



PSI IN ACTION: CONTRIBUTING TO INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE IN RESPONDING TO CRISES AND EMERGENCIES



In late 2022, the Psychological Society of Ireland received an invitation from the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS), to contribute ideas on IUPsyS's responses in crises and emergencies. In this feature, we have shared the PSI response to this invitation, and included some reflections on the process from PSI Special Interest Group in Human Rights and Psychology (SIGHRP) members, Dr Michelle Cowley-Cunningham (Dublin City University) and Dr Elaine Rogers (University of Limerick).

PSI SIGHRP Submission: A reflection on our process

Late last year the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) sent out an invitation for national bodies representing the psychology profession to submit a proposal on how psychological science could best respond to international crises and emergencies.

The call resonated palpably with us. Having formed the Special Interest Group in Human Rights and Psychology (SIGHRP) in the preceding months, we experienced first-hand the complexity in conceiving and implementing a psychological approach to a humanitarian crisis. As we now know, the war in Ukraine meant that the Republic of Ireland received an unprecedented 50,000 refugees in less than a year (Central Statistics Office CSO, Republic of Ireland, 2022). At the outset we felt compelled to do something, but it was early days, and we were unsure if we could help.

As the Special Interest Group in Human Rights and Psychology (SIGHRP), we quickly realised how effective a human rights lens could be, not only to guide a psychological intervention in a crisis but define whether we should have a role. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights UDHR, Article 2 states: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind... made on the basis of political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs... [for example when in need of medical and psychological treatment]". This definition is commendable but does not in and of itself make demands of psychologists, so we had to reflect deeper on the connection between human rights and psychological science.

We set about asking our group key questions about our role, for example: "Does a lens of human rights law identify the refugee crisis as a legally permissible call for psychological intervention?", "If so, what can we do, and how quickly?", "How can we uniquely complement other interventions happening?", "What resources do we have to make it happen?", and critically "How do we ensure any initiative we choose is of a recommendable and equitable standard?". Psychological science by its nature aims to promote quality research-led intervention, so a brainstorming session with our group quickly identified that Psychological first aid (PFA) could be a pragmatic solution. Working collaboratively on a suite of PFA resources we received positive responses from the Health Service Executive, PSI, Irish Red Cross, national and international media. We could not have imagined this solution before thinking about the connections between human rights approaches, psychological science, and best practice.

When we saw the call for the IUPsyS submission that autumn, we naturally followed up. We noted too the prescient timing given the ongoing proceedings in the Oireachtas regarding human rights-based reform to the Mental Health Act 2001 (i.e., the *Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Heads of Bill to Amend the Mental Health Act 2001*, Houses of the Oireachtas, Oct 2022). This dialogue and the contributions of many of PSI's esteemed expert members afforded a new language, or phrasebook if you like, with which to connect the psychologies to human rights in a more sure-footed manner. You will find that our statement brought to bear its tone of voice, new language, and many recommendations from the proceedings. The connection therefore for us between human rights and psychological science is that they both provide mutually informing dictates on the premises and quality of psychological intervention in the face of international crises and emergencies.

Working together with PSI International Liaison Officer Dr John Francis Leader and then PSI President Vincent McDarby, we submitted our statement via the PSI to the IUPsyS once Council approved. The feedback from the first aggregated summary of findings from the eighteen international submissions documents and reflects many of our recommendations, notably the importance of interdisciplinarity, research-led intervention, health equity, the education of psychologists, and creation of an international forum.

In the round, we discovered that human rights approaches can provide solutions by affording conceivably very open definitions, albeit complex ones. That said, they do help set the tone for a decided intervention really well. We encourage you to read our full statement (included below) on how a human rights-based approach will better inform how the IUPsyS, within its mission and capacity, more mindfully responds and contributes to alleviating the psychological effects of international crises emergencies for the individuals caught up in them.

Should you have any comments, suggestions, or ideas we would encourage you to reach out to us at: humanrights@psychologicalsociety.ie

Michelle Cowley-Cunningham (SIGHRP Secretary, Dublin City University) and Elaine Rogers (SIGHRP Chair, University of Limerick)

Acknowledgements

Dr John Francis Leader (PSI International Liaison Officer), Past PSI President Dr Vincent McDarby, and SIGHRP 2022 Dr Elaine Martin, Dr Meg Ryan, Dr Anne Byrne-Lynch, Ms Alexis Carey, Ms Suzanne Mc Hugh, Dr Ian Miller.

The Psychological Society of Ireland pronouncement regarding the invitation to contribute ideas on the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) responses in crises and emergencies

In response to the IUPsyS call for member organisations to 'contribute ideas on the IUPsyS responses in crises and emergencies', the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), through guidance from the PSI Special Interest Group in Human Rights and Psychology (SIGHRP), is proposing a set of human rights-based recommendations to aid the IUPsyS policy mission for actions moving forward.

Following the Ukraine crisis, the Republic of Ireland received an unprecedented 50,000 refugees in less than a year (Central Statistics Office CSO, Republic of Ireland, 2022). The inevitable psychological demand this crisis presents reminds us daily how fragile but also how resilient the human condition is, whether persons be refugees fleeing from Ukraine or other and increasingly regular human-made or natural disasters. Other global pressures, such as climate change, are impacting the global south population's access to food, clean water, and economic stability. Conflict crises, exacerbated by lack of these resources together with income inequality and poverty, means that there is a global refugee and displacement crisis within, between and outside of all our national borders.

From our experience in delivering rapid and actionable guidance to aid psychologists offering clear and practical advice to care for those with lived and ongoing refugee experiences, we propose that a human rights-based approach is vital to ensure adequate response to crises and emergencies in the future.

Taking that to mean a human right commonly understood as an inalienable, fundamental right to which a person is inherently entitled, simply because they are a human being, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights UDHR, Article 2 states: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind... [for example] made on the basis of political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs...". A human rights-based approach will, therefore, enable psychological science to better comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities UNCRPD (e.g., for jurisdiction signatories) where Article 4 seeks to "...abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination" against persons seeking psychological interventions. Furthermore, a shift towards human rights-based approaches to mental health practice aspires to promote, encourage, and foster higher standards and good practices in their delivery. Recognising the shift in how equitable treatment should be provided for people experiencing mental health difficulties, the Republic of Ireland is presently also advocating for human rights-based reform to its own Mental Health Act 2001, that is, to 'move the Act towards empowering people accessing mental health services to make decisions about their own healthcare insofar as possible' (Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Heads of Bill to Amend the Mental Health Act 2001, Houses of the Oireachtas, Oct 2022, p.8).

We thereby recommend at the specific level of a practitioner, premises to aid the application of psychological science methods to treat those experiencing psychological crisis more humanely and without contributing to any additional trauma by: (i) practicing a more person-centric approach towards mental health care; (ii) working collaboratively across the psychological sciences to apply multi-disciplinary treatment of people accessing mental health interventions; and (iii) enhancing the regulation of mental health facilities and services. In summary, we contend a human rights-based approach will better inform how the Union, within its mission and capacity, more mindfully responds and contributes to alleviating the psychological effects of those crises for individuals, and we recommend that:

1. Psychological science methods are used to ensure resources, and psychological resources, reach the most vulnerable individuals experiencing crisis (e.g., children, the elderly, those with disabilities, the acutely distressed).
2. Psychological interventions take place with key facilitative infrastructure in place, facilities, and procedures, to enable their dignified participation with, or uptake by, individuals experiencing crisis (e.g., hygienic treatment environments; non-judgmental interaction).
3. Psychological interventions are equally informed by psychological science and human rights-based approaches to ensure the autonomy and dignity of the individual experiencing crisis (e.g., ensuring person-centred treatment; assuring autonomy by using assisted decision-making approaches).
4. Psychological interventions have key regulatory infrastructure to enable their effective participation with or uptake by individuals experiencing crisis (e.g., document and implement procedures around issues of consent).
5. Psychological resources, whether they be professional or educational, are trauma informed, person centred and community focused for individuals experiencing crisis.
6. Further, we advocate that the IUPsyS in collaboration with other international psychology and human rights organisations, establish a forum to conduct international research on human rights awareness and best practice. This forum will help better inform professional bodies and share best practice with psychology practitioners and psychology practitioners in training.

Dr Vincent McDarby
President, The Psychological Society of Ireland

The Psychological Society of Ireland agrees for this pronouncement to be placed in a repository open to Union Members in its entirety.

The PSI wishes to express sincere thanks to members of the Special Interest Group in Human Rights and Psychology, particularly Dr Michelle Cowley-Cunningham (SIG Secretary) and Dr Elaine Rogers (SIG Chair), who were instrumental in the formulation of the PSI pronouncement.

Summary of IUPsyS Consultative Report on a Policy on Human Crises

The International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS, <https://www.iupsys.net/>) developed from some of the earliest international meetings of psychologists in the late 19th century, and was founded formally after World War II (<https://www.iupsys.net/about/iupsys-history/>). There are currently over 90 national members, with the Psychological Society first joining in 1974.

The IUPsyS *Strategic Plan 2020-2024* specifies their aim to increase the Society's impact "as a broker or convener of psychological science", with a policy on emergency situations presented to the IUPsyS Assembly in 2021, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategic objective is linked to the call for member submissions on responding to crises and emergencies described earlier in this feature. This overview is based on an interim report to members shared in December 2022, in which IUPsyS noted that 18 regions had responded, including 15 national members, three regional members and one affiliate organisation. The report notes that much of the detail from these responses related to the potential role and actions for IUPsyS in the context of crises and emergencies.

A number of broader points are noted in the report by IUPsyS. For example, the issue of how crises and emergencies are defined or classified was noted, with the implications of these decisions for how an organization such as IUPsyS or indeed national professional bodies, noted. Perhaps unsurprisingly, IUPsyS note differing views on the need for neutrality, as well as the assumption of an agreed body of knowledge versus action based on a body of scientific knowledge. Another theme highlighted the potential for partnerships with other international and national associations including human rights organisations and bodies with expertise or mandates relating to disaster response.

From a practical perspective, responses included input on how such a response would be coordinated (i.e., committee structures, terms of reference, management processes). Responses also included suggestions regarding possible initiatives or activities at the local, national or international level. These were classified into four categories, which were presented as:

1. Development of psychological science and its application.
2. Proving local support.
3. Communication and facilitation of communication.
4. Resourcing and capacity building.

Suggestions under Theme 1 included compiling and communicating relevant research, as well as developing materials and responses that would support education, training, products, and services, all of which could be disseminated via online information platforms. Theme 2 was illustrated the potential for networks to coordinate expertise and support, allowing for national and regional experience to be accessed. That the local level the potential for advocacy and increased awareness was also noted. Theme 3 build on the network idea, highlighting the need and potential for communication between member organisations of IUPsyS and within these organisations, with this communication facilitating further action. Finally, Theme 4 incorporated a range of suggestions, including collaboratively organised events to build skills and capacity and the possible need to support professional licensing for members in the absence of local structures. This theme also noted the impact of the digital environment on practice and responses in this area.

In concluding, the IUPsyS report noted that the organisation is at the early stage of the process of developing a position on responding to human crises and emergencies. It highlights the complexity of the issues involved, particularly given the potential for crises to be politicised. The report cites the concept of science diplomacy, referring to the European Union External Action (EUEA), which is the diplomatic service of the EU. For more information on this context see https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/science-diplomacy_en. IUPsyS propose scientific diplomacy as a possible framework for further developments in this area.

Suzanne Guerin
Irish Psychologist Editorial Team

