

Project 1 billion

Mental health challenges in post-conflict societies

More than 1 billion persons today have been affected by mass violence, embodied in the experience of war, ethnic conflict, torture and terrorism. The last century has been described as the “refugee century,” with international targeting of civilians and human suffering showing no signs of abating in the 21st century. Currently there are 45 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP), accounting for the homelessness of 1 out of every 200 persons worldwide. Approximately 45 conflict-affected nations are in desperate need of reconstruction in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa.

For nations affected by mass violence, mental health policy is essentially non-existent, and there is no standardized global approach to the mental and physical healing of traumatized groups. Fortunately, modern science has demonstrated the capacity of local primary health care systems, traditional healers, and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGO) to play a major role in reducing the suffering and disability associated with mass violence. This, in turn, creates the proper environment for socio-cultural and economic development, as well as reconciliation.

In recognition of this great scientific opportunity to make a difference in the healing of post-conflict societies, the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma (HPRT) convened a major meeting of seven post-conflict Ministries of Health from met with over 18 country representatives, and major UN Agencies and donors in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina in September 2002. At the Sarajevo meeting, **Project 1 Billion** was formulated and the Rome working group of all post-conflict Ministries of Health was planned as the critical next step, envisioned as a halfway point toward the implementation of a global mental health *Action Plan* that is science-based, culturally adaptable to different settings, and cost efficient.

On December 3 and 4, 2004 in Rome, **Project 1 Billion**: International Congress of Ministers of Health for Mental Health and Post-Conflict Recovery, brought together for the first time in history, Ministers of Health from the world’s post-conflict countries to endorse a science-based, culturally effective and sustainable *Mental Health Action Plan* for post-conflict recovery. The *Project 1 Billion Book of Best Practices: Trauma and the Role of Mental Health in Post-Conflict Recovery* was also produced by leading international authorities in health, economic development, human rights and anthropology to serve as a guideline for governments, policy-makers and donors in post-conflict societies, presented at the meeting, and disseminated globally.

Thirty-five Ministers of Health attended the historic December 2004 meeting. At the meeting it was decided that the next stage of Project 1 Billion would include:

- Widespread international dissemination of the Mental Health Action Plan and Book of Best Practices within each of the post-conflict countries, as well as to major international donors and policy makers;
- On-site technical assistance and supervision provided to each country through support of the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program;
- Development of a Master's Degree program through the University of Rome to train health professionals and policy makers in mental health and post-conflict recovery;
- Modification of World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Bank practices to make their programs and policies more relevant and useful in post-conflict settings;
- The establishment of a web-based newsletter among the Ministers of Health, coordinated and edited by alternating Ministers every two years;
- The completion of an extensive needs assessment questionnaire on the status of mental health in each post-conflict country, the results of which will be published in the near future;
- Collaboration of National Institute of Health (USA) and Istituto Superiore di Sanita (Italy) to prepare research agenda and recommendations for research partnerships based upon the Action Plan and Book of Best Practices.

To date, our history has been plagued with widespread violence throughout the world. Until now, Ministers of Health, who have been responsible for healing the suffering of their traumatized citizens, have been unable to provide mental health care for their societies, because of lack of knowledge of effective mental health skills and practices, and the reluctance of international donors and governments to invest in approaches without demonstratable outcomes and cost-effectiveness. Project 1 Billion is contributing a remedy to this situation; no longer can the psychological damage inflicted upon civilians be ignored by the international community in the social and economic recovery of conflict and post-conflict societies.

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For further information on Project 1 Billion, or for a copy of the Mental Health Action Plan, Book of Best Practices or Mental Health Survey, please see www.project1billion.org.