Findings

**Negotiating Culturally Appropriate PSS:** Most of the participants convey the concept and term *psychosocial* is not culturally appropriate in various contexts because communities may associate individuals in PSS programs with mental illness. This can lead to stigmatization of the students participating in PSS programs.

**Lack of Referral Systems:** At times, referral systems do not exist due to lack of infrastructure or capacity. Because of this, INGOs cannot ensure that students receive the support they may need, which includes community and family support, focused, non-specialized support, and specialized services.

**Conflicting Systems of Care:** The content of the PSS program may be culturally and contextually relevant, but INGOs providing PSS programs for students can conflict with existing systems of care. In the Sudan region, for example, one INGO employs local staff to facilitate PSS programs in areas where elders, aunties, and uncles are the traditional sources of such support, thereby delegitimizing their role in providing PSS.

**Issues with Evaluating Well-Being:** Participants suggest evaluating self-reported subjective and temporal conceptualizations of well-being is very difficult. Many of them also feel the aid architecture prevents them from finding better ways to evaluate PSS programs due to the demand for data from donors. Complicating this issue are contexts like parts of the Congo Basin region where cycles of violence exist and some teachers abuse and sexually exploit students. The students in this region might self-report that they are relatively well because violence is normative.

**Competition Over Collaboration:** Competition for funding can occur between organizations to the detriment of the communities that are affected by conflict. Further, when planning child protection, education, and PSS in clusters, representatives of organizations may promote their own models in order to receive more funding, which participants reflect may not always be in the best interests of the community.

**Silos within INGOs:** In the context of an emergency response, participants report a strong connection between child protection and education. However, the lack of internal collaboration between these two fields can limit the scope and size of programs the INGO provides.

**Limitations of PSS Programs at Schools:** The small amount of time students spend in PSS programs limits the support these programs actually provide for students. Participants question if their programs are doing enough.
Findings cont.

**PSS Program Models:** The models of PSS programs that are a part of this study vary, and some of the findings are specific to how INGOs implement them. A mapping of the models and findings specific to them are below:

- **Selection Can Stigmatize Students:** In the Direct-Service Approach, teachers select students to attend PSS programs. This can cause stigmatization of these students, especially if their peers and community associate those receiving PSS with mental illness. In addition, even with training from INGOs, participants suggest there is no way of knowing if teachers are selecting the students who most need PSS.

- **Facilitator Training, Capacity, and Well-Being:** INGOs can cause harm by not considering the qualifications and experiences of PSS program facilitators. First, the facilitator might not have enough training to handle sensitive information that students might share. Second, if teachers are the facilitators, they might not have the capacity to facilitate PSS programs in addition to their current workload. Third, facilitators have similar exposures to conflict as the students, and they may need PSS themselves.

- **PSS Facilitators as Perpetrators of Violence:** In the Congo Basin region, there are issues of safety in schools where some teachers are the perpetrators of violence against students for which PSS programs are seeking to support. Here, the teachers are the selectors and may be the facilitators of PSS programs, which can do harm.

- **Teachers Change in the Classroom-Based Approach:** PSS programs are inherently child-centered. In the South Asia region, one INGO trains and supports teachers to facilitate PSS programs. Here, the participants report teachers are changing their approach from teacher-centered to child-centered as a result.
Implications

Based on the literature and findings, INGOs may take the following considerations into account when implementing PSS programs:

**Elicit Input from Communities**: If communities associate the term *psychosocial* with mental illness, INGOs may consider not using this term. Rather, programs may elicit input from communities to understand what their needs are. This implies an action research approach, which should valorize local knowledge without romanticizing non-Western traditions.

**Use a Classroom-Based Approach**: If communities identify schools as being one of the venues for PSS programs, INGOs may use the *Classroom-Based Approach* where all students in select schools or grade levels receive PSS. This reduces the possibility of stigmatization and enables facilitators to better understand which students may need focused, non-specialized support, and specialized services.

**Select Facilitators Carefully**: In contexts such as the Congo Basin region where some of the teachers are the perpetrators of violence against students, it is not appropriate for them to select students to receive PSS or to facilitate PSS programs. If teachers are a part of the INGO’s PSS model, the organizations should vet the teachers to ensure they will not cause additional harm to students.

**Train and Support Facilitators**: Facilitators of PSS programs require more than a once-off training; they need continuous support. As this can become expensive, INGOs could consider periodic training during the PSS program as well as establishing learning communities where facilitators can share strategies. INGOs should consider including PSS activities into the trainings and support they provide the facilitators since they may experience similar exposures to conflict as the students.

**Utilize a Referral System**: PSS should exist in a multi-layered system of support. If a referral system does not exist, INGOs should formalize connections with other entities providing culturally relevant focused, non-specialized support, and specialized services.

**Adjust the Measurements of Well-Being**: As some of the concepts of well-being are socially constructed, subjective, temporal, and contextual, evaluating well-being is challenging. In order to mitigate this issue, programs could focus more on measuring factors that ameliorate well-being, e.g., child/parent reunification, increase of skills and knowledge relating to coping mechanisms, identification of existing support mechanisms, security of environment, etc.

**Provide a Venue for Critical Reflection**: These research findings and their implications would not exist if participants were not critically reflective about their INGO’s PSS programs. Many participants express, however, that a formal venue within their organizations for critical reflection is lacking. The aim of this venue should inform practice and mitigate potential harm.
Methods
This research focuses on four INGOs that provide PSS programs at schools in conflict-affected contexts. Two to three practitioners per organization participated for a total of 10 INGO participants. Supplementing these perspectives are two ‘critical friends’ with extensive experience in emergency response and PSS who were also interviewed. These critical friends reflected on the phenomena that were identified as important insights from INGO participants. To provide a platform for all participants to express their professional wisdom about the area of inquiry, the interview format was semi-structured. The interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone, or on Skype for approximately an hour with an email follow-up, if needed, for questions or clarifications.

Half of the participants are from the region in which they are implementing PSS programs, and more than half of the participants live in the context where the programs operate. The experience of the participants in the fields of education, child protection, and/or PSS ranges from 3 to 23 years with an average of 13 years of experience. Their collective geographic experience spans over 40 countries, with work in over 20 of these countries in response to conflicts and crises.

It is not the intention of this qualitative research to generalize all INGO PSS programs at schools in conflict-affected contexts, but rather better understand the realities practitioners perceive in implementing PSS programs. As a limitation of this area of inquiry, PSS at schools only serves a small portion of communities affected by conflict.

This research was conducted as part of Stephen Richardson’s Master’s of Education degree at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Center for International Education. For more information contact Stephen at stephen.m.richardson@gmail.com.