

Enhancing Effectiveness of Social Protection by Psycho-Social Support in Uganda and Ethiopia – Summary



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On-Line / Off-line support for Post-Traumatic Stress

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Abstract

This study presents the effect of Psycho-Social Counselling on Social Protection in highly traumatized communities. The research was undertaken in Northern Uganda and Ethiopia during 2016 and 2017. The study compared off-line and on-line communities. The participants were selected in a migration context. The participants were members of communities with high levels of Post-Traumatic Stress.

Context

In Northern Uganda communities are characterised by return migration. Communities are highly affected by the terror of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA), which abducted many children as recruits in the army and exercised terror attacks on the remaining communities. Since the peace agreement in 2006, the Government of Uganda has aimed to rehabilitate the region. The communities identified that trauma should be addressed as part of the economic recovery given the high level of Post-Traumatic Stress among the members of the communities.

In Northern Ethiopia, the refugee communities are living in a transit situation within camps specifically set up for this purpose. The refugees suffer from high levels of trauma as a result of inhumane treatment within their country of origin and on the migratory routes. The camps are under the authority of the Administration for Refugees and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) of the Government of Ethiopia.

In Northern Uganda and in Northern Ethiopia, the central government is active in efforts to improve the situation of the communities. Poverty is extreme, with insufficient availability of even basic necessities such as water and food. In Northern Uganda the support is provided in the form of social protection measures. In North Ethiopia the support is offered in the form of livelihood support. In both instances, the support offered is relatively small. In kind-support can take the form of small animals or seeds.

On-line / off-line

The two communities have much in common and the connectivity in both geographies is limited. The communities in Northern Uganda are characterised by a high-penetration of feature phones, while the communities in refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia utilise smart phones. In this research the impact of offering on-line psycho-social support to help relief post-traumatic stress was investigated.

Design of the Research

The research was designed in three phases. In all three phases the impact of support on Social Economic Resilience (SER) was measured. Social Economic Resilience was defined as the self-perception of current and future opportunities to sustain and improve resilience of livelihood.

The research measured the intermediate effect of psycho-social support on the impact of Social Protection on Social-Economic Resilience. This was measured in an off-line setting (Northern Uganda) and on-line setting (Northern Ethiopia).

In the first phase the relation between Social Protection, Psycho-Social Support and Social Economic Resilience was measured in an off-line setting. In the second phase, the same was measured, with a tool fit for on-line use, to support psycho-social counselling. In the third phase, this tool was measured in an on-line setting.

On-line Trauma Counselling Intervention

The trauma counselling program, called the Self-Help Low-Cost PTS programme (SHLCPTS), was specifically designed for low resource settings with high PTS and on-line use. The approach was based on Eye Movement Desensitizing and Reprocessing (EMDR) techniques. This technique has been specifically developed to help address Post Traumatic Stress.

The application of this programme consisted of three components:

- Component 1: Educational sessions to raise participants awareness of their symptoms and the causes of these symptoms
- Component 2: Coaching and exercises sessions on techniques to gain control over distressing PTSD symptoms
- Component 3: Group sessions to encourage participants to share their experiences with members of their community

The primary objective of the SHLCPTS-program was to enable participants to learn strategies to help them overcome Post Traumatic Stress affecting their day-to-day functioning. Due to the expected positive effect of the program on their day-to-day functioning, it was expected that ultimately, their Social and Economic Resilience would improve.

Researchers were available during the implementation of the programme and support for referral for mental health medical services were available to the participants.

Sampling

The selection criteria for the participation in the research were: high social-economic vulnerability, high Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and women (in the study in Northern Uganda). In Ethiopia, participants were selected based on their use of a smartphone.

Results

In the first study, the effect of existing Social Protection support and trauma counselling on SER were tested among 471 women in North Uganda. The results showed that Social Protection support and Psycho-Social counselling (within the year preceding the study) each had a positive (significant) impact on perceived Social Economic Resilience, measured in capabilities, perceived income opportunities, and empowerment. Moreover, the impact of trauma counselling was somewhat more pronounced than the effect of Social Protection support.

In the second phase, the feasibility of the trauma counselling program, was investigated along the (lagged) effect of Social Protection and trauma counselling among 356 women participants living in North Uganda. The results of this second phase indicated that the lagged effect Social Protection on Social and Economic Resilience were minimal (not significant). However, the Psycho Social support projects showed a lagged positive effect on perceived income opportunities and empowerment.

Moreover, in exploring the lagged effects, the results showed that receiving both Social Protection and Trauma Counselling (in the past) had an additional positive effect of the perceived capabilities and perceived income opportunities. These results suggest that the effects of Social Protection were not sustainable, but the effect of trauma counselling was.

Regarding the effect measured through the intervention of the off-line SHLCPTS-programme, the qualitative results indicated that the program could be successfully implemented in remote rural areas of Northern Uganda. During interviews carried out six months after the program, participants reported a wide range of positive impacts on their lives, their families and the community at large. Positive effects included increased self-esteem and decreased domestic violence. The participants also showed an enhanced ability to address interpersonal conflicts.

The effect of the SHLCPTS-programme in increasing Social Economic resilience was also tested quantitatively. While within-group effects were positive and significant, the results between-groups were not. A close analysis of the quantitative data suggested that the lack of significant effect between-groups could be the result of a problem of bias of selection of participants for the participation in the SHLCPTS-program.

In the third research phase, the effectiveness of the SHLCPTS-program on Social Economic Resilience was measured in more controlled conditions. In this third study the SHLCPTS programme was delivered via an on-line mobile phone APP with 103 participants (male and female) who were randomly assigned.

The participants received either a short version of the programme with only two educational session or a full version that included two educational and five coaching and exercise sessions. Some of these participants also received livelihood support provided by NGOs. Participants who received the full SHLCPTS-programme reported higher perceived income opportunities (although the objective income situation did not change), higher Social Economic Resilience, particularly in perceived capability, and higher empowerment. This was a significantly higher score on Social Economic Resilience, compared to the level measured at the start of the programme.

Participants who received the short version did not report an increase in their Social Economic Resilience. The results also showed that livelihood support in the camp did not alter the level of Social Economic Resilience.

The interviews with participants showed their interest in on-line delivery of psycho social support which gave them a greater degree of privacy than other approaches would do. The programme was also appreciated as it did not require re-narration of the highly traumatic events. This would suggest that re-narration may be causing re-traumatisation and that this should be avoided, especially in on-line programmes where little referral for support maybe available. In this study three people were referred to the services of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), in order to deal with the effects of trauma, shown in the course of the participation in the intervention.

Theoretical Interpretation of Results

The results of the studies suggest that traumatized communities need to feel protected and enabled to regain their livelihood. The findings point to the conclusion that the reorganization of the provision of both livelihood support and mental health support contributed to a sense of self-efficacy and has a positively impact on resilience, specifically on the perceived capability, income security and empowerment.

Empowerment correlated systematically high with other aspects of Social Economic Resilience. This offers an opportunity to organize services in a way that will contribute to returnees and refugees so that they may feel both protected and positive in terms of the prospects provided to rebuild their livelihoods in the locations where they receive such support. Support for trauma relief critically enhances the positive impact of the livelihood support on Social Economic Resilience.

The findings of the study give new insights of the relevance of feelings as information (Schwarz, 2010) to understand decision-making. This seems particularly relevant for the understanding of decision-making among returnee and transit refugee communities, affected by high levels of trauma. This may offer new insights to revisit the theory of push-and-pull which is still dominant as an explanatory framework for migration but has shortcoming in explaining dynamics of decision-making on migratory trajectories.

Finally, the findings suggest the positive potential of offering psycho-social support for on-line mode, which could potentially have further implication for reaching highly traumatized persons in remote areas reachable by phone. The research also showed that on-line mental health support may have advantages for some groups.

Implications for policy

The results of this study demonstrate that policy on (re-)integration of returnees and refugees is strengthened by the inclusion of support for Post Traumatic Stress. The results show that psycho-social support for persons suffering from high levels of trauma, has a sustainable effect on Social Economic Resilience.

Participation in Social Protection support had a less significant effect than participation on Psycho Social Support. Nevertheless, the Social Protection Support in Northern Uganda showed significant effect on Social Economic Resilience. However, this was not the case in the environment of the refugee camp in Ethiopia – offered there as livelihood support. Possibly the livelihood support in the camp was not sufficiently encompassing to make a difference within the reality of the camp.

The study showed that Social Economic Resilience can be increased in cost-effective ways through low-cost psycho-social interventions.

The study leads to the following recommendations:

- Integration of the SHLCPTS and other forms of psycho-social counselling as trauma support in social protection and livelihood programmes so as to strengthen the positive effects on Social Economic Resilience;
- Strengthening of capacity for professional mental health in order to provide trauma support;
- Strengthening the emphasis on communication of the positive effects of livelihood programmes in order to strengthen the positive thoughts regarding integration and reintegration;
- Avoidance of the negative influences of Post-Traumatic Stress on communities with high numbers of severe Post Traumatic Stress. This can be achieved by strengthening law and order and minimize criminal organizations in order to enhance the feeling of security in the communities;
- Advancing further investigation to research the possibilities to provide trauma support on-line.

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