RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Strengthening social cohesion through psychosocial interventions in Myanmar

Interventions for strengthening social cohesion (defined as the strength of relationships and the sense of belonging, trust, and mutual support among individuals and groups) are evaluated in conflict-affected Myanmar.

Exploring the impact of group-based interventions

A randomised study in conflict-affected communities in Myanmar evaluated whether group interventions – one focused on developing psychosocial skills and the other on shared group activities – could enhance mental well-being and social cohesion. The psychological skills program increased trust and emotional openness among participants and influenced their perceptions of local governance. Low levels of depression were found at both baseline and endline, despite evidence of significant hardship in this population. Context-specific tools may be needed to better understand mental health needs in Myanmar.

People working on a rice field in Myanmar. Photo by Alejandro Rugama on Unsplash.

Background

In Myanmar, the compounded impacts of civil war, displacement, and chronic underdevelopment have left communities with critical unmet mental health needs. In areas where professional mental healthcare remains out of reach, community-based psychosocial interventions offer a promising alternative. This project tested whether structured psychosocial support and group programs could improve mental health and social cohesion.

How the research was conducted

A randomised evaluation was conducted among 1170 individuals in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar. The impact of a 10-week psychosocial skills support program ("group skills") was compared with a "group activity" program of shared tasks (e.g., cooking, handicrafts, or environmental cleaning) without skills training, and a control group receiving no intervention. Baseline and endline data on mental health and social cohesion outcomes were collected two months pre-and post-intervention.

Key findings

- The study found that levels of mental distress were low at baseline, and there were no significant changes in mental health outcomes across the groups.
- However, both the group skills and group activity interventions increased interpersonal trust.
- The group skills program, which included structured psychosocial training and emotional expression, enhanced feelings of closeness and reduced participants' sense of individual responsibility for local public goods – placing more expectation on community leaders. This shift in attribution coincided with decreased participation in local volunteering, potentially indicating a diminished sense of personal obligation for certain tasks normally done by leaders.
- The group skills program also appeared to promote emotional openness, which may be a key building step in creating trust and closeness among participants that then leads to shifts in perceptions of political responsibility.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

These findings offer suggestive evidence that, in conflict settings where trust has eroded, psychosocial interventions, even without improving individual mental health, may help rebuild social relationships that underpin local governance.

Programs aiming to strengthen social cohesion in conflict settings should consider integrating psychosocial skill-building to enhance emotional openness. While traditional mental health outcomes may not shift quickly, fostering group connections and shared responsibilities may help rebuild the social relationships that underpin local governance.

Policymakers and practitioners can leverage these approaches as a scalable, low-resource supplement to mental health care, especially in areas with limited services.
Moreover, practitioners could invest in alternative mental health measurement tools that better capture resilience and well-being in contexts where stigma may suppress self-reporting.

Recommendations for future research

Further research is needed to better understand the true prevalence of mental disorder in this context. Research should also examine the long-term impacts and cultural adaptation of group psychosocial interventions across diverse settings and population groups and refine delivery models that are effective and culturally appropriate. It would be informative to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis that this study could not accomplish due to complexities of attributing costs in a volatile operating environment coupled with realigned research priorities.

About the study team

This study was conducted by researchers Nicolas Cerkez, Alexandra Hartman, Jonathan Weigel, and Kyaw Zay Ya, in collaboration with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and a Myanmar-based partner organization (name withheld for security reasons). Fieldwork was conducted in 2022 and 2023 across 90 villages.

Keywords

Myanmar, mental health, psychosocial support, social cohesion, conflict, group intervention, RCT, humanitarian recovery

Articles and further reading

Further information can be found on the Elrha project page:
https://www.elrha.org/projects/depression-in-the-time-of-conflict-myanmar

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http://www.elrha.org/programme/research-for-health-in-humanitarian-crises/