

Book review

Ulrike Mann: Public health in the first Chechen war 1994–1996. Aspects of humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies. (International Public Health Series, Vol. 12) Verlag Hans Jacobs

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Without Abstract

This book is good and grim. It brings to the fore an important risk factor for health: violent and dirty internal wars which the United Nations label as complex emergencies. In the case of Chechnya, an independence movement was the starter. Military interventions and armed reactions were cruel: razing of cities, bombing of infrastructure, villages and houses, laying of land mines, use of chemical and biological weapons, cleansing of villages, raping of girls and women, detention, torturing, eventual killing. Armed groups, gangs and criminals were roaming around amidst lawlessness and looting of private and public goods. Civilians, health workers, and journalists were indiscriminately affected. After a general review of the features of complex emergencies and their impacts on individual and public health, this book deals with the Chechen war of 1994–1996 as a specific example of a man-made disaster leading to a vast humanitarian crisis. Such sheer endless crises were and are witnessed in many areas of the world, e.g. in Sudan, Cambodia, East Timor, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Guatemala and Rwanda.

Ulrike Mann brilliantly describes and understandably analyses the political, social, cultural, economic, geostrategic, environmental and military contexts of complex emergencies and their impacts on public and individual health, on physical and mental health. Collaterals are the breakdown of the economy with unemployment, food insecurity, environmental hazards and the destruction of the social fabric of society.

This book is in the true spirit of the Ottawa Charter of the World Health Organization on the intrinsically interrelated prerequisites for health: “peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable economy, sustainable resources, social justice and equity”.

In spite of inconsistent and insufficient data, Ulrike Mann clearly assesses the Chechen health system and the main aspects of physical and mental health before, during and after the first war of 1994–1996. The civilian population was the main victim. “About 95% of the casualties and people injured were non-combatants.” People “died not only from bullets, bombs, and mortars, but also from disease, cold and hunger” and from wide environmental damage. The diseases of the war and after the war are diseases of the poor. Excellently analysed are the many indirect influences on health and excess morbidity and mortality and on the availability of health services and health workers under extremely insecure working conditions, many of whom were indiscriminately killed, taken as hostages and used as human shields.

Public health responses or humanitarian aid to the victims of the Chechen wars could not be very effective. Ulrike Mann carefully discusses the operational, political and ethical dilemmas of humanitarian neutrality and impartiality versus human rights interventionism. *Médicines sans Frontières* and the International Red Cross did outstanding jobs with limited impacts, nevertheless. Difficulties in accessing the population in need, lack of security and lack of international support were core problems. After balancing the various options, there seems to be a rather grim prospect for humanitarian aid, public health efforts and development programmes under such circumstances.

Ulrike Mann ably assesses the very complexity of complex emergencies and skilfully uses the analytical tools of public health and political sciences. Her book presents a very good balance of a case study with general observations and conclusions on the emergence of public and private criminality disguised as a justifiable response of a leading nation to an independence movement. The international community did not interfere in the internal affairs of Russia—an important international player. The outlook is even grimmer considering that similar intra-national conflicts with vast violence against civilians in politically marginal countries could face an aggressive and interventionist action of a self-declared superpower, which instead of solving conflicts with a development perspective would rather fuel future conflicts in the context of the alliance against terrorism. Public health professionals ought to develop a stand on this and turn into lobbyists for a dignified survival—wherever that may be in our “one world”.

In his preface, Ulrich Laaser—the leading editor of the book series on International Health—correctly states that “war and peace have become central topics also for the health sciences and public health.” He should be praised for stimulating and advising Ulrike Mann’s thoughtful and well-written academic thesis.