

PROJECT UPDATE¹:

Psychosocial and mental health policy in countries emerging from conflict and natural disaster: analysis of policy and program responses

(Also referred to as the *Mental Health in Fragile States* project)

Field work was conducted in the Solomon Islands between June and November 2006, and initial findings were presented at a national workshop with key stakeholders in late November. In addition, a report on the community findings was presented to the community.

Papers relating to the work to date have been presented at the following conferences:

- *Australian Health Promotion Association Annual Conference*, 23-26 April 2006, Alice Springs
- *Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Section of Social & Cultural Psychiatry Triennial Conference*, 4-7 September, Cairns.

Insights from the work have also been presented at the Interagency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Conflict Situations in November in Sydney and at the Research Retreat of the UNSW Human Rights Initiative in December 2006. In addition, the project team organised and contributed to a half-day seminar on *Culturally competent psychosocial policy and program responses to conflict and disaster in Sri Lanka* hosted by the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW on 5 December 2006.

Findings from the Solomon Islands case study suggest a process of incremental change, building on a longstanding but fragile concern with mental health and psychosocial and issues. Donors, particularly AusAID, have been influential over the past decade. However, penetration to community level remains extremely poor and community-based and developed responses (traditional and modern) are the mainstay of community support.

The work has also identified several questions that are beyond the scope of the current project to address. For example, the extent and burden associated with psychosocial and mental health problems across the country, and the particular service and support needs of young people living in urban areas.

Preparatory work has been undertaken for the two remaining countries under investigation, Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka—making links with national contacts, identifying potential key informants and collecting relevant documents. Timor-Leste was selected as the second case study, partly due to the complexity of the political and social situation in Sri Lanka and partly due to security considerations. The complexity has major implications for site selection for the service and community components of the research. Advice received indicates that to fully understand psychosocial and mental health policy and programming in Sri Lanka, a country exposed to both conflict and disaster and with extensive donor activity, the research would need be conducted at least three districts, not just one. Although both countries experienced renewed conflict

¹ Adapted from ARC progress report (Feb 2007)

in 2006, the security situation in Timor-Leste poses fewer direct risks to team members and the conduct of the research.

All three countries under investigation experienced renewed unrest and/or an escalation of violence during 2006. This was unexpected and made the security of Australian researchers and in-country staff a concern. This also reiterated the value and importance of undertaking this research and presented opportunities to examine responses to psychosocial and mental health need in “real time”.

At this stage, due to security concerns, it is likely that field work will commence in Timor-Leste in July 2007, after the general election has been held.