

IMPROVING COORDINATION AS CO-CHAIRS OF THE IASC MHPSS REFERENCE GROUP

The IFRC co-chairs, together with the World Health Organisation, the IASC MHPSS Reference Group. The IFRC PS Centre team in the co-chair function is composed by Dr Carmen Valle Trabadelo (co-chair) and Barbara Levin (Communication and Coordination Officer).

I. INTRODUCTION

The IASC MHPSS Reference Group consists of more than 65 member agencies and 21 observer organisations. It develops and promotes evidence-based MHPSS practices through a unique collaboration between NGOs, UN, International Agencies and academics.

Its main mandate is to advocate for and disseminate its inter-agency guidelines and tools, ensuring quality MHPSS implementation at country-level. The Reference Group has developed a range of resources through a bottom-up, inclusive approach, that engages affected populations, country-level MHPSS actors, and global expertise. These resources cover diverse MHPSS-related themes, such as suicide prevention, disability and inclusion, peacebuilding, monitoring and evaluation, and coordination. Their operationalisation at country-level is ensured through ongoing implementation support.

As a co-chairing agency, the PS Centre has a unique opportunity to collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders and agencies to bridge the gap between global and country level responses. From contributing to resources, participating in high-level advocacy events (e.g., the 5th Global Mental Health Summit, The Victim Assistance Conference from the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in Cambodia, the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks or the European Humanitarian Forum) to country missions, the co-chairing role expands the PS Centre's global network and capacity to respond the world's largest humanitarian crises. 2023 was no exception, where new and ongoing emergencies posed significant MHPSS risks on affected populations.

II. COUNTRY-LEVEL COORDINATION

Coordination continues to emerge as a key component in all phases of an emergency, from preparedness, active response, and recovery. The Reference Group therefore works in various contexts to establish and strengthen sustainable coordination mechanisms that ensure no emergencies are left behind.

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Coordination brings together local, national, and international actors responding to the various MHPSS needs in a specific context. Effective coordination has proved to reduce duplication, address harmful gaps, and support the efficient use of scarce resources. Considering the multi-sectoral nature of MHPSS, coordination addresses accountability to the affected populations, who will first and foremost feel the consequences of implementation gaps. In short, coordination can save lives.

Country coordination is carried out by MHPSS Technical Working Groups (TWGs) and supported by the Reference Group at the global level. In 2023, 87% of all humanitarian emergencies have a functioning MHPSS coordination mechanism, compared to 56% in 2019.

As the co-chair of the Reference Group, Carmen provides various forms of support for the TWGs, including technical advice, capacity strengthening, mentoring and humanitarian diplomacy. In her coordination and communication role, Barbara ensures the flow of information to and from TWGs with the wider MHPSS community. In 2023, the team conducted in-person missions to Venezuela, Colombia, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), and Yemen.

- **Occupied Palestinian territory:** When the mission was conducted in July 2023, oPt was facing cyclical violence, characterized by political, social, and economic instability. This takes a devastating and compounding toll on the mental health of affected populations with already limited access to MHPSS services. With two present TWGs in both the West Bank and Gaza, Carmen and Barbara were able to provide technical support and trainings on MHPSS coordination in each context. This training brought together TWG partners to discuss key components of MHPSS coordination (e.g., engaging external stakeholders, service mapping and advocacy). A key outcome of the trainings was to show partners that, with a strong coordination mechanism, they are not only better positioned to address gaps and challenges, but are also prepared for future emergencies. In the aftermath of October 7th, preparedness proved to be a crucial asset in responding to the unprecedented needs in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This mission set the foundation of a strong collaboration between the TWGs in oPt and the Reference Group, that allows continuous support throughout the MHPSS response to the War in Gaza and its impacts in the West Bank.
- **Venezuela:** faces a prolonged crisis, with deep economic, social and political unrest. This has resulted in significant shortages in public services and increased difficulties in access to food and other basic needs. Though the MHPSS needs continuously rise in Venezuela, the capacity to meet such demands remains insufficient. The TWG in Venezuela was established in 2021, after a support mission from Carmen. It has made significant progress in coordination, uniting agencies across sectors to continue their joint MHPSS efforts. To strengthen the TWG, Carmen and Barbara met



with partners to review its 2023 workplan, identify the current needs and challenges, and provide technical support for capacity building. They also visited projects, including Venezuelan Red Cross, in the state of Táchira, bordering Colombia, which continues to be heavily impacted by the migration crisis. A mission report is available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

- **Colombia's** complex reality of displacement, natural hazards, and violence by armed groups severely impacts its very diverse populations. These compounded challenges have a severe affect on the mental health and psychosocial well-being, with great psychosocial pressures accumulated over many decades. The challenge to seek specialized services and adapt to the specific needs of Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and migrant communities, called for the need to improve the national MHPSS response and establish a multisectoral coordination mechanism. To support this, Carmen and Barbara's mission in 2023 included a preliminary assessment of the MHPSS response and inter-agency partnerships. This assessment was used as a foundation to deploy a MHPSS expert, who began establishing Colombia's TWG. They also visited partners in Chocó to learn about the challenges in areas affected by drivers of the humanitarian response in Colombia. A mission report is available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) for more information about the context in Colombia and the MHPSS preliminary assessment.
- **Yemen:** With almost 22 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in the county, affected populations continuously face severe food insecurity and have very limited access to healthcare, water, sanitation and other basic needs. While the conflict and inaccessibility to basic needs greatly impact the mental health and wellbeing of the population in Yemen, MHPSS services are continuously deprioritised within the health system and humanitarian response. The capacity to respond to increasing MHPSS remains insufficient. Despite these challenges, the reactivation of MHPSS TWG activities in Aden gave Carmen the opportunity to build on her previous mission in 2022. The mission in 2023 aimed to provide on-the-ground support to the MHPSS TWG, focusing on capacity strengthening, strategic planning, technical advice and advocacy related to MHPSS inter-agency coordination. This included a coordination capacity building session with the TWG members, as well as meetings with the Health, Protection and Education clusters, highlighting the importance of integrating MHPSS across sectors.

In addition to direct country supports from missions in 2023, remote technical support was also provided through meetings, workshops, mentorships, consultations, trainings and webinars, particularly for the following countries:

- Afghanistan, Armenia/ Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic,

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Chad, Colombia, Czech Republic, DRC, Ethiopia, Hungary, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Moldova, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, occupied Palestinian territory, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Türkiye, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen.

III. THE INTER-AGENCY MHPSS INTERAGENCY SURGE MECHANISM

The **Inter-agency Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Surge Mechanism** is an initiative established in 2020 by the IASC MHPSS Reference Group and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency. It facilitates rapid deployments to establish or strengthen MHPSS coordination in humanitarian crises. In total, there has been 48 deployments in 38 countries between 2020 – 2023.

As a Reference Group co-chair, Carmen supports such deployments through technical advice, mentoring and additional training and capacity building. For example, she supported various deployments in Venezuela, from establishing the TWG itself, to building capacity in service mapping and information management. In Colombia, the preliminary assessment in 2023 led to a deployment to support the establishment of a TWG, highlighting the importance of a multisectoral coordination mechanism. Similarly, Carmen has provided ongoing support to colleagues in Iraq, Chad, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (South Kivu), Mozambique, Pakistan, oPt, Niger, and Somalia.

