**Public health and humanitarian actions in complex emergencies – New foundations for the training of health professionals**

by Pierre Perrin

**An analytical framework for a better understanding of complex emergencies**

The complexity of the problems

Humanitarian actions must be integrated into healthcare systems of varying quality depending on the socio-economic development of the countries. In the refugee camps of Darfur, gross mortality rates have been reported ranging from 2.0 to 3.2 deaths per 10,000 people. Specifically, the most vulnerable groups, such as children aged below 5 years, are hit hardest. The majority of deaths are caused by diseases that could be prevented: diarrhoeal diseases, malaria, measles, hepatitis E...

Complex emergencies also occur in countries with advanced health care systems. During the armed conflicts in Eastern Europe, health problems such as renal insufficiency and heart diseases had to be taken into account.

In complex emergencies characterised by violence, humanitarian action has to play a major role in the analysis of violations of individual (torture, abduction ...) and social integrity (forced displacement, separation of families, ethnic cleansing, harassment of vulnerable groups ...). These problems primarily constitute human rights violations, but they are also factors causing health problems. Especially when used as a tool of war, violence has an enormous impact on the population’s mental health, in particular for children who are victims or witnesses of violent acts and some of whom will suffer from permanent psychological damage.

The phenomenon of violence does not spare any group of society and, for children, takes various forms: «Millions of children are caught up in conflicts in which they are not merely bystanders but targets. Some fall victim to a general onslaught against civilians; others die as part of a calculated genocide. Still other children suffer the effects of sexual violence or the multiple deprivations of armed conflict that expose them to hunger or disease. Just as shockingly, thousands of young people are cynically exploited as combatants.»

Sexual violence is on the rise in armed conflicts. It has become a tool of war that exacts a heavy toll on women. In its report on women facing war, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) states: «Sexual violence has been used against women or members of their families as a form of torture, to injure, to extract information, to degrade and intimidate, and as a punishment for actual or alleged actions.»

The mutilation of hands, arms, feet and legs is common practice in certain contexts and particularly affects women and children.

In armed conflicts, detained persons are even more vulnerable. Arbitrary arrest, execution without trial and torture are other forms of violence.

Health and human rights are inseparably linked. Hence, Public Health is a key field for identifying the impact of violence on the population and thereby helps to influence the conduct of armed groups towards respecting the rights of the population.

Finally, based on the collection of data on the health impact of hostilities, Public Health allows for exerting influence on the use of weapons and political-military strategies at a political level within the framework of humanitarian actions. The epidemiological analysis of the impact of anti-personnel mines on the population has greatly contributed to banning them, which has also more recently been the case for cluster munitions. Numerous studies show that...
the forced displacement of people results in the high mortality rates that are observed in such situations. These data are essential for negotiations with the parties involved in the conflict and for making them abandon military strategies detrimental to the population.

The concept of «human security» makes it possible to take all these elements together. In complex emergencies, the essential aspects of human security are:

- Accessibility of services indispensable for health: food, water and health care
- Respect for the individual and social integrity.

The complexity of causes

In complex emergencies, the direct causes of violence are most frequently related to the behaviour of the fighting factions, e.g. sexual violence against women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo resulting from the conduct of armed groups and excesses committed by the LRA against the population in Uganda.

In most cases, the health workers providing assistance to the population concerned are in direct contact with the armed groups responsible for the violence. Therefore, they have to know how to manage this interface in order to put an end to and even prevent these severe violations of human rights.

Abstract

**Öffentliche Gesundheit und humanitäre Hilfe in komplexen Notfällen – Neue Grundlagen für die Ausbildung von Gesundheitspersonal**

Der Begriff «komplexer Notfall» ist definiert als «eine humanitäre Krise in einem Land, einer Region oder einer Gesellschaft, in denen ein interner oder externer Konflikt zu einem totalen oder erheblichen Zusammenbruch der Staatsgewalt geführt hat und die eine internationale Reaktion erfordert, welche über das Mandat oder die Kapazität einer einzelnen Organisation und/oder des laufenden Landesprogramms der Vereinten Nationen hinausgeht.»

Solche «komplexen Notfälle» sind in der Regel gekennzeichnet durch:

- ausufernde Gewalt, zahlsreiche Todesopfer, massive Verletzungen, weit reichende Schäden für die Gesellschaft und die Wirtschaft,
- die Notwendigkeit von vielfältiger humanitärer Hilfe in großem Maßstab,
- die Behinderung oder Verhinderung der humanitären Hilfe durch politische und militärische Faktoren,
- erhebliche Sicherheitsrisiken für humanitäre Helfer in manchen Gebieten.1

Komplexe Notfälle stellen eine bedeutende Herausforderung für die Sicherstellung der Gesundheitsversorgung dar. Die Hauptschwierigkeit besteht dabei nicht darin, fachliche Lösungen für spezifische Gesundheitsprobleme zu finden, sondern ergibt sich aus der komplexen Verflechtung von politischen Aspekten und Sicherheitsfragen, welche die Umsetzung von Strategien für die öffentliche Gesundheit erschweren.

Somit ist es wichtig, dass das Gesundheitspersonal, das in einem derartigen Umfeld arbeitet, eine Ausbildung erhält, durch die es die Lage besser erfassen und verstehen kann, so dass es die zu Recht an sie gestellten Erwartungen voll und ganz erfüllen kann.

1) IASC, Dezember 1994

There is a high number of causes at the root of complex emergencies: poverty, access to natural resources (water in the occupied territories of the West Bank, oil in Iraq, minerals in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc.).

If humanitarian emergency actions do not generally take these basic causes into consideration, it is important to understand them in order to obtain a better picture of the operational framework under such conditions and, in the medium and long term, to address them in future development initiatives so that these basic destabilising factors can be reduced.

The complexity of parties involved

While in the past the number and diversity of parties involved in humanitarian actions always made co-ordination a difficult task, the main factor raising complexity today is the close interaction between the activities of humanitarian stakeholders and those of political players, which contributes to blurring the border of humanitarian actions. They are no longer defined by the mandate of the parties alone, but rather by the consistency of this mandate with the respect of fundamental humanitarian principles (impartiality, neutrality, independence, non-violence). Hence, activities aimed at providing access to food, health care, water, etc., can be performed by parties which comply with the basic principles of humanitarian actions and by parties involved in the political management of complex emergencies or even in the conduct of hostilities themselves. The complexity of the relationships between these parties constitutes a great challenge in humanitarian actions so that information on the mandates and strategies of all parties is crucial in order to help the health workers to adapt their activities in such an environment.

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING ACTIVITIES

The regulatory framework for health:
The big humanitarian agencies and the World Health Organization adopted guidelines so that health workers can manage Public Health activities in the best possible way in complex emergencies, e.g. fighting a cholera epidemic, implementing a mass vaccination campaign, improving the nutritional status of children who frequently suffer from severe malnutrition, rehabilitating a hospital.

Widening the regulatory framework for health to cover multidisciplinary actions

In the case of human rights violations, reference is made to international law on human rights (charter, conventions, protocols, policies and guidelines) that guarantees the rights of individuals and defines violations. As complex emergencies occur in an environment characterised by violence that is in most cases directly linked with armed conflicts, international humanitarian law plays a major role.
Anthropological and sociological knowledge will help the health workers to «decipher» the diversity observed in the needs as perceived by the people themselves.

Concepts of political sciences can contribute to better delimiting the responsibilities of the parties involved and will allow the health workers to play their role better in the negotiations on safeguarding people’s rights.

A professional approach to complex emergencies requires good knowledge of management tools, e.g. evaluation, definition of objectives, analysis of constraints, mobilisation of human, logistic and financial resources, follow-up mechanism, etc.

Thus, the analysis of complex emergencies and the coherent integration of health measures into the activities planned require sound Public Health knowledge as well as good multidisciplinary training in the fields of law, political sciences and management. These elements need to be covered in the training of health professionals who will respond to complex emergencies.

**Public health education for complex emergencies**

**Classic Public Health education**

The basis of the training contents required for coping with health problems in complex emergencies corresponds to the classic orientation of Public Health:

- nutrition and food aid
- rehabilitation of the environment and housing
- control of communicable diseases
- medical/surgical treatment
- epidemiological surveillance.

Training also has to cover the management of chronic diseases, mental health, reproductive health, the analysis of healthcare systems, etc.

Familiarity with the main guidelines is indispensable. WHO makes available the most important documents relevant for these situations by providing access to databases on the internet.

**Multidisciplinary education**

Legal aspects and concepts of political sciences (e.g. law on human rights, international humanitarian law, rights and duties of states, the role of the United Nations) are important. Basic knowledge of these fields allows health workers to participate in humanitarian diplomacy efforts in a professional way.

**Management education**

Solid management expertise is necessary for:

- analysing complex emergencies
- establishing action plans, including objectives, strategies and follow-up measures
- defining a strategy for co-operation with donors.

**Do current education programmes teach students to meet these challenges?**

While classic Public Health master programmes meet the training needs for the traditional dimension of Public Health, they only cover the other aspects of human security to a minor extent. Reflections have only just begun on the introduction of a genuine master programme on Public Health and human security in complex emergencies.

There are already several programmes on this topic, such as the «Public Health Science for Human Security» course that provides part of the knowledge required in complex emergencies:

«After the cold war ceased in the early 1990’s, the concept of «Human Security» has become the primary common concern of international society. The new concept addresses the issues of security of «people», instead of «nation», such as illnesses, disasters, outbreaks of infectious diseases, environmental hazards, poverty, conflicts and so forth, and recognizes that all peoples of the world have the right to live in peace, free from fear and want. Most of the insecurity events and situations in the 21st century are the complex of multiple causing factors and their solutions might require new lead-
ers, both in research and in practice, who carry broader perspectives based on interdisciplinary views and scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{10}

Other courses integrate a module on health and human security into the classic Public Health master programme.\textsuperscript{11}

In most cases, health professionals have to study Public Health and then take short courses on law, political sciences, protection of people, etc. Hundreds of such courses are held at universities and they are also included in the internal training programme of humanitarian organisations.

References

1) IASC, December 1994.
7) The Convention on Cluster Munitions was opened for signature in Oslo on December 3rd and 4th, 2008.
8) In its report, the Commission on Human Security defines human security as protecting people from human rights violations, from threats such as conflict as well as poverty, creating political, economic and cultural systems that allow the population to live in dignity.
9) Master’s degree programme of Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine in Japan.
10) Idem.
11) For example, the Master of Public Health degree programme of the University of British Columbia in Canada.