Trauma-sensitive approach to evaluations

Experiences with evaluations in trauma-related contexts: Challenges identified and practical lessons learnt

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Challenges of evaluations in a trauma sensitive contexts

- Physical safety of respondents
- Psychological safety of respondents
- Social safety of respondents (stigma)
- Dynamics of NGO trust and control
- Pre-determined measures
- Role of the evaluator
A young-old looking woman accessing health care agrees to talk to us. We ask her about her understanding of the concept of peace.

She replies: “You see that man sitting over there?”

In a country where honour killings are a reality for women, we are thoughtful about every move we make. We do not look at the man, but nod blandly and smile as if she is saying something very ordinary.

She continues: “He is my brother-in-law. I cannot go anywhere alone. Today my mother-in-law was not well so she could not accompany me here. So when you ask what I understand peace to mean, I cannot even begin to conceptualise this concept. I don’t know what peace could mean without freedom.”

*medica mondiale*: Wienberg, K., Meintjes, B. & Grussendorff, S. “To be able to raise our voices”: Hearing from women about their perspectives on peace, justice, empowerment and solidarity in the post-conflict societies of Kosovo and the Kurdistan Region of Northern Iraq (KRI), 2020, not yet released.
Psychological safety of respondents: Example

An analysis of women’s access to health care:

• The approach was based on the “5A” model of access to health care (Penchansky and Thomas, 1981)
• It is quite a ‘technical’ model, and we were very careful not to introduce any questions about women’s experiences of violence and when designing the questions we put a lot of effort into avoiding triggering respondents’ memories of violence.
• During almost every interview the respondents started to spontaneously share their memories of sexual violence towards women during the war.
• The NGO met with the women beforehand to say explicitly “The researchers will not ask you about your personal experiences of violence.” And still, many of the women chose to share their experiences of violence.

Social safety of respondents

The third challenge is the social safety of participants. There is often a challenge of participation in evaluations, where even being involved in the study can contribute negatively towards stigma.
Dynamics of NGO trust and control

A very different type of challenge in evaluations in conflict-sensitive contexts is the dynamics between the evaluation team and the host NGO, often a specialist in their field.

The risk to:

- the NGO’s reputation
- their concern for the wellbeing of their participants
- their lack of trust in the expertise of the evaluators

Can cause complex dynamics which may challenge the **independence** of evaluations.

In addition, the boundaries between evaluation and therapeutic intervention or case management can be blurred.
Pre-determined measures

• Evaluations may want to know about the prevalence and **types of exposure to adversity** of the beneficiaries of a project. This can be a challenge to the psychosocial and physical safety of respondents.

• Many evaluations are based on **pre-determined impact and outcomes indicators and measures** which can be difficult to measure without triggering or re-traumatising beneficiaries.
Principles of a trauma-sensitive approach to evaluations

These challenges are real and despite all measures of care and protection, often the challenges cannot be surgically removed from evaluation processes.

This is why we prefer to promote a trauma sensitive approach to evaluation, which:

• takes into account and mitigates some of the challenges

• mainstreams a trauma sensitive approach to the extent that the participation of respondents in evaluations in high risk contexts is psychosocially supportive, to the best of our ability.
Principles of a trauma-sensitive approach

A trauma-sensitive approach may be summarised as mainstreaming the principles of:

- **Security**: ensuring physical safety and a psychosocial sense of safety and privacy of women participating in the research
- **Strengthening**: empowerment and strengthening of the person’s self-esteem in the light of having possibly been through disempowering experiences
- **Promoting solidarity and connection**, to counteract a feeling of disconnection and a sense of isolation or judgement
- **Promoting** **mindful organisations**, with an awareness of the importance of self-care

Mainstreaming a trauma-sensitive approach to evaluations

Conceptualisation of purpose

Design

Ethical guidelines

Methods, instruments

Data processing & feedback

Mindful support of one another during the process
Practical strategies towards a trauma-sensitive approach to evaluations

- Meaningful participation
  - Avoid triggering painful memories
  - Include respondents in design of indicators
  - Collect sensitive information within projects
  - Use waiting group control groups
  - Integrate TSA into questions
  - Offer a choice of methods
  - Refer respondents for counselling

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Meaningful participation

Working in trauma- and conflict-sensitive contexts, meaningful participation becomes helpful:

• Developing strong partnerships with experienced local NGOs (with meaningful participation from conceptualisation of the evaluation purpose, all the way through to feedback)

• Evaluations are an opportunity to step back, reflect and learning meaningfully together about one’s work, gather some sense of progress and success and acknowledgement for the work accomplished and gain new vision and focused direction for the future

• To prepare and engage respondents very well (not just quick ‘informed consent’ – tick) – meaningful discussion on the purpose of the evaluation, how it can be done, what measures should be taken, do’s and don’ts

Collect sensitive information within the programme

Another practical way around the challenge of collecting sensitive information is to do this within the programme itself:

• We should always see what data is already available and being collected within the programme, rather than creating additional work and sensitivity.

• Or we can build in these questions into the programme, for example during pre-test and post-test surveys or the type of data collected.

Isolabantu Youth CBO leaders, who already collect sensitive data on their participants in rural South Africa
Waiting group control groups

• Establish control groups from waiting groups where possible,
• or insist that control groups are offered access to the intervention

Control waiting group youth coming together across gang conflict lines for the first time, naming themselves “Live Dogs”
Integrating trauma-sensitive questions

We try to build into the evaluation as many trauma-sensitive and psychosocially strengthening activities and questions as possible:

• We try to strengthen the **sense of control** of respondents

• We focus on **strengths and positive examples of coping strategies**

• We try to draw on **positive connections and social support** in a respondent’s life

• We try to create a sense of **solidarity and connection** with others

Zimbabwe Youth CBO leaders from MMPZ, who led this participatory evaluation
Methodology

Where possible:

• Give participants a choice of how they may safely participate (individual interviews, group discussions, written responses)

• Allow respondents to participate anonymously or use a false name or else the NGO can keep the actual names if needed

A teacher in rural Zimbabwe prefers to be interviewed out in the open
Offer counselling

Where possible:

• Offer individual counselling by local experts

• Refer respondents in distress for individual counselling immediately

Medica Gjakova offices in Kosovo offer counselling, survivor support groups, income generating and other services for women
Mindful support throughout the evaluation process

Where possible:

• We try to reduce stress and build self-care and solidarity into the work, amongst the evaluation team members and with the host organisation

• For example through regular reflection on the process and experience of the evaluation

• A focus on the positive aspects and strengths

• A respectful attitude of shared ownership

• Ask about how best to schedule and organise the evaluation

• And fun social activities

medica mondiale Duhok evaluation closing lunch
A review of the purpose of evaluation from a trauma-sensitive approach

The proposed core purpose of evaluation from a trauma-sensitive approach:

- To step back, pause and reflect meaningfully together on our work – did we do what we said we would do, did we achieve what we hoped to achieve?
- What is working really well that we should do more of, what is not working well that we can let go of?
- How was the process of doing this work for you? What are the painful or heavy experiences that we need to process or offload?
- What are the successes which we can celebrate and acknowledge one another for?
- Where is the real energy in the work now that we can use to move us forward?