

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
WEEKLY MEETING

Summary Note

20 June 2007
Geneva

I Briefing on the Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings

Mr. Mark van Ommeren (WHO), Scientist, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Mr. Mark van Ommeren briefed participants on the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, which both addresses the mental health of aid workers and that of the people suffering from an emergency. The Guidelines have been developed within the framework of the IASC Task Force on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, chaired by WHO and InterAction. The Guidelines, which are the outcome of inputs from 27 UN agencies, NGO consortia, and individual NGOs, are expected to be launched on 14 September 2007.

The main objective of the Guidelines is to enable humanitarian actors and communities at the local, national and international level to plan, establish, coordinate, and implement a set of minimum multi-sectoral responses to protect and improve people's mental health in the midst of an emergency.

The Guidelines focus on issues ranging from pre-existing social and psychological problems to those included in and/or induced by an emergency. Moreover, the Guidelines address problems following the humanitarian aid situation, such as lack of information, scarce food distributions, and tensions between IDPs and host countries. This broad approach reflects the core message embedded in the Guidelines: A wide range of humanitarian activities influence the mental and social environment, including information sharing, education, coordination, food security, health services, and protection – activities that all should help protect and promote human dignity. Consequently, mental and psychosocial problems need to be addressed from different angles.

Regarding the application of the Guidelines, Mr. van Ommeren stressed that it is important to know what the Guidelines can and cannot be used for. While the Guidelines provide concrete strategies for mental health and psychosocial support, they are not orientated towards the work by individual psychosocial workers. The Guidelines seek to address the current absence of a multi-sectoral, inter-agency framework that enables effective coordination and identification of both constructive and harmful practices. The implementation, therefore, requires extensive collaboration among various humanitarian actors, including NGOs, UN agencies, governmental authorities, and donors working in the field.

The Guidelines were well received among participants, who all stressed the need for such guidelines. Most questions and concerns raised by participants were related to the role out and

implementation aspect. Mr. van Ommeren acknowledged that the role out of the Guidelines in the field already is facing constraints. At the outset, the Task Force was intended to complete five field tests by the end of 2007. This, however, is not likely to happen, as very few humanitarian actors have committed to role out of the Guidelines in the field.

The mandate of the Task Force will cease by the end of the year, and it is not the intention of the Task Force to request an extension. Mr. van Ommeren, consequently, emphasised the need for the creation of an interagency mental health and psychosocial support network to follow-up on the implementation of the Guidelines. That being said, Mr. van Ommeren pointed to the fact that several UN agencies and NGOs have commenced the process of institutionalising the guidelines, including UNICEF, Care Australia/Care International, IFRC, and American Red Cross.

II Update on the 68th IASC Working Group Meeting, 13-15 June 2007

Before closing the meeting, Ms. Marilena Viviani, Chief of the IASC Secretariat, provided participants with an update on the outcomes of the 68th IASC Working Group meeting, which took place in New York, 13-15 June 2007.

The summary record and action points are currently being finalised by the IASC Secretariat and will be shared with the IASC agencies shortly.

Participants

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