

Strengthening Social Work in Complex Emergencies: A Study of Northwest Syria

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May, 2023

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Ph.D. in Social Work

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English Abstract

Given the challenging nature of performing social work functions in complex emergencies, knowing more about the perspectives of local practitioners as to effective social work practices in complex emergencies would offer practitioners who perform social work functions in such settings more useful models to inform their critical tasks. Thus, this three-manuscript dissertation draws upon a study of areas of Northwest Syria to explore perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice, how to improve support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions, and recommendations for ‘good’ social work practice in other complex emergencies. A socioecological framework, constructivist grounded theory methodology and online collaborative community-based methods guide this study. To involve the perspectives of practitioners familiar with Northwest Syria in and on the research study, this study engaged 13 practitioners (6 Syrian; 7 international) in an online Community Advisory Board in English and Arabic. To promote the relevance of the research to the culture and context, seven Community Advisory Board members (3 Syrian; 4 International; 4 Arabic Interviews) participated in a pilot study interview. In addition, 10 Community Advisory Board members completed an online survey to inform the second phase of interviews. 22 interviews occurred in this second phase (20 Syrian; 2 International; 19 Arabic Interviews). To account for the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews also explored participants’ perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices during the pandemic and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners during the pandemic. As Syria did not have a formal social work profession prior to the complex emergency, this study found that the country’s ongoing crisis strained the naturally, structurally, and culturally embedded supportive nature of families and communities. This strain created a need for new social work practices to help to re-activate the family and community’s contributions to address their own needs. Thus, this dissertation argues that social work practices can help to re-activate rather than replace the supportive roles of families and community members during complex emergencies. To improve support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions, this study also found that performing social work practice in complex emergencies has a distinct impact on practitioners, generating a need for them to be better supported. Syrian practitioners perceived the ability of their social work practice to address the community needs in a manner relevant to the culture and culture and accepted by the community as both important and impactful to them. As such, Syrian practitioners described actions to strengthen coordination and referral mechanisms, as well as to increase their input, involvement and autonomy on the social work practices as supportive and

helpful. Thus, this dissertation argues that improving support for Syrian practitioners requires adopting a psychosocial approach and making changes to how practitioners perform social work functions. During the research process, this study found that including practitioners' perspectives both in and on the research through a Community Advisory Board increased the study's relevance to the culture and context and also benefited practitioners, offering practitioners an opportunity to advance their epistemic agency. Thus, this dissertation argues that research in complex emergencies should include practitioners' perspectives, yet practitioners should also receive direct benefits from their involvement in research. Direct benefits could include offering helpful information and optional opportunities to engage and connect with other practitioners. Taken together, social work practice in complex emergencies matters, and can even be lifesaving. Thus, the social work profession must continue to advocate for and support social work practice and practitioners in complex emergencies.

French Abstract

Étant donné le défi que représentent les fonctions liées au travail social en cas d'urgences complexes, une meilleure connaissance des perspectives des praticien.ne.s locaux sur les pratiques efficaces de travail social en cas d'urgences complexes permettrait d'offrir à ces praticien.ne.s qui travaillent dans de tels contextes des modèles plus utiles à l'accomplissement de leurs tâches d'importance critique. En ce sens, cette thèse en trois articles se base sur une étude des régions du nord-ouest de la Syrie afin d'explorer des perspectives sur une « bonne » pratique en travail social, sur les façons d'améliorer le soutien aux praticien.ne.s syrien.ne.s qui assument des fonctions en travail social et formuler des recommandations pour appliquer une « bonne » pratique en travail social à d'autres contextes d'urgences complexes. Cette étude a pour cadre conceptuel le modèle socioécologique, suit la méthodologie de la théorie ancrée ou *constructivist grounded theory* (CGT) et fait appel à des méthodes de recherche en ligne communautaires et collaboratives. Afin d'inclure les perspectives de praticien.ne.s familier.ère.s avec le nord-ouest de la Syrie sur et dans la recherche, cette étude a formé un comité consultatif communautaire bilingue (anglais et arabe), en ligne, avec 13 praticien.ne.s (6 membres syriens, 7 membres internationaux). Afin d'accroître la pertinence de la recherche en regard de la culture et du contexte locaux, 7 membres du comité consultatif communautaire (3 membres syriens, 4 membres internationaux, 4 entrevues en langue arabe en tout) ont participé à une entrevue d'étude pilote. De plus, 10 membres du comité ont complété un sondage en ligne afin de déterminer la seconde phase d'entrevues. 22 entrevues ont été menées dans cette seconde phase (20 Syriens, 2 de l'international, 19 entrevues en langue arabe en tout). Afin de prendre en considération la pandémie de COVID-19, les entrevues se sont également intéressées aux perspectives des participant.e.s sur de « bonnes » pratiques en travail social en temps de pandémie ainsi que sur les formes efficaces de soutien aux praticien.ne.s syrien.ne.s dans ce contexte. Comme la profession de travailleur.se social.e ne préexistait pas de manière officielle à la situation d'urgence complexe, cette étude a trouvé que la crise a exercé une pression supplémentaire sur le rôle de soutien qui s'inscrit de manières naturelle, structurelle et culturelle dans les familles et des communautés. Cette pression a créé le besoin que de nouvelles pratiques de travail social viennent réactiver la capacité des familles et des communautés à répondre à leurs propres besoins. Par conséquent, cette thèse soutient que les pratiques de travail social peuvent aider à réactiver plutôt qu'à remplacer le rôle de soutien que jouent les membres des familles et des communautés en cas d'urgences complexes. En ce qui concerne l'amélioration du soutien aux praticien.ne.s syrien.ne.s qui performant des fonctions de travail social, cette étude a aussi trouvé que la pratique du travail social

dans le contexte d'urgences complexes a un impact spécifique sur ces praticien.ne.s, lequel génère un besoin de soutien. Toutefois, les praticien.e.s syrien.ne.s percevaient la capacité de leur travail à répondre aux besoins de la communauté d'une manière adaptée à la culture locale et acceptée par cette communauté comme importante et significative pour eux. À ce titre, les praticien.ne.s syrien.ne.s ont décrit comme utiles et comme source de soutien les actions qui renforcent la coordination et les mécanismes de référence, et celles qui préconisent leur consultation, leur contribution et leur autonomie dans leurs pratiques de travail social. En ce sens, cette thèse argue que l'amélioration du soutien apporté aux praticien.ne.s syrien.ne.s demande une approche psychosociale et nécessite d'apporter des changements à la façon dont on performe les fonctions liées au travail social. Pendant le processus de recherche, cette étude a trouvé qu'inclure les perspectives des praticien.ne.s à la fois dans et sur la recherche par le biais d'un comité consultatif communautaire a pour effet de renforcer la pertinence de la recherche pour la culture et le contexte en question, en plus d'offrir l'opportunité aux praticien.e.s de développer leur agentivité épistémique. Ainsi, cette thèse soutient que la recherche en cas d'urgences complexes devrait inclure les perspectives des praticien.ne.s, à condition que ces dernier.ère.s tirent des bénéfices directs de leur implication dans la recherche. De tels bénéfices directs peuvent inclure le partage d'informations utiles et l'opportunité optionnelle d'interagir et d'entrer en contact avec d'autres praticiens. Somme toute, le travail social en cas d'urgences complexes fait une différence, et peut même être crucial pour la survie. C'est pourquoi la profession de travailleur.se social.e doit continuer de défendre et de soutenir les pratiques et les praticien.ne.s de travail social en cas d'urgences complexes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who participated in this study. I would like to thank the Community Advisory Board Members and those who completed interviews. A special thank you to the practitioners who dedicated their hearts, souls and skills to care for other Syrians. Your work inspired me to document these practices through my PhD research to benefit other practitioners, including other Syrian practitioners, and the social work profession globally. May your experiences and perspectives continue to inspire other practitioners who are responding to those who are experiencing difficult situations. Most importantly, I hope the words of your colleagues inspire you.

I would like to thank all those whose participation and support made the research possible. I would like to thank all my colleagues, mentors and friends in humanitarian work who mentored and worked alongside me during some challenging, but meaningful experiences. Those experiences culminated to inspire this dissertation.

Thank you to my supervisor whose support was critical for conducting this research. Thank you for your ongoing encouragement, feedback and support. This dissertation would not be possible without the time and effort you took to offer thoughtful support and feedback. Thank you to my advisory committee for your guidance. Thank you to the two social work graduate program directors whose constant support was also critical to the completion of this research. Thank you to the all the support offered through McGill's Three Months to Advance Your Thesis Program. Thank you to the paid security consultant who thoughtfully reviewed my dissertation plan and was graciously and generously available to answer my questions. Thank you to the paid translator who translated the French abstract.

Thank you to the two peer researchers, Adnan Al Mhamied and Lana Al Houssami, who are Syrian and whose dedication and insights made this research possible. Thank you for sharing your time and input during meetings to discuss the research process. Thank you also for searching the literature in Arabic to inform this dissertations' literature review. Thank you for your efforts to translate and back translate key research documents and share interview invitations. Thank you for your assistance to communicate with the Community Advisory Board members and interview

participants in Arabic and to create, share and translate the online surveys in Arabic. Thank you for the way you conducted, transcribed and translated interviews. I also appreciate your input during the data analysis process and your efforts to translate the final report.

I would also like to thank the leader and members of my Peer Writing Group at McGill for reviewing early drafts of manuscript I, drafts of my methodology section, and components of the literature review for manuscript III. I am also grateful to the instructor and fellow students from the McGill Thesis Lab who reviewed the intro, literature review and findings section of manuscript III.

This research would not be possible without financial support from the following sources: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, McGill University Graduate Mobility Awards, McGill Global Non-Communicable Disease Alliance, and McGill Global Health Programs.

Thank you to my parents, family and friends for your constant encouragement.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who perform social work functions in complex emergencies.

As participants shared during the interviews:

“We hope that the results of our experience that we are living will get to others, in a way that they don’t go through the same suffering” -*Syrian Practitioner*

“Inshallah we will be able to deliver our voice, our messages, and the suffering of people. We hope that there will be a provision of quality services in Syria” -*Syrian Practitioner*

“In the end I mean we want to leave a mark, in the end I am 40 years old, another 20 years and I will be sitting home but I want to leave a mark, leave an impact because in this society if you don’t take a hold of it, generations will be destroyed” -*Syrian Practitioner*

Contribution to Original Knowledge

This research contributes original knowledge to benefit the current Syrian response by documenting perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices and effective forms of support for Syrians who perform such practices. However, this study also contributes knowledge to areas established as priorities within the global social work profession and humanitarian community. The Secretary General of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) acknowledged the social work professions’ failure to address social workers’ concerns in contexts impacted by war and the need to create relevant social work practice models for such settings (Truell, 2020). Specifically, Truell calls for social workers who have experience working during war to guide the social work profession: “we need to turn to the many examples from the prolonged and real experience of social workers in war situations to give us hope and guidance for new and more effective ways of working” (Truell, 2020, p. 180-181). However, the term “complex emergency” can direct the social work professions’ attention to the complexity surrounding social work practice in some settings impacted by war; as Keen (2008) asserts:

more generally, the term ‘civil war’ can prejudice our understanding of the complex fault-lines of conflict and the complex manipulation of violence for a wide variety of purposes, whereas the label ‘complex emergency’ draws attention to complexity and embodies a useful degree of vagueness about the *nature* of a violent conflict. (p. 2)

The nuances and sensitive nature of some humanitarian crises, requires social work research and practice attuned to such intricacies to effectively support practitioners working within the realities of such settings. However, there is only one known study that specifically names and focuses on social work in complex emergencies (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). Knowing more about effective social work practice in complex emergencies can inform the social work profession to better support and equip practitioners who perform social work functions in such challenging settings.

Within the global humanitarian community, The Grand Bargain, which is an agreement signed by 61 state and United Nations agencies as well as the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movements, local and international organizations commit to “more support and funding tools to local and national responders” and “a participation revolution: include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], n.d., para 4). This

commitment is increasing momentum for the localization of humanitarian aid. However, alongside efforts to increase localization of humanitarian aid, there is an ethical imperative to ensure local responders are adequately supported. The Sphere Guidelines (2018) outline the duty of care humanitarian organizations possess to ensure their staff members receive sufficient support. Thus, to support these priorities, this dissertation draws upon the experience of Syrian and international practitioners with experience performing social work functions in response to the complex emergency in Northwest Syria. Given the difficulties of performing social work practice in such settings, the dissertation also explores these practitioners' perspectives on how to improve support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria. The three manuscripts included in this dissertation offer distinct contributions to original knowledge.

Manuscript I Contribution to Knowledge: *Benefiting or Extracting: Facilitating a Remote Community Advisory Board in a Complex Emergency to Improve Social Work Research Ethics & Relevance- An Example from Northwest Syria*

Considering the need to engage practitioners in research to produce more relevant research within humanitarian contexts (Tol et al., 2012), knowing more about how to practically and effectively engage practitioners in research during complex emergencies can strengthen researchers' ability to design and implement research that offers practitioners meaningful opportunities to be included. Thus, manuscript I outlines how this dissertation research designed and implemented an online Community Advisory Board to incorporate international and Syrian practitioners' perspectives both *in* and *on* the research during a complex emergency. Existing research in low- and middle-income settings benefits from the use of a Community Advisory Board (Zhao et al., 2019). Similarly, existing social work research to develop a social work curriculum used an in person advisory committee in Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2016), and research in Northwest Syria used an independent consultation group (Douderai et al., 2021). Yet, there is a need for further documentation of how to effectively design and facilitate an online Community Advisory Board during a complex emergency, such as the ongoing crises in Northwest Syria. This manuscript builds on the literature on facilitating Community Advisory Boards in low- and middle-income settings (Zhao et al., 2019) and existing recommendations for conducting remote, qualitative research in conflict settings (Douderai et al., 2021). To build on this existing scholarship, this manuscript describes methodological lessons learned and recommendations to improve the use of online

Community Advisory Boards in other complex emergencies. This first manuscript argues that practitioners' involvement in research can strengthen the study's ethics and relevance, but research should not only *extract* information from practitioners to purely advance research without offering a *benefit* to practitioners. By drawing upon insights and feedback from Community Advisory Board members during the interviews and online surveys, this manuscript highlights two key findings. First, this study found facilitating a pilot project with the online CAB promoted the study's ethics and relevance to the Syrian context. Second, the interview data indicates how when carefully facilitated, practitioners could benefit from their involvement in the research process and practitioners hoped the findings would help them in their ongoing practice and also benefit other practitioners. This manuscript also discusses how offering practitioners opportunities for epistemic agency by including their perspectives both *in* and *on* the research helps to decolonize social work in complex emergencies, where practitioners, and particularly local practitioners, may not have many opportunities to be included in research and knowledge production. Ultimately, this first manuscript offers important insights to researchers with a focus on complex emergencies by promoting learning about best practices for research in such settings. In addition, this article is also the first known piece of social work scholarship to discuss social work research methods during complex emergencies, contributing to key social work knowledge. Knowing more about how to effectively conduct social work research in complex emergencies could help other researchers plan and facilitate studies in these settings, fostering the feasibility and effectiveness of conducting social work research in complex emergencies which could help address the existing knowledge gaps on social work practice in complex emergencies.

Manuscript II Contribution to Knowledge: *Perspectives on 'Good' Social Work Practices in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: A Study of Northwest Syria*

There is a lack of social work research in complex emergencies, and particularly social work research exploring perspectives on effective social work practices. The second manuscript draws upon the Syrian and international practitioners' perspectives of 'good' social work practice within a complex emergency such as Northwest Syria. Creating a unique contribution to social work practice knowledge globally, some Syrian practitioners in the study have over 10 years performing social work functions in response to the Syrian crisis, without formal social work education. Not having formal social work education in Syria prior to the crisis provides a unique setting to explore how effective social work practices emerged in a context without a history of formal social work

education. Notably, this study offered Syrian practitioners an opportunity to share their perspectives on what they perceived as ‘good’ social work practices in Arabic with a Syrian interviewer, ensuring that practitioners who preferred to offer their insights in Arabic rather than English could participate in the study. Since data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also explored and offers insights on ‘good’ social work practice during the pandemic. This second manuscript highlights how practitioners described the important and culturally embedded roles of Syrian families and communities which the complex emergency strained, creating a need for new social work practices to help to restore these roles. Existing scholarship and global guidelines emphasize the importance of strengthening family and community support during emergencies (Bragin, 2020; IASC, 2007). This manuscript contributes to this existing knowledge by highlighting how Syrian and international practitioners perceived ‘good’ social work practices as those practices that helped to re-activate the family and community’s supportive roles through a range of social work practices that the community perceives as suitable. For example, practitioners highlighted the following ‘good’ practices that could help restore the family and community’s supportive roles: facilitating peer group activities, supporting livelihoods, the creation of supportive centres, providing case management, raising awareness, and community-led initiatives. Yet, practitioners also shared how ‘good’ social work practices should be rooted in aspects of Syrian culture such as spirituality, religion, and stigma. Practitioners also noted ‘good’ practices are best practiced by practitioners who know the community, are trustworthy and have a relevant education and background. Ultimately, this second manuscript illustrates how social work matters in complex emergencies and can even be lifesaving, calling for continued attention to strengthen social work practice and improve support for practitioners who perform social work functions in complex emergencies. The manuscript contributes to the knowledge of how to restore the social fabric in complex emergencies by providing practical examples of how social work practice can help to re-activate family and community supports during complex emergencies. This manuscript also helps build a foundation to inform future social work-related interventions in Northwest Syria by capturing and formally documenting existing social work practice knowledge. This second manuscript offers implications for social work research by demonstrating how research can explore perspectives on social work practice within complex emergencies in order to strengthen social work practice models for such settings. Finally, this second manuscript demonstrates how the practitioners with experience on the ground, within the realities of social work practice in complex emergencies, must be given

opportunities to formally document their experiences to benefit other practitioners working in complex emergencies and the social work profession globally.

Manuscript III Contribution to Knowledge: *Strengthening Organizational Support for National Humanitarian Staff in Complex Emergencies: Perspectives from Northwest Syria*

Considering the increased global commitments and momentum to improve support for national humanitarian staff (IASC, 2019a; IASC, 2019b; Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [RCRC], 2019), only three known studies explore support for national humanitarian staff (de Fouchier & Kedia, 2018; Strohmeier et al., 2019; Othman et al., 2018). Situated within the literature and global guidelines to support national humanitarian staff, this third manuscript draws upon both Syrian and international practitioners' perspectives on how to improve support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria. This manuscript highlights how practitioners shared the distinct impact of performing social work functions in complex emergencies. Yet, practitioners also emphasized how performing social work functions that were perceived as useful to address the communities' needs in a manner that was relevant to the culture and context and accepted by the community was particularly important and impactful to them. Thus, this manuscript argues that improving support for national staff who perform social work functions requires making changes to how practitioners perform social work practice by taking a psychosocial approach. Specifically, practitioners in the study stated that strengthening coordination and referral mechanisms as well as improving their involvement, input and autonomy on the social work practices were supportive and helpful for themselves as practitioners. Thus, this manuscript asserts that improving support for national staff who perform social work functions should consider taking a psychosocial approach to how practitioners perform social work functions. For those engaged in supporting national staff who perform social work functions, this manuscript calls for future research and practice to consider how adopting a psychosocial approach to make changes to how practitioners perform social work functions could be helpful form of support and potential organizational intervention to support national staff. Specifically, the article calls for two potential key actions to apply this a psychosocial approach: (1) identify and address national staff's concerns related to social work practice and (2) consider increasing practitioners' input, involvement and autonomy to conceptualize and implement social work practice to support practitioners. The research makes an original contribution to knowledge by exploring both perspectives on 'good' social work practice and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners in the same study. For

the social work profession, this manuscript highlights the importance of ongoing research to develop more relevant models of social work practice in complex emergencies as part of supporting national staff who perform social work functions.

Taken together, this dissertation contributes to existing knowledge by giving more voice to practitioners with experience working in the reality of complex emergencies. These practitioners' perspectives, whose lives and vital work often go unrecognized, can guide the direction of social work practice in complex emergencies to proceed in a manner that reduces the risks of harms that can arise from practicing social work in complex emergencies. This dissertation helps to equip policy makers, researchers and practitioners to appreciate and depend on the foundational knowledge of social workers within complex emergencies. Ultimately, this dissertation captures and validates the sophisticated manner in which Syrian practitioners performed locally established social work functions during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria.

Contribution of Authors

To contribute to the comprehensive literature review for this dissertation, Lana Al Houssami searched the Arabic literature.

Manuscript I: Benefiting or Extracting: Facilitating a Remote Community Advisory Board in a Complex Emergency to Improve Social Work Research Ethics & Relevance- An Example from Northwest Syria

Authors: Paul, K., Al Houssami, L. & Bragin, M.

Karen Paul: Conceptualization of study and methodology, project administration, funding acquisition, managed data collection process, conducted and transcribed interviews, analyzed data, writing – original draft,¹ revising original draft

Martha Bragin: Writing – reviewing and editing.

Lana Al Houssami: Data collection – conducted translation and back translation; supported recruitment and communication with participants in Arabic; conducted, transcribed translated interviews in Arabic; wrote memos to inform data analysis, and provided input on data analysis. Writing – reviewing and editing.

Manuscript II: Perspectives on ‘Good’ Social Work Practices in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: A Study of Northwest Syria

Authors: Paul, K., Denov, M., and Al Houssami., L.

Karen Paul: Project administration, funding acquisition, managed data collection process, conducted and transcribed interviews, analyzed data, writing – original draft

Myriam Denov: Supervision, conceptualization, methodology, writing – reviewing and editing

Lana Al Houssami: Data collection and analysis, writing – reviewing and editing

Manuscript III: Strengthening Organizational Support for National Humanitarian Staff in Complex Emergencies: Perspectives from Northwest Syria

Authors: Paul, K., Denov, M., and Al Houssami., L.

Karen Paul: Project administration, funding acquisition, managed data collection process, conducted and transcribed interviews, analyzed data, writing – original draft

Myriam Denov: Supervision, writing – reviewing and editing

Lana Al Houssami: Data collection and analysis, writing – reviewing and editing

Overall Contributions to Data Collection and Analysis

Under Dr. Myriam Denov’s supervision and guidance, I took the lead in designing the research and online Community Advisory Board, acquiring funding for research costs such as Arabic translation, facilitating data collection and collaborating with two Peer Researchers who are Syrian –

¹ This article informed the description of contributions: Brand, A., Allen, L., Altman, M., Hlava, M., & Scott, J. (2015). Beyond authorship: attribution, contribution, collaboration, and credit. *Learned Publishing*, 28(2), 151-155. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1087/20150211>

Adnan Al Mhamied and Lana Al Houssami. During 2020 and 2021, I facilitated weekly meetings with the two peer researchers to discuss and coordinate the research. The two peer researchers conducted the following:

- Translated and back translated key research documents
- Communicated with Community Advisory Board members and participants in Arabic
- Conducted interviews with Community Advisory Board members and participant in Arabic and English
- Transcribed Arabic interviews

Lana Al Houssami, a peer researcher, who is also an author on the manuscripts, did the following:

- Helped recruit participants
- Translated the interviews from Arabic to English
- Wrote memos to support data analysis
- Facilitated the online surveys with the Community Advisory Board in Arabic
- Provided input on the final report
- Translated the final report

I also conducted three interviews in English and transcribed six English interviews. I took the lead in data analysis and writing by conducting the initial analysis of the interviews followed by line-by-line analysis and then segment by segment analysis. I drafted the final report. The second author, Dr. Myriam Denov provided overall supervision and support throughout the research process.

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 – Research Implementation Flow Chart

Chart 1 – Interview Guide Changes Chart

Figure 2 – Perspectives on Good Social Work Practices in Northwest Syria

Figure 3 – Perspectives on Effective Forms of Support for Syrian Practitioners

List of Abbreviations

ACU IMU – Assistance Coordination Unit/ Information Management Unit
AoR – Area of Responsibility
AUB- American University of Beirut
BASW – British Association of Social Workers
BiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina
CAB – Community Advisory Board
CAR – Central African Republic
CBPR – Community-Based Participatory Research
CGT – Constructivist Grounded Theory
CP – Child Protection
DACUM – Develop-A-Curriculum
DOI- Digital Object Identifier
FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD – Focus Group Discussion
GBV – Gender-based Violence
GSSWA – Global Social Service Workforce Alliance
HeRAMS – Health Resources Availability Monitoring System
HNO – Humanitarian Needs Overview
IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IASSW – International Association of Schools of Social Work
ICRC – The International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP – Internally Displaced Person
IFSW – International Federation of Social Work
IFRC – International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMC – International Medical Corps
LMIC- Low- and middle-income country
MA – Mine Action
MHPSS – Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSP- Minimum Services Package
M&E – Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO- Non-governmental organization
NWS- North-West Syria
OCHA – Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OED – Oxford English Dictionary
OPT – Occupied Palestinian Territories
PFA – Psychological First Aid
PhD – Doctor of Philosophy
PR – Peer Researcher
PSW – Psychosocial Worker
RCRC – Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
REB – Research Ethics Board
R2HC – Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises
SOP – Standard Operating Procedure
SPC – Syria Protection Cluster
TOR – Terms of Reference

UN- United Nations

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UNOCHA – United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNODC – United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WHO – World Health Organization

WHO EMRO – World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office

Introduction

Acknowledging the Presence and Reality of Social Work Practice and Practitioners in Complex Emergencies

Practicing social work in complex emergencies may result in an array of harms such as importing western models of social work practice that are inappropriate and/or incongruent to the contexts (Bragin et al., 2016). As such, many cautions should be taken to avoid undermining the affected populations' strengths, resources, capacities, and natural forms of coping (IASC, 2007) through social work practice. Although social work practice in complex emergencies may cause harm, this dissertation also acknowledges that social work practice and practitioners *exist and practice* within complex emergencies. Drawing upon and inspired by my experience as a social worker working alongside such practitioners in complex emergencies such as Ukraine, Afghanistan, Libya and the Syria response, this dissertation acknowledges the reality that social workers and practitioners who perform social work functions in complex emergencies are, on a daily basis, face to face with individuals and communities affected by unimaginable violence and suffering. The extent of this violence, suffering and loss is so unfathomable, one can't even begin to describe it in writing to give the people who experience these losses the necessary honour and respect. Yet, it is against this very backdrop, that this dissertation seeks to continue to turn the social work professions' attention towards the practitioners who are working within the reality of complex emergencies such as Northwest Syria. This dissertation also seeks to support practitioners working in complex emergencies by documenting the practice knowledge of practitioners with experience working in Northwest Syria.

Research Rationale and Objectives

Research Rationale

While working on social work in Afghanistan in 2013, I witnessed how social work exists within complex emergencies. Following my initial work in Afghanistan, I took a course on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in complex emergencies (Fordham, n.d.) where I learned about the distinct reality of complex emergencies and how these humanitarian crises can impair the functioning of existing institutions and systems (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.), creating a possible need for external support. This conception of complex emergencies resonated with me after working in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, I witnessed how levels of substance use increased

(United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2009), and thereby amplified the need to support Afghans who were dependent on substances. This rising need strained Afghanistan's existing system of care for mental health and substance dependence, creating a need for support to strengthen Afghanistan's system of care for mental health and substance use to address these rising needs. Simultaneously, I witnessed efforts to formalize social work in Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2016) creating a unique opportunity to strengthen the role and practice of social work to further support the recovery of Afghans from substance use within systems of care for mental health and substance dependence. Through these experiences, I both learned about and witnessed the notion of "building back better" within the field of MHPSS in emergencies (WHO, 2013). This notion acknowledges how alongside the suffering caused by emergencies, such crises can also create opportunities to build back better by strengthening mental health systems to improve these systems' quality and ability to address mental health needs for the long term such as through decentralizing services and establishing community based mental health care (WHO, 2013). Building on my experience in Afghanistan, I saw opportunities for the social work profession to contribute to this process of building systems of care back better which motivated my continued field work.

During my fieldwork in complex emergencies from 2013 to 2017, I worked alongside Libyans, Afghans, Ukrainians, and Syrians who provided social work functions, with and without formal training in social work. I witnessed how national practitioners who performed social work functions were a key part of existing systems such as mental health systems. During my practice, I was intrigued by how these roles could be strengthened or built back better in the context of these complex emergencies. I saw opportunities to further support these social workers who existed within current systems of care. I can remember sitting at my desk in Afghanistan and searching on my computer for social work scholarship that could guide this process of supporting practitioners to perform social work functions. I was wondering how might an Afghan 'social worker' support another Afghan who wants to stop using substances in a small town far from Kabul? How would this practitioner adequately incorporate Afghan culture into their practice? How would this practitioner navigate the resources available to them in a small town or rural area far from the city? What techniques would this practitioner use? Although I experienced difficulties to find such guidance within existing social work scholarship, those who wrote the most relevant scholarship, which was available at that time, supervised this dissertation research – specifically Dr. Myriam

Denov and Dr. Martha Bragin. I also received supervision and support from newer, relevant scholars such as Dr. Amal Elsana.

During my practice in complex emergencies including Afghanistan, Libya, Ukraine and the Syria response, I often struggled to know which types of practices were useful, especially practices with groups and communities. In my experience, understanding the usefulness and origin of the practices felt like peeling back an onion's layers. On one layer, practitioners' ability to search practices on the internet influenced social work practice, which I felt could lead to helpful practices at times and harmful practices at other times. On another layer of this onion, the humanitarian response and external actors from different contexts who sought to offer support also influenced practitioners, which I also believed could improve the effectiveness of practice or lead to practices that could cause harm. Yet, another layer of the onion was the local response to care for others. During my own practice experience, the combination of and interaction between these layers seemed complex and difficult for me to peel back to identify what practices or combination of practices truly offered support prior to starting a program or initiative. Although the use of monitoring and evaluation processes could provide critical information about the usefulness of a practice during the implementation of such practice, I experienced difficulties navigating these various layers of the onion at the planning stage. I also noticed that these layers of external influence, online materials, and the local response could at times be challenging or even overwhelming for national practitioners to discern. During my dissertation research, I sought to further understand the complex interplay of factors influencing 'good' social work practices in complex emergencies and how to better support practitioners to navigate these complicated layers.

After leaving my time of fieldwork in humanitarian aid and returning to the classroom to pursue a PhD in social work, I was inspired by the creativity and courage of my colleagues, including my Syrian colleagues. Working on the Syria response was the most darkness I have ever experienced because of the intensity of the crisis. However, that experience was also, simultaneously, the most light I had ever experienced due to the actions of my Syrian colleagues to care for other Syrians. Upon returning to the classroom, I also constantly struggled to articulate and put into words my experiences with social work practice in complex emergencies. In complex emergencies, this combination of such a profound light and such a profound darkness creates the backdrop for a beautiful and unique type of social work practice and practitioner to emerge. I became motivated to

document this type of social work practice and practitioner to inform the global social work profession. I hope the social work profession can continue to understand and learn from the experience of practitioners who are practicing within the reality of complex emergencies.

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I struggled with how to become a researcher who conducts the type of research that would have guided and supported my practice when I was working in complex emergencies. During my PhD, I wrestled with how I would become the type of researcher that conducts research that would benefit the Syrian, Afghan, Ukrainian and Libyan practitioners I worked with. How would I continue to coordinate with other humanitarian actors to produce such research? I wrestled with how my scholarship could address the challenges of practice in such settings and offer some professional support, acknowledgement and appreciation for those practicing social work in complex emergencies. Throughout my doctoral studies, I realized how challenging it can be for social work research to address those questions and conduct relevant research. However, my doctoral research is my attempt to build on what other practitioners, researchers and scholars have navigated to create a presence of social work scholarship that offers relevance and support to practitioners performing social work functions in complex emergencies. Thus, this work is dedicated to those who perform social work functions in complex emergencies.

Furthermore, my own experience participating in research while working in complex emergencies and interacting with researchers in complex emergencies informed the research design. For example, my personal experience motivated me to involve practitioners throughout the research process. My previous experience participating in research as a practitioner also motivated me to be mindful of what questions the interviews asked to avoid causing distress through an interview and avoid asking questions about sensitive topics. Since I have experience working in complex emergencies, I selected a constructivist epistemology and methodology that acknowledged the influence of my own experience on the process of research creation. However, to ensure my own personal experience was appropriately incorporated into the research I took steps such as writing memos, writing in a methodological journal, working closely with two peer researchers who are Syrian and facilitating a Community Advisory Board. Through my time working in complex emergencies, I learned how such emergencies can include many sensitivities which require careful thought and integration throughout conducting and disseminating social work research. Notably, Northwest Syria is a delicate context, requiring careful attention to do no harm by conducting

research. Furthermore, Mazurana et al., (2013) have noted that when conducting research in conflict settings, there may be things that cannot be said and silence is an important consideration.

Ultimately, the necessity and ability of practitioners to continue to perform social work functions in complex emergencies, with few available practice models from the social work profession, creates a strong rationale for social work research to explore perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies through a study of a specific area of Northwest Syria.² Consequently, this dissertation seeks to shed light on these unique practitioners, both Syrian and international, and to document their voices in order to inform the social work profession’s direction within complex emergencies. The practitioners who are on the ground, and in the thick of the realities of social work practice in complex emergencies must be given a formal, documented way to share their experiences to benefit other Syrian practitioners and practitioners in other complex emergencies. In spite of the difficulties of performing social work functions in complex emergencies, this dissertation highlights the tenacity of practitioners to develop forms of social work practice to address the affected communities’ needs through their practice. So perhaps, by giving more voice to practitioners with experience in these realities, these practitioners’ perspectives can guide the direction of social work practice in complex emergencies to proceed in a manner that reduce the risks of harms that can arise from practicing social work in complex emergencies.

Building Social Work [Back] Better in Complex Emergencies

This dissertation builds upon the existing movement to build mental health systems back better during humanitarian crises (WHO, 2013), by calling the social work profession to consider how complex emergencies also create an opening to carefully consider how social work practice is emerging in such crises. This dissertation calls the social work profession to ‘build social work back better’ rather than simply importing or supporting models of social work that may be irrelevant or even harmful. Thus, ‘building social work back better’ requires efforts to reduce the risks of harm arising from social work practice in complex emergencies and to move towards quality social work practices that are more effective and relevant to the culture and context. Furthermore, contexts experiencing complex emergencies such as Northwest Syria that did not have a formal social work

² The research occurred in a specific area of Northwest Syria, which is notable as the needs might be different according to the context. The specific area is available upon request due to the sensitivity of the situation and the area as well as to protect participants’ safety.

profession prior to the crisis but have practitioners performing social work practice call for careful consideration of how to ‘build social work better.’ As such, complex emergencies provide an opportunity to ‘build social work [back] better’ in a way that aligns with the supportive and caring aspects of the culture. Since it is important to not assume that all aspects of a culture are supportive (IASC, 2007), research can explore perspectives on which aspects of the culture and new practices emerging within the emergency response are considered supportive and useful to document and promote ‘better’ social work practice. Considering how to ‘build social work [back] better’ also requires careful consideration of how social work research is conducted and how practitioners who perform social work functions are included in research during complex emergencies. However, there is a lack of social work research in complex emergencies globally or in Northwest Syria to inform such a process of ‘building social work [back] better.’ By gathering the insights of both international and Syrian practitioners on ‘good’ social work practice in Northwest Syria and how to improve support for Syrian practitioners, this dissertation seeks to foster considerations on how to ‘build social work [back] better’ in complex emergencies such as Northwest Syria. To describe the background for this research, this dissertation will describe the complex emergency in Northwest Syria, the importance of social work in complex emergencies such as Northwest Syria, and the state of social work in Northwest Syria.

The Complex Emergency in Northwest Syria

Northwest Syria is experiencing a complex emergency (WHO, 2022). The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres’ describes the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Northwest Syria by stating:

Needs in the north-west of Syria continue to increase: 2.8 million people, mostly women and children, are displaced. Many live in camps or informal settlements. More than 90 per cent of people in the North-West need aid. These are people who have suffered particularly heavily during 11 years of conflict and humanitarian crisis. (United Nations [UN], 2022, June 20, para 8)

Although the International Federation for the Red Cross (2019) described Syria as a complex emergency prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic heightened the complexity of the crisis. After Northwest Syria had its first confirmed case of COVID-19 in July 2020, the pandemic caused additional strain on health care (Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2022a)

as health care facilities had, in the past, not been able to address existing needs prior to the pandemic (Humanitarian Needs Overview [HNO], 2022). At the time of writing, despite the decreased prevalence of COVID-19, the pandemic remains an ongoing concern. Uncertainty and hesitation around the vaccine created a barrier for ongoing COVID-19 vaccinations. Although COVID-19 vaccinations began in May 2021, just 9% of people in Northwest Syria had one vaccine dose, and approximately 5% of people had both doses in April 2022 (OCHA, 2022a). In sum, complex emergencies create a challenging setting to perform social work functions.

The Importance of Social Work Practice in Complex Emergencies: The Context in Northwest Syria

The context in Northwest Syria illustrates the importance and relevance of social work practice to respond to needs arising through the complex emergency. The protracted complex emergency in Syria may weaken social structures and family networks as Syrians may have experienced loss or separation from loved ones (Hassan et al., 2015). Difficulties meeting basic needs may increase violence and stress within families, cause Syrians to take on debt, access informal housing or employment which increases their vulnerability to further abuse and exploitation (Hassan et al., 2015). Challenges meeting basic needs, accessing services and a weakened social fabric may also be linked to the significant increase of sexual and gender-based violence (Hassan et al., 2015). In response, a key resource is social workers who play a critical role in responding to the needs arising from complex emergencies (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). Social work plays a critical role in responding to the needs of persons living in complex emergencies as well as contributing to a longer term, sustainable response and development of systems. Yet, it is important for interventions to be appropriate within the local culture, adapted to the affected community, utilize “culture-specific expertise” and emphasize the strengths of the affected persons (de Jong, 2002, p. 37). This requires a need to reconsider current conceptions of good social work practices existing in high income or western contexts (Rabiau, Denov & Paul, 2023). Knowing more about perspectives on effective social work practice in complex emergencies can improve the ability of practitioners who perform social work functions to respond to their communities’ needs.

State of Social Work in Northwest Syria

Prior to the start of the crisis, Syria did not have a formal social work profession and social work may have been in its initial stages of formation (The Professional Association for

Social Work and Social Workers [BASW], 2013). Notably, Syrian women's and youth organizations may have conducted social work functions to support women, children and families prior to the crisis. In addition, Islam has requirements to care for those in need (Murphy, 2011). Yet, Syrians nonetheless performed social work functions for war-affected persons (Harrison et al., 2013; Hassan, 2013). For example, local Syrians provided case management for very vulnerable Iraqi refugees in Syria (Quosh, 2013). After the crisis began in 2011, these case management services began to include care for Syrians and expanded to provide support through hotlines as well as mobile outreach services (Quosh, 2013). The International Federation for Social Work (IFSW, 2016) supported local Syrian social workers to develop a Syrian social work organization but acknowledge the profession's need to do more. Affected Syrians such as village councils continue to play a key role in responding to and protecting vulnerable groups (Syria Protection Cluster [SPC], 2019). Local charities are providing food for displaced Syrians and humanitarian actors increased their support for those newly displaced Syrians (OCHA, 2020), demonstrating local Syrian practitioners who conduct social work functions play a critical role to support other Syrians.

To offer insight into the number of Syrians who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria, the WHO (2021) recently reported 2,053 social workers within the mental health workforce in all of Syria. In Northwest Syria, the Turkey Health Cluster for Northwest Syria reported community health workers as part of the available staff by health facilities (Health Resources Availability Monitoring System [HeRAMS], 2021). Notably, community health workers provide social work functions such as referrals to services and providing information. The Turkey Health Cluster reported 93 community health workers available in hospitals; 59 community health workers available in mobile clinics; 536 community health workers available in primary health care; 27 community health workers available in specialized care centres; and 235 community health workers available in other locations (HeRAMs, 2021). Although the benchmark for the number of available community health workers is more than 10 per 10,000, Northwest Syria has only 2 available community health workers available for every 10,000 people (HeRAMs, 2021). Furthermore, Nemiro et al. (2021) note that a recent initiative trained 120 psychosocial workers in the region, and WHO developed a training manual and provided training for 41 psychosocial workers in NWS (WHO, 2018). These numbers offer insights into the presence of Syrians who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria. Although Syria did not have formal social work education prior to the complex emergency, this dissertation research seeks to document these Syrian practitioners practice

knowledge to inform the social work profession globally. To further situate this dissertation research, this dissertation will describe the need for social work globally in complex emergencies, the need for social work research in complex emergencies, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for social work research in Northwest Syria.

The Need for Social Work Research in Complex Emergencies Globally

The social work profession should give further attention to how ‘to build social work [back] better’ in complex emergencies. However, knowing more about what constitutes ‘better’ or ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies can inform the process of promoting more culturally and contextually relevant social work practices. Thus, this dissertation addresses existing research gaps within social work and MHPSS in humanitarian contexts. The social work profession lacks effective practice models for settings affected by war (Truell, 2020) and complex emergencies. More recently, the annual State of the Social Service Workforce Report highlighted *The Vital Role of the Social Service Workforce in Humanitarian Contexts* (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance [GSSWA], 2022). This report recommended to “build the evidence base” and called for additional research to highlight the social service workers’ roles throughout the emergency response as well as how the social service workforces’ unique abilities can best support those impacted by emergencies (GSSWA, 2022, p. 43). Similarly, Ventevogel and Whitney (2023) highlighted the need to better emphasize the role of social work within the growing attention towards MHPSS in humanitarian contexts. Within the field of MHPSS in humanitarian contexts, specific existing research gaps include how to improve community level social supports; the efficacy of local supports (Tol et al., 2020); and family focused interventions (ELRHA, 2020). There is also a need to develop more practical and rigorous methods to evaluate commonly used community-based psychosocial support programs such as awareness campaigns (Haroz et al., 2020). This dissertation research helps address these gaps through a study of Northwest Syria.

The Need for Social Work Research in Complex Emergencies During COVID-19

Despite existing initiatives to support social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2020a; IFSW, 2020b; IFSW, 2020c) as well as research and scholarship documenting practitioners’ experiences during the pandemic (Amira, 2020; Musinguzi et al., 2022), there is no known social work research exploring perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies during the pandemic. To support the response to the

COVID-19 pandemic, IFSW developed key functions of social workers during COVID-19. These key functions included community mobilization to promote the availability of basic needs; including vulnerable persons throughout the design and implementation of the response; and “advocating within social services and in policy environments that services adapt, remain open and pro-active in supporting communities and vulnerable populations” (IFSW, 2020c, para 2). IFSW also developed ethical guidance for practicing social work during the COVID-19 pandemic (IFSW 2020a; IFSW 2020b) by drawing upon global research exploring ethical challenges for social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Banks et al., 2020). Since the research conducted by Banks et al., (2020) was not available in Arabic, this dissertation research contributes to existing social work knowledge on the pandemic by being accessible to practitioners in Arabic. Although existing social work literature described social work in Palestine during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amira, 2020), and social work research explored the experiences of social workers in Uganda during the pandemic (Musunguzi et al., 2022), there is no known social work research exploring perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies during the pandemic. However, such exploration can further inform the social work profession’s response to future health emergencies.

The Need for Social Work Research in Northwest Syria

Knowing more about how practitioners perceive ‘good’ social work practice in line with the culture and context in Northwest Syria can help build ‘better’ social work practice if Syria decides to formalize the profession. Although there is existing research exploring the experiences of Syrian mental health professionals in Turkey (Hamid et al., 2020), and an evaluation of an organizational staff care program in Northern Syria (Othman et al., 2018), there are no known studies exploring international and Syrian practitioners’ perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria. Since existing research focused on health care providers in Syria (Fardousi et al., 2019; Footer et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2022), this dissertation research addresses the need for more knowledge on how to effectively support Syrians performing social work functions to strengthen organizations’ abilities to support these practitioners. Echoing Ekzayez (2020), a Syrian doctor and researcher who asserted the need for more research to document good practices and lessons learned during the health response in Northwest Syria, this dissertation research documents ‘good’ social work practices during the existing response in Northwest Syria.

Research Objectives

To address these gaps in knowledge, this dissertation research pursues the following research questions:

- Research Question: Drawing upon a study of Northwest Syria, what are perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practice in the midst of complex emergencies?
- Research Sub-Questions:
 - What is considered ‘good’ social work practice conducted by Syrians during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria?
 - What are useful forms of support for Syrians who perform social work functions in the midst of the complex emergency in Northwest Syria?
 - What are recommendations for ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies?

This dissertation research considers ‘good’ practices as those that are proven to be useful and create good results, and are thereby recommended as models (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2016). Notably, this dissertation’s research questions and method were established prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as the pandemic emerged, the study adjusted to this new reality by incorporating questions about the pandemic into the interviews. Since the original research questions centre overall on perspectives on good social work practice during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria, perspectives on good social work practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northwest Syria are not the primary focus of this dissertation. Future work with the existing data set will analyze and share the data focused on ‘good’ social work practices and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic to help inform future responses to health emergencies within complex emergencies.

Conceptualizing and Defining Social Work in the Context of Northwest Syria

Since Syria did not have a formal social work profession before the start of the complex emergency, the global definition of social work and core purposes of social work guide this study. The International Federation for Social Work defines social work stating, “social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (IFSW, 2014, para. 1). Similarly, the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* describe social

work as “targeted at interventions for social support and for developmental, protective, preventive and/or therapeutic purposes” (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p. 3). These standards also highlight the *Core Purposes of Social Work* which include to advocate to protect persons who may experience difficulties to protect themselves; to support the inclusion of vulnerable groups; to assist persons to access community resources; and “form short and longer-term working relationships with and mobilize individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities to enhance their well-being and their problem-solving capacities” (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p.3). In a setting such as Northwest Syria, that did not have a formal social work profession prior to the start of the crises, the core purposes of social work offer insights into what constitutes social work practice in Northwest Syria. As illustrated through this research, practitioners performed locally based, social work functions in Northwest Syria in line with the overall definition and values of social work.

Comprehensive Review of the Literature

To situate this doctoral dissertation within the current literature, this section describes the existing research on social work practice in complex emergencies, the rationale for situating research on complex emergencies within scholarship on social work in conflict settings, and how social work scholarship on conflict settings informs social work research in complex emergencies. To situate this doctoral dissertation within the Syrian context and culture, this section also discusses formal education and professions related to social work in Syria.

Existing Research on Social Work in Complex Emergencies

The existing study (Bragin & Garcia, 2009) that names and focuses on the reality of social work in complex emergencies, demonstrates the relevance of the social work profession to the response to complex emergencies and the need for more attention to social work in complex emergencies. In this study, Bragin and Garcia (2009) explored the necessary competencies for practitioners working in child protection through interviews with participants from humanitarian organizations who respond to complex emergencies and natural disasters (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). Overall, the study found the competencies necessary for social work practice are similar to the required competencies from international organizations who provide support to children and young people during complex emergencies and disasters (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). Based on the study’s results, Bragin and Garcia (2009) suggest social work should play a larger role globally in

strengthening local capacity to promote culturally relevant, effective practice with children and youth who are impacted by natural disasters and complex emergencies, implying the possibility that this practice could extend to other areas in addition to children and youth. According to the study, two outstanding questions are how to increase the social work profession's effectiveness and recognition in emergency settings; and how to increase the social work profession's capacity to enable professional social workers from the context to lead in areas impacted by crisis (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). This dissertation contributes to addressing these outstanding gaps by exploring perspectives on 'good' social work practice in complex emergencies.

Rationale for Situating Research on Complex Emergencies Within Scholarship on Social Work in Conflict Settings

In the absence of a robust literature specifically focused on social work and complex emergencies, the existing social work research and scholarship on war and conflict also informs this dissertation research. Since complex emergencies may involve conflict (IASC, 1994) and humanitarian crises connected to mass violence, conflict, genocide and civil war may also be complex emergencies (Keen, 2008), social work scholarship and research on war and conflict offers relevance to this study on social work in complex emergencies. Providing additional support for the use of this literature, Allen and Schomerus (2012) describe how the term "complex emergencies" can be ambiguous, yet this term is a recognized way to describe contexts impacted by war that include an international humanitarian response. Existing literature describes social work in post-conflict settings (Ana & Nino, 2012; Bragin 2015; Corbin, 2012; Denov 2010; Doucet & Denov, 2012; Duffy, 2009; Frederico & Picton, 2007; Harachi et al., 2011; Rohr, 2012; Schiff et al., 2018; Sonnenberg & Ghaderi, 2021), but social work practice differs in the midst of active conflict than when the setting is peaceful. Other social work scholarship describes social work with immigrants and refugees fleeing war (Mapp, 2007; Snoubar et al., 2017) and care for refugees in a host country (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012; Harding & Libal, 2012), yet host country policies, structures, initiatives and the presence of social workers from the host country make social work practice different than social work practice in complex emergencies. Similarly, existing social work literature focuses on disasters (Bragin, 2011; Boursassa, 2009; Boyd, 2007; Dominelli, 2013; Herath, 2017; Laksmono et al., 2008;). Although complex emergencies can be "exacerbated by disasters associated with natural hazards" (WHO, n.d., para. 13), Duffield (1994) distinguishes complex emergencies from natural disasters:

Unlike natural disasters, complex emergencies have a singular ability to erode or destroy the cultural, civil, political and economic integrity of established societies. They attack social systems and networks. Humanitarian assistance itself can become a target of violence and appropriation by political actors who are organic parts of the crisis. Complex emergencies are internal to political and economic structures. They are different from natural disasters and deserve to be understood and responded to as such. (p. 4)

Since disasters are typically more one-time event rather than a protracted conflict, complex emergencies require a unique form of social work practice that differs from disasters. As some complex emergencies lack a formal social work profession, this dissertation also builds upon the existing social work literature describing the experience of paraprofessionals performing social work functions within extreme environments (Lavalette, 2011).

How Social Work Scholarship on Conflict Settings Informs Research in Complex Emergencies

This social work literature emerging from settings impacted by war and conflict highlights consistent themes over time, supporting the need for this dissertation research and informing aspects of this study's design. This existing scholarship discusses how social work practice in settings impacted by war and armed conflict settings raises questions about the nature of social work; is influenced by the social work profession's status and societal structures; requires multi-leveled practice; impacts social workers; requires supervision; necessitates quality social work education; and links to the global level.

Conflict Settings Raise Questions About the Nature of Social Work

The existing literature on social work practice in conflict settings and extreme situations raises questions about the nature of social work practice. Lavalette (2011) questions if people need to be formally trained as professional social workers to engage in social work; who are social workers; and what constitutes professional social work? Jani (2015) and Campbell et al., (2018) also discuss the challenge to define social work. Lavalette (2011) describes "popular social work" as social work practice that emerges in extreme environments, stating that emergencies present an

immediate need to develop social work practice that collaborates with communities to address their needs. To address these critical needs, “communities and social movements act to create an engaged popular social work” (Lavalette, 2011, p. 1). Notably, while popular social work should inform effective social work practice, not all popular social work may be effective. Those performing popular social work may also not be adequately equipped to care for persons experiencing multi-complex protection and mental health needs such as suicidal intent and domestic violence, risking harm to themselves and others. For example, to address the needs of Ukrainian internally displaced persons (IDPs), a significant volunteer movement rose to address their basic needs. Yet, these volunteer organizations typically lacked qualified service providers and more systematic approaches (Semigina & Gusak, 2016). While there is a need for careful consideration of the effectiveness of popular social work, popular social work could still add value and lessons learned to the formal social work profession (Lavalette, 2014). The work to develop a social work curriculum in Afghanistan based on the existing role of Afghans who performed social work functions provides an excellent example of this process (Bragin et al., 2016). Thus, this dissertation research explores how Syrian practitioners who perform “popular social work” in Northwest Syria can inform the social work profession.

The Influence of the Social Work Profession’s Status on Social Work Practice and Practitioners in Conflict Settings

The existing literature also describes how the social work professions’ status in a country shapes social work practice during war and conflict. For example, Sri Lanka did not have a formal social work profession, negatively influencing the potential for the social work profession to contribute to care for IDPs during the civil war (Herath & Lesnik, 2008). Afghanistan is another context that did not have a formal social work profession. Afghan service providers called themselves social workers and performed social work functions despite receiving formal training. Unfortunately, not having formal training made it difficult for Afghan ‘social workers’ to support clients with substance dependence (Berger, 2014). Yet, Papell (2015) highlights the unique role Afghan social workers could play in promoting the healing of their country. Research drawing upon Afghan knowledge and the role of Afghans performing social work functions formed the basis of an Afghan social work curriculum (Bragin et al., 2016). The conflict and international actors may also shape the development of the social work profession. For example, within the context of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Lindsay (2008) describes how social work was a new

profession formed within the context of political conflict, involvement of international organizations and high levels of social needs. These examples demonstrate how conflicts create an opportunity to strengthen the social work profession by building upon local popular forms of social work, yet these opportunities should be navigated carefully to avoid doing harm.

In other contexts, the lack of recognition for the social work profession influenced social work practitioners. For example, at the time of research in Palestine, social work and psychosocial work were still becoming professions, and the weak status of the profession created an additional strain for the workers (Lindsay, 2007). Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, social workers felt a lack of power compared to other professionals (Maglajlić et al., 2008). The status of the social work profession in the context affected by conflict significantly influenced the social workers and their experiences. The literature also discusses the importance of social work professional associations, ongoing training and legislation to clarify social work roles. Based on a study of Palestinian social workers, participants highlighted needs for ongoing professional development and participation in professional associations at the level of their work (Lindsay, 2007). At the level of governance, participants identified needs for professional regulation and legislation clarifying the roles of service providers (Lindsay, 2007). Based on a survey exploring social work educators' perspectives from Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Morocco, and predominately Palestine, Ibrahim (2018) recommended strengthening recognition for the social work profession and emphasizing its value as an important welfare service. This literature highlights the need for the social work research to consider the potential impact of the social work profession's status on practitioners who perform social work functions during complex emergencies and thereby reinforces the need to explore how to improve support for these practitioners. Since this dissertation research explores perspectives on 'good' social work practice in Northwest Syria, which is a setting without a formal social work profession, this research also explores perspectives on how to effectively support Syrians who are performing social work functions in Northwest Syria.

The Influence of Societal Structures on Social Work Practice in Conflict Settings

Interwoven throughout the literature is the influence of societal structures such as culture, ethnicity, religion or spirituality on social work practice in conflict settings. For example, spirituality is an important component of Palestinian social work practice (Lindsay, 2007). Ibrahim (2018) also highlights the importance of incorporating religious values such as Islam into Arabic social work

practice, noting most Arabic countries found social work education on Islam instead of cultural aspects from North America or Europe. Ibrahim (2018) notes the significance of Islam as it forms the basis of legislation and culture in most Arabic countries. Due to the history of socialism in Ukraine, some IDPs expected social workers to address all of their difficulties. Social workers provided appropriate care, but also supported IDPs to take action in their own lives. Rather than using an approach focused on empowerment of IDPs, the volunteer organizations provided for the basic needs of IDPs and allowed the IDPs to take a more passive role (Semingina & Gusak, 2016). This Ukrainian example demonstrates how the local history may also shape popular forms of social work practice in ways which may not be perceived as effective. At times, international involvement may ignore these essential components of the local context. In Croatia, there was a shift from community service to psychosocial approaches during the war, yet these psychosocial approaches lacked attention to context and broader community structures (Soroya & Stubbs, 1998). The influence of societal structures on social work practice in conflict settings supports the need for social work research to explore effective social work practice in complex emergencies. Although complex emergencies profoundly strain societal structures (OCHA, 1999), communities affected by complex emergencies may still possess important cultural aspects that should be integrated into social work practice. Knowing more about how effective social work practice emerges in the context of strained, but important societal structures will help the social work profession move towards 'better' social work practices.

The Need for Multi-Level Social Work Practice in Conflict Settings

The existing literature on social work in settings impacted by war or conflict describes the need for social work practices at multiple levels such as at the micro level with individuals, the mezzo level with groups and the macro level with communities. Examples of micro social work include counselling through hotlines as part of state systems in Israel (Gilbar, 1992), and mental health social work in Northern Ireland (Healy, 1996; Campbell & Healey, 1999). Examples of mezzo social work practice are groups to promote peace among Israeli and Palestinian youth (Bargal, 1992) and clubs for war veterans in Croatia (Gruden et al., 1999). Examples of macro level practice are community organizing to help persons advocate for their rights in the middle east (Grodofksy, 2007; Grodofsky, 2012); community organizing to address the needs of conflict affected persons in Lebanon (Lavalette & Levine, 2011); community organizing with Arabs and Jews in Northern Israel (Grodofsky & Yudelevich, 2012). Some literature discusses social work practice at

multiple levels such as the use of individual and group counselling in Palestine (Lindsay, 2007); clinical social work and community organizing in Ukraine (Seminga & Gusak, 2016); and the need for local Afghan social workers to engage in different levels of practice (Papell, 2015). Some authors believe that mezzo or macro level interventions may be more valuable than micro level interventions, stating “focus on community and group work is often more effective than individual work” (Ramon, 2015, p. 972). Yet, the literature consistently discusses social work practice engaged in multiple levels and over time from various contexts such as Croatia (Gruden et al., 1999); Israel (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2005); Northern Ireland (Campbell & McCrystal, 2005), Ukraine (Semigina & Gusak, 2016) and the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). Thus, social work research should explore perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Social work research already explored the perspectives of social workers on multi-leveled social work practice within social work education (Duffy et al., 2013). A survey of 80 social workers from different contexts, mainly the United Kingdom, explored the subject of including political conflict in international social work curriculum. This survey explored questions on the inclusion of approaches to interventions within social work education. 30% of respondents supported interventions focused on basic needs; 28% of respondents supported interventions focused on interdisciplinary and inter-agency work; and 27% of respondents supported community development interventions. The topic of layers of intervention followed a similar pattern of diverse opinions with 39% of participants selecting interventions on the “individual and family levels,” 32% selecting interventions on the community level and 31% field work social work (Duffy, 2013). Based on these findings, Duffy et al., (2013) emphasized “consequently, this is a theme where there is considerable diversity of opinion” (p. 698). Considering this diversity of opinion, this dissertation research explores international and Syrian practitioners’ perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice overall and with individuals, families, groups and communities to increase the social work professions’ knowledge of how social work practices at different levels can be useful in complex emergencies.

Practicing Social Work in Conflict Settings Impacts Social Workers

Existing social work research documents the specific challenges and growth experienced by social work practitioners in conflict settings, developing recommendations to improve support for practitioners. Research focused on social work practitioners in the midst of violent conflict in Israel,

Palestine or Northern Ireland documented the impact of working and living in a situation of violent conflict on local social workers (Baum 2012a; Lindsay, 2007), difficulties navigating work and family life (Baum, 2016); challenges working with (Baum, 2012b) and supervising persons from the other side of the conflict (Baum, 2013); and difficulties navigating professional dilemmas (Ramon et al., 2006). Social workers may also experience growth and increased teamwork in conflict settings. In Northern Ireland, the conflict presented an opportunity to develop and train social workers (Campbell & Healey, 1999). Yet, other research suggests not all social workers may experience equal opportunities for growth. An exploration of post traumatic growth among social workers identified more growth among the Jewish social workers and no growth among the Arab social workers. This research also identified that support from the community played an important role in helping social workers grow and deal with distress (Baum & Ramon, 2010). The findings from research with Palestinian social workers and psychosocial workers suggested the need for better structures to support social workers in the midst of conflict at the level of personal, professional, occupational, systems and governance (Lindsay, 2007). Similarly, based on a study of burnout among Palestinian social workers, Abdallah (2009) recommended institutions to care for social workers, paying particular attention to promoting their self-esteem. However, this dissertation research seeks to address the need research on effective forms of support for national social workers from the perspective of Syrian and international practitioners.

Practicing Social Work in Conflict Settings Requires Supervision

The literature consistently emphasizes supervision, peer supervision and reflexivity as important for social work practice in conflict settings. Despite the recognized importance of supervision (Bargal, 1992; Lindsay, 2007; Leavitt, 2003; Loewenberg, 1992), research identified a lack of supervision for social workers (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). Social work research also identified the importance and value of reflexivity among social workers. A study of Palestinian social workers illustrated their desire “for opportunities to reflect on their own practice, share their views/experiences, expand their knowledge-base and ultimately feel valued as ‘reflective practitioners’” (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018, p. 728). Based on this value of reflexivity, this dissertation research provides international and Syrian practitioners with opportunities for reflexivity by asking questions about their perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices, which may be a potential benefit for practitioners who participate in this research. Improving the knowledge of

‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies, may also further equip supervisors to effectively conduct supervision for practitioners.

Practicing Social Work in Conflict Settings Necessitates Quality Social Work Education

Early social work literature emphasized the lack of training and education for social workers to address conflict related problems (Campbell & Healey, 1999), and the lack of literature on professional education for social workers focused on war or political conflict (Lindsay, 2008). More recently, increased scholarship has focused on social work education and conflict (Bragin et al., 2016; Coulter et al., 2013; Duffy, 2012; Duffy et al., 2013; Lindsay, 2008). This scholarship describes the development of social work education in the OPT (Lindsay, 2008) and Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2016), as well as service user involvement in social work education on political conflict in Northern Ireland (Duffy, 2012) and the development of a framework on political conflict and international social work education (Duffy et al., 2013). Bragin et al (2016) and Lindsay (2008) agree that imported curriculums may not be appropriate for conflict settings. Swedish social work professors, who taught in Iraq, also emphasized the need for specific contexts to develop their own models of social work aligned with the global standards for social work (Liedgren, 2015). In Ukraine, Semigina (2018) highlights the need to include lessons from responding to the conflict into Ukrainian social work curriculums. Thus, this dissertation explores how to effectively support local actors to develop their own forms of quality social work practice and education by documenting practitioners’ experiences responding to the crisis in Northwest Syria.

Social Work Practice in Conflict Settings: Links to the Global Level

Supporting social work practice and education as requested in countries affected by conflict, requires strong links at the global level in order to foster meaningful engagement across contexts. Social work practice within conflict settings should also inform social work practice at the global level. The literature emphasizes the need for international collaboration among social workers to jointly address the challenges of political conflict (Lindsay, 2007; Ramon et al., 2006) and recommends alliances and dialogue at the international level to exchange and create approaches for professional social work practice in contexts of conflict (Lindsay, 2007). In Sri Lanka, Herath and Lesnik (2008) also called for the support of international social work practitioners and academics to develop quality social work education for Sri Lankans. Social work academics in countries affected by conflict continue to invite engagement at the global level in order for social work to effectively respond to the needs created by conflict (Ibrahim, 2017). As unique forms of practice may emerge

within a conflict setting, effective practices from non-social workers and social workers can inform and improve the work of social workers at the global level. Palestinian social workers developed a unique, strong knowledge base over time, one that could contribute to the international knowledge on social work in conflict (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). Similarly, Ibrahim (2018) believes social work in English speaking countries can learn from social worker practice in other contexts, particularly on how to address major conflict. Yet, Harrop and Ioakidimis (2018) believe this exchange should be “mutual and therefore international social work organizations should enhance and extend their support towards Palestinian practitioners on the basis of genuine internationalism” (p. 735). Thus, this dissertation research seeks to provide international and Syrian practitioners with an opportunity to formally document their perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices to benefit the social work profession and practitioners globally and thus contribute to ‘building social work [back] better’ in complex emergencies such as Northwest Syria.

Situating Social Work in the Syrian Context

Although Syria did not have formal social work education or a profession prior to the start of the complex emergency, existing related formal professions and education in Syria included psychological counselling and psychology. Since Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions Northwest Syria may have these educational backgrounds, knowing more about these professions offers insights into the context in which social work practices emerged in response to the crisis in Northwest Syria. Furthermore, the psychological counsellors’ role continues during the complex emergency. An assessment in Northern Syria found 22% (102) of schools had a psychological counsellor, and 34 camp schools in Northwest Syria had psychological counsellors available (Assistance Coordination Unit/ Information Management Unit [ACU IMU], 2019). Thus, this section will provide an overview of the formal education and professions related to social work in Syria with a specific focus on psychological guidance counselling and psychology, as well as existing research on psychological counselling in Syria.

Psychological Counselling in Syria

Prior to the start of the complex emergency in Syria, most schools had psychological counsellors who were consulted when children experienced difficulties connected to their psychological state (ACU IMU, 2019). To address these difficulties, psychological counsellors work to support children and involve their parents as necessary to discuss and resolve the challenges,

particularly during adolescence (ACU IMU, 2019). In Syria, psychological counselling is a five-year program taught at the Education Faculty in Damascus, Homs, Latakia, Sweda, Dara and Latakia (Dayani, 2015). Syrians who graduate from psychological counselling possess knowledge of psychological theories, human behavior and development, abnormal psychology, counselling skills, the psychological counselors' role and tasks (Dayani, 2015). The psychological counselling program at Damascus University equips psychological counsellors to work in schools to address students' behavioral and academic difficulties as well as to work in social institutions to support other groups such as people with disabilities, youth in conflict with the law, and orphans. The program also equips clinical psychological counsellors to support health care service such as hospitals (Damascus University, n.d.). Psychological counsellors can also work in civil associations, organizations or companies working on mental health (Dayani, 2015). Syrians who complete the 5-year psychological counselling program can pursue a Master's within areas such as psychological counselling, mental health, developmental psychology and educational psychology (Dayani, 2015). In Syria, the aspects of the psychological counsellors' roles to support student experiencing difficulties, persons with disabilities, orphans and children in conflict with the law align with the with the core functions of social work to "facilitate the inclusion of marginalised, socially excluded, dispossessed, vulnerable and at-risk groups of people" (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p. 3).

Psychology in Syria

In Syria, psychology and psychological counselling share a similar study duration, but the degrees include some different topics and graduates may pursue different careers (Dayani, 2015). Graduates of psychology work in different areas of psychological counselling within the Ministry of Education (Damascus University, n.d.). Graduates of psychology can be psychologists within organizations working on mental health or child and youth focused organizations. Graduates of psychology can also become a psychological counsellor in civil associations and schools (Dayani, 2015). Psychology programs are only offered through the Faculty of Education at Damascus University (Dayani, 2015). Damascus University has a Department of Psychology situated within the Faculty of Education. Through the five-year program, graduates of psychology acquire a fundamental knowledge of psychology including psychology's history; different fields of psychology; psychological disorders; psychotherapy and a basic knowledge of psychological counselling (Dayani, 2015). Graduates of psychology can pursue Master's programs in areas such as general psychology, mental health, media psychology, educational and development psychology (Dayani, 2015). Within

Syrian colleges, teaching consists of both theoretical and practical components for both the five-year psychology and psychological counselling programs (Dayani, 2015). The mandatory practical component begins in the first year and frequently involves creating research seminars, but lacks a strong field aspect (Dayani, 2015). Often students' grades are allocated 20-30% for the practical components of the program in contrast to 70-80% for the theoretical components (Dayani, 2015). Further, psychology and psychological counselling graduates are unable to practice psychotherapy without Masters of Psychotherapy or PhD (Dayani, 2015).

Psychological Counselling Research in Syria

Offering additional context on the presence and practice of Syrian counsellors, existing Syrian research offers insights into the techniques most frequently used by Syrian counsellors which also helps situate research exploring social work practices in Northwest Syria. While the article does not specify the date of the research, Syrian research explored and evaluated the behavioral difficulties of children in school and the psychological counselling techniques used by the children's counsellors used to address these difficulties in Damascus, Hama, Homs, Der Al-Zoor and Lataqia (Abdullah, 2017). Offering insights into the presence of social workers in Syrian schools, Abdullah (2017) describes the entire study population as 3,500 psychological counsellors specialized in either counselling or psychology as well as 1,500 social counsellors specialized in social work or sociology. Of this total population of counsellors, this study included 240 counselors (Abdullah, 2017). Based on the Syrian counsellors' report, the most commonly experienced difficulties by school children included "disobedience of teacher's, underachievement, [and] aggression" (Abdullah, 2017, p. 150). According to Abdullah (2017), the Syrian counsellors ought to use a variety of counselling techniques. To explore the techniques the counsellors' used to address the school children's difficulties in this study, Syrian counsellors completed a scale listing 20 psychological counselling techniques and one open ended question asking counsellors about other techniques used by the Syrian counsellors (Abdullah, 2017). The study found the counsellors reported using the following techniques most often to address school children's' difficulties: "individual counselling, group therapy, leisure time counselling, client centred therapy, systemic counselling and behavioral counselling" (Abdullah, 2017, p. 155). Further, Abdullah (2017) describes how psychological counselling programs within schools should address the needs of school children who experience learning, behavior and emotional difficulties, but do not qualify for special education. Based on the study's findings, Abdullah (2017) recommends to include diverse counselling techniques into

programs developing counsellors' skills. Increased understanding of Syrian psychology, psychological counselling and the techniques used by Syrian counsellors increases understanding of the context in which Syrians perform social work functions in Northwest Syria.

**Introduction to Manuscript I: Benefiting or Extracting: Facilitating a Remote Community
Advisory Board in a Complex Emergency to Improve Social Work Research Ethics &
Relevance- An Example from Northwest Syria**

This first manuscript discusses the design and implementation of an online Community Advisory Board to include practitioners' insights both *in* and *on* the research. The Community Advisory Board helped the research better address the following overall research question: what are perspectives on what constitutes 'good' social work practice in complex emergencies by drawing upon a study in Northwest Syria? I included a Community Advisory Board in the research, in part because I helped facilitate a Community Advisory Board to support social work research on homelessness in Canada. During this process, I learned how a Community Advisory Board can further align the research with the target populations' perspectives by including the target population in the research process. However, facilitating a Community Advisory Board in Canada differs from facilitating a Community Advisory Board in Northwest Syria due to challenges such as being difficult to engage with participants in person. To account for these differences, I drew upon my own work experience in complex emergencies and existing scholarship to design an online Community Advisory Board. Thus, this manuscript explains how my dissertation research drew upon available scholarship to design and implement an online Community Advisory Board. Including practitioners' perspectives improved the ability of the research to answer my overall research questions, producing the study's findings highlighted in manuscripts II and III. This manuscript contributes to existing knowledge on how to include practitioners effectively and meaningfully in research during complex emergencies through an online Community Advisory Board. A challenge to implementing research in complex emergencies may be a lack of appropriate methodologies to guide such research. Knowing more about how to meaningfully include international and local practitioners in such research fosters more effective and feasible research methods and offers practitioners more opportunities for epistemic agency during the production of knowledge on social work practice in complex emergencies.

Author Contributions to Manuscript I

- Karen Paul, First Author's Role: I wrote the initial draft of the manuscript and revised subsequent manuscripts based upon input from my peer writing group, the second author, the third author and my supervisor.
- Lana Al Houssami, Second Author's Role: Drawing upon her experience as a peer researcher, Lana Al Houssami reviewed and provided input on the argument, the findings and discussion sections. Specifically, Lana helped recommended which challenges, methodological lessons learned and recommendations the article should highlight. Based on her experience conducting, transcribing and translating interviews with Syrian practitioners, Lana also helped strengthen the argument and added specific sentences to the findings and discussion to emphasize Syrian practitioners' experiences and perspectives. Lana also provided suggestions for how to revise the challenges encountered in the research and the methodological lessons.
- Dr. Martha Bragin, Third Author's Role: Dr. Martha Bragin contributed to the article's conceptualization, reviewed and edited the article. Specifically, Dr. Martha Bragin highlighted the importance of ensuring research does not only extract information from practitioners, but also promoted their epistemic agency which informed the study from its inception and is central to the manuscripts' argument. Dr. Bragin wrote the sections on epistemic agency in the introduction, results and conclusion. Dr. Martha Bragin also highlighted the importance of the IASC Recommendations for Ethical Research, which I incorporated.
- Supervisor's Role: Dr. Myriam Denov reviewed and provided feedback on the second draft, contributing to the articles conceptualization by emphasizing the importance of including practitioners' perspectives both *in* and *on* the research.
- Other Contributions: My peer writing group at McGill University reviewed and offered input on the initial draft of the manuscript. These discussions with my peer writing group helped me conceptualize the article by emphasizing how the Community Advisory Board can foster research ethics and relevance.

Manuscript 1: Abstract

A Community Advisory Board can engage a study's target population in the research design and implementation. Despite the increasing scholarship on Community Advisory Board's in low- and middle-income countries, little scholarship exists to guide research to facilitate an online Community Advisory Board during complex emergencies. This article describes how research exploring perspectives on 'good' social work in complex emergencies through a study of Northwest Syria designed and facilitated an online Community Advisory Board with international and Syrian practitioners. This study found engaging practitioners in a pilot project helped improve the study's ethics and relevance to the Syrian culture and context and that carefully designed research could benefit practitioners themselves. This process also demonstrated how ethical research in complex emergencies should be relevant and useful to participants, does not do harm and promotes practitioners' epistemic agency. Ultimately, this article argues practitioners with experience on the research topics can improve the study's ethics and relevance during complex emergencies, however research should offer benefit rather than only extract information from practitioners.

Manuscript I: Benefiting or Extracting: Facilitating a Remote Community Advisory Board in a Complex Emergency to Improve Social Work Research Ethics & Relevance- An Example from Northwest Syria

Characteristics of complex emergencies such as threats against humanitarian workers and difficulties with access (IASC, 1994) make conducting ethical and relevant research in complex emergencies challenging. Yet, research is necessary to document innovative responses and good practices emerging in difficult conditions (Ekzayez et al., 2021). Social work research is particularly needed to document responses among those who perform specific social work functions. Including practitioners who are responding to the crisis as research collaborators is one way to ensure that their experiences are noted, studied and understood. One example of promising social work practices that require documentation are those being carried out in Northwest Syria (NWS). This paper will provide an illustrative case study from NWS where researchers included active practitioners as research collaborators by means of a Community Advisory Board (CAB). The paper will explore the CAB process in detail and highlight the strengths, benefits, limitations, and complexities of utilizing this method to engage practitioners as research collaborators online during a complex emergency.

Engaging Practitioners as Research Collaborators – Importance and Constraints

Engaging practitioners as research collaborators is difficult but essential during complex emergencies. For the purpose of this paper, a practitioner is defined as “a person engaged in the practice of a particular skill, art, or discipline” (OED, 2022b, para 3). In complex emergencies, social work practitioners may include professionals where they are available as well as those who perform social work functions such as case management and sharing information with communities. It is important to include practitioners in the research team since they have practical experience and know the communities’ cultures, needs and resources. Thus, practitioners’ perspectives offer insights critical to promoting more ethical and relevant research, adding value to the research process. For example, collaboration between researchers and practitioners may increase research quality by drawing upon practitioners’ insights, generate more opportunities to change policies and programs, and strengthen the learning for both researchers and practitioners in humanitarian settings (Nemiro et al., 2022). However, within humanitarian settings globally, a lack of coordination between research

institutions and practitioners and lack of time in practitioners' schedules may make it difficult for practitioners to fully collaborate in research studies (Nemiro et al., 2022). Therefore, scholarship must give attention to the meaningful engagement of practitioners as research collaborators during complex emergencies such as NWS.

Engaging Practitioners in Research in Complex Emergencies Requires Careful Considerations- The NWS Example

The nature and characteristics of the complex emergency in NWS necessitates careful considerations for engaging practitioners in research. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which is responsible for coordinating the inter-agency response to complex emergencies (IASC, n.d.), a complex emergency is:

- a) a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression;
- b) a humanitarian crisis which requires an international response which goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency;
- c) a humanitarian crisis where the IASC assesses that it requires intensive and extensive political and management coordination. (IASC, 1994, p. 2)

Describing the complex emergency in NWS, The Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA, 2022b) explains: “the humanitarian situation in north-west Syria is at its worst since the start of the conflict in 2011. 4.4 million people, mostly women and children, are trapped in a war-zone along the border with Türkiye” (p. 2). In NWS, the COVID-19 pandemic caused additional pressure on health care services (OCHA, 2022a), which only exacerbated an already dire complex emergency and made practitioners' work more difficult. Furthermore, OCHA (2022b) states NWS has limited basic services, and 3.1 million people lack sufficient food. So, practitioners working in NWS address immense needs with limited resources in a complicated environment. In addition, security threats for aid workers necessitate careful considerations for including practitioners in research. The *Aid Worker Security Report 2021* states that most of the main attacks impacting humanitarian workers happened in South Sudan followed by Syria in 2020 (Stoddard et al., 2021). Illustrating the difficulties with access to provide the necessary assistance, the United Nations (UN, 2022) reports “the UN Security Council has adopted a resolution to extend lifesaving aid deliveries into northwest Syria from Türkiye for a further six months” (para. 1). Difficulties with

border crossings make engaging practitioners who are in NWS in research in person challenging, making online methods more feasible.

The Urgency of Ethical and Relevant Research in Complex Emergencies

The participation of local stakeholders, including practitioners, throughout the research process to promote research ethics and relevance is emphasized in global guidelines such as the *IASC Recommendations for Conducting Ethical Mental Health and Psychosocial (MHPSS) Research in Emergency Settings* (referred to hereafter as IASC, 2014) and existing scholarship. For example, a systematic review exploring research ethics in humanitarian crises, highlighted the need to engage communities to ensure research achieved the ethical obligation of being useful to the target community (Bruno & Haar, 2020). Similarly, the IASC (2014) recommends researchers collaborate with local researchers, coordinators, target communities and practitioners to exchange knowledge and promote research safety. Research should do no harm by addressing potential risks to participants (IASC, 2014). Ethical research must also be designed well, which includes considering contextual factors and clearly defining central concepts, to make a meaningful contribution to MHPSS service delivery (IASC, 2014). To this end researchers can engage community members to review language and concepts (IASC and UNICEF 2011, as cited in IASC, 2014). Involving practitioners who are engaged in social work practice within the affected community throughout the research process can increase research ethics and relevance by ensuring the research is well-designed, clear and useful to the community.

Considering the demands placed upon practitioners in complex emergencies, practitioners should benefit from their involvement in research. In a study exploring research priorities for MHPSS in emergency settings, Tol et al., (2012) found researchers focused more on research excellence or quality, but practitioners focused more on how useful the research is on the ground. Yet, the critical need to provide services makes conducting relevant research in humanitarian settings essential (Tol et al., 2012). Tol et al., (2012) conclude that ongoing efforts to promote both excellent and relevant research is required to lessen the gap between researchers and practitioners such as by incorporating more “research into practice and by engaging practitioners in research” (p. 34). Furthermore, the IASC (2014) states research should provide “immediate and direct benefits to communities” such as training for research teams (p. 5). Thus, engaging practitioners to improve

research relevance may also benefit practitioners by generating research findings that offer useful practice-related insights.

Epistemic Agency as a Reason to Engage Practitioners as Researchers in Complex Emergencies

It is now widely accepted that all knowledge is situated knowledge, meaning that researchers' perspectives influence what we learn and what we understand in any research project (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1993). Therefore, if we want to learn from and about good social work practices in NWS, social work practitioners, from and working inside of NWS, must be among those designing, informing and analyzing the study. Finally, as the results bear out, ensuring that any new knowledge production is co-created with the people being studied is a critically important element in the decolonization of social work (Bragin, 2005; Razack, 2009). This makes it imperative to find ways such practitioners be fully engaged as collaborators in a way that makes it safe and practical for them to do so (Bragin, 2005; Bragin et al., 2014).

Engaging Practitioners in Research Through a Community Advisory Board to Address Ethical Concerns

A Community Advisory Board (CAB) is a practical way to promote research ethics (Zhao et al., 2019) and engage practitioners' perspectives, not only *in* research but *on* the research process. Typically, a CAB is "comprised of individuals who represent the community targeted for research and who serve as liaisons between the research team and the community" (Mlambo et al., 2019, p. 2). The role of a CAB can include informing the researchers about the cultural and social context of the community, supporting the creation and review of research procedures, materials, recruitment strategies and dissemination, promoting trust in the connection between the community, and sharing the community's concerns and priorities with the researchers (Mlambo et al., 2019). Existing research in complex emergencies engaged practitioners through an advisory committee in Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2014) and Syrians in an independent consultation group regarding research on NWS (Douderai et al., 2021). Furthermore, based on five years of doing remote research in NWS, Douderai et al., (2021) recommend having a research consultation group to promote research ethics and considerations such as duty of care, particularly in contexts without a functional ethics review board. Yet, there is a need for more scholarship to provide detailed documentation on how to design and facilitate an online CAB to meaningfully engage practitioners in research in complex emergencies.

State of Knowledge on The Use of Community Advisory Boards in Research Studies

Despite the lack of scholarship on CAB's in complex emergencies, there is available literature on CABs in high income settings (Cronley et al., 2021), and an increasing scholarship exploring CABs in low- and middle-income settings (LMICS) (Lwin et al., 2014; Mlambo et al., 2019; Mugenyi et al., 2021; Pancras et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2019). This literature offers insights into how a CAB can promote research ethics and relevance in LMICS which may differ from high income settings due to cultural, social, historical, and economic considerations (Zhao et al., 2019) such as distinct languages, education and social contexts. A scoping review explored the facilitation of CAB's within LMICS, conducting analysis of 83 relevant publications (Zhao et al. 2019). One such publication took place on the Thai/Myanmar border which is also a complex setting for research (Lwin et al., 2014). Analysis of interviews with CAB participants identified the following challenges: travel to meetings due to the sensitive political situation, difficulties navigating multiple languages, and challenges to feel comfortable to share their views, particularly if they may differ from others (Lwin et al., 2014). However, the participants noted many benefits of being part of the CAB such as having a place to learn about other communities (Lwin et al., 2014). Furthermore, fourteen publications described the CAB's accomplishments as improving connections between local communities and researchers and addressing ethics concerns in coordination with institutional review boards (Zhao et al., 2019). This same scoping review identified challenges with facilitating CABs in LMICS such as "incomplete ethical regulations and guidance" and "limited knowledge of science" (Zhao et al., 2019, p. 5). For example, authors shared difficulties in explaining key research concepts to the CAB members across differing social backgrounds, cultures, and levels of education (Zhao et al., 2019). Thirteen articles included in the review emphasized the lack of "guidance on ethical regulations" as negatively influencing the CAB's work, so Zhao et al., (2019) recommend that future research should incorporate more contextualized ethics resources into training to better equip CAB members to navigate ethical difficulties (p. 5). However, the scoping review (Zhao et al., 2019) did not mention anything specific to facilitating CABs online, which is critical in NWS.

Engaging Practitioners in Research in Northwest Syria

Syria did not have a formal social work profession prior to the complex emergency, and there is no known social work scholarship discussing NWS. Yet, existing health scholarship in NWS informs CAB design by recommending to include Syria-based researchers to strengthen Syrians' research capacity and research relevance (Ekzayez et al., 2021) and equal research partnerships

between academic institutions and humanitarian organizations (Ekzayez, 2020; Ekzayez et al., 2021). Such research partnerships would function primarily through remote collaboration and would require trust, awareness of opportunities, risks, and each partners' capacity (Ekzayez, 2020). Effective partnerships require local Syrian actors to play a central role (Ekzayez, 2020). Engaging more Syrians, including those based in Syria, in international research will uplift their voices; improve their collaborators' capacity; ensure the research method, data, and results are more relevant and authentic; and improve the process of applying the research findings to practice (Ekzayez et al., 2021). Thus, incorporating a CAB into research in NWS may create opportunities to strengthen Syrians' research capacity and foster collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

In summary, research in complex emergencies, such as NWS, may face challenges, such as a disconnect between researchers and practitioners which an online CAB could help address by engaging international and national practitioners in a collaborative, relevant and ethical study. A CAB could foster relevant research on NWS by ensuring practitioners who are knowledgeable of the context 'on the ground' are included in research design and implementation and can help to ensure the proposed research benefits practitioners. Thus, this article describes and discusses how research on social work practice in NWS, involved practitioners performing social work functions from and familiar with the context in NWS through an online CAB. The CAB members participated in a pilot project and online surveys to offer their input on the research topic and process. Drawing upon this experience, this article describes key findings, challenges and methodological lessons to strengthen the inclusion of practitioners in online CAB's in other complex emergencies. This article discusses the potential benefits of greater inclusivity and epistemic agency of the inclusion of the CAB, as well as any limitations noted. Epistemic agency by practitioners helps to de-colonize work in emergencies in which research and knowledge building is often constructed by outside members of the humanitarian community. This study gains construct validity and trustworthiness when informed by practitioners who know the situation best. Ultimately, this article argues that practitioners who have experience with the research area and topic can increase research relevance and ethics in complex emergencies, but this engagement should *benefit* rather than merely *extract* from practitioners. To extract can mean "to draw out" or "to take from something of which the thing taken was a part" (OED, 2022a, para. 1 & 2). Extracting takes something without reciprocity. Thus, research should not only request information, input and support from practitioners to solely advance research without in turn providing information, opportunities to learn or connect that provide value to

practitioners. In this study, the practitioners hoped the study would gain knowledge applicable to their own continuing practice and effectively coordinate with local practitioners and the humanitarian community to ensure the research is beneficial. Further, practitioner collaborators must be acknowledged in all publications.

Methods

This section discusses how this research drew upon available scholarship on online participatory research (Barratt et al., 2015; Tamí-Maury et al., 2017) to design and implement a remote CAB to explore perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating a CAB in research exploring perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices brings the study closer to the goal of exploring ‘good’ practices through ensuring the research is accessible and triangulating findings. Considering the absence of formal ethical approval processes within NWS, this study also included a CAB to foster ethical research to gather insights on who else should approve the research. This section also describes how the research design supported the use of a CAB, the CAB’s role, preparations for the CAB and the CAB’s involvement in the research. Figure 1 illustrates the process undertaken to structure the entire research study.

Figure 1 – Research Implementation Flow Chart



Research Design

This study is informed by the social ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), collaborative, community-based research methods (Glass & Newman, 2015) and constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014), which all support the use of a CAB. For example, applying the social ecological approach, the study's theory, to research methods emphasizes the need to incorporate community and cultural perspectives to more completely describe the target population of the research (Denov & Akesson, 2017), and identify perspectives on what are considered 'good' practices. Since Syria did not have a formal social work profession, international practitioners who are familiar with professional social work and Syria can offer valuable insights. As such, the CAB includes both international and Syrian practitioners. Similarly, collaborative community-based research builds upon the knowledge and experience of community members to ensure insights that might have been missed are included in the research and to increase the relevance of the research findings (Glass & Newman, 2015). This creates a strong rationale for this study to facilitate a CAB to gather practitioners' perspectives *in* and *on* the research. Collaborative approaches facilitated online can help reach the socioecological framework's goal to include diverse perspectives and broader components of Syrian practitioners' socioecological system by allowing a range of actors from different locations and backgrounds to participate. Similarly, CGT emphasizes data co-construction (Charmaz, 2021) and is linked to social constructivism which emphasizes "social contexts, interaction, sharing viewpoints, and interpretive understandings" in addition to "knowing and learning as embedded in social life" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). So, CGT supports the CAB's role to provide input on the research process and emerging findings.

Building Upon Existing Scholarship to Design an Online CAB

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused researchers to suddenly adapt research methods to online platforms (Polidano et al., 2022; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020), this study selected online collaborative methods prior to the pandemic precisely because of its flexibility in complex emergencies. Thus, the available scholarship on online participatory research prior to the pandemic (Barratt et al., 2015; Tami-Maury et al., 2017) informed the CAB design. Transnational research using online participatory methods with discrete populations of cannabis growers recommended conducting a pilot study to further involve participants in the research process (Barratt et al., 2015).

So, this current research included a pilot study with the CAB. Tami-Maury et al., (2017) highlighted the following benefits of community based participatory research with online communities: being able to access and communicate with participants in different geographic locations at different times and allowing participants to engage anonymously which may allow participants to contribute ideas more freely. Yet, a limitation of the anonymity provided through online research can be the difficulty to acknowledge participants for their input (Tami-Maury et al., 2017), so this current research gave CAB members the option to be acknowledged. In complex emergencies, online collaborative methods offer participants the flexibility to communicate anonymously from diverse geographic locations at their convenience.

The CAB's Role

This study sought to promote practitioners' meaningful engagement by creating clear expectations of the CAB's role. The CAB members' role included to share relevant reports, participate in a pilot study interview, provide feedback on the research process through an online survey, support participant recruitment by sharing invitations, and offer feedback on the findings and their experience as CAB members. Considering the demands facing practitioners and feedback from the ethics board, the research did not require the CAB members to do all these tasks. Furthermore, the CAB occurred in a doctoral dissertation study with predetermined research questions which limited the CAB's input on the research. The study created a Terms of Reference (TOR) to acknowledge the limitations created by this reality, such as not being able to incorporate all the CAB's recommendations. Due to ethical reasons, the TOR highlighted other limitations such as not giving CAB members access to raw data, or other study participants' names.

Research Participants

Community Advisory Board Participants

Social workers or related practitioners with experience responding to the Syrian crises in a specific area of NWS were eligible for the CAB.³ Practitioners who performed social work functions in the areas of MHPSS, rehabilitation, health, protection, gender-based violence and child protection were eligible. Practitioners in diverse roles such as front-line workers, case managers, psychosocial workers, outreach workers, social workers, community health workers, managers and technical

³ The research occurred in a specific area of Northwest Syria, which is notable as the needs might be different according to the context. The specific area is available upon request due to the sensitivity of the situation and the area as well as to protect participants' safety.

advisors were also invited. Both practitioners who worked on the Syria response before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic were eligible. Practitioners could participate in Arabic or English.

Research Process

Phase 1- Community Advisory Board Preparations

Promoting the researchers' and participants' security and wellbeing is a key aspect of ethical research in emergencies (Chiumento et al., 2017). Facilitating an online CAB in NWS required careful preparations such as coordinating, considering safety, taking steps to minimize distress and engaging Syrian researchers to foster ethical research.

Coordinating

Since researchers should coordinate with those organizing the emergency response (IASC, 2014), developing the research design included preliminary exploratory trips and key informant interviews in 2018. The first author conducted 3 key informant interviews to gather input on the research design from practitioners with relevant experience. The first author also traveled to Jordan twice to participate in events, enabling discussion of the study with other practitioners.

Considering Safety

Ethical research should identify and mitigate security risks such as risks to personal security and political, economic or social impacts (IASC, 2014). This study collaborated with a security consultant to conduct a security assessment. The security consultant reviewed the research study's ethics application and provided input on the ethics board's questions about the study. For example, the security consultant recommended how to communicate the risks associated with the research in the informed consent form and to communicate with CAB members by telegram where possible. Telegram is a secure and encrypted digital platform with security features such as the auto-delete function to foster an untraceable connection. The McGill Ethics board approved the study (REB file #: 42-0619). The security consultant remained available to address concerns throughout the study, as well as to identify and reduce potential risks when sharing findings.

Minimizing Distress and Engaging Syrian Researchers

Recollecting painful events and times when practitioners were unable to be effective can make discussing social work practice in complex emergencies distressing. To minimize unnecessary distress, engaging practitioners in a CAB requires careful considerations such as having Syrian Peer Researchers (PRs) available to communicate in Arabic, carefully choosing interview questions, and having English and Arabic speaking clinicians who are familiar with humanitarian practice available to support distressed participants. To ensure practitioners could participate in Arabic, the research hired a male and female Syrian PR, one of whom is the second author. The PR's completed back translation of key research documents, supported Arabic communications with CAB members, conducted Arabic interviews, transcribed and translated interviews, and offered insights on the data analysis. After these careful preparations, the research recruited CAB members.

CAB Recruitment

The study recruited CAB members in 2020. The study used purposive sampling methods (Palinkas et al., 2015) by inviting coordinators of relevant coordination groups and requesting coordinators to share the invitation with their mailing list. Using convenience sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), the study drew upon existing networks to share invitations with eligible practitioners. The first author sent individual English invitations by e-mail or telegram, and the second author sent the Arabic invitations. The invitation described the study's purpose, the CAB's role as well as the TOR, workplan and research summary as attachments. The work plan outlined the CAB's tasks, time commitment and proposed timeline. The research summary highlighted the research questions and key social work definitions. Practitioners could respond in English or Arabic by e-mail or Telegram. The CAB included 13 practitioners (six Syrian, seven international).

Phase 2 – Pilot Study with the CAB

CAB members were invited to participate in a pilot study involving an interview and an online survey in 2020. CAB members provided verbal informed consent for the interviews. The interviews explored the CAB members' perspectives on 'good' social work practices with individuals, families, groups and communities; effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners; and recommendations for 'good' social work practice in other complex emergencies. The study also explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their work and perspectives on effective forms of support for practitioners during the pandemic. Appendix 1 includes the interview guide. To reach a broad audience depending on the participant's preferred platform, participants could choose to do

the interview by Telegram, Skype, WhatsApp or Wire. Seven CAB members (four international; three Syrian; four Arabic interviews) completed pilot interviews. The research donated \$20 to a Syrian charity for each interview.

An online survey gathered CAB members' feedback on the research process. An online survey fosters participants' anonymity and allows participants in different roles to freely share their perspectives. CAB members provided informed consent electronically for the survey. The online survey explored the interview guide's translation, the informed consent process, the proposed sample, recruitment strategies, who else should give approval for the research to proceed, and any other relevant concerns or recommendations. Ten CAB members (five English, five Arabic) completed the survey. The first author analyzed the survey responses and discussed the suggested changes with the PRs to inform the next phase of interviews.⁴

Phase 3- Interviews

Since some CAB members did not do an interview during the pilot, the second author conducted interviews with three Syrian CAB members in 2021.

Phase 4- Follow up Survey

After analyzing the interview data using CGT (Charmaz, 2014), the first and second author created a final report to highlight the research process and key findings for practitioners. In 2022, the study shared the draft final report and an online survey with CAB members in Arabic and English. The online survey explored recommendations for future research, how to change the final report, what worked well about participating in an online CAB and recommendations for how to improve an online CAB. Five CAB members completed the survey (three English; two Arabic). For each survey completed, \$10 was donated to a Syrian charity.

Limitations

This current study is limited due to not collecting participants' demographic information and location to protect participants' security. However, this made the participants feel safer since some of them were based in NWS. Similarly, while most CAB participants were practitioners, not

⁴ Summaries of the recommendations provided by the CAB members and the decisions on how to incorporate the feedback are available upon request.

collecting demographic information does not allow for additional analysis based on the practitioners' professional background or role.

Results

This study engaged international and Syrian practitioners' perspectives *in* and *on* social work research during the complex emergency in NWS through an online CAB. This article describes two key findings. First, this study found conducting a pilot project with the online CAB fostered research ethics and relevance to the Syrian context. Specifically, CAB members made practical recommendations to improve the study's contextual considerations, key concepts, and coordination, increasing the study's construct validity, trustworthiness and benefit to practitioners. Second, the interview data also reflects how, when done carefully, the practitioners reported benefitting from their involvement in the research process itself. Practitioners stated that they were glad to share their experiences because they knew their voices mattered and would be considered which helped them express their ideas more freely. Practitioners also described their hope for the study to develop knowledge applicable to their own ongoing practice and for the findings to benefit other practitioners. Ultimately, these findings illustrate how practitioners who have experience with the research context and topic can increase research relevance and ethics in complex emergencies, but this engagement should *benefit* rather than merely *extract* from practitioners. Research can benefit practitioners by creating opportunities for meaningful engagement with research, fostering more ownership of knowledge production and epistemic agency.

1. *Increasing Research Ethics and Relevance Through the Pilot Study*

Ethical research should be coordinated and designed well. Well-designed research includes considering sociocultural aspects of the context and using clear definitions of central concepts (IASC, 2014). Through the online survey in the pilot project, the CAB members' recommendations improved the study's contextual considerations, use of key concepts, and coordination which strengthened the study's overall design, ethics and relevance.

1.1 *Improving Research Relevance by Improving Contextual Considerations*

To improve the study's contextual considerations for gender, a CAB member recommended to have translators of both genders available:

You may need to check if female social workers are happy to have a male translator (and vice versa). Perhaps have translators of both genders available. – *CAB Member in English*

The IASC (2014) states “it is important to address matching researchers and participants where this is culturally appropriate” (p. 38). So, the study mentored the second author to conduct interviews, giving participants the choice to interview with a male or a female Syrian PR in Arabic.

1.2 Improving Research Relevance by Strengthening the Use of Key Concepts

CAB members explained how participants’ responses could be impacted by not previously having a formal social work profession in Syria, and made recommendations for how to improve the study’s use of social work as a concept:

Due to the lack of a social work profession, professional body or educational opportunities in Syria prior to the conflict, and the unregulated way it has developed since, understanding of what social work is and should be may be lacking for many, even those who do carry out social work functions or have received social work related training. This may limit some participants ability to provide examples and recommendations of good social work practice. – *CAB Member in English*

Use a clearer term for the word ‘social practices’. – *CAB Member in Arabic*

Ask a broader opening question, such as how would you describe social work in the NW Syrian context? What does a social worker do? What does the job profile mean to you? Then go into good practice discussions. – *CAB Member in English*

Since ethical research considers sociocultural aspects of the context (IASC, 2014), the study added the following question to the beginning of the interview: “how would you describe social work in the context of Northwest Syria?”⁵

⁵ The revised interview guide is in Appendix 1.

1.3 Improving Research Ethics by Strengthening Collaboration with Practitioners

Since research should coordinate with humanitarian actors to exchange knowledge and avoid research duplication (IASC, 2014), the CAB members strengthened this study's ethics by offering practical suggestions on how to coordinate with other practitioners. When asked who else should give approval for the research to process, one CAB member recommended informing the clusters:

I do not think you need approval, but it may be useful to inform Health, Protection Clusters and relevant Sub-Cluster/Working Group chairpersons of the research, as there is no central or official authority for social work in the target area. – *CAB Member in English*

Similarly, another CAB member recommended contacting coordination groups to ensure the research offers practical benefits:

Discussing with the global MHPSS reference group, GBV AoR, and CP AoR, as well as the regional and Whole of Syria coordination to ensure there is not duplication and identify any synergies, as well as ways that the research can contribute practically to practice to ensure value add[ed]. – *CAB Member in English*

The same CAB member outlined how the research could approach such coordination groups and engage additional practitioners, including local NGOs, throughout the research process:

Suggest to send them an email and set-up a call to discuss with the coordination leads, as well as possibly to virtually present the research study framework for feedback in a coordination meeting so other members have the opportunity to opt in to participate or share suggestions (and in particular trying to reach leadership of umbrella local NGOs to ensure they are informed and consulted). And then similarly for preliminary and/or final findings and recommendations. – *CAB Member in English*

When giving input on where else the research should apply for ethics approval to proceed, the same CAB member highlighted how more alignment between academic research and global humanitarian standards could ensure research offers practical value:

Though the university research board/ethics committee should be sufficient for official ethics approval (as approval through a local body is not as possible due to the situation in Syria). However, I would also highly recommend feedback/input from other MHPSS, GBV, and CP specialists throughout the process (as is taking place through this survey consultation), as often there has not always been alignment of academic research to global humanitarian standards, particularly in regard to consultation with communities themselves and ensuring there is value added to research. – *CAB Member in English*

To avoid merely extracting information from practitioners, this practitioner describes how improved coordination between practitioners and researchers could ensure research reciprocates and offers value. In summary, the CAB members' practical suggestions improved the study's coordination, relevance to the Syrian context and use of social work as a central concept, which may have enabled practitioners to share their valuable insights more easily. Enabling practitioners to share their practice knowledge better may also offer practitioners more epistemic agency and make the findings more relevant to practice, increasing the study's value to practitioners.

2. *Benefits to CAB Members*

Although the interviews did not include a specific question about the CAB members' view of the research, the interviews asked a question about staff wellbeing, which was of relevance to practitioners on the CAB. CAB members shared how these discussions on staff wellbeing helped them think about their work. During the interviews and final online survey, CAB members also shared reflections on the research process. CAB members shared how they felt the research was beneficial for themselves, and how they hoped the research would also benefit others. For example, a practitioner expressed the interview was self-care:

I felt this interview was self-care. – *Syrian CAB Member*

Another practitioner was thankful for the opportunity to reflect on their experience and advocate:

We are just always so happy because we don't get the chance to you know a captive audience but I mean to have the chance to process through what the what was taking place at the time and also I think it is a platform to really advocate for things. – *International CAB Member*

A different practitioner hoped reflecting on the interview questions would benefit them:

Inshallah I will be able to give good information, and inshallah I will benefit from the questions— I mean that I personally benefit... that I think about the questions. – *Syrian CAB Member*

The same practitioner also hoped the research would be available in Arabic, and shared with other Syrian workers for their benefit:

I hope to have a chance to read the research and benefit from it inshallah... from the information in it...and I really wish that it would be translated to Arabic...and to also be shared with the workers in Syria so that they benefit from it. – *Syrian CAB Member*

Similarly, another practitioner wanted their own experience to help others:

I am very happy to participate in this research...I always try people to be like people like you in time of crises and disasters did not end from the earth... we try as people who got involved in this field to transfer this experience hoping that it reduces the damage that may happen somewhere. – *Syrian CAB Member*

The same practitioner reiterated their happiness to share their experience to benefit others:

I am really happy, to tell you again that me relaying this simple experience to people who will benefit from it. – *Syrian CAB Member*

Another practitioner expressed the benefit of sharing the research results with coordination groups to highlight social work's potential:

As social workers we also need to let other people know within the humanitarian sector of we don't do enough of this obviously but what is social work what is the potential of it, so I think you know discussions with, definitely I mean the results of your research, having presentations of this for example with the clusters, with different organizations working in Northwest Syria opening their eyes to the possibilities lets say would be hugely beneficial. – *International CAB Member*

When asked about what worked well during their experience with the online CAB during the final online survey, a practitioner noted the benefit of learning about other practitioners' experiences:

Showing the role and impact of social workers in Northwest Syria and benefiting from colleagues' experiences. – *Syrian CAB Member*

In summary, practitioners' reflections on the research suggest a carefully designed CAB can engage and benefit practitioners by offering practitioners an opportunity to reflect on their practice and share their experiences to help others. Rather than conducting research that only extracts practitioners' knowledge, these findings illustrate the importance of research benefiting practitioners generating and sharing findings applicable to their ongoing practice. Another way research can benefit practitioners is by advancing their epistemic agency. By engaging practitioners in aspects of the design, conduct and review of the study itself, the practitioners, reported experiencing a sense that their thinking mattered, and that they were in fact drivers of the study and therefore co-creators of the knowledge the study produced which could be shared to benefit others. When people closest to an experience are included in producing the knowledge created about it, it results in stronger objectivity, than would be possible when their standpoint is absent (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1993).

Discussion

Given the need to include practitioners as research collaborators, this study found carefully including a CAB into the research design can promote research ethics and relevance and may benefit

practitioners as it benefits the objectivity of the study itself in the following ways. The CAB included practitioners' perspectives, including experienced field practitioners who are directly engaged in practice on the ground, which increases the study's relevance as well as its ethical foundations. Since engaging communities can help achieve research's ethical obligation of being useful to the target community (Bruno & Haar, 2020), including practitioners in the CAB promoted research ethics by gathering perspectives on social work practice from practitioners with practical experience, increasing the study's ability to generate more relevant, practice-related findings. Considering the context in NWS, the CAB members offered practical recommendations to improve the study's contextual considerations, use of key concepts and coordination. CAB members noted the research provided a beneficial opportunity to reflect and hoped the research could benefit their own ongoing practice and share their experiences to help others. Other studies highlighted how involvement in research can help empower diverse groups (Sheely, 2018; Stack, 2013; Travers, 1997). Yet, efforts to carefully design a CAB must not only *extract* practitioners' knowledge about the context to benefit the research, but the practitioners must also directly *benefit* from their involvement in the research. Research must also ensure that the practitioners have a meaning role in co-creating the study and analyzing results, leading to actual ownership of the production of knowledge. It may be said that and in this case was experienced as a benefit to the practitioners, due to its support of epistemic resistance (Collins, 2019). This is both a specific ethical obligation of social work (Bragin, 2005; Razack, 2009), but also leads to greater scientific objectivity and accuracy in the results (Bragin, et al., 2014; Collins, 2019; Harding 1993).

The difficult reality of practitioners' experiences in NWS increases both the importance and challenge of conducting research that engages and benefits practitioners who participate in a CAB. The research study included CAB members from NWS which is a war-torn area, and some CAB members joined from camps for internally displaced persons. Compared to other contexts, practitioners in NWS may have had fewer opportunities to participate in research, heavy workloads and poor internet, which make participating in online research from NWS hard. Since the research culture is not very common in NWS, very few people have participated in previous research, so participating in research may be new. CAB members, who were also practitioners in NWS, were very busy doing field work, which is more daunting than office work. In NWS, poor internet connections caused delays and difficulties for CAB members during interviews. In addition, remote data collection means participants must use their own resources such as phone credit or time for a call

(Hensen et al., 2021). The research team explored options for how to compensate participants. However, ethical concerns and Canada's sanctions against Syria prevented this study from compensating CAB members with phone credit or an honorarium in exchange for the resources CAB members used to complete interviews or online surveys. Since multiple barriers exist to conducting research that benefits CAB members in complex emergencies, future research must continually explore how to facilitate online CABs that do no harm, provide opportunities for epistemic agency and offer reciprocal benefits to practitioners. For example, given the constraints of ethics and sanctions, future studies should consider how research can compensate CAB members for the resources required for CAB involvement. In addition, future research could gather the CAB's perspectives on the definition of 'good' practices used to guide the interviews. This article highlights methodological lessons learned to provide additional ideas for how a CAB could offer more value to practitioners.

Methodological Lessons Learned

1. Hire a knowledgeable and trusted security consultant to complete a security assessment prior to starting a CAB and to be available throughout the study: Conducting a security assessment prior to starting the CAB reduced the risks of having key research documents or communications methods place the researchers or CAB members at risk. Douedari et al., (2021) recommend exploring the potential consequences of engaging people remotely through informal conversations with key stakeholders prior to developing research to prevent placing communities at further risk. Conducting a security assessment to inform the CAB design also ensured the research did not solely rely on the CAB members input to identify security risks. This allowed the CAB members to focus their input on the study's methodological and technical aspects, increasing practitioners' epistemic agency.

2. Engage researchers from the complex emergency to facilitate the online CAB: Engaging researchers from the complex emergency who speak the local language and understand the context ensures the CAB is accessible to national practitioners in their local language and more relevant to the context. For example, the Syrian PRs made an interview question exploring 'good' practices with individuals more understandable given the Syrian context. Furthermore, allowing national practitioners to participate in their own language may also strengthen the quality of practitioners'

feedback, thus improving the study's relevance, and benefit to practitioners. In the final survey, a CAB member emphasized the novelty of engaging Syrian practitioners in Arabic:

I appreciate the efforts you made to actively involve Syrian practitioners, for them to engage in their mother tongue and to give them the opportunity to talk about their work — this does not happen often for social workers operating in active conflict zones. – *CAB Member in English*

3. Conduct a pilot project with the online CAB: Doing a pilot project with the CAB members ensures CAB members' perspectives are included in the data and improves the study's ethics and relevance. For example, during the pilot interviews, the question exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted your work was distressing. To foster more ethical research by reducing causing unnecessary distress through the interviews the question was changed. Furthermore, if the study uses interviews, future research could invite CAB members to participate in an optional pilot study interview followed by an online survey or follow up interview to gather the CAB members' feedback on the interview process based on their own experience doing the interview and allow CAB members to ask questions about the research process and content.

4. Offer practitioners useful information: Future research should give CAB members helpful information about the research. For example, research could provide CAB members with optional opportunities to strengthen their research capacity through videos, voice recordings or optional online workshops using secure platforms. Literature on facilitating CAB's in LMICs also highlighted the challenge of not providing CAB members with sufficient information about research to inform the CAB members contributions (Zhao et al., 2019). In NWS, Ekzayez et al., (2021) highlighted the importance of strengthening research capacity for Syrians, particularly inside Syria. Short videos in Arabic could explain research concepts such as informed consent and social work. In addition, a CAB member recommended sharing more information about the research in the online survey:

slightly more regular updates with how the research is progressing, and updates on how it was shifted to address the C-19 pandemic. Perhaps quarterly updates or twice yearly?– *CAB Member in English*

Research should consider how to give the CAB updated information on the research process. When starting the CAB, an online survey could explore CAB members' perspectives on the recommended platforms and types of information that could benefit practitioners.

5. Offer practitioners optional opportunities to engage and connect: Since a challenge of using online methods is participants may feel disconnected (Tami-Maury et al., 2017), online CAB's should consider providing CAB members with optional opportunities to connect with other CAB members and engage in the research through online surveys. During the final feedback survey, CAB members recommended giving participants opportunities to connect:

Have group sessions among community advisory board. – *CAB Member in Arabic*

If ethics allow, it would be useful to know who else is on the Community Advisory Board and maybe having the opportunity to engage in a FGD with fellow CAB members. – *CAB Member in English*

The same CAB member described the online CAB's benefit and hopes for discussions with other practitioners:

Ability to respond to requests based upon workload. As online I could move it around work commitments and be more flexible with my responses than if an in-person presence was required. It also makes it somehow more accessible as less travel costs, visa requests, hosting etc required to engage. However, I very much missed being able to sit and meet (again) with Syrian practitioners who are still actively engaged in this work – to directly discuss things, reflect on social work practices etc. – *CAB Member in English*

Thus, future research could use the security assessment and online surveys with CAB members to explore if and how CAB members could safely connect online. Future research could also provide CAB members with more opportunities to engage and share their insights on the research through additional online surveys. For example, an online survey could explore how a CAB could benefit practitioners.

Conclusions & Areas for Future Research

The provision of social work services during complex emergencies is by definition a difficult task (IASC, 1993). Yet it is precisely social work services which are most required in these circumstances (Bragin, 2014). Therefore, it is important to study effective practices so that they can be understood and replicated. One frequently encountered problem of such studies is that they are done by outsiders, often from the international humanitarian community, and therefore may privilege outsider experiences over those of local social work providers (IASC, 2014). To address these issues, the inclusion of local practitioners as collaborators on the research team, engaged throughout the process as knowledge creators. Aside from the more complete objectivity provided by such inclusion, it strengthens the epistemic agency of local practitioners and, in so doing, further decolonizes the research process (Collins, 2019).

This article promotes learning about ‘good’ practices for research in NWS and suggests considerations for research in other complex emergencies. Specifically, this article provides a concrete example of how incorporating an online CAB into research design enables the effective inclusion of local practitioners as research collaborators in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. The inclusion of the online CAB allowed the study to agilely adapt to unpredictable complexities, in this case including a pandemic. Having selected online methods prior to the start of the pandemic allowed the study to continue seamlessly without requiring major methodological or ethical revisions. Such online methods also allowed this study to include practitioners’ perspectives, and particularly the perspectives of Syrian practitioners who are on the ground performing social work functions in NWS. Given the demands of the response experienced by practitioners working in complex emergencies, an online CAB is one aspect of research design that could contribute to strengthening collaboration between researchers and practitioners, producing research that is more beneficial to practitioners and affected communities. Although including practitioners’ perspectives both *in* and *on* the research process can strengthen research ethics and relevance, online CAB’s should not merely take information from practitioners but also offer benefits such as by sharing helpful information, creating safe opportunities to connect with other practitioners as well as generating and sharing findings that offer relevance to social work practice. Future research should gather additional feedback from practitioners involved in online CAB’s during complex emergencies

to continue to learn how to the use of CAB's to promote more ethical, relevant and beneficial research in complex emergencies and ultimately provide better support to practitioners who perform such vital tasks.

Appendix 1-- Interview Guide Changes Chart

Pilot Phase	Second Phase
Interview Part 1-- Perspectives on Good Social Work Practices in the Syrian Context	Interview Part 1-- Perspectives on Good Social Work Practices in the Syrian Context
1. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices to care for individuals within the context in Northwest Syria?	1. How would you describe social work in the context of Northwest Syria?
2. What do you think makes it a good practice?	2. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices within the context in Northwest Syria?
3. From your perspective, what are examples of good social practices to care for families within the context in Northwest Syria?	3. What do you think makes it a good practice?
4. What do you think makes it a good practice?	4. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices to care for families within the context in Northwest Syria?
5. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices with groups in the context of Northwest Syria?	5. What do you think makes it a good practice?
6. What do you think makes it a good practice?	6. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices with groups in the context of Northwest Syria?
7. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices to support communities within the context of Northwest Syria?	7. What do you think makes it a good practice?

<p>8. What do you think makes it a good practice?</p>	<p>8. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices at the community level within the context of Northwest Syria?</p>
	<p>9. What do you think makes it a good practice?</p>
	<p>10. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices to care for <i>individuals which were conducted with some privacy away from groups</i> within the context of Northwest Syria?</p>
	<p>11. What do you think makes it a good practice?</p>
<p>Interview Part 2 – Perspectives on Effective Forms of Support for Syrian Practitioners</p>	<p>Interview Part 2 – Perspectives on Effective Forms of Support for Syrian Practitioners</p>
<p>9. From your perspective, what are useful forms of support for Syrians providing social work functions in Northwest Syria?</p>	<p>12. From your perspective, what are useful forms of support for Syrians providing social work functions in Northwest Syria?</p>
<p>Interview Part 3 – Impact of the Pandemic</p>	<p>Interview Part 3 – Perspectives on Good Social Work Practices During the Pandemic</p>
<p>10. How has the pandemic affected your work?</p>	<p>13. From your perspective, what are examples of good social work practices in Northwest Syria during the pandemic?</p>
<p>11. From your perspective, what are useful forms of support for Syrians providing social work functions in Northwest Syria during the pandemic?</p>	<p>14. From your perspective, what are useful forms of support for Syrians providing social work functions in Northwest Syria during the pandemic?</p>
<p>Interview Part 4 – Recommendations for Good Social Work Practices</p>	<p>Interview Part 4 – Recommendations for Good Social Work Practices</p>
<p>12. What are recommendations for good social work practices in other settings affected by complex emergencies?¹</p>	<p>15. What are recommendations for good social work practices in other settings affected by complex emergencies?⁶</p>

⁶ “A complex emergency can be defined as a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict, and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country programme.” (UNHCR, 2001, para 1). Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/partners/partners/3ba88e7c6/coordination-complex-emergencies.html>

13. Is there anything else important you would like me to know?	16. Is there anything else important you would like me to know?
<p>“A complex emergency can be defined as a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict, and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country programme.” (UNHCR, 2001, para 1) Retrieved from: https://www.unhcr.org/partners/partners/3ba88e7c6/coordination-complex-emergencies.html</p>	

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Introduction to Manuscript II

Perspectives on ‘Good’ Social Work Practices in Complex Emergencies:

A Study of Northwest Syria

The second manuscript highlights participants’ perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practice during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria. This manuscript addresses the dissertation’s overall research question which seeks to explore perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies by drawing upon a study of Northwest Syria. This manuscript also addresses the dissertation’s first and third sub research questions which seek to explore the following: what is considered ‘good’ social work practice conducted by Syrians during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria and what are recommendations for ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies? By addressing these research questions, manuscript II contributes to existing knowledge by documenting the practice knowledge of practitioners with relevant experience, including Syrian practitioners who possess vast, prolonged experience responding to the crisis in Northwest Syria. Since these Syrian practitioners had the opportunity to participate in an interview in Arabic with a Syrian interviewer, Syrian practitioners could share their practice insights in their own language offering unique insights into practice in Northwest Syria. By documenting the perspectives of these Syrian practitioners in Arabic, this research specifically contributes to Truell’s (2020) call “to turn to the many examples from the prolonged and real experience of social workers in war situations to give us hope and guidance for new and more effective ways of working” (p. 180-181).

Author Contributions to Manuscript II

- Karen Paul, First Author’s Role: I wrote the article and revised subsequent drafts.
- Dr. Myriam Denov, Second Author’s Role: Dr. Myriam Denov helped edit and revise the manuscript. Dr. Myriam Denov also wrote the sections on why there may be a lack of social work research in complex emergencies and the need to use caution when thinking about ‘good’ social work practices.
- Lana Al Houssami, Third Author’s Role: Lana Al Houssami reviewed and edited the manuscript. Lana Al Houssami helped select quotes for the findings section, develop the overall argument, contributed input on the conclusion, and the description of the Syrian

context. Since Lana conducted, transcribed and translated 19 interviews in Arabic, Lana helped the manuscript aligns with what the practitioners shared in Arabic.

- Other Contributions: The two peer researchers, who were supporting the research, offered insights on the state of social work in Northwest Syria during weekly meetings that supported the development of this manuscript. Through one of our discussions, the peer researchers described how Syrian family and community members often performed social work type functions prior to the start of the crisis. For example, during a discussion of the Arabic literature review, the notes from our research team meeting on February 22nd 2021 summarize our discussing by stating: “how the concept of seeking help shifted in the context, previous forms- links to the challenges that these practitioners face in the work- some still rely on the extended family.” In addition, my committee member, Dr. Amal Elsana highlighted the importance of how practitioners root their practice in their knowledge of how families and communities could support themselves.

Manuscript 2 Abstract

Existing scholarship discusses social work during war and conflict, but less social work scholarship specifically names and focuses on the reality of complex emergencies. This article discusses perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice in complex emergencies by drawing upon a study of Northwest Syria which included 29 interviews with international and Syrian practitioners. This study found that although Syria did not have a formal social work profession before the emergency, the crisis created a need for social work practice to help re-activate Syrian families and communities’ supportive nature. Participants perceived ‘good’ social work practices as a range of practices, that are suitable to the community, which helped to re-activate the family and community’s supportive role. Practitioners described how ‘good’ social work practices incorporated Syrian culture and were best performed by practitioners with certain characteristics. Ultimately, this article argues social work practice should reactivate rather than replace these existing culturally embedded forms of support.

Key Practitioner Messages:

- During complex emergencies, ‘good’ social work practice considers and incorporates cultural aspects such as spirituality and stigma.
- A range of social work practices, which are suitable to the community, can help to restore family and community supports.
- Practitioners who know the community, are trustworthy and have a relevant background can best perform ‘good’ social work practices.

Manuscript II: Perspectives on ‘Good’ Social Work Practices in Complex Emergencies: A Study of Northwest Syria

Background

Complex emergencies are characterized by extensive societal and economic destruction, massive displacement (OCHA, 1999), weakened institutions (WHO, n.d.), mass casualties, loss of life, barriers to effectively responding, and high levels of danger towards humanitarian responders, all of which create needs that require unique forms of external support (IASC, 1994). The term “complex humanitarian emergency” was developed to define situations where multiple factors, including political and historical factors, make a setting particularly vulnerable to crises and influence the outcomes (Leaning, Briggs & Chen, 1999 as cited in Ventevogel et al., 2011). Keen (2008) highlights how the term “complex emergencies” draws attention to their unique complexities: “more generally, the term ‘civil war’ can prejudice our understanding of the complex fault-lines of conflict and the complex manipulation of violence for a wide variety of purposes, whereas the label ‘complex emergency’ draws attention to complexity and embodies a useful degree of vagueness about the *nature* of a violent conflict” (p. 2). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is responsible for coordinating inter-agency humanitarian assistance (IASC, n.d.), defines a complex emergency as:

a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression; b) a humanitarian crisis which requires an international response which goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency; c) a humanitarian crisis where the IASC assesses that it requires intensive and extensive political and management coordination. (IASC, 1994, p. 2)

Recent examples of complex emergencies include Ukraine, Yemen, and Northwest Syria (WHO, 2022).

Yet, the very nature, convolution, and intricacies of complex emergencies makes it difficult to provide necessary support (IASC, 1994). As a result, complex emergencies demand social work practice that is uniquely tailored to the contexts’ realities. While local social workers play a critical

role in responding to the needs arising from the complex emergency (Bragin & Garcia, 2009), the complex emergencies' impact on the family, community, and societal structures profoundly shapes the nature and direction of social work of practice. However, social work research has yet to document practitioners' perspectives on what *they deem* to be effective social work practices in complex emergencies. To address this gap, by drawing upon the perspectives of practitioners working in the insecure context of North West Syria (NWS), this study explores perspectives on what is considered 'good' social work practice in complex emergencies. Based on practitioner's perspectives, this article asserts that social work practice can play a key role in helping to *reactivate* rather than *replace* the natural support systems that comprise the social fabric of families and communities in complex emergencies. In relation to the notion of "reactivating", the IASC Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Emergency Settings acknowledge how communities impacted by emergencies often contain both informal and formal mechanisms which communities mobilize to address their needs. If these mechanisms are strained, *re-activating* these existing supportive structures is part of promoting a useful emergency response (IASC, 2007). As such, this article argues social work practices should not emerge to continually take over and replace the role of existing formal and informal structures, but practitioners who perform social work functions can help to reactivate and revitalize rather than permanently take on culturally embedded supportive family and community roles.

The Complex Emergency in Northwest Syria

In NWS, since 2011, the ongoing complex emergency continues to profoundly impact Syrians through massive displacement, loss of life, and barriers to responding to the emergency. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2022b) documents that 2.8 million people are internally displaced in NWS. Furthermore, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and United Nations (UN) Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, explained:

March marks 11 years of war in Syria, [and] said such devastation "finds few parallels" in recent history. More than 350,000 people have been killed, nearly 14 million have been displaced and basic services are destroyed. Meanwhile, civilians continue to be killed and injured along front-line areas in the country's north-west. (UN, 2022a, para.

4)

Exemplifying the barriers to effectively responding, Martin Griffiths also stated that not renewing the UN Security Council's authorization to provide cross-border assistance "will disrupt life-saving aid for the people living in north-west Syria" (UN, 2022b, para 17). The mass displacement, loss of life, and barriers to effectively responding create a complex situation in NWS.

Other characteristics of the complex emergency, such as strained institutions, economic and societal destruction influence social work practice in NWS. For example, the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO, 2022) reports how shelling damaged health and educational facilities. OCHA (2022a) reports 8% of healthcare facilities have been destroyed, and only 422 of 624 health care facilities are functioning. Similarly, strained educational systems influence social work practice by creating new needs, such as a lack of education. OCHA (2022a) found that 44% of children in NWS were not in school. Moreover, not attending school has left children vulnerable to child labour and child marriage. Demonstrating the economic and societal destruction, OCHA (2022c) reports increased suicide due to financial hardship, domestic violence, or lost property. The strained institutions, societal and economic destruction represent profound challenges to engaging in supportive social work practice in NWS. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the emergency. In this context, this research explored what practitioners working in the complexity of NWS viewed as 'good' social work practices.

Social Work in Northwest Syria

Although Syria did not have formal social work education prior to this crisis, international organizations introduced social work roles to support displaced Syrians. For example, to address child protection, gender-based violence, and MHPSS concerns, existing programs now incorporate social work functions such as case management (SPC, 2019). Similarly, organizations developed the psychosocial support worker (PSW) role to address the gap in psychosocial support services (Nemiro et al., 2021). In addition, an estimated 280 psychosocial workers provide MHPSS services in NWS (WHO EMRO, n.d.) and some Syrian PSWs have received psychological guidance counselling degrees from Syrian universities. Having Syrians perform social work functions in NWS, without formalized social work education allows for a unique exploration of how effective social work practice can emerge during crises.

Social Work in Northwest Syria: What is ‘Good’ Practice in a Complex Emergency?

Social Work Research in Complex Emergencies

Although there is a growing body of literature addressing social work in conflict settings (Bragin et al., 2016; Semigina & Gusak, 2015), there is only one known social work study that specifically names and focuses on complex emergencies (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). The available research on social work practice in complex emergencies may be less apparent for a few reasons. First, conducting research in such settings is challenging because accessing communities within active war zones is difficult and dangerous, making empirical research desperately needed, yet often unattainable. Second, social work research has more frequently addressed the realities of political conflict (Sonnenberg & Ghaderi, 2021), armed conflict (Bragin et al., 2016), and war (Maglajlić et al. 2008). Thus, there is a need for social work research to ensure the inclusion of the perspectives of practitioners’ with experience in complex emergencies to inform social work practice.

Although social work research on complex emergencies has underscored the relevance of the social work profession in such crises (Bragin & Garcia, 2009), the need to pay particular attention to the unique culture and context has been emphasized (Bragin et al., 2016, Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). As an example, based on a study comparing the competencies required by child protection organizations working in complex emergencies with social work competencies, Bragin and Garcia (2009) recommend that social work should increase its role in strengthening local capacity to promote culturally relevant, effective practice with youth impacted by complex emergencies and possibly other practice areas. Similarly, research on social workers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, stated the social work education is mainly based on Western social work theories, yet Palestinian social workers do not always follow these Western theories in practice (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). Both studies highlight the need for greater attention to culture and context, as well as the necessity to explore what local practitioners believe to be ‘good’ social work practices in complex emergencies.

In response, this research explores practitioners’ perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice, and participants’ reasons and explanations as to why they represent a ‘good’ practice. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO, 2016) emphasize that ‘good practices’ are ones which produce good results and can be thereby recommended as models. However, determining what is

considered ‘good practice’ is inherently variable, dynamic, and deeply impacted by local culture, history, economics, geography, power relations, and must be contextualized to the broader socio-historical context. What is considered ‘good’ in one context, may not be in another. Moreover, using the terminology of ‘good’ practice may be problematic, as it has sometimes been used by social workers to justify abusive practices (Ives et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of considering whose voices inform social work and the need for practitioners’ perspectives from diverse contexts to carefully strengthen social work practice.

Method

The social ecological framework guides this study (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The social ecological model considers a person within the multiple, interacting layers of their family, peers, school, employment, community, culture, society and broader systems. At each of these levels, the person may be influenced by, and simultaneously actively influence their environment (Denov & Akesson, 2017). Bronfenbrenner (2005) acknowledges the impact of *time* on the different levels, noting culture and beliefs may change over time and place. This framework highlights the need to explore effective practices with individuals, families, groups and communities.

Although this study was designed before the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection occurred during the pandemic. This study therefore incorporated questions about the pandemic into the interviews. Thus, perspectives ‘good’ practices during the pandemic are included, but are not the article’s primary focus. Ethical approval for this study was received from the McGill University Ethics board (REB file #: 42-0619). The well-being and anonymity of participants were assured via multiple strategies. A security consultant provided information on secure communication methods. To ensure anonymity, participants’ demographic information was not collected. Furthermore, participants provided verbal consent for interviews and could choose to participate with their name or a pseudonym; and to be audio recorded. Two Syrian Peer Researchers (PRs) conducted interviews in Arabic to ensure culturally appropriate support. Although the interviews were designed to not ask about distressing topics, sometimes difficult topics arose during the interviews because of the challenging environment. In response, having Syrian PR’s was important. For example, when discussing a challenging topic during an interview, a participant told the Syrian PR: “when I talk, you know how it is.” Nonetheless, if participants experienced distress from the interviews, clinicians were identified who could provide additional support in Arabic or English.

The research included four phases: (1) Developing a Community Advisory Board (CAB), (2) A Pilot Study (3) Interviews, and (4) Data analysis.

1. *Developing a Community Advisory Board:* This study was guided by collaborative community-based research methods (Israel, 1998) in an online format. Community-based research methods recognize the importance of involving a range of actors from the community in the research (Israel, 1998) which supports the use of a CAB. The CAB ensured that culture, sensitivity, and ethics were an integral and ongoing part of the project by providing their input on the research through a pilot study. Six Syrian and seven international practitioners familiar with NWS joined the online CAB. International staff /practitioners can be defined as “all staff not from the country within which they are working,” and may include staff from nearby countries and who have experience working as national staff in their own country (Stoddard et al., 2011, p. 3).

The CAB population included practitioners such as community health workers, case managers, PSWs, social workers, managers and technical advisors with remote or in person experience related to a specific area of NWS.⁷ Practitioners working in gender-based violence, health, rehabilitation, MHPSS, protection and child protection were all included.

CAB participants were recruited using convenience sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015) by sending an invitation to eligible participants by drawing upon existing networks and purposeful sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015) by sending invitations to relevant coordination group leaders.

2. *Pilot Study:* The pilot study invited CAB members to participate in an interview and provide feedback through an online survey. Seven CAB members (Four international practitioners; Three Syrian practitioners) participated in semi-structured interviews in 2020. Participants received FAO’s (2016) definition of a ‘good’ practice and the interviewer reviewed the aspects of the social work’s definition and core purposes. The interviews explored participants’ perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practices with individuals, families, groups, communities; why these practices were considered as ‘good’; ‘good’ social work practices during the COVID-19 pandemic; how to

⁷ The research occurred in a specific area of Northwest Syria, which is notable as the needs might be different according to the context. The specific area is available upon request due to the sensitivity of the situation and the area as well as to protect participants’ safety.

effectively support Syrian practitioners; and recommendations for ‘good’ social work practices in other complex emergencies. The interviews lasted from 30 to 120 minutes and were conducted via skype, whats app, the wire, or telegram. Ten CAB members completed the survey. Based on the pilot study feedback, the research added an interview question asking how participants would describe social work in NWS, and provided participants the choice to interview with a male or female Syrian PR.

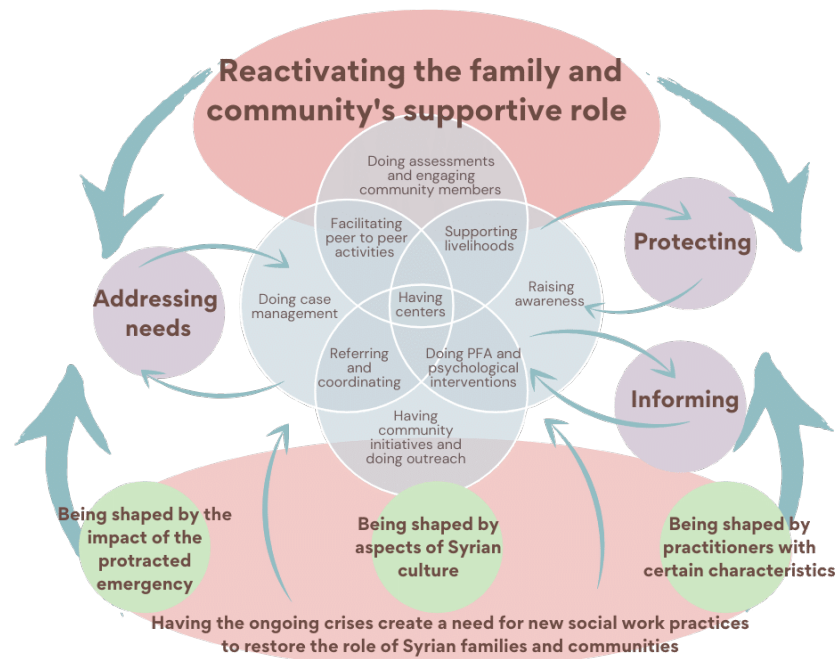
3. Interviews: In addition to the previously described inclusion criteria for the CAB, the population for these interviews also included community members with experience providing or receiving care related to the core purposes of social work (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). These participants were identified using convenience, purposeful and snowball sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015). The research used convenience sampling techniques by sending invitations through professional networks as well as purposeful sampling techniques by sending invitations to relevant coordination group leaders and inviting CAB members to share the interview invitation. Twenty-two participants (2 international practitioners; 20 Syrian practitioners) completed interviews in 2021. The third author completed 19 interviews in Arabic and the first author conducted three interviews in English.

4. Data Analysis: The first author analyzed the data using constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). CGT is a contemporary form of grounded theory which focuses on research relationships and subjectivity, gaining “abstract understanding of studied life” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). CGT was accomplished through initial and focused coding, writing memos, establishing categories, and creating diagrams to explain the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). To ensure rigour, the third author also wrote memos and the first author discussed the analysis with the Syrian PRs. To conduct initial coding, each transcript was read and a memo was written describing the interviews’ meaning; and then coded line by line to focus on the participants’ meanings and actions (Charmaz, 2014). While memo writing, a list of initial codes was developed and diagrams were drafted. Next, data was coded segment-by-segment, allowing for more focused codes to emerge, and focused codes were then grouped to develop categories and revise the diagrams.

Findings

This article reveals three key findings which suggest that social work, as an emerging profession, can help to *reactivate* rather than *replace* the socio-historical and cultural support systems that comprise the social fabric of families and communities in society during complex emergencies. First, Syria did not have a social work profession prior to the start of the complex emergency. However, the ongoing crises of war, displacement, and an ongoing pandemic, created a need for social work practices to emerge and to help restore the critical and supportive role of Syrian families and communities that have been torn apart by multiple crises. Second, practitioners considered ‘good’ social work practices as those that helped to reactivate the family and community’s supportive role through a range of practices that are suitable to the community. These practices included peer group activities, livelihood support, case management, awareness raising, community initiatives, and centres such as spaces for women, youth, vocational training and psychosocial support. Third, effective social work practices were considered those that reflected and embedded Syrian culture and included local understandings of spirituality and stigma. Practitioners suggested that effective practices were those that are best performed by practitioners who know the community, are trustworthy and have related experience and education. The study’s findings ultimately suggest social work matters in complex emergencies, and can even be lifesaving. Yet, it requires careful consideration of who is conducting the practice and how the practices are aligned with the culture and context, particularly in NWS that did not previously have a formal social work profession.

Perspectives on Good Social Work Practices in Northwest Syria



1. *Complex emergencies and the need for new social work practices*

Practitioners described the integral and supportive role of family and community's in Syrian culture:

We are a community whose, like with strong family ties for most of the time, and we, it is very common for us to help one another in the manner that a social worker would do. – *Syrian Practitioner A*

Because the family forms the community, so if we worked on the family then it's done, it's the core of society. -*Syrian Practitioner D*

In Northwest Syria if you are, if you are someone requiring support, your first port of call is your family members, your immediate or your extended family and there is this widespread respect and understanding that the family does support each other. - *International Practitioner B*

The family has a big role in the social support process.. when someone comes to you who needs some sort of support...maybe he has a weakness in social communication....we communicate with the family and the surrounding social network to enhance his social networks and become socially active person better than remaining in isolation....We rely a lot on the family and friends role because they have a big role within the local community. -*Syrian Practitioner C*

Practitioners also explained the deleterious impact of the crisis on these supportive family and community networks, creating a need for new forms of support:

The family has a huge role in enhancing the recovery and psychological wellbeing and offering self-care. And here we are now after nine years of what let's say the crisis, the family is no longer able to offer enough care and in a good way... However, the family and parents still have a huge role. – *Syrian Practitioner C*

Because of the shattered community you know there is now a conspicuous need for social work, now people started to appreciate, to understand the value of this sort of work. *-Syrian Practitioner A*

Furthermore, practitioners explained how social work was regarded a new phenomenon:

At the beginning of the war there was when the organizations work began between 2012 and 2013, in truth we can call it a primitive situation...people were not accustomed and even organizations were not accustomed to a disaster of such magnitude and this is normal, there was no clear concept of social work. *-Syrian Practitioner D*

Ultimately, participants explained how the family and community play an integral and supportive role in Syrian culture. Although the emergency strained these critical networks, these roles were not completely diminished, creating a vital need for new social work practices to recognize and build on culturally embedded supportive roles.

2. Practitioner perspectives on 'Good Practice': reactivating the family and community's supportive role through a range of practices

Practitioners suggested that 'good' social work practices were those that helped to reactivate family and community contributions, through a range of practices such as peer group activities, awareness raising, centres and livelihood support, case management, awareness raising and community initiatives. To reactivate is to "to make active or operative again; to restore to a state of activity, bring back into action" (OED, 2022, para 2). Since Syrian families and communities supported each other prior to the crisis and social work practices are relatively new, practitioners emphasized how 'good' social work practices re-enabled families and communities to continually address their own needs. As such, these 'good' practices worked to revitalize the family and community's supportive role by reactivating economic and social life, the individual's role in the family and community and the community's role.

Peer Group Activities

Practitioners described peer group activities as a process of gathering together those who share the same age, gender and are experiencing similar problems. This is accomplished to exchange experiences, receive information and engage in collective activities, facilitating the development of ongoing relationships and support. The difficulties with humanitarian access, lack of human resources and the overwhelming, diverse needs in NWS make facilitating ongoing support critical. As these participants described:

You are also bringing clients and families together that you would otherwise be seeing separately and you are trying to create a mutual social support network between them and a peer network that can exist and can be supportive and mutually reinforcing as a network without the social worker being present and that is particularly key in Northwest Syria because of the humanitarian access issues, so the groups have to find some way of existing without this consistent external facilitation. *-International Practitioner B*

When I make a peer support group for the purpose of that I don't create a therapeutic relationship between a patient and a doctor...but to create a culture between the group's individuals themselves in a way that they share the experience among themselves to strengthen the social structure and try to restore some sort of relationships prior to the crises. *-International Practitioner U*

Through the group activity we are strengthening the feeling of belonging, encouraging sharing and exchanging ideas, enhance social communication, strengthen individuals' self-esteem, we are giving some sort of legalization and that he's not alone the one who suffering of these circumstances or this hardship and this at the end would be to build the individuals capacity to heal and recover. *- Syrian Practitioner H*

In summary, initiating peer group activities helped restore Syrian's social life and roles in the community.

Centres and Livelihood Support

Practitioners described the ways in which centres, which included spaces for women, youth, vocational training and psychosocial support, can help to revitalize Syrian's social and economic life as well as their roles in the family and community. For example, one practitioner described how centres helped Syrians recover from the impact of the war:

Why are those centres good for us in Northwest Syria?...the people left through hard conditions they were living a normal life, they were subjected to war, displacement...So it's normal that any normal person of us would have inferiority complex...even if it was small...if this problems is neglected... it could develop to become a big issue.. sometimes the problems develop and the person goes into isolation...sometimes it would develop into aggression sometimes – here we are hearing about suicide – so what is the reason for these problems? Those problems that the person went through, he can't tolerate what happened to him, thus when these centres opened and is providing activities and services they alleviate the suffering on this community here and also sessions like discharge sessions, provide them protection, provide them with vocational training to improve their living status, to teach them a profession that they would benefit from, in addition to psychological support sessions, discharge sessions, in addition to group community activities – when people ...in the community when they share their pains, when they share their thoughts. All these centres that served them...alleviate the suffering and the person would urgently need these practices because they helped him recover and get back his normal life. -*Syrian Practitioner M*

Considering the impact of the crisis on societal structures, centres were also said to contribute to restoring Syrians' social life:

When they used to go and visit one of the community centres, empowerment centres... they used to feel like “we are back to something beautiful in life, we are gathering again outside the camp and going out.” -*Syrian Practitioner I*

Given the profound economic destruction, centres provided spaces for rehabilitating Syrian's livelihoods, re-enabling Syrians to address their needs:

They would integrate him in a certain craft or profession that he used to do before ...so it will be like a rehabilitation process and enrichment classes and at the end of the project they would support him with some cash so he can as they say stand on his feet again, improve his materialistic status...the reason of conflict in the family is the materialistic status, so this ease things up a bit for the family and...it would be a successful project and provides an income ... We saw success stories and success cases in the economy recovery projects.... I heard it a lot ... my materialistic status was over the wind [excellent]..... “I was a sultan but now humiliation, oppression and need...people’s help”. So really when these service are provided in a professional and correct manner, in a way that guarantees beneficiaries access to it. So..he would tell you that indeed today I have changed, I became a new person, I can actually do something to my community, I am not a burden, I don’t need anyone. -*Syrian Practitioner K*

Centres were also noted for their ability to become spaces for communities to rehabilitate the locals:

The centres that were opened by organizations, frankly women centres had a very positive role, why?... they spread a very positive message....for example now we have a lot of women centres but not affiliated to any organization... it’s a group of people wanted to establish this centre...to rehabilitate the locals, a wife that lost her breadwinner, a girl who lost her mom and dad...and she wants to start a job so she started learning. – *Syrian Practitioner J*

Furthermore, another practitioner described why having vocational centres for youth and other practices to support families restores the community’s role:

All these practices are contributing to enhance the well-being and increase the capacities of the community to rise on its own in a more effectively. – *Syrian Practitioner H*

Case Management

Practitioners expressed the ways in which case management, which can be provided in centres, had the capacity to revitalize the individual's role in the family and the community:

psychosocial centres, where there are services, case management, and, and following up with the cases of course. In addition to the MHPSS service.... in addition to psychological education and awareness raising sessions, peer group activity, in addition to that individual sessions where we directly deal with the beneficiaries who might be facing pressures. So we as PSWs we help with these issues and put a plan for the individual, a treatment plan. We will put it with the beneficiary, until they reach the level of recovery. They can go back to be an active individual in their community...these practices and these activities helps them to deal with these pressures and problems and then they can go back to their normal function. -*Syrian Practitioner H*

We consider [case management] like lifesaving activities during suicide attempts or even on the level of her psychological status it became better...those people could be integrated, she could be a girl so she would be integrated or returned back to school or education. -*Syrian Practitioner K*

When asked what makes these 'good' social work practices, a practitioner explained how case management re-empowers the community:

We are here guaranteeing the prosperity of community. I mean today when I actually build the capacity of those people and re-empowering in the community.- *Syrian Practitioner K*

Awareness Raising

Practitioners also described raising awareness as a 'good' social work practice that encourages the individual's role in the family and community. Considering that the crisis impacted families and created new problems and challenges, one practitioner described how awareness raising contributed to restoring a sense of coherence in families:

Now, the family we want to talk about in Syria despite the depth of tragedy and the problem and the huge tearing and some families lost their breadwinner, some families lost some of their members but the structure of family is still present and we really need coherence in the family, we are even to restore we are relying to second and third degree relative or even fourth if they are there let's say, if the first degree relative is not there or he's in a bad situation and he needs support so we started conducting sessions, I mean the most important thing for the families and if you focus on it is awareness raising sessions, you can't imagine what awareness raising sessions could do.... Because they are introducing a community - let's be honest before this things they didn't have much of a big issues...so of course the families and awareness raising sessions for the families are necessary and very important and it also includes how we teach them parenting skills... we are trying to help them understand the more you come together as a big family the more you would be together and you can help and support each other. – *Syrian Practitioner D*

Furthermore, this same practitioner highlighted how the practitioners' role is to nourish a sense of humanity, remove obstacles and increase the connection between families and communities during awareness raising sessions:

When the person supervising the group nourish this sense of humanity in them and and you are a big family the situation would become easier, and ...the more reclude the family gets and they face their problems by themselves then the situation would get much more difficult, so our job is to remove the obstacles between the families and remove the obstacles between the displaced and residents or the hosting village or community, the more they get closed to each other the better the results would be.
Syrian Practitioner D

Community-led Initiatives

Practitioners shared how community should conduct social work with or without the presence of organizations, indicating the importance of new social work practices emerging to re-activate rather than replace culturally embedded family and community supportive mechanisms:

We should coordinate with the community leaders to achieve social work, second thing is training staff for these leaders we train them on social work or give them a good idea on what social work is for them to spread in the community where they live, third we should work on the matter of brainstorming, what are the most points or risks the community faces that can be solved through social work....The last idea as a whole that we through training, raising awareness, coordination, and organizing within the community we can achieve social work regardless of the presence of organizations or not....I mean now, the presence of organizations may be strength but it's a positive and a negative point, a negative point because it's making us dependant on organizations, so social work is being reduced or the concept of it and it's a positive point because it's giving us support...but we should as a community work on the concept of social work as a whole, what risks it involves? What difficulties and challenges does it have? And through social work we should solve things in this community and don't be dependent on organizations and other people. – *Syrian Practitioner F*

What makes these social practices good is firstly, these practices, as you know, could rely on volunteering as a main pillar to achieve its goal's...You can't achieve everything if you don't have volunteers are volunteering, volunteers and at the same time, this would be a way to the local communities so they can rely on themselves. So they can count and then rely on themselves. –*Syrian Practitioner J*

Practitioners shared how community-led initiatives helped to restore the community's supportive role:

What makes them a good social work practice is that they gave back the responsibility of protection of children to the community... the community level did not do enough and they were not empowered enough to take control to take care of their own to

shoulder the responsibilities they should be, they were not even aware that these were their responsibilities so the NGOs did this community based intervention where they trained some individuals from the community some local councils some etc and... they enabled like empowered them to... to shoulder the responsibility that they should be undertaking. -*Syrian Practitioner A*

In another example, a practitioner described a community initiative to support education:

These initiatives are genuinely saving many cases like the last initiative I did, it was with some of my colleagues which is for example there's one of schools in the community. Their financial support was cut from the beginning of the school year from August till now. The teachers didn't receive it any salaries at all. So we did an initiative which is collecting money from parents of students after taking the consent from the Minister of Education. We took the parents' consent and from the school principal that we will do for example a group for collecting donations to raise money through these donations and pay the teachers' salaries so that the educational process can continue...many schools have emulated in order to secure teachers' salaries and so that the educational process can continue and so that the children or student don't face or don't be end up on the streets and girls are not exposed to early marriage and violence and cases of exploitation. -*Syrian Practitioner O*

One practitioner explained a community initiative called *kafala* to support children to stay with their families. *Kafala* is a child protection measure, prevalent in Islamic legal countries, which can be formal and involve a competent body or informal in nature. *Kafala* occurs when a person, who is called the *kafil*, voluntarily cares for the specific needs of a child deprived of their family. The practitioner described facilitating *Kafala* because an orphanage had closed:

We tried to recommunicate with the parents, for example if there's *Kafala* for this child then the mother can take care of this child, aaa there was a large number of children who we were able to return them to their mothers of course after coordination with several organizations and many people received a lot of support for those orphan children. -*Syrian Practitioner L*

Practitioners also shared examples of community-led initiatives which they perceived to be ‘good’ social work practices during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I tailored 1500 masks that I paid for personally and distributed them to women and some hospitals and to some people passing by in the streets and to some community committees who don’t have masks, as a type of encouragement for them to wear the masks and so they can be a role model for them, and indeed there were many women who followed that example and tailored masks, so the initiative is that instead of being quarantined in the tent and sitting, you can tailor masks and take a small amount of money on tailoring them, this way you cover your own expenses and also a protection factor in the community. -*Syrian Practitioner O*

While this initiative exemplifies reactivating the family and community’s supportive role through practices such as community led initiatives, practitioners also emphasized that certain factors shape ‘good’ social work practices, which are addressed below.

3. The importance of Syrian culture and local Syrian practitioners

Practitioners considered ‘good practices’ to be rooted in Syrian cultures. For example, practitioners emphasized the need to consider religion and spirituality:

General awareness raising sessions, I mean they are touching the wound, I mean they come and introduce them to aaaa in our community there’s beating, in our community there’s the phenomena of early marriage....why are beating your wife? You are a Muslim, there is no such thing as beating in Islam, I mean if we come to religion if we come to religion my dear brother there’s no such thing as beating in Islam. -*Syrian Practitioner P*

When you want to do good social work practices, the first thing is ... there should be ... let’s something matching and suitable to the community you are working in....if you come through religion, morals, customs and traditions, they would accept you more here in our community. -*Syrian Practitioner G*

Alongside the importance of religion, practitioners described the need to consider the stigma associated with seeing a social worker. A practitioner explained how offering social work within centres appeared to carry less stigma:

These physical spaces enable social workers to operate and to operate to neutrally meet a client where they are not going to be stigmatized. – *International Practitioner B*

Participants shared how practitioners should have direct knowledge of the community:

One should have a good comprehension... to the culture in the community, meaning that he should know that the community... for example one of the things that could happen – the community could consider the person is possessed but he's not mentally ill, it's easier for him to be considered possessed - this person is possessed but it's impossible that he's mentally ill. So the social worker should understand this situation and know that this the culture in the community to be able to deal with people ...explain the situation in a way that is suitable to his culture. – *Syrian Practitioner Q*

According to practitioners, being trustworthy to clients and communities is the core of their ability to perform effective social work practice:

Our community is known for its customs and traditions, most people know each other, I mean people... the stigma matter is really important for us and especially for the people who've been subjected to violence. We are in war and the word war means that you expect all types of violence could happen and all types of difficulties, challenges, and psychological pressures – so what makes them good is because there's confidentiality, there's respect, there's trust: building trust between the service provider and beneficiary. –*Syrian Practitioner O*

Participants highlighted the importance of having relevant education, experience, training and capacity building:

At the start of humanitarian work so there weren't much focus, we heard about people for example about people who were hired with middle school certificates or baccalaureate [high school diploma] or so on, now no, more scrutiny is being done and experience in addition to the degree....So this helps to increase a little bit the quality of practices. -*Syrian Practitioner R*

These people we can say who worked in 2011 their experiences are not like now I mean now we're in 2020, I mean nine years gave them long-established experience, there are training courses and certain programs available to acquire skills and experiences and capacity building and this will affect the community. -*Syrian Practitioner C*

The data illustrated the ways in which practitioners believed that performing 'good' social work practices were conducted by those who know the community, are trustworthy, and have relevant experience and education contribute to promoting effective social work practices.

Discussion

This study explored practitioners' perspectives on what are considered 'good' social work practice in complex emergencies through a study of NWS. As demonstrated in this research, local social workers and paraprofessionals who perform social work functions play a critical role in responding to the needs of families and communities affected by complex emergencies (Bragin & Garcia, 2009). The findings highlight the sophistication of Syrian practitioners' ability to perform social work practices which have been locally established over time and validated by experience. This study reflects how practitioners rooted their knowledge of 'good' social work practices within how Syrian families and communities can support themselves. In complex emergencies such as NWS, the long duration of the crisis, strained institutions, limited external aid and mass displacement makes reactivating the family and community's supportive role even more critical because there are few alternatives. The crisis strained the family and community's supportive roles, yet these roles were not completely diminished and maintained their importance within Syrian culture, creating an essential resource for social work practice to build upon. Although the Syrian family and community's integral role may not return to the way it was before the crisis, social work

practice can help to build upon existing Syrian forms of support rather than emerging as a practice that fully takes on these roles. This is critical as building upon available resources, including remaining existing systems, supports a more culturally relevant and sustainable response (IASC, 2007).

Reactivating the family and community's supportive role is consistent with the IASC Guidelines (IASC, 2007). A key principle in these guidelines is providing multi-layered MHPSS which is depicted through an intervention pyramid. The second layer of this pyramid describes how supporting a portion of the population to access critical community and family supports can promote affected persons to sustain their mental health and psychosocial well-being (IASC, 2007). These guidelines acknowledge how an emergency disrupts family and community systems, and that affected persons will benefit from support to access any remaining family and community supports (IASC, 2007). The IASC Guidelines (2007) highlight the following helpful interventions to strengthen family and community supports: supporting livelihoods, activating social networks through groups for youth or women, and educational activities which align with the practices suggested as useful in this study. Furthermore, the IASC Guidelines (2007) emphasize the importance of community mobilization and taking steps "to activate and strengthen local supports and to encourage a spirit of community self-help" (p. 100). In keeping with these guidelines (IASC, 2007), this study's findings illustrated how social work practice can contribute to restoring culturally embedded family and community supports. Similarly, Ventevogel and Whitney (2023) argue that "in the blossoming field of humanitarian MHPSS, social workers have a unique and critical role to play in keeping the heritage of community empowerment alive" (p. 15). Furthermore, Bragin (2020) acknowledges how in emergency settings, social workers who are not from the affected context should work to re-activate existing systems of support which includes local practitioners. This research offers additional evidence highlighting the importance and ability of social work practice to effectively help to restore families and communities' supportive mechanisms during crises.

This study demonstrates how a range of locally based social work practices, rooted within the supportive elements of cultures, societal structures, spirituality and beliefs across time can help to reactivate the family and community's supportive roles as illustrated by the socioecological model. As noted earlier, the socioecological model emphasizes the permeating nature of time, cultures, and beliefs across the different levels surrounding practitioners and acknowledges practitioners' ability to influence their surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This research highlights Syrian practitioners' ability to influence their communities by rooting a range of practices within their socio-cultural and

historical knowledge of how Syrian families and communities support themselves. For example, Syrian practitioners drew upon existing culturally supportive traditions such as *kafala*. Similarly, other social work scholarship has highlighted the ways in which families and communities fulfilled social work functions prior to the emergence of social work in Sri Lanka (Herath, 2017), Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2016), and Iraq (Faraj, 2021). Furthermore, this study highlighted how practitioners' in-depth knowledge of the relevant cultures and communities fostered effective practice. For example, practitioners emphasized the value of incorporating aspects of Islam into awareness raising. Existing scholarship emphasizes the importance of appropriately incorporating aspects of culture such as spirituality into social work practice in Palestine (Lindsay, 2007) and Afghanistan (Bragin et al., 2016). In Afghanistan, a study found the duties of the Afghan child protection social worker include working with parents to “prevent harmful traditional practices and teach correct interpretation of Islam” (Bragin et al., 2016, p. 753). Furthermore, research in other conflict settings have noted how family can be both a source of support and a potential harm (Akesson & Basso, 2022). Global guidelines also recommend the use of local practices to offer support, but also caution to not “assume that all local cultural practices are helpful” (IASC, 2007, p. 15). As such, research and practice must continue to identify the supportive aspects of families and communities for social work practice to build upon in order to successfully empower individuals and communities to jointly address their own needs.

This study offers insights for other complex emergencies on how social work practice can contribute to restoring the social fabric. Existing scholarship prioritizes promoting “community-based psychosocial methods that focus on social connectedness and interpersonal ‘healing’” in humanitarian contexts (Jones & Ventevogel, 2021, p. 3). Yet, a research gap is how to successfully strengthen local community level social supports (Tol et al., 2020). This study offers insights into how social work practice may help to restore this social fabric in complex emergencies by supporting the revitalization of the family and community's supportive role through a range of practices that are suitable to the community practices including a focus on centres, livelihoods, case management, raising awareness and peer group activities.

Conclusion: Limitations & Future Directions

Ultimately, this study found social work in complex emergencies not only matters, but also it can even be lifesaving by supporting children to stay in school and preventing suicide. However, it

requires careful consideration to ensure social work is *re-activating* rather than *replacing* traditionally effective forms of support that lie within the social fabric of families and communities. As institutions are strained in complex emergencies, and there can be difficulties with accessing support, social work practice must incorporate locally-supported family and community roles. This study found the protracted nature of the Syrian crises generated a need for social work practice to re-establish Syrian families and communities' supportive roles. Practitioners viewed 'good' social work practices as those which helped reactivate the family and community's supportive roles in a manner suitable to the community. Conducting 'good' social work practice requires careful consideration of who is practicing social work and how such practices are aligned with the culture, especially in a setting such as NWS that did not have a formal social work profession before the crisis. Given that contexts without a social work profession start to formalize the profession by exploring existing cultural practices and theories to incorporate with global standards (Bragin et al., 2016), this research documents insights on social work practice and theory in NWS that could contribute to future social work development. Ultimately, this research validates the sophisticated and thoughtful practices Syrian practitioners are doing to benefit their communities.

This study's limitations offer directions for future research. Since this research did not collect participants' demographic information, this study has limited knowledge of how representative the sample is of different organizations, genders, disciplinary backgrounds and years of experience, limiting the analysis. Another limitation is that this research did not analyze existing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data. Future research could analyze relevant M&E data to triangulate the findings. Notably, the perspectives documented in this research require further testing and M&E to ensure the practices are suitable and useful in different communities. Future scholarship might also explore perspectives of effective social work practice in other complex emergencies such as Ukraine and Yemen; 'good' practices with specific populations; and compare perspectives on 'good' practices between contexts. Future work with the existing data set will analyze and share the data focused on 'good' social work practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future scholarship can continue to analyze the broader historical and societal factors influencing social work in NWS.

Despite the challenges experienced by social workers in the midst of conflict and ongoing upheaval, creative and innovative social work practices emerge (Harrop & Ioakidimis, 2018). This

research suggests the importance of considering how social work practice can help to reactivate the family and community's supportive role, particularly in a context where social work is a new role necessary to address needs arising from the complex emergency in a manner suitable to the community. The practitioners who have documented their learnings, successes, and dilemmas through this research provide a source of hope and strength for social workers engaged in the ongoing practice of social work in complex emergencies. As one Syrian practitioner expressed: "there's an adage that's like this: "what harms maybe can be beneficial"...inshallah that we with our experience that we went through with our lives be beneficial to others of this humanity that we all belong to." As the social work profession plays a key role in complex emergencies, social work researchers must continue to consider how to conduct research that ultimately supports those who perform social work functions during complex emergencies.

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Introduction to Manuscript III: Strengthening Organizational Support for National Humanitarian Staff in Complex Emergencies: Perspectives from Northwest Syria

The third manuscript highlights participants' perspectives on effective form of support for Syrian practitioners who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria. Thus, manuscript III shares research findings that address this dissertation's second sub-research question which seeks to explore the following: what are useful forms of support for Syrians who perform social work functions in the midst of the complex emergency in Northwest Syria? I chose to situate manuscript III within the literature and discussion on support for national humanitarian staff. During my dissertation research, I was an observer member of the IASC Reference Group for MHPSS and was active in the working group on staff and volunteer care. Through my involvement in this working group, I co-created a draft guidance note on organizational staff support for national staff and volunteers. To develop this guidance note, I helped conduct a literature review exploring support for national staff and national staff wellbeing. I also helped draft sections of the guidance note for further review. Helping develop this guidance note deepened my understanding of the state of knowledge on support for national staff, increasing my knowledge of existing policies, guidelines, research and initiatives. Manuscript III thus contributes to discussions on how to improve support for national staff, and particularly national staff who perform social work functions in complex emergencies.

Author Contributions to Manuscript III

- Karen Paul, First Author's Role: I wrote the article and revised subsequent drafts.
- Dr. Myriam Denov, Second Author's Role: Dr. Myriam Denov reviewed and edited the manuscript. Dr. Myriam Denov wrote most of the section on the socioecological model in the methodology. Dr. Myriam Denov highlighted how the data suggests good social work practices are good for the community and practitioners.
- Lana Al Houssami, Third Author's Role: Lana reviewed and edited the manuscript, contributing sentences throughout the manuscript. Specifically, Lana helped write the paragraph in the discussion describing the experience of practitioners in Northwest Syria.

- Other Contributions: The instructor and my fellow peers at the McGill Thesis Lab reviewed the introduction, literature review and results section of this manuscript. My peer writing group at McGill also reviewed components of the literature review for this manuscript.

Manuscript 3 Abstract

National staff are an essential part of responding to complex emergencies. Knowing more about what supports are needed to help and assist national staff are vital. Based upon 29 interviews with international and Syrian practitioners, this study explored perspectives on effective forms of support for Syrians who perform social work functions during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria. This study found performing social work functions during the crisis had a unique and often distressing impact on practitioners. Participants described how performing social work functions was nonetheless impactful and important to them. Practitioners highlighted the supportive nature of actions to strengthen how they performed social work functions. Thus, this article calls for future practice and research to consider how taking a psychosocial approach into account throughout how national staff practice social work could be a potential organizational intervention and play a critical role in creating comprehensive support systems for national staff.

Manuscript III: Strengthening Organizational Support for National Humanitarian Staff in Complex Emergencies: Perspectives from Northwest Syria

National humanitarian staff are a critical component of the response to complex emergencies. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which is responsible for the inter-agency coordination of the response to complex emergencies, a complex emergency is defined as:

a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression; b) a humanitarian crisis which requires an international response which goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency; c) a humanitarian crisis where the IASC assesses that it requires intensive and extensive political and management coordination. (IASC, 1994, p. 2)

Such humanitarian crises are characterized by societal and economic destruction (OCHA, 1999), high amounts of civilian casualties, immense security threats for humanitarian workers, and difficulties to access the affected context to provide the necessary humanitarian assistance (IASC, 1994). Current complex emergencies include Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Northwest Syria (WHO, 2022a). While such emergencies require external support (IASC, 1994), national humanitarian staff, directly impacted by the emergency, may be the only ones with access to support others who are affected (ICRC, 2017). National humanitarian staff (hereafter referred to as national staff) can be defined as “paid personnel working on assistance programming in their home countries” (Stoddard et al., 2011, p. 3). Assistance offered by national staff may include performing social work functions such as community organizing and case management. However, for national staff, being impacted by the emergency in their professional and personal lives can create unique challenges (ICRC, 2017). To address these challenges, there is increasing global momentum to work to improve support for national staff. However, there is a need for more research to inform initiatives that directly address the psychosocial and occupational needs of national staff, particularly from the perspectives of the national staff themselves (Othman et al., 2018).

Research on national staff and complex emergencies is particularly relevant in Northwest Syria (NWS) – a context that has experienced war since 2011 (UN, 2022). The Humanitarian Needs

Overview (HNO, 2022) describes Syria as: “a complex humanitarian and protection emergency characterized by over 10 years of ongoing hostilities and their long-term consequences including widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, explosive ordnance contamination, and the largest number of internally displaced people in the world” (p. 8). In NWS, the HNO (2022) described continued shelling and airstrikes. Illustrating the security threats for humanitarian workers, the HNO (2022) explained how aid workers in NWS experience ongoing armed incidents, causing injury or death and destroying buildings. Demonstrating the access difficulties in providing assistance, the HNO (2022) has highlighted how the UN Security Council has “authorized cross-border operations, but more is needed” (p. 21). The COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to this complexity. Within the Middle East and North Africa region, the HNO (2022) states that Syria is one of the countries most impacted by COVID-19. These contextual challenges combined with the difficult nature of social work practice in such settings call attention to what it truly means to support national staff in complex emergencies.

Research has documented the unique challenges and resources among Syrian humanitarian workers, particularly those working in the realm of health responses. Syrian healthcare providers have described the challenges they face: the difficulty of providing healthcare in the midst of the ongoing conflict, feelings of constant risk, isolation, depression and a lack of response from the global community (Footer et al., 2018). Syrian health workers reported experiencing distress due to the ethical challenges encountered in their work and insecurity within the context (Singh et al., 2022). In besieged areas, healthcare workers reported feelings of concern for their families, stress impacting their work, and fears about their safety (Fardousi et al., 2019). However, Syrian healthcare workers described continuing to work as a coping strategy, the importance of team spirit, maintaining hope, feeling satisfied with their work (Fardousi et al., 2019), and a professional commitment to their job (Footer et al., 2018). Since research has documented Syrian healthcare workers’ perspectives, there is, however, a need for research to explore the perspectives of Syrians specifically performing social work functions.

Syrian humanitarian workers who perform social work functions in NWS work on difficult cases in a challenging conflict zone, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work functions include supporting people to access resources and assistance within the community, mobilizing communities to promote their well-being, and supporting the inclusion of vulnerable

people and communities (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). Syria did not have formal social work education prior to the crisis, and international organizations introduced social work functions within the humanitarian response. In NWS, Syrians who perform social work functions include case managers and psychosocial workers⁸. Furthermore, these Syrian practitioners may provide parenting programs, referrals, awareness raising, and case management (UNICEF, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a hotline was created to address pandemic-related stress in NWS (WHO, 2020). More recently, initiatives have begun to offer support for these workers. For example, WHO facilitated a “training of trainers” program on stress management, coaching, peer support and self-care for 328 humanitarian workers in NWS (WHO, n.d.). This initiative reflects increasing global momentum to support national staff and an acknowledgement of the chronic stress and complexity of their work.

Global Momentum to Support National Staff

Global momentum to support national staff is reflected through global commitments and guidelines. For example, the IASC-Associated Inter-Agency Group, the Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) identified the following priority area of work: “development of guidance for national NGOs and Community Based Organizations on caring for humanitarian staff and volunteers working in emergency settings” (IASC, 2019, p. 5). The Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies called for more attention to the needs of local actors in humanitarian emergencies (RCRC, 2019). Most recently, the MHPSS Minimum Services Package (MSP) included guidance “*on caring for staff and volunteers providing MHPSS support*” (MHPSS MSP, n.d.). As highlighted in the MHPSS MSP (n.d.), existing guidelines on staff support include guidance from the Antares Foundation (2012), IASC (2007), and ICRC (2017). Yet, to support this global momentum, research is urgently needed to document national staff’s perspectives on how to offer effective support in complex emergencies.

State of Knowledge on Effective Forms of Support for National Staff in Complex Emergencies

Existing research has explored effective interventions for national staff in the Central African Republic (CAR) (de Fouchier & Kedia, 2018), South Sudan (Strohmeier et al., 2019) and Northern Syria (Othman et al., 2018). In CAR, de Fouchier and Kedia (2018) found a stress

⁸ This paper refers to Syrians who perform social work functions as practitioners.

management group for national staff was cost effective, feasible and enhanced psychosocial wellbeing. In South Sudan, Strohmeier et al., (2019) explored national and international aid workers' recommendations on how agencies can better support their staff. This study found aid workers wanted increased staff support, had unique perspectives on how to strengthen services, and that national and international staff had different staff support-related priorities. In Northern Syria, Othman et al. (2018) evaluated the impact of an organizational staff support program for Syrian medical and support staff finding organizational strategies decreased work-related stress. The existing research from Northern Syria demonstrated the importance of multi-layered interventions, tailored directly to address staff concerns.

Othman et al (2018) used a participatory approach to develop and evaluate the impact of a staff care program, developing multi-leveled interventions to address challenges reported by staff at various levels. For example, at the organizational level, difficulties included a lack of involvement in decision making; a need for more fairness; poor time management and communication. The program thus coordinated with management by providing them with input on needs raised by staff and created an organizational strategy for burnout prevention. Following the program's implementation, participants reported improved relationships with colleagues, a better physical work environment, improved perspectives of their work, and decreased role ambiguity. However, the study did not find any significant changes in job satisfaction or organizational structure (Othman et al., 2018). Othman et al., (2018) call for more research "to understand the supra-organisational stresses that continue to contribute to work stress" (p. 104).

Despite this emerging body of research, several research gaps remain. First, there is still a need for a stronger evidence base to "identify appropriate, context-specific measures" (Strohmeier et al., 2019, p. 47), as well as the development of programs to foster bottom-up approaches, address local needs, and create opportunities for staff needs to be heard (Othman et al., 2018). Moreover, there are no known studies exploring national staffs' perspectives on *how to improve* support for national staff in complex emergencies during the COVID-19 pandemic or how to effectively support national staff who perform social work functions. To address these gaps, this research explored, from the perspectives of national and international staff, how to effectively support Syrian national staff who perform social work functions in NWS.

During this study, practitioners' perspectives indicated the need to consider if making changes to *how* national staff perform social work functions could be a helpful organizational intervention. To support staff, organizational interventions “seek to assess, modify, mitigate or remove work-related psychosocial risks to mental health conditions” (WHO, 2022b, p. 6). However, additional understanding of which considerations are necessary to support national staff through organizational approaches are “urgently needed” (WHO, 2022b, p. 17). In response, this article builds upon existing approaches and interventions to alter *how* humanitarian aid is delivered to reduce distress among populations affected by emergencies (IASC, 2007; MHPSS MSP, n.d.).

There has been a call to advocate for social, psychological and cultural considerations in *how* humanitarian assistance is delivered (IASC, 2007), also referred to as an MHPSS approach (UNHCR, 2017; Ventevogel, 2018), MHPSS considerations (MHPSS MSP, n.d.), or a psychosocial approach (Horn, 2016). This paper will use the latter term. Psychosocial “reflects the dynamic inter-relationship between psychological and social issues” (Williamson & Robinson, 2006, p. 4). Thus, a psychosocial approach is “a way to engage with and analyse a situation, build an intervention, and provide a response, taking into account both psychological and social elements, as well as their interrelation” (Terre des Hommes, 2012, p. 7). As part of providing multi-layered MHPSS in emergency settings, this approach recognizes an MHPSS response to the general population's need for security and basic services should assess the impact of the provision of basic services such as food and shelter on the affected community's mental health and advocate for humanitarian actors to provide basic services in a manner that promotes the affected community's mental health (IASC, 2007). Thus, humanitarian actors should develop and offer basic services in a participatory, socially appropriate, and safe manner that promotes the affected community's dignity (IASC, 2007). Ultimately, adopting a psychosocial approach to providing humanitarian assistance means “not doing more, but doing differently” (Horn et al., 2016). A program manager from Malawi shared their understanding of this approach as “doing our existing activities in a slightly different way . . . Now it's very clear that it's about being conscious during planning, and doing every component with “psychosocial eyes” (Horn et al., 2016, p. 251). In this current study, practitioners' insights called for considering how applying a similar lens to social work practice could be a useful organizational intervention for national staff.

Drawing predominately upon Syrian practitioners' perspectives, this study's findings suggest *that the ways in which* national staff perform social work functions is important and impactful to practitioners. Specifically, this study highlighted three key areas practitioners interviewed perceived as important and impactful: the relevance of their social work practice to the culture and context, how their practice addressed the community's needs, and the community's acceptance of their practice. Ultimately, this study's findings suggest 'good' social work practices are those that are regarded as "good" for both communities and practitioners. Thus, this article calls upon future research and practice to explore how taking a psychosocial approach into account *throughout how national staff practice social work*, could protect and promote national staff's mental health and play an important role in developing comprehensive support systems for national staff in complex emergencies.

Research Methods

The socio-ecological model, which guided this study, recognizes that individual development occurs within the context of socially organized subsystems – family, peers, and communities – and are interconnected and interactive, determining key outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Individual lives are also informed by structural realities - historical, geo-political, social, cultural, spiritual, and legal norms and institutions (Wessells & Kostelny, 2013). The multi-faceted approach is particularly useful when studying national staff in the context of complex emergencies, as it acknowledges their ability to influence (and, in turn, be influenced by) multiple levels of family, organization, and community as well as the ongoing interactions between these levels.

Although this study was designed prior to the COVID-10 pandemic, the data was collected during the pandemic. The study thus incorporated questions about the pandemic into the interviews. While perspectives on effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners during the pandemic are incorporated, they are not, however, the article's key focus. The McGill Ethics board approved the study. To account for ethical considerations due to NWS's unique context, the research engaged a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to inform the research process through a pilot project, and did not request participants to share demographic information. Participants provided verbal consent for the interviews and could choose the following: to be interviewed in Arabic or English, to be recorded, to participate with their own name or a pseudonym, and to conduct the interview through telegram, WhatsApp, skype or the wire. If the participant felt any distress during the interview they

could take breaks, not be audio-recorded, and ask the research team to delete any information. If participants felt additional distress as a result of the interview and wished to speak with a clinician, an Arabic and English-speaking clinician were made available. The first author had worked on MHPSS in complex emergencies, such as Afghanistan, Libya, and the Syria response. Two Syrian Peer Researchers (PRs) supported this research, providing critical insights on the culture and context throughout the process.

The research consisted of the following three main phases. Phase one, which occurred in 2020, was used for the translation of key documents into Arabic, and the creation of a CAB. Thirteen practitioners (six Syrian; seven international) with experience performing social work functions in NWS joined the CAB. Supporting the use of a CAB, collaborative community-based methods (Israel et al., 1998), also guided this study. Collaborative community-based methods seek to equitably include agency representatives, researchers, and community members into the various phases of the research to improve the study's exploration of a particular topic (Israel et al., 1998). Thus, the CAB's purpose was to gather input on the research from national and international staff familiar with NWS to improve the study's relevance and suitability to the context. Convenience and purposeful sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015) were used to reach out to potential CAB members.

During phase two of the research in 2020, pilot study interviews with members of the CAB were conducted with four international and three Syrian practitioners. The interviews explored participants' perspectives on what they perceived to be 'good' social work practices with individuals, families, groups and the community in NWS, perspectives on effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners, and recommendations for 'good' social work practices in other complex emergencies. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews explored participants' perspectives on what they considered 'good' social work practices during the pandemic and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners during this period. Rather than limiting participants' answers to only occupational or psychosocial support, the interview questions allowed for a broad exploration of useful forms of support for practitioners. Ten CAB members completed an online survey to provide input on sampling, recruitment, informed consent, translation, required ethical approvals, and to share any other study concerns or recommendations.

During the third phase of the research, which occurred in 2021, additional participants were recruited for interviews using purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) by sending invitations through professional networks. This phase included 22 interviews (2 international practitioners, 20 Syrian practitioners; 19 Arabic interviews) conducted by the first and third author. Interviews asked the same questions as previously described. However, in response to the CAB's feedback, the interviews also asked how participants would describe social work in NWS.

Data Analysis

This study used constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) which uses methodological strategies like memo-writing and coding, but is founded upon a different epistemological foundation than grounded theory and incorporates more recent progress in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014). As a result, CGT focuses on relationships in research, the researchers' subjectivity, the research location as well as data formation, use and quality and seeks an "abstract understanding of studied life" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). The first author analyzed the data using CGT through phases of initial and focused coding, establishing categories, and developing diagrams (Charmaz, 2014). To inform the data analysis, meetings occurred with the Syrian PRs, one of which is the third author. During initial coding, each interview was read, and a memo was written to reflect on the interview's key points. Memo writing offers a space to engage actively with the data, cultivate ideas, practice reflexivity, examine codes, and to identify actions and meanings (Charmaz, 2014). During line by line, emerging initial codes were depicted through diagrams. Next, the data was analyzed segment by segment, and focused codes were carefully selected and revised based on their relevance to the research question, frequency, and salience. The diagrams were continually updated to explore the connections between the focused codes, creating categories. Lastly, a final report was created, allowing further refining of the diagrams and categories with input from the third author. The final report was shared with CAB for their review and input.

Limitations

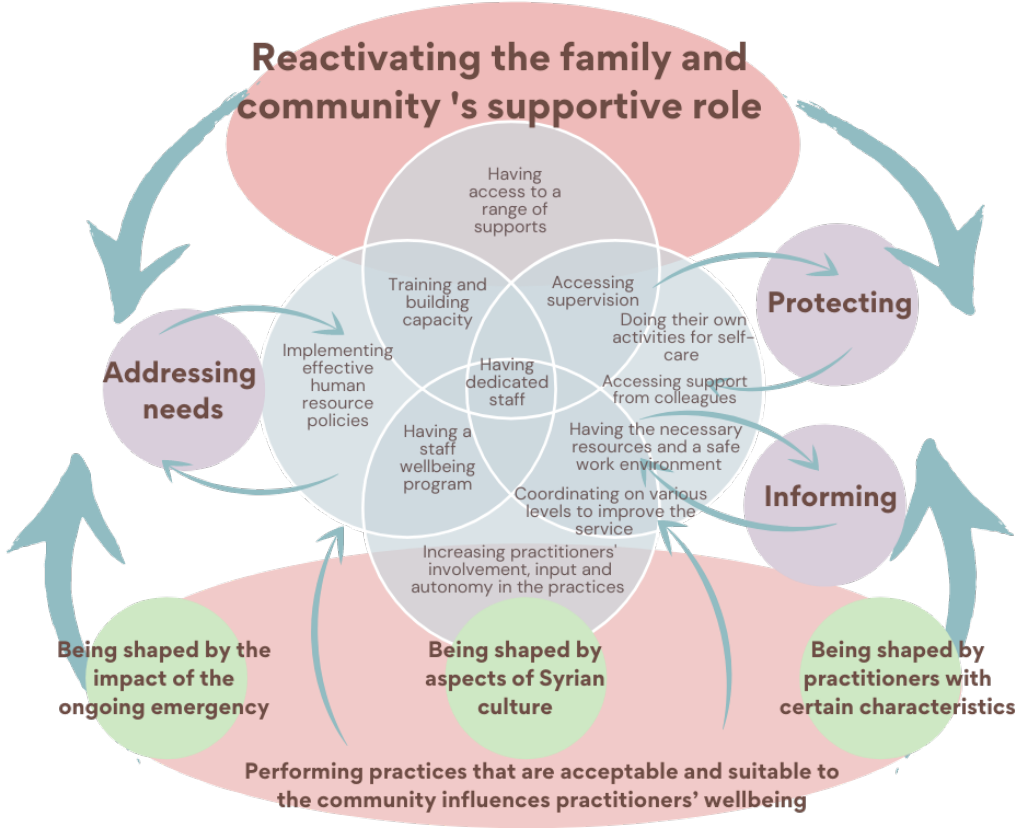
This study possesses several limitations. First, this study draws upon only one context characterized by having remote management and not having formal social work education prior to the start of the complex emergency. Second, this study did not ask participants their demographic information to ensure their anonymity. As such, the study is unable to perform additional analyses

based on participants' role, experience, gender, professional background, specific location and type of employer, ultimately limiting an intersectional analysis.

Findings

This study found that performing social work practice during the ongoing complex emergency in NWS has had distinct deleterious impacts on national staff, creating a need for support. Participants described a range of useful supports such as having a safe environment as illustrated in the figure below. Since safety is already acknowledged as important for supporting staff in emergencies (IASC, 2007; Strohmeier et al., 2019), this article sheds light on participants' responses in need of further attention. For example, despite the challenging nature of their daily social work practice, this study found *that the ways in which* national staff practiced social work was important and impactful to them. Specifically, three key areas were regarded as important and impactful to practitioners: the relevance of their social work practice to the local culture and context, the ways in which their practice addressed the community's needs, and the community's acceptance of their practice(s). Thus, participants discussed that taking steps to improve *how* social work practice is conducted, inherently worked to support Syrian practitioners. For example, strengthening coordination and referral networks, as well as increasing practitioners' involvement, input and autonomy to conceptualize and implement social work practice were deemed helpful for practitioners. Ultimately, improving support for national staff requires taking a psychosocial approach into account throughout *how* national staff practice social work. These elements are addressed in greater depth below.

Perspectives on Effective Forms of Support for Syrian Practitioners



1. The Unique Challenges and Impact of Performing Social Work Functions in a Complex Emergency

Participants described how performing social work functions had important and long-lasting impacts on them given what performing these practices exposed them to and required of them:

the one who not in this field doesn't know that the amount of negative feeling the one receives working in protection and psychological support is a lot... I mean it could be obstacle for him sometimes to go about his daily life. – *Syrian Practitioner A*

social practitioners in general – first those are listening to many traumatizing events, to many problems, to many pressures you can't 100% separate your work from your home or your work from your personal life....so we always carry these worries – *Syrian Practitioner D*

especially who work with psychosocial support cases, those are giving their souls, you hear me, people? -*Syrian Practitioner B*

Furthermore, practitioners described how the COVID-19 pandemic only increased these challenges and difficulties:

the pandemic came and added to it. Now I have exhaustion, now pressure in normal circumstances. I mean it was huge, I mean like this life, but I moved from the pressure stage to the exhaustion stage and the majority now are in the exhaustion stage. – *Syrian Practitioner E*

those who provide social work functions are always under pressure because of the pandemic. – *Syrian Practitioner F*

Resulting from the impact of performing social work functions, Syrians highlighted how practitioners require support, such as supervision or staff wellbeing programs, because of the unique nature of their work:

there are organizations who has a department that has an employee or two dedicated to provide psychological support to other employees in general and there are organizations who did this and it was appreciated and it was very good thing that if you yourself the social worker or the psychological worker need support because he's seeing horrible things. – *Syrian Practitioner C*

there's something called staff well-being, it could be a vent of psychological pressures, it could group activity with the employees you like...it could be picnic outside, going out to a restaurant, to a swimming pool. *There are a lot of options for workplace well-being but in depth there's nothing...*Sometimes you have the technical supervisor in mental health, you can talk to him freely about your problems. Okay, is this enough? Honestly, I don't think it's enough...social practitioners in our areas are in need for more support than other practitioners in other areas. – *Syrian Practitioner D*

Although Syrian practitioners described the usefulness and supportive nature of existing initiatives aimed to support staff wellbeing, practitioners described the need for more in-depth support for national staff who perform social work functions because of the job's distinct complexities and challenges.

2. The Importance and Impact of How Practitioners Practice Social Work

Syrian practitioners explained how conducting specific social work practices – particularly those that are culturally and contextually relevant, address the community's needs, and are accepted by the community – are particularly important and impactful to them. Considering that Syria did not have formal social work education prior to the complex emergency, having Syrian practitioners perform social work practices may be new to both communities and the practitioners themselves. Since the community's acceptance of services impacts the practitioner, performing contextually and culturally relevant social work practices were revealed to be important to practitioners:

The most important thing is to deliver this service, so I can use the terminology in a way that is suitable for the community that I am offering the service to....and it won't cause me a headache with the community, so the important thing is the culture and studying the community and its culture, will they accept? For example woman protection, we can discuss together and say that women protection is in Qur'an and it's in Islam, just because here it's woman protection and here it's, just consider it woman in Islam, they would accept it. I mean I am talking from an Islamic community perspective. -*Syrian Practitioner Q*

Given the lack of basic services and difficulties meeting basic needs in NWS (OCHA, 2022), participants explained how performing social work practices that address the community's needs, impacts the practitioner by gaining the community's respect and protecting the practitioners' dignity:

...in addition to the place and mechanism of distributed items...if I want the beneficiary or community to respect me, I should offer something that would meet his needs...At the end this would protect the beneficiary's dignity and the humanitarian worker. -*Syrian Practitioner R*

Similarly, a practitioner explained how exploring the community's needs and having a role in selecting activities that are relevant to the specific context and culture make them feel comfortable:

I would have a big role, first I would go and explore the community I am going to in and would explore the community that I am in, see its needs.... I should go as person, meet the community and meet the people and what is the target that I could achieve, other than that I would see how can I work? The work methods, the suitable working hours. For example in many times we would find out that For example our working hours is from 8 – 2, for example I find that some camps don't accept until 10 or 11 ...this used to cause a lot of embarrassment to the people there. In other camps, no it used to be 6 am, for example we are talking about the change of culture, change of customs and traditions, change of population, for example they have a certain system, now when I will be aware of the goals aware of activities' goals, numbers and I have a role in choosing the means, choosing the activities, this thing would make me really comfortable. *-Syrian Practitioner O*

Furthermore, a practitioner described how their own mental health improved when the social work practice that they engaged in benefited the community:

I created this program for them and now they are healthy and at the same time when they got out they made for mefirst, they took the fruit and they were an advertisement for my work and the result is positive for the community, the mental health for the community and for their families have improved, their mental health improved, and at the same time my mental health improved because I am achieving something, you understand me? This was me talking about peer support group. *-Syrian Practitioner B*

Likewise, another practitioner described how their supervisee's perspectives changed as they realized their practice could make a positive difference in the community:

unlike other services that were not very fit for the context, these ones were good, they helped people and the ...social workforce started to like what they were doing because before they were not reconciled with themselves so they used to do the work for the sake of the salary because they needed money but then when they were told how to do things in the right way and you know they started to find meaning for what they were doing and they started to change the lives of people around them... So it is like an epiphany for them... they started to love it... they were very excited and enthusiastic for this sort of work when they realized that they could make some difference some changes to the lives of the people around them. -*Syrian Practitioner P*

In summary, practitioners shared the distinct challenges associated with performing social work functions in complex emergencies, fostering practitioners' unique need for support. Yet, practitioners also shared that the ways in which they performed social work functions is important and impactful to them. In particular, practitioners sought to perform social work functions that addressed the community's needs in a manner suitable to the community and culture.

3. Improving How Practitioners Conduct Social Work Practice

Participants shared that taking the following steps improved how social work practice was conducted and was therefore supportive to the Syrian practitioners themselves: 1) strengthening coordination and referral networks to improve service delivery, and 2) increasing practitioners' involvement, input and autonomy in the social work practices.

3.1 Strengthening Coordination and Referral Networks to Improve Service Delivery

According to participants, strengthening coordination and referral networks helped to support practitioners by making it easier to perform social work functions and improve service delivery. Participants described strengthening coordination, communication and referral networks at different levels (such as among management and other organizations) as supportive by improving their ability to perform useful social work practice:

They need to be provided with the needed... coordination with organizations....I mean sometimes for example earlier we talked about referring cases when we were talking about case management but when I do the referral but there's no responding

due to unknown reasons, so it's better to have a coordination on a higher level...let's say that the coordination is happening on the management level - this really helps as well, it would raise the performance. – *Syrian Practitioner K*

Offering the service in general, it will be improved when it... address[es] to the need on the ground... Or let's say when it's implemented in a correct way....for example...I am in a centre a case came to me and such so I want to refer this case, but unfortunately once I want to make the referral it takes 2 weeks to a month, so for example when I have more attention towards this I would have something called emergency that I mean responding to emergency needs, that I for example did a referral, okay? I wish that this gets done as fast as possible ... I mean the subject of routine procedures sometimes is an obstacle to providing for the beneficiaries...so if there's a way to improve it or to give more importance to the case in hand, for example a higher priority and considering it an emergency... I feel that this coordination is weak or not answering the existing needs, of course between organization, centres, polyclinics or hospitals in general. So more coordination may result in good benefit. – *Syrian Practitioner L*

This same practitioner also recommended having a dedicated department to address emergencies and stronger coordination to address beneficiaries' urgent needs faster. Another practitioner emphasized how cluster guidelines and referral pathways makes staff's work easier:

the cluster guidelines, the cluster trainings as well, some organizations they are doing like general training to build the capacity of the practitioners of social workers so they are all on the same page, they have like one guidelines, one referral system so everything is clear, there is 4Ws to know where to refer these cases, so there is some structure, some organizational let's say structure, so this make[s] their life easier. – *International Practitioner M*

According to another practitioner, making sure referral pathways were working, was an effective form of support for Syrian practitioners:

I think the referral systems we mentioned already that is also important for...the MHPSS staff but also for other...staff plugged into the MHPSS programming like community health workers so really making sure our referrals were working...so really following up referrals and identifying and working on gaps and bottle necks. – *International Practitioner I*

When discussing perspectives on what participants deemed ‘good’ social work practices, service mapping was mentioned as a particular help and support for practitioners:

when.... [the] service mapping is enhanced and available for you that’s really good and allows you to get enough information from the service centres in the community which you are operating in, this always helps you. It really helps the social worker. – *Syrian Practitioner N*

Both international and Syrian practitioners highlighted how improving coordination and referral pathways was supportive and helped Syrians performing social work functions. As such, this illustrates how taking actions and advocacy to improve *how* practitioners conduct social work practice is an important form of support for practitioners themselves.

3.1.1 Coordination as Supportive During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When asked about effective forms of support for practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants asserted coordination, communicating with and involving community members was supportive:

how you adapt to these types of situations comes down to the leadership that you have like regardless of the ability of the individual staff let’s say in social work roles and how well and how resilient they are and how well they can adapt... they need a more uniform identified approach especially within an organization like this and across the different sectors as well...we have...the MHPSS team providing case management sessions but the child protection team deciding oh we can’t do it and things like this...which could...lead to further problems. – *International Practitioner H*

where I go regularly it can be like a meeting, a group of people meeting like a technical group or the people who are responsible for community work or social work always providing like new updates, whether it's about social work or about social work during the pandemic or... more information about this pandemic. Because even for you like, as a person, you might not have enough information about this pandemic. So for me I see that even offering information about the pandemic has a big role. – *Syrian Practitioner G*

This practitioner highlighted the supportive nature of involving, coordinating and communicating with community members to learn about people's needs:

During the pandemic, the possibility of physical communication was less, there's no freedom in transportation, most of the time I would have isolation... So the main support method is when example I have... for each community or for each group of people, I would have available communication means...for example I can communicate with anyone through the head of local council, their numbers would be ready and available, through my ability to reach to groups, to groups I can provide through them awareness, through them, I can provide psychological consultation, hear the people's needs, I mean the main idea is activating communication means and ability to reach out to the beneficiaries or community members.– *Syrian Practitioner O*

Similarly, the same practitioner explained how coordination helped them provide for beneficiaries with accurate information and maintain the community's trust, helping them feel more comfortable in their role:

For example I had a training course or I had an awareness session for a number of people in a X day, I would be surprised that the clinic or medical point was closed four days ago, okay, I don't want to lose the trust of people, I should be to tell that don't come from far to this medical point, if they came and found it closed, "why didn't he tell us while he supposed to have this awareness session?" so I would have a communication mean with all those people all the time and have an access to any place, for sure this will me feel more comfortable during the pandemic. – *Syrian Practitioner O*

This example illustrates how national's staff social work practice and community interactions may impact national staff. Similarly, another Syrian practitioner highlighted how sharing information online with the community during the COVID-19 pandemic helped them as a practitioner, because it reduced the stigma they felt from the community:

Many of the existing organizations or institutions they are counting more on providing awareness raising sessions through the screens..... Okay, what does this help me as a social worker? ...The more information they have about the pandemic... this helps me more..... I mean, this way they wouldn't they wouldn't stigmatize me. I mean imagine just imagine that here for us...the person who used to wear a mask would be stigmatized. – *Syrian Practitioner G*

The same Syrian practitioner elaborated on how raising the community's awareness can support practitioners by reducing the additional pressures resulting from the community's beliefs:

one of the beliefs is that this pandemic is made by evil... is made by the evil powers and it's not real. I mean okay, for me, like as a social worker I am under psychological pressures because of this, until I am able to convey to the people that know this is an actual pandemic it's so real. – *Syrian Practitioner G*

In summary, participants' responses illustrated that improving *the ways in which* national staff perform social work functions worked to simultaneously support practitioners. Coordinating among management to strengthen referrals or coordinating with community members to gather updated information to inform their practice supports practitioners by helping the practitioners maintain trust with the community and/or ensuring practitioners have the necessary information, making practitioners' jobs easier. Thus, adopting a psychosocial approach may mean identifying and addressing practitioners' practice related concerns.

3.2 Increasing Practitioners' Involvement, Input and Autonomy

Participants emphasized how supporting practitioners means involving practitioners during project planning and implementation because practitioners' community knowledge can foster more culturally and contextually relevant practices:

the most important thing in support is that they are a source for projects or ideas. I mean for example I would suggest a certain idea and I would see its implementation method, I should know the community very very well....So here is the duty of social worker is to be in good contact with people in the community, take their opinions and even try to engage them in the beginning...I mean in project phases, any certain plan from planning to implementation even after implementation.- *Syrian Practitioner O*

We need their ideas, they have ideas about social work that can be laid out in the communities they are working in that are not available, we try to help them with them.
-*Syrian Practitioner F*

Furthermore, one participant stated that increasing practitioners' autonomy supported practitioners by improving their ability to address the communities' needs, particularly in the context of remote management:

if we want to talk generally about the forms of support. To have authorities, those people or those practitioner[s] to have authorities... I mean I could need to make any decision that could save a whole community but unfortunately I contacted my management and they were out of coverage, or they are on a break, or they are such and such. So in these things if we can have more authorities for the ones inside Syria.
-*Syrian Practitioner J*

Similarly, the same practitioner explained how having increased autonomy to decide when to implement activities based on the changing security situation would also be supportive:

I am expected to do a certain activity the next day but there's a security situation that happened the next morning...I mean here you don't know, are you going to stop or work? I mean in my assessment I should stop because my safety and the safety of the

beneficiaries is more important than anything but I could have a responsibility... that “this is your responsibility, you didn’t do responsibility. Who told you to stop, we have to do this, no one sent you an official email.” So unfortunately, these procedures is a burden on those persons working in this community where we are living... now thank God, all the people I worked with were very supportive. *-Syrian Practitioner J*

A Syrian practitioner emphasized how having a little more authority and input would enable practitioners to use their extensive experience to design practices that are more effective and relevant to the community:

We receive the project already designed and prepared I am with you, but ask us, ask us because we are on the ground...And give us a little bit of authority... Authority that annihilates the routine and makes work sweeter and faster and does not affect the general goal of the project, okay?...sadly we are tied with something called routine and moulding...by moulding, I mean this organization succeeded in this place so we will spread its experience but darling its experience succeeded in this place because it suited this place but it does not suit this other place...just let us participate in the project, ask us and take our opinions we’re not just here since the past one or two years, we have been living like this since 2012. *-Syrian Practitioner B*

In summary, increasing Syrian practitioners’ input, involvement and autonomy was reported as supportive by practitioners, enabling them to incorporate their community knowledge to design and implement more useful and relevant social work practices. Thus, taking psychosocial considerations into account may mean advocating for staff to have more input, involvement and autonomy in how social work is conceptualized and implemented.

Discussion

The data ultimately shed light on how performing social work functions in complex emergencies has a unique and often detrimental impact on national staff, and as such, improving support for national staff who perform social work functions may require taking a psychosocial approach into account throughout *how* national staff practice social work. During this study, Syrian practitioners shared the distinct impact they experience from working in an active warzone and the

types of support they perceived as useful for themselves as practitioners. The Syrian practitioners' suffering increased with the emergency's complexity. The complex emergency created challenges which profoundly influenced Syrian practitioners such as border closures and an ever-changing security situation. Some Syrian practitioners were no longer able to cross the border to attend trainings, have supervision, or see family members in person. Syrian practitioners experienced difficulties planning activities, having the location no longer be safe and then needing to cancel the activity. Since having Syrian practitioners perform social work functions was new to some communities, the community may have perceived some practices as more acceptable or suitable over time (Paul, unpublished data), having a positive impact on practitioners. These contextual difficulties combined with the challenges rising from social work practice call for careful consideration to how taking a psychosocial approach to *how national staff practice social work* could support national staff.

Existing research and guidelines acknowledge the influence of work-related stressors derived from national staff's practice on national staff, supporting the impact of *how* social work practice is conducted on national staff. For example, in research on national staff working in post-conflict Sri Lanka (Lopez-Cardozo et al., 2013) and Northern Uganda (Ager et al., 2012), national staff reported chronic stressors such as feeling unable to change the beneficiaries' situation (Ager et al., 2012; Lopez-Cardozo et al., 2013); and insufficient recognition from beneficiaries (Ager et al., 2012). Guidelines highlight additional causes of stress such as being overwhelmed from many unaddressed needs (ICRC, 2017), and the interconnection between workplace stressors and stressors within the family and community (Antares, 2012). This study indicates that national staff's perception of their practice as culturally and contextually relevant, addressing the community's needs and accepted by the community was important to them. *How* practitioners viewed their practiced impacted themselves as practitioners by protecting their dignity and offering practitioners a sense of accomplishment.

Although existing global guidelines call attention to *how* humanitarian assistance impacts the *affected population* (IASC, 2007), which includes national staff, this article calls attention to the importance of considering *how* providing humanitarian assistance such as social work functions impacts the national staff who perform them. This study offers critical insights to those who seek to support national staff by demonstrating that making changes to how social work practice is conducted may be a useful organizational intervention. The socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) illustrates how actions at the organizational level to help practitioners provide more

contextually relevant social work practice may indeed support practitioners by helping improve their interactions with the community. Performing social work functions is deeply embedded within the socioecological model's multiple, interacting layers including the cultural, social, spiritual and historical realities. Thus, organizational interventions should consider the alignment between the layers of the practitioner, organization, community, as well as broader societal, cultural, spiritual and historical realities. To strengthen the alignment between these layers, this study's findings suggest organizations should take steps to increase the practitioners' input, involvement and agency, which can help improve the interaction between the practitioner and community by enabling the practitioner to perform more contextually relevant practices. Taken together, these findings offer insights into the potential need to take a psychosocial approach to *how* national staff perform social work functions through the following:

Potential Key Action 1: Identify and Address National Staff's Concerns Related to Social Work Practice

Taking a psychosocial approach could include identifying and addressing national staff's concerns related to social work practice. The need to identify and address national staff's practice related concerns is supported by existing guidelines on staff support which call for actions to identify and address work-related stressors (IASC, 2007; MHPSS MSP, n.d.) through a needs assessment to inform programs to support staff (ICRC, 2017); and having a staff care policy or plan (Antares, 2012; IASC, 2007). Staff care policies should address both routine and unexpected causes of stress and include specific strategies to decrease various risks in each project including routine causes of stress (Antares, 2012). According to ICRC's (2017) guidelines, a needs assessment should explore topics such as helpers' experiences, how challenges at the structural or managerial level influence helpers' wellbeing, and helpers' practice related difficulties. Furthermore, needs assessments and other initiatives to identify work related stressors should explore national staffs' concerns related to their social work practice.

Potential Key Action 2: Consider Increasing Practitioners' Input, Involvement and Autonomy to Conceptualize and Implement Social Work Practice to Support Practitioners

Taking psychosocial considerations, such as exploring if and how increasing practitioners' input, involvement and autonomy in conceptualizing and implementing social work practice could

support practitioners. Previous research on staff in Northern Syria described a lack of involvement in making decisions that influence their work as a management-related concern, and the staff care program recommended that staff provide input to procedure development within their framework for burnout prevention (Othman et al., 2018). Similarly, the Antares Guidelines (2012) recognize a lack of meaningful engagement as a source of stress for practitioners, emphasizing the importance of staff involvement in developing policies, and recommending organizations review existing policies, such as the organization's decision-making processes, to confirm the policies decrease potential causes of stress (Antares, 2012). However, it is important to consider when and how increasing national staff's autonomy with their social work practice is supportive. Contrasting this current study, a study exploring ethical decision making among health care workers in Northern Syria noted some participants described how remote managers acknowledged the ability of front-line health care staff to make specific decisions due to the front-line staff's awareness of the context, but this placed additional pressure on staff to make difficult decisions (Singh et al., 2022). This contrasting finding highlights the importance of incorporating questions to explore if and how increasing practitioners input, involvement and autonomy is supportive for practitioners into needs assessments.

Conclusion

This article calls for the potential application of taking a psychosocial approach to *how* social work is practiced as an organizational intervention to ensure national staff perform social work in a way that fosters their autonomy, dignity, self-efficacy and reduces their distress (MHPSS MSP, n.d.). This study sheds light on the need for further exploration through consultations, discussions, research and staff support assessments to inform the global momentum to improve support for national staff. Future exploration of these potential key actions could occur within needs assessments to design staff support programs or assessments of work-related stressors which is in line with existing guidelines (IASC, 2007; ICRC, 2017; MHPSS MSP, n.d.). Future research would benefit from exploring national staff's perspectives in other complex emergencies, including those performing social work functions, on how to improve support for national staff using qualitative research, accessible to national staff in their own language.

The study has highlighted the immense capacity, strength and agency of Syrian practitioners and their commitments to improving the lives of their clients, often at great risk to themselves and their well-being. The social work profession should continue to explore how to improve practice

models for complex emergencies through further research. Strengthening social work practice models to alter the foundations of social work practice and ensure alignment between the practitioner and the community through further research may be a way to support national staff by ensuring information is available to foster social work practice in a way that is both relevant and useful to their communities. Since national staff play such a critical role in responding to complex emergencies, national staff's perspectives are essential to propel global momentum to improve support for national staff and most importantly honour their humanity. As one Syrian practitioner said, "we are not machines, we are humans."

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Discussion

A Three-Pronged Approach to Building [Back] Social Work Practice in Complex Emergencies

This dissertation research explored perspectives on what constitutes ‘good’ social work practice in the midst of complex emergencies by drawing upon a study of Northwest Syria. This dissertation also explored useful forms of support for Syrians who perform social work functions in Northwest Syria and recommendations for ‘good’ social work practice in other complex emergencies. This dissertation highlights and validates the sophisticated manner in which Syrian practitioners performed locally established social work functions in Northwest Syria. Taken together, this dissertation’s three manuscripts illustrate the need to use a three-pronged approach to ‘building social work [back] better’ in Northwest Syria and other complex emergencies. This three-pronged approach requires considering (1) how social work research is conducted, (2) how ‘good’ social work is practiced, and (3) how to effectively support practitioners who perform social work functions in complex emergencies.

The First Prong: Considering How Social Work Research is Conducted

‘Building social work [back] better’ during complex emergencies requires carefully considering how social work research is conducted. Social work research should capture and develop effective social work practice models that are relevant to the culture and context, which can help social work practitioners. Taken together, the three manuscripts suggest that carefully including practitioners’ perspectives in such research can have multiple, positive impacts on both the process of developing social work practice and supporting practitioners. The first manuscript highlights the importance of including practitioners, who have relevant social work experience, in designing and implementing social work research in complex emergencies, offering practitioners, who know the reality of practice in such settings, opportunities for epistemic agency. Similarly, the second manuscript highlights how practitioners who know the community are well situated to perform ‘good’ social work practice, meaning social work research should include the perspectives of practitioners who know the community well in order to truly capture and document models of ‘good’ social work practice. Furthermore, the third manuscript discusses how practitioners perceive increasing Syrian practitioners’ input and involvement to develop and implement social work practice as supportive and helpful. Thus, including practitioners’ perspectives in social work research can play a role in supporting practitioners by helping develop more relevant models of ‘good’ social work practice. Similarly, a description of social work practice during the conflict in Bosnia and

Herzegovina (BiH) also emphasizes the importance of including local practitioners' perspectives. In BiH, international actors employed some existing social workers, but these international organizations failed to incorporate existing customs, knowledge and experience from BiH's social sector. Instead, the international organizations formed a parallel social welfare system, shaped predominately by locals who could translate English rather local social workers (Maglajlić et al., 2008). Thus, including local practitioners' perspectives in research on 'good' social work practice in their own language can help develop more relevant models of social work practice, which contributes to supporting practitioners. Ultimately, 'building social work [back] better' in complex emergencies requires carefully considering how to conduct social work research, social work practice and support practitioners, which are all interconnected.

The Second Prong: Considering How 'Good' Social Work is Viewed and Practiced

'Building social work [back] better' also requires gathering and sharing perspectives on 'good' social work practices which are in line with the culture and context in complex emergencies. The second manuscript highlighted how 'good' social work practice should build on and re-activate the culturally embedded and supportive nature of Syrian families and communities because Syria did not have a formal social work profession prior to the crisis. The second manuscript also emphasized how 'good' social work practice is rooted in aspects of the Syrian context and cultures. In addition, the third manuscript highlighted the impact and importance of how practitioners performed social work practice on practitioners themselves. Practitioners noted the importance and impact of performing social work practice that was relevant to the culture and context, addressed community needs and was accepted by the community. Taken together, this dissertation highlights how 'good' social work practice is good for both the practitioner and the community (M. Denov, personal communication, 2022). Furthermore, 'good' social work practice integrates and considers culture and context which is a critical part of what constitutes 'good' social work practice *and* support for practitioners. Illustrating the connection between the first and second prong, social work research is a powerful tool to document the effective integration of culture and context into 'good' social work practice. Previous scholarship also highlights how culture and context shapes the nature of social work practice prior to and during war and conflict. For example, in Sri Lanka, community support has historically been embedded in the culture, and community care existed prior to the emergence of a social work profession (Herath, 2017). Likewise, in Iraqi-Kurdistan, supporting others is an essential part of Kurdish culture, but the social work profession only began in 2007 (Faraj, 2021). In

Afghanistan, traditionally, extended families and communities protected children, and community leaders provided additional support when needed (Bragin et al., 2016). Ultimately, societies have ways that they structure the provision of social welfare and child welfare services. In some contexts, traditional and folk methods support social and child welfare services. Furthermore, some societal structures can have phenomenon's that are well known and well-practiced, and such societal structures can perform and fulfill social work functions in a sophisticated manner [M. Bragin, personal communication, 2022]. Since performing social work functions may be culturally embedded in contexts experiencing complex emergencies, 'building social work [back] better' should use research to identify and document 'good' social work practices that successfully integrate the supportive elements of the culture, which also helps practitioners by providing more relevant social work practice models.

The Third Prong: Considering How to Effectively Support Practitioners

'Building social work [back] better' also requires careful consideration of how to effectively support practitioners who are performing social work functions in complex emergencies. Offering critical insights into how to effectively support practitioners, this dissertation research found an overlap between 'good' social work practices and effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners. For example, practitioners viewed coordination as both a 'good' social work practice and an effective form of support. Strengthening coordination and referral mechanisms aligns with recommendations in existing research, guidelines and handbooks. In research exploring recommendations to improve support for humanitarian staff in South Sudan, participants recommended coordinating with different agencies to strengthen security (Strohmeier et al., 2019). Participants in this dissertation research highlighted the importance of coordination to share information and strengthen referral pathways. Existing guidelines highlight coordination and strengthening referral networks as recommended practices (IASC, 2007; Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Minimum Services Package [MHPSS MSP], n.d.), but these guidelines do not specifically emphasize how coordination and strengthening referrals impacts and can support national staff. However, the Gender Based Violence (GBV) coordinators handbook creates recommendations for "supportive coordination practices" such as creating sub-cluster routines, establishing the sub-cluster as a supportive environment, being mindful of timelines, promoting consistency among coordination group leadership, and respecting members' breaks (Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility [GBV AoR], 2019 p. 192). As this dissertation illustrates,

supervisors and coordination group leaders can advocate for timely referrals and ensure practitioners can access information to guide their practice through coordinating with community members, which ultimately helps practitioners and communities. Taken together, the three manuscripts suggest ‘good’ social work practice and effectively supporting practitioners can overlap, suggesting that efforts to improve social work practice can benefit both communities and practitioners. In summary, ‘building social work [back] better’ requires a three-pronged approach in which each prong is interconnected. Ultimately, involving practitioners in social work research connects to exploring how practitioners’ view ‘good’ social work practice which may play an important role in effectively supporting practitioners in complex emergencies such as in Northwest Syria.

Implications For Social Work Practice

This dissertation research offers implications for how Syrians can continue to perform social work functions, how social work practice could be built in Northwest Syria and how social work could be ‘built back better’ in other complex emergencies.

Implications for Social Work Practice in Northwest Syria

In the absence of a formal social work profession, this dissertation’s findings offer implications for continuing to practice social work functions in line with Northwest Syria’s culture and context. For example, this dissertation’s findings orient future community-based work such as facilitating community led initiatives or peer group activities by highlighting examples of how these interventions can be designed and implemented to help reactivate the ability of Syrian families and communities to support each other. This dissertation’s research findings also provide insights into how social work functions can help address specific problems such as substance use in Northwest Syria. To further illustrate this example, substance use is becoming an increasing concern in Northwest Syria (ACU IMU, 2022; OCHA, 2022b). During humanitarian emergencies, key actions to prevent substance use can include advocating for or facilitating recreational, educational and vocational activities to be re-stored as quickly as possible (IASC, 2007). Manuscript II offers critical insights on how Syrians can conduct social work functions to help reactivate and strengthen Syrian’s vocational lives and education systems. Key actions to prevent and reduce the harms associated with substance use can also include sharing information with the community (IASC, 2007). This dissertation’s research findings offer insights into how incorporating aspects of Syrian culture and

spirituality can help share information with communities in Northwest Syria. Furthermore, for Syrians who are recovering from substance dependence, participation in educational and vocational activities or involvement in self-help, support or mutual support groups can be key recovery management activities (WHO & UNODC, 2020). This dissertation's research findings on how practitioners' perceived and described peer group activities as a 'good' social work practice offer insights that may support the development of peer group activities to support Syrians recovering from substance dependence, alongside added considerations for the unique experiences of those recovering from substance dependence. In summary, this dissertation's research findings can help strengthen the ongoing use of social work functions in Northwest Syria by providing practical examples of what existing practitioners viewed as 'good' social work practice.

If Syrians build and formalize the social work profession, this dissertation research's findings offer insights into how Syrian social work practice could be developed in line with the International Association for Schools of Social Work (IASSW) Global Standards. The IASSW (2020) global standards describe the need to include social work in context within formal social work education. Specifically, formal social work education should include "knowledge of how traditions, culture, beliefs, religions and customs influence human development across the lifespan, including how these might constitute resources and/or obstacles to growth" (International Association for Schools of Social Work [IASSW] & IFSW, 2020, p. 11). The findings of this dissertation research also offers practical case studies, particularly in the final report that can inform future trainings, workshops and supervision for Syrians who are performing social work functions in Northwest Syria. For example, psychosocial workers or case managers working in the areas of gender-based violence, child protection or mental health and psychosocial support could benefit from reviewing, discussing and reflecting on the 'good' practice examples highlighted in this study.

Implications for Social Work Practice in Other Complex Emergencies

This dissertation research findings' address gaps identified in existing social work literature from Ukraine, offering insights for how to 'build social work back better' in other complex emergencies. For example, Ukraine provides an example of a context, where macro level social work is valued, yet the social work profession lacks community-based techniques required (Semingina & Gusak, 2016). Ukrainian social work research highlighted the need to use empowering rather than paternalistic social work approaches (Semingina & Gusak, 2016), the need for more attention to

sustainable community development as well as restoring individual and community resilience (Semigina, 2019). To help address these gaps and needs, this dissertation research's findings offer examples of how supporting a range of 'good' social work practice such as community led initiatives, centres, peer group activities, supporting livelihoods, and case management can help restore the family and community's supportive roles. However, Northwest Syria and Ukraine have cultural and contextual differences which must be considered when applying the findings of this dissertation study to another complex emergency such as Ukraine. Thus, Ukrainian social workers can carefully consider how a range of 'good' social work practices may also contribute to restoring the Ukrainian social fabric. Furthermore, the IFSW partnered with Ukrainian social workers to begin a community centre during the recent escalation of the conflict in Ukraine (IFSW, 2022). Of relevance to this initiative, manuscript II offers insights into how centres were considered a 'good' social work practice. In Northwest Syria, centres played a critical role in re-activating the supportive nature of families and communities by offering an accessible space for people to gather and to offer a range of other 'good' social work practices. However, given the importance of effectively integrating culture and context into 'good' social work practice, the 'good' social work practices highlighted in this dissertation research require further adaptation, testing and research to explore if and how these 'good' social work practices relate to other cultures and contexts impacted by complex emergencies such as Ukraine, Yemen and Afghanistan.

This dissertation's research findings support recommendations from the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance's (GSSWA) report titled *The Vital Role of the Social Service Workforce in Humanitarian Contexts* to prepare social service workers for responding to emergencies and to promote social service worker's safety and wellbeing (GSSWA, 2022) and address needs highlighted by social work research. For example, the GSSWA (2022) acknowledges how responding to emergencies necessitates a unique skill set, so giving social service workers sufficient training could increase social service worker's ability to offer support throughout the various phases of an emergency. Thus, to support the GSSWA's (2022) recommendation to "equip social service workers for emergency response" (p. 43), this dissertation study's findings provide practical examples of 'good' social work practice during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria that can be incorporated into training curriculums to help the social service workforce consider the application of such 'good' social work practices in their own cultures and contexts through discussions during the training. These case examples and discussions could contribute to

strengthening the social service workforce's practical skills for responding to complex emergencies. Similarly, social work research has highlighted how international social workers perceive employers as expecting knowledge of "high conflict or emergency contexts" and "culturally relevant policy development/implementation" (Kim et al., 2021, p. 6). Yet, international social workers did not always perceive international social work education to equip social workers with such knowledge (Kim et al., 2021). Hence, this study offers insights to inform international social work education on social work practice during emergencies and high conflict as well as examples of culturally relevant implementation. The GSSWA (2022) also recommends to "ensure the safety and well-being of all social service workers" (p. 43), and the findings of this dissertation study contribute to this recommendation by suggesting that efforts to foster 'good' social work practice as well as attention and changes to *how* practitioners perform social work practice contributes to developing a comprehensive system of support for social service workers. Thus, the 'good' social work practices highlighted in this dissertation can help implement the GSSWA's (2022) recommendations to prepare social service workers for responding to emergencies and to protect social service workers' safety and wellbeing and can inform international social work education, which are also critical to 'building social work [back] better' in complex emergencies.

Implications for Policy

This dissertation research highlighted the importance, and even lifesaving nature, of social work functions performed by Syrian practitioners who had not received formal training in social work, raising critical questions about the social work profession's responsibility towards practitioners who perform social work functions in complex emergencies where no formal social work profession exists. Existing scholarship on social work practice during extreme situations raises questions about the nature of social work practice such as who are considered social workers during the response to extreme events (Lavalette, 2011). The existing social work literature in conflict settings also highlights how the social work profession's status can influence practitioners during war and conflict (Lindsay, 2007). Considering the importance and impact of the social work profession's status on practitioners, this dissertation's findings raise questions such as should the social work profession play a role to ensure these practitioners have access to information and training about social work that could support practitioners during complex emergencies? Furthermore, manuscript III highlighted how giving Syrian practitioners more input, involvement and autonomy in how they conducted social work functions was an important form of support for the practitioners themselves. Similarly, during an interview in this dissertation research, an international practitioner noted how

giving Syrian practitioners more training in social work theory could strengthen practitioners' professional background and foundation to further innovate social work practice (Paul, unpublished data). As such, this dissertation research raises further questions about the social work profession's role to support national practitioners to have more autonomy, input and involvement in their social work practice during complex emergencies where no formal social work education exists. With the increased use of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, should the global social work profession prepare online modules that could be contextualized and translated to different languages? Could these online modules offer information on the social work profession, social work theory, practice and ethics that would bolster national practitioners' credentials and abilities to have more input, involvement and autonomy over their social work practice? Could the global social work profession offer a type of social work diploma to such practitioners who undergo online training modules? Although there are many nuances and logistics that could make such an initiative complicated, this dissertation research calls upon the social work profession to consider how to give more accessible and relevant information about social work to help support national practitioners in complex emergencies where no formal social work profession exists.

In the absence of existing relevant initiatives, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance is an existing initiative contributing to the support of practitioners who perform social work roles in complex emergencies. For example, the recent report on social service workforce's role in humanitarian settings recommends recognizing the social service workforce's critical role throughout the different phases of emergency management (GSSWA, 2022). The report also acknowledged how less recognition of the social service workforce's critical role during the emergency response can make it more difficult for social service workers to be included in the broader humanitarian response (GSSWA, 2022). In response, this dissertation's findings provide important documentation of how social work functions matter and can even be lifesaving during complex emergencies. Since the GSSWA (2022) calls for advocacy to donors to support the social service workforce, the documentation of the importance of social work practitioners and functions provided through this dissertation research can bolster such advocacy efforts which are required to 'build social work [back] better' in complex emergencies.

Implications for Research

Since conducting research on ‘good’ social work practice plays an important role in identifying, documenting and sharing ‘good’ social work practices which are relevant to the culture and context in order to ‘build social work [back] better,’ this dissertation research calls for careful consideration of how to continue to design and implement research to explore perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices. Considering the challenge of conducting research in complex emergencies, the social work profession and humanitarian practitioners should consider if and how more rapid forms of assessment could also identify, analyze, document, share perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice. Alongside these efforts the social work profession should continue to consider how to analyze, evaluate and compare perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices from different complex emergencies in order to increase the social work professions’ knowledge of what constitutes ‘better’ social work practice and improve support for practitioners. Future social work research should continue to explore how to develop practice-based evidence (Green, 2008). As exemplified in this dissertation research, using remote, collaborative methods and a Community Advisory Board may be a critical aspect of developing practice-based evidence to provide further triangulation of the findings. However, additional attention to how to strengthen research methods to develop practice-based evidence for social work in complex emergencies is an area in need of further research. Future research could further involve a Community Advisory Board in discussing the findings on good practices as part of the process to create practice-based evidence. This dissertation also underscores the importance of offering practitioners opportunities to share their perspective in their own language with someone from their context. As such, social workers should continue to advocate with research funders to fund research in complex emergencies, including remote research. Social workers should also advocate with donors to offer to sufficient funds for translation and transcription, so research can include practitioners in research in their own language.

This dissertation research also highlights the value of including a Community Advisory Board in social work research in complex emergencies to include practitioners’ perspectives on the research and ensure the research is coordinated with the humanitarian response. The importance of collaboration and coordination in research in Northwest Syria is highlighted in existing literature. For example, in the context of the cross border response to provide health care in Northwest Syria, a desk review, ten key informant interviews with international and Syrian humanitarian aid workers

with experience on the health response in Syria, and field notes from the Lancet - American University of Beirut (AUB) Commission on Syria's Research and Documentation Team, found the importance of a adopting low profile approach in order to access vulnerable populations in Northwest Syria, interpersonal trust as critical for collaboration between non-Syrian and Syrians, and a bottom up approach to coordination where Syrian professionals working in areas outside of government control coordinated amongst themselves (Duclos et al., 2019). To coordinate effectively with relevant, local actors, this dissertation research recommends future research should include phone calls or meetings as part of the recruitment process. Meeting with coordination leaders or other key local actors allows for researchers to share information about the research and potential participants to ask questions.

Since conducting research on complex emergencies can be extremely challenging, future social work research should carefully consider the extent of support and resources required to undertake such research well. The necessary support and resources can include sufficient supervision, funding, and time. Conducting research in complex emergencies, particularly as doctoral students who may be learning to conduct research in complex emergencies, requires sufficient supervision and space to discuss the challenges and complexities arising during the research process. As such, future research could explore effective forms of support for researchers in complex emergencies. Conducting social work research in complex emergencies also requires sufficient resources such as finances and time. As such, preparations to undertake research in complex emergencies should consider how the study will apply for and acquire the financial resources required to conduct a security assessment, make the research accessible in the local language and engage in knowledge translation. Research in complex emergencies also requires allocating sufficient time to engage in coordination with other practitioners throughout the duration of the study, to take breaks during the research process, and to share the findings with the community in a timely manner. Since the contexts in complex emergencies change quickly, researchers should plan sufficient time to analyze and share the study's findings while the findings are still relevant to the impacted community. Social work researchers should also ensure the research findings are shared in a manner that is clear and accessible for practitioners or the impacted community. Engaging in knowledge translation of social work research may also help 'build social work [back] better' by promoting discussion and sharing of 'good' social work practices that are relevant to the culture and context.

Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation is limited because it could not provide an in-depth discussion of all the data collected in this study, creating areas for future scholarship and research with this dissertation's data set. For example, this dissertation discusses aspects of effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners in manuscript III. Yet, future scholarship could discuss the other aspects of effective forms of support the Syrian practitioners highlighted such as having a staff wellbeing program, implementing effective human resource policies, having the necessary resources and a safe environment and doing their own activities for self-care which also help contribute to developing comprehensive systems of support. Similarly, manuscript II of this dissertation describes some of the 'good' social work practices highlighted by practitioners; however, future scholarship could discuss the other 'good' social work practices practitioners highlighted such as doing assessments and engaging community members, coordinating and referring, and doing Psychological First Aid and psychological interventions. During the interviews, practitioners provided in-depth descriptions of their perspectives of how to conduct 'good' social work practices such as how to facilitate peer group activities or do case management. Although the final report from this dissertation study includes more details of the practitioners' perspectives on how to conduct 'good' social work practices, future scholarship should continue to discuss practitioners' perspectives on how to conduct 'good' social work practices to offer more practical implications for social work practice in complex emergencies. Similarly, future scholarship could analyze how many practitioners mentioned each specific practice as 'good' to offer additional insights on 'good' social work practice in complex emergencies. Since gathering data in complex emergencies requires the time of practitioners who are busy with the demands of the current response, continuing to analyze and share the findings from this current data set will foster a more ethical use of the existing data.

Future research and scholarship with this dissertation's data set could also explore specific topics and themes emerging in the data. For example, future scholarship could conduct additional analysis and discuss how practitioners emphasized the need for more attention to social work in complex emergencies, stigma and social work in health care within complex emergencies during the interviews. Future scholarship could also offer a more detailed discussion on participants' perspectives on 'good' social work practice during the pandemic to inform social work practice

during any remaining responses to the pandemic or future health emergencies. Since this research explored how practitioners would describe social work in the context of Northwest Syria, future research should conduct additional analysis of these responses to inform future efforts to strengthen social work practice in Northwest Syria. Future research could explore how historical and societal structures such as civil society shape the development of social work practice in Northwest Syria. Future research should also explore the existing Arabic literature and research on how women's clubs, scouts and voluntary associations may perform social work functions within Syrian culture and thus influence emerging social work practice in Northwest Syria. The practitioners also offered additional recommendations for 'good' social work practice in other complex emergencies, which future scholarship should discuss and share. For next steps, this dissertation seeks to share the final report in English and Arabic. As highlighted in manuscript III, this research hopes to share and discuss the findings with practitioners through relevant clusters in Northwest Syria to foster more discussion on 'good' social work practice in Northwest Syria and support knowledge translation.

This dissertation is limited as the perspectives on 'good' social work practice are only gathered from Northwest Syria. Thus, the findings of this dissertation study require careful attention to culture and context when considering the implications for other complex emergencies. As a result, future social work research on complex emergencies should explore perspectives on 'good' social work practice in other complex emergencies to further understand how culture and context influence 'good' social work practice. Furthermore, future research should explore perspectives on 'good' social work practice in two contexts to compare and contrast how culture and context shapes 'good' social work practice. In the future, research should also include gathering and analyzing existing monitoring and data to further triangulate the data on 'good' social work practices where appropriate. In addition, this dissertation is limited as it did not specifically ask participants to identify as a beneficiary, community member, international or Syrian practitioner. So, future research could also consider asking participants which categories they identify with to further understand who is informing such perspectives on 'good' social work practice. Considering how to effectively include more beneficiaries and community members in research exploring perspectives on 'good' social work practices are other important areas for future social work research to offer further insights on how to 'build social work [back] better.'

Final Conclusion and Summary

This dissertation research explored perspectives on ‘good’ social work practice in Northwest Syria, effective forms of support for Syrians who performed social work functions, and recommendations for good social work practice in other complex emergencies. This dissertation found ‘good’ social work practices can play a critical role in re-activating the culturally embedded supportive nature of Syrian families and communities through a range of practices such as supporting livelihoods, peer group activities, case management, raising awareness and community-led initiatives. This dissertation illustrates the importance of practitioners’ perspectives who perform social work functions to improve social work practice models. This study also highlights how supporting practitioners in their social work practice and including practitioners in research can strengthen the ability of the social work profession to effectively address the needs of communities impacted by complex emergencies. This dissertation also found making changes to how practitioners practice social work can contribute to supporting Syrian practitioners. This dissertation also discussed how including the perspectives of both international and national practitioners who know the situation best strengthened the study’s trustworthiness and construct validity. The practitioners included in this study also hoped the research would produce knowledge relevant to their own ongoing social work practice in Northwest Syria, would be shared with others in Arabic and would be well coordinated with local practitioners and the humanitarian community to ensure the research is beneficial. To support ‘good’ social work practice in other complex emergencies, this dissertation’s three manuscripts offer insights into how careful consideration to each of the three intertwined prongs of social work research, social work practice and support for practitioners can contribute to ‘building social work [back] better.’ Notably, including relevant practitioners in the process of conducting social work research to explore perspectives on ‘good’ social work practices in complex emergencies, can help better support the social work practitioners themselves. Applying this three-pronged approach can help the social work profession foster and support initiatives to re-activate culturally embedded family and community support, which includes local practitioners themselves to be the driving force behind social work initiatives in their own contexts. Ultimately, this dissertation has documented and validated the sophisticated, locally established social work functions performed by Syrians during the complex emergency in Northwest Syria. As a Syrian practitioner shared “at the end I am the son of this community I mean if there’s anything that I can do to help this community.”

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Appendix 1 – Community Advisory Board Invitation

Greetings,

I am currently at the McGill University School of Social Work working on my PhD research. After my previous work in response to the Syrian crisis, I am exploring perspectives on what constitutes good social work practices in complex emergencies through a study of the context in a specific area in Northwest Syria.⁹ I am also exploring effective forms of support for Syrian practitioners who are performing social work functions. Taking into account the global COVID-19 pandemic, my dissertation will explore perspectives on ‘good social work practice’ prior to the pandemic and ‘good practices’ emerging in the midst of the pandemic. Dr. Myriam Denov from McGill University School of Social Work is my faculty advisor.

Due to your experience performing social work functions in response to the Syrian crisis in Northwest Syria, I would like to invite you to join a community advisory board. While a doctoral dissertation has limitations on the extent of participation in my overall research questions, I will develop an online community advisory board to inform my research. Community advisory board participants will be invited to do the following:

- Share any additional relevant literature, reports, manuals, documents, assessments or strategies
- Participate in a pilot interview by telegram, wire, skype, or whats app. The interview will explore your perspective on good social work practices and effective forms of support for Syrians who perform social work functions as part of the Syrian response (1 hour)
- Complete an online survey to provide input on the interview guide, proposed sample, recruitment strategy, approval processes and translation if applicable (30 minutes)
- Share information about the study with other eligible participants by telegram or e-mail
- Review the final report with the emerging findings and provide feedback through an online survey (1 hour and 30 minutes)
- Share the final report with relevant persons by telegram or e-mail

Please note the research does not require community advisory board participants to do all of the tasks listed above. For purposes of anonymity, the research will not collect names of individuals or organizations who participate. Pseudonyms can be used to identify participants. However, participants or organizations can choose to be acknowledged for their participation in the research. All communication will be conducted by telegram using the following number [telegram number] or e-mail using the following e-mail address [e-mail address]. All communication including telegram messages, e-mails, interviews and surveys can be completed in English or Arabic. Please see the attached Terms of Reference and workplan for the community advisory board. I have also attached a brief research summary of my doctoral dissertation. If you are interested and available to participate in the community advisory board, please send me a telegram message at [telegram number] or e-mail at [e-mail address].

⁹ The research occurred in a specific area of Northwest Syria, which is notable as the needs might be different according to the context. The specific area is available upon request due to the sensitivity of the situation and the area as well as to protect participants' safety.

Feel free to let me know what questions you have or if you would like to request additional information. If you would like more information, you may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Myriam Denov at [supervisors' email].

Gratefully,

Karen Paul
PhD Candidate, McGill School of Social Work
Telegram: [number]
[e-mail]

Supervisor: Dr. Myriam Denov
McGill School of Social Work
[supervisor phone number and e-mail]