproportionately on the most fragile populations, who have the least capacity to adapt. That is a challenge that the Movement has no choice but to take on. At the International Conference in 2007 climate change was recognised as one of the four main priority areas of work for the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement<sup>1</sup>. Action on climate change was previously hampered by denial as to whether it was 'man-made', but as the scientific evidence mounted, the debate changed. It is now mainly centred around how best to take action to prevent further climate change and how best to deal with the effects. It is key to avoid moving from 'denial to despair' as there is much that can be done to limit the humanitarian consequences of climate change. Assisting people to take action and be in control can in itself be a tool to limit the feeling of helplessness.

There are significant areas of overlap between work on climate change and work on psychosocial

support. Climate change will likely increase the need for variety of types of psychosocial support. Both areas of work need to be integrated within regular programs and both fields of work can have something to teach the other on how this is best done. Climate change also results in new types of challenges for individuals and communities and through understanding more of how social support networks function, we can better understand how to reduce vulnerabilities within communities.

above, is one way to do so. There is also a need to assess what aspects of vulnerability are related to psychosocial wellbeing of individuals and communities and how communities can become more resilient. Strong social networks may mean that communities are more likely to be able to tackle challenges jointly and it is important to learn more about these aspects. In urban areas, social and community networks will be different and as an increasingly large proportion of the world's



Chishan Evacuation Centre Southern Taiwan August 15, 2009. The typhoon Morakot triggered the worst floods in Taiwan in decades. Photo by Pichi Chuang / REUTERS.

## Social networks

Decreasing vulnerabilities of communities is key when it comes to addressing the challenge of climate change. Enabling communities to use early warning systems, as described

population live in cities we need to learn more about how best to make such communities more resilient. On an individual level, elderly people with poor social networks are more exposed to the effects of for example



Left to right: (1) Rescuers try to get hold of a man, stranded by floods as Typhoon Morakot approaches in Shanghai, China, August 9, 2009. Stringer/REUTERS. (2) Jeseník nad Odrou, Czech Republic, June 25, 2009. Rescue workers and volunteers evacuate a woman from her flooded house. Petr Josek/REUTERS. (3) Amazonas State, northern Brazil May 18, 2009. Floods and mudslides from months of heavy rains in northern Brazil drove more than 300,000 from their homes and killed at least 44. Bruno Kelly-A Critica/REUTERS.

heat-waves and we also need to tackle these types of vulnerabilities in the context of climate change.

### Early warning – early action

The concept of ‘early warning – early action’ is about how climate prediction tools can help planning for extreme events such as floods or drought. Climate change predictions – such as whether a region will



A mountain village in Chiayi County, southern Taiwan, surrounded by floods following Typhoon Morakot, August 18, 2009. Photo from REUTERS.

*Flooding, due to heavy rainfall, has had immense consequences all over the world in the last couple of months. This summer, landslides and floods were the worst disaster to strike the island of Taiwan in more than fifty years, causing close to 500 deaths. Flooding in Northwest Pakistan worsened the refugee crisis initially caused by fighting in the region. The floods, affecting as many as 80,000 people, strained relief efforts further and added to the burden of both the already vulnerable and relief agencies. The same happened in Sri Lanka in August where refugee camps were inundated by flash floods. Heavy floods also caused havoc in Central Europe in the month of June 2009.*

on average face more droughts in the coming decades can be useful for strategic planning in the long term while seasonal forecasts are useful for operational planning. In preparing for disasters, such information can allow disaster managers to raise funds in advance, even before a disaster has struck. Such a seasonal forecast was used in the 2008 West Africa flooding season. The forecast, issued in May, showed that there was a high probability of extreme rainfall in West Africa in the coming three months. The International Federation launched an emergency appeal to humanitarian donors based on this forecast, for the first time ever. This allowed them to preposition stocks, develop contingency plans, mobilise volunteers, alert communities and address potential psychosocial issues (For other examples, see chapter 3 “bridging timescales” in the 2009 World Disasters Report - [www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2009/](http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2009/)).

### A tool of empowerment

With climate change, communities will have to get used to living with increased amounts of climate variability. Past experience may no longer fully explain the present or predict the future. Such uncertainty may itself have consequences for psychological wellbeing as it can lead to feelings of being disempowered. Farmers find that crops are failing as weather patterns alter, and traditional means of predicting the weather may no longer hold true. Rainfall patterns change and areas that have no experiences of flooding may be affected. New and existing meteorological tools will help us to predict some of this variability weeks and even months in advance, allowing for

### The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre was established in 2002 by the IFRC and Netherlands Red Cross. It is a reference centre supporting the Movement to understand and address the humanitarian consequences of climate change and extreme weather events. The key is to integrate considerations of climate change into regular plans and programs, in all relevant areas, and not to see climate change as a stand alone, vertical program. The Climate Centre also works on capacity-building, advocacy, resource mobilisation, program development and academic partnerships.

advanced planning and action. This may include preparing for the psychosocial effects of an imminent disaster, through preparing volunteers to give support. In itself, the fact that staff, volunteers and communities can prepare in advance may be a tool for strengthening resilience and, by extension, psychosocial wellbeing. In the process of working with communities to help them tackle the effects of climate change, the Climate Centre looks for ways of how to communicate the message that the climate is changing, in the best manner, without leaving people in despair. Such communication needs to be constructed carefully and include the message that it is within the power of communities to address the challenge. This may be one of many areas where we can learn from work done on psychosocial wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. ■

#### Footnotes:

- (1) This conference brings together the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as well as governments party to the Geneva Conventions.
- (2) Ebi KL, Semenza JC: Community-based adaptation to the health impacts of climate change. *Am J Prev Med.* 2008 Nov;35(5):501-7. Review.



# “In other places you can always rebuild...”

## An interview from Gaza

Interview by **Hedinn Halldorsson**

*“How can you rebuild your life psychologically if you can’t even rebuild it physically?”, asks the psychosocial delegate, Zara Sejberg, talking from the Gaza strip. “In other places you can always rebuild, but here you can’t.” When describing the circumstances on the ground, the need for psychosocial support becomes all too evident. A consortium of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, led by the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), has for several years run psychosocial projects in the West Bank, and recently opened four more centres in Gaza.*

“Now that several months have passed since the war, the general feeling is hopelessness. Most people find the situation to be bleak, they are pessimistic and in fact expect another war to break out”.

The ICRC report, *Gaza: 1.5 million people trapped in despair*, released in June 2009, explains how this small coastal strip is cut off from the rest of the world, how most people are struggling to make ends meet, not being able to rebuild their lives. The reason is the severe restrictions on movement of people and goods. There is a severe shortage of drinking water and power cuts happen every day.

“Due to the closure we cannot bring trainers into Gaza. We find ourselves in a situation where we have new staff with limited experience. We have moved some staff from the centre we opened first, to the other three in order to benefit from their experience.”

**Zara tells about how the constraints are felt in several ways.**

“One of the challenges is that it is impossible to bring building material, furniture and office equipment into the Gaza strip, so as a result of the closure everything comes through the tunnels between Egypt and Gaza. In the past two weeks 12 people have been killed working in the tunnels. It is a very lucrative business. Many people are making a lot of money on importing things to Gaza through it. That is why we are torn between needing to purchase material locally and knowing that poor people are risking their lives dragging material through the tunnels.”

**You arrived in Gaza in the beginning of July 2009, six months after the conflict ended. Was the situation better or worse than you expected?**

“I have worked in the West Bank before but I have only been in Gaza for a couple of weeks. My colleagues here say they have never seen anything like it.

This time, it is really tough for people to get back up on their feet again. They are trying to return to a sense of normality but to do that they need basic necessities and access to basic services that simply aren’t here. We want to provide quality psychosocial services and at the moment, we are unable to do that. Due to the constraints, we are not able to deliver what we otherwise could. I think that one of the main factors of feeling such despair is the result of the closure and all the constraints on daily life. It is really taking its toll.”

**How exactly does the situation affect the population?**

“The main symptoms I notice in adults are symptoms of depression, like hopelessness, physical aches and pains, difficulty in concentrating, anxiety, etc. In children we can see the risk of developing long term symptoms if they are not supported. Many children are fearful of leaving their homes, they have intrusive memories, and suffer from anxiety, bed-wetting and guilt





## Background

On 27 December 2008, in response to continued rocket fire from Gaza on southern Israel, Israeli forces launched a combined land and air military operation in the Gaza strip. As well as causing significant damage to infrastructure and buildings, the operation resulted in severe human suffering. According to The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the operation left 1440 Palestinians dead, including 431 children, and 114 women. 5450 were injured. An initial health needs assessment by WHO on 29 January 2009 stated that the military operation had caused a deterioration of the security situation in Gaza and an increase in signs of psychological and social distress.

Jabaliya, approximately 4 km north of Gaza city, one of the areas that was worst hit during the conflict. The psychosocial team of the Palestinian Red Crescent started activities nearly immediately after the war ended. To begin with, activities for children who had lost their homes and were living in tents were carried out outdoors but today, a psychosocial centre has been established. Photo from Palestinian Red Crescent.

after losing a friend or sibling. We see that expressed through repetitious traumatic play for example. And it goes without saying there is an increase in violence. I was in a workshop recently where the children drew destruction, “martyrs” and dead bodies in the burial position. And they had been asked to draw different emotions. Of course they sometimes copy one another, but I still find it worrying that there were very few “happy” pictures. The men feel particularly hopeless as well due to the high rate of unemployment and inability to rebuild their homes. It is difficult to work with them because of the culture of them being strong. Relaxation exercises in the centres are very useful, many of the adults cry when they attend to them. Not in a hysterical way but just calmly, it is their way of releasing the tension and pain inside.”

**What about Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers - how are they coping?**

“They talk of feeling sad, depressed in some cases, from listening to all these stories. They also have their own person-

al ones. They all need more debriefing opportunities. For instance when I asked the Gaza team this morning how they were doing, since I knew I would be talking to you, they even said that just being asked how and if they were coping was helpful. Most of them say that it is the resilience and the joy children express during activities that keep them going. They are the source of inspiration and energy to keep on

and go to work every morning. Dealing with what the children have witnessed is a huge challenge though. I heard this story about a Gazan boy, coming to one of our centres. He had lost both his arms and legs in an explosion. He insisted on participating in playing ball and asked the facilitator to throw the ball at his head.”

**What about care of staff and volunteers, are they being cared for?**

“My impression is that we are not recognizing how serious the situation is, many simply can’t see they need support, and keep on working towards the point of no return, towards burnout. Now we have started with psychosocial support sessions for the emergency medical staff because they were the most affected and we have also planned a retreat for PRCS staff and volunteers where they can spend a day with their families relaxing and having fun by the sea.

What struck me, when I had just arrived, was this tour with a coordinator in Jabaliya, north of Gaza city, one of the places that was worst hit during the airstrikes in January this year. As we drove along, we passed home after home that had been completely flattened. What to me were just houses in ruins, were to him houses of people he had known. Raising his voice, he talked faster and faster so eventually the driver couldn’t keep up with the interpretation, telling details about how people had died and how their bodies had been dragged out of the ruins. I could feel so much pain in his voice and I just wished we could have kept on driving a little bit longer for him to get all of this out. And then it dawned on me that everyone had a similar story, that my colleague wasn’t any different from all the others I work with.” ■

## Psychosocial support for the population in Gaza

The primary target group of the project are community members, while PRCS staff and volunteers are secondary. The aim is to improve quality of life of those affected by the conflict, enhance their psychosocial wellbeing and resilience, and to increase the capacity of the Palestine Red Crescent Society to provide support. The Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies that form the consortium that runs the project are Palestinian, Danish, Icelandic, Italian and French. The four new centres in Gaza all have one coordinator and four psychologists or social workers. Main activities in the centres are workshops and trainings, supporting emotional wellbeing, personal development and social skills by enhancing coping mechanisms and self-confidence. The centres are also supposed to be safe places for children to express their feelings through play, games, art, music and sports.



# Hope, despair and transformation

## Climate change and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing

By Jessica G. Fritze, Grant A Blashki, Susie Burke and John Wiseman

*Climate change affects psychosocial wellbeing in several ways. Extreme weather impacts have a direct and immediate impact on mental health, while constant coverage of climate change and its consequences, nurtures fear and anxiety, affecting one's wellbeing. What is more, climate change is causing disruption of social ties and environmental factors that promote mental health.*

The areas of emerging concern about the relations between climate change and mental health, are three. Firstly, the direct impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events, that are likely to have immediate impacts on mental health concerns. Secondly, vulnerable communities are beginning to experience disruption to the social, economic and environmental determinants that promote mental health. Finally, there is an emerging understanding of the ways in which climate change as a global environmental threat may create anxiety about the future.



Victims of flooding are rescued and transported by boats on main streets, Bangladesh. Photo from IFRC archives.

### Immediate mental health impacts of climate change

An extensive body of evidence shows the ways in which extreme weather events can lead to psychological and mental health outcomes associated with loss, disruption and displacement as well as as cumulative mental health impacts from repeated exposure to natural disasters<sup>1,2,6</sup>. Mental health impacts differ according to the type, suddenness and scale of the catastrophe, and the social, historical and cultural context in which it occurs<sup>7</sup>. Despite cultural variations between countries and

individuals, communities show some common patterns of psychosocial responses to disasters<sup>3</sup>. Acute traumatic stress is the most common response after a disaster, with symptoms subsiding once conditions of safety and security have been re-established<sup>8</sup>. Some survivors will continue to experience chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as a range of other stress-related problems such as complicated grief, depression and anxiety disorders<sup>9</sup>. Children often exhibit more severe

distress after disasters than adults do<sup>10</sup>.

### Impact of climate change on social and economic determinants of mental health

While some communities are more likely to be exposed to climate change impacts due to their location (for example, coastal areas), others have limited adaptive capacity due to poverty, poor physical and service infrastructure and economic reliance on climate vulnerable





Floods in Bangladesh. Photo from IFRC archives.

ecosystems<sup>12</sup>. Some communities are vulnerable on both counts, and it is in these communities that the social and economic impacts of climate change are likely to be most severe.

### Social exclusion and effects of displacement

Social exclusion refers to a multi-dimensional lack of connection with the activities of the wider community and encompasses a lack of economic participation, social disconnection and a lack of access to services<sup>13</sup>. In addition to the effects on economic participation outlined above, climate change is likely to fracture social networks and community cohesion through the increased displacement of climate vulnerable communities as a result of both economic and forced migration.

There is little doubt that both long-term effects of climate change and associated extreme weather events will displace significant numbers of people, largely from already vulner-

able communities. The combined effect of extreme weather events, sea level rise, destruction of local economies, resource scarcity and associated conflict due to climate change, is predicted to displace millions of people worldwide over the coming century. The most commonly cited figure of projected population displacement from climate change is 200 million people by 2050<sup>14,15</sup>.

The negative mental health impacts of forced migration are significant although they vary greatly depending on individual circumstances<sup>16</sup>. The loss of connection to place and the lack of a sense of belonging associated with displacement can also undermine mental health<sup>17</sup>. Increased exposure to cultural and racial discrimination in receiving communities is also a risk factor. This is especially likely if immigrants are seen as a cultural threat or as competition for natural or economic resources, which may well be the case in climate change situations<sup>15</sup>.

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## Exposure to violence

At this point, there are conflicting views on whether a direct connection exists between climate change and violent conflict<sup>19</sup>. However, climate change is likely to undermine human security by 'reducing access to natural resources that are essential to sustain... livelihoods'<sup>20</sup>. Increased competition for scarce resources, especially water, has historically been associated with increased violent conflict<sup>18</sup>, as does forced migration.

## Emotional distress arising from awareness of climate change as a global environmental threat

The longer term impact of climate change on mental health comes from people's emerging awareness of climate change as a global environmental threat – not the experience of climate change events per se. As people's understanding of climate change grows, it is likely to have a significant impact on their social and emotional wellbeing. There is a complex relationship, between climate change and people's awareness of, and responses to, environmental

threats. From a psychological point of view, feelings and thoughts about such a potentially enormous threat are likely to be 'managed' by adaptive protection motivation systems, and modified through social comparison with others and selective information exposure<sup>11</sup>.

However, for many people, the resulting emotions are commonly distress and anxiety. People may feel scared, sad, depressed, numb, helpless and hopeless, frustrated or angry. Sometimes, if the information they get on climate change is too unsettling, and the solutions seem too difficult, people can cope by denying that there is a problem.

The psychological impact of climate change as a global phenomenon also has a lifecycle aspect. Children and young people growing up with an uncertain future that is not of their making may experience the threat of climate change very differently from their parents and grandparents.

## Mental health and climate change: policy, practice and research implications and challenges

Reducing mental health impacts of climate change requires a solid research base. Key research questions

include what the key mental health promotion impacts and implications of the most probable climate change scenarios are? What are the implications for particular localities and for the most vulnerable and excluded population groups? And finally, what are the key mental health and mental health promotion impacts of proposed climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies?

## Climate change, hope, despair and transformation

In the long-term, hope and morale in the community about climate change is deeply intertwined with mental health promotion. For the community to be less pessimistic about the future requires a realistic understanding of what climate change means and what can be done. At a time when the predictions from our most credible scientists are becoming increasingly grave, those involved in mental health promotion need to pay close attention to the relation between evidence, hope and action.

*This is an excerpt from an article published in the International Journal of Mental Health Systems in September 2008. The article in full can be accessed at: <http://www.ijmhs.com/content/2/1/13>*

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# Healing through football

## Using sports and physical activities in post-disaster intervention

By **Claudia Stura**, project coordinator and **Sofian Labbani**, project manager at ICSSPE (International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education)

*What do children doing karate in Bam, boys horseriding in Beslan, or a group of Darfurian girls forming a volley ball team, have in common? They are all beneficiaries of recent psychosocial sport programmes aiming to address the psychological anxiety, pain and hopelessness in the aftermath of armed conflicts and natural disasters. The ease of applying sport and physical activity programs in diverse cultural settings, the ability to reach large groups of people and the unifying power of sport, broadens the range of interventions within the humanitarian world in the context of psychosocial relief.*

The use of sport and physical activity in psychosocial programs as a tool for trauma relief among populations affected by disasters has increasingly gained recognition, due to the shift away from isolated one-dimensional approaches to more holistic and integrated ones. Examples of recent successful programmes are several. The Kids League has run programmes in Northern Uganda, using football to reintegrate children living in post-conflict areas into their communities. In Zambia, the organisation Grassroots Soccer, runs a series of activities that allow youths to gain necessary skills to lead healthy lives. Sport can play a valuable role in helping people affected by disasters, particularly in the early phases of relief. It helps overcome trauma and to cope with stress, as well as providing a unique way of addressing psychosocial needs.

### A safe ground

Sport and physical activity can attend to both social and psychological issues, in gentle and non-intrusive ways; and it can assist to non-verbally assess, express and resolve the difficulties that disaster-affected individuals face. This is achieved through less confrontational means of addressing issues, which they would often not be able to deal with otherwise. As problems primarily manifest

socially and behaviourally during and after a major disaster, physical activities allow brief periods of relaxation; and team sports have the potential to focus attention away from the experience of loss and to regain a sense of security and structure on neutral and safe ground.

play programs in a disaster setting can positively influence the enhancement of resilience, facilitate emotional and social stabilisation and advocate for the acquisition of new skills and abilities.

Since social reconnection - the re-establishment of peer relations and opening up alternative opportunities for



Samuel is 14 years old and from Kitgum, Uganda. He was abducted by rebels in 2003 and spent over one year in the bush. Samuel was trained to be a soldier and witnessed and took part in atrocities. He managed to escape in 2005. Samuel was friendless and lonely. He joined The Kids League and ended up walking 10 km to play football. Samuel has gained his first social and personal contacts through sport. In his third game, he scored a goal and was hugged for the first time in his life.



Robert is 12 years old from Lira, Uganda. He was abducted by rebels in 2003 and escaped in 2006. He had terrible nightmares. He joined The Kids League the same year and now manages to sleep peacefully. He dreams of playing football against Brazil.

Photo by The Kids' League / T- Dudley

### Building trust

The social benefits, even in severe situations, includes fostering a team spirit and building trust, mutual respect and social cohesion. Sport and

self-expression - is crucial to the development of coping skills, many psychosocial programs are now introducing sport programs and physical activity for children in emergency settings.





Speedy re-establishment of cultural activities like games and other physical activities can make significant, immediate contributions towards the stabilisation of a situation.

### Responding to a need

The need for a training seminar for professionals on how to implement sport programs in post-disaster settings has become increasingly apparent. As a result, the

International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE) has developed a comprehensive training package for disaster responders with the intention of providing them with the practi-

cal skills and knowledge required to deliver sport and physical activity programs in the early stages of disaster relief. ■

### The International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE)

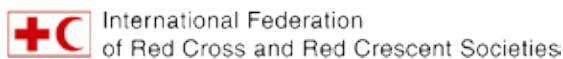
The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support and the ICSSPE are currently working on increased future collaboration. The International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education's main activities are the promotion and dissemination of results and findings in the fields of sport science and their practical application in cultural and educational contexts. ICSSPE contributes expert knowledge and facilitates exchange of information between members and partners, by organising conferences and seminars and by communicating through its website and publications. Currently, 320 organisations and institutions worldwide form the ICSSPE. 2008 marked its 50th anniversary. During the last five decades, the Council has continuously worked towards achieving a higher awareness of human values inherent in sport, physical activity and physical education worldwide, contributing to sustainable social development and peace, bridging gaps and fostering tolerance.



**"Sport in Post-Disaster Intervention – Third International Seminar"**  
2-8 November, 2009 in Rheinsberg, Germany.

The seminar addresses topics including psychology as part of emergency relief, teaching and learning in crisis areas, inclusive activities and games, cultural aspects of physical activities, challenges for physical activities in a crisis area, aspects of civil-military cooperation and examples of good practice. Participants will also be trained to train others in implementing sport and physical activity programs in relief work. For more information and registration visit [www.icsspe.org](http://www.icsspe.org).

# Psychosocial Centre



**The Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support (PS Centre)** was established in 1993 and is a delegated function of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, hosted by Danish Red Cross and situated in Copenhagen, Denmark. Its primary function as a "Centre of Excellence" is to develop strategically important knowledge and best practice which will inform future operations of the Federation and National Societies.

The centre was established to promote, guide and enhance psychosocial support initiatives carried out by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies globally. The International Federation Psychological Support Policy Paper, adopted May 2003, established the basis of Red Cross and Red Crescent intervention both in emergency response operations and in the implementation of long-term development programmes. Within this policy, the mandate of the PS Centre is to mainstream psychosocial support in all National Societies. As stated in the consultation on National Society centres and networks commissioned by the Governing Board of the International Federation in March 2007, the centre provides a potentially flexible and creative structure to develop and disseminate expertise.

## The Seven Fundamental Principles

Proclaimed in Vienna in 1965, the seven Fundamental Principles bond together the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, The International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. They guarantee the continuity of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and its humanitarian work.

### Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples. Read more about the principle of Humanity.

### Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress. Read more about the principle of Impartiality.

### Neutrality

In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Read more about the principle of Neutrality.

### Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement. Read more about the principle of Independence.

### Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain. Read more about the principle of Voluntary service.

### Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or one Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory. Read more about the principle of Unity.

### Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide. Read more about the principle of Universality.

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## The International Federation Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support

c/o Danish Red Cross  
Blegdamsvej 27  
Postboks 2600  
2100 Østerbro  
Copenhagen  
DENMARK

Tel: +45 3525 9200  
E-mail: [psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org](mailto:psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org)  
Internet: <http://www.ifrc.org/psychosocial>

