Reviewer's report

Title: School-based mental health intervention for children in war-affected Burundi: a cluster randomized trial

Version: 1 Date: 21 September 2013

Reviewer: Alastair Ager

Reviewer's report:

1. I think this is a generally well conceptualized study addressing an important issue: the impact of a well documented intervention of potential relevance across a range of settings.

2. The literature review contextualizes the study well, is clear and logical in its presentation of issues and the implications of previous findings. It might better flag that there is a variety of approaches to ‘psychosocial intervention’ and that disparate findings, in part, may reflect range of intervention effectiveness (and intervention quality or fidelity) as well as mediators and moderators.

3. My personal sense is that the power calculation was based on very optimistic effect sizes from those two previous studies. The Inter-Agency Guidelines on the Evaluation of Psychosocial Programming in Humanitarian Emergencies identifies a rather more modest expectation of effect sizes for psychosocial interventions.

4. I think issues of screening could be clarified with revised/elaborated language.

5. I understand the rationale for allocation of intervention and control to the two Districts, but think this was probably a mistake given the multiple contextual differences likely across the two Districts (which is reflected in significant differences in scores on a number of measures).

6. Instruments are well described and justified, with rigorous application of psychometric principles. There was some excellent work here on tool development. LGCM is well explained.

7. The differences of trajectories by condition by moderator are clearly complex and hard to follow, but I am not sure they could be expressed/written any more clearly to be honest. I have seen LGCM trajectories graphically posted – would the authors consider doing so here?

8. (Essential) I do think that when it comes to the Discussion the reader needs some assistance in making sense of the complex, and on occasion, potentially contradictory findings. I recognize that the authors have sought to do this, but currently I do not think the discussion would suitably inform the ‘tailoring’ of interventions that they call for. I think, therefore, that the Discussion should be substantially reworked.

9. (Essential) It may be helpful for the authors to be aware of the questions that I
had in my mind by the time I got to the end of the Results section. I got partial answers to these questions in the Discussion, but I think a clearer narrative is required to convince the reader that the paper is saying something more than ‘it’s complicated’. The questions I had were:

- With significant variation between Districts confounded with exposure to intervention can we meaningfully conclude anything about intervention effectiveness?
- With no main effect for intervention are the different trajectories observed in relation to different moderators really of any substantive interest?
- If such variation is of interest in targeting intervention strategy, what is the ‘theory’ or conceptual frame that makes sense of such variation.

There is, as noted above, an element of addressing these questions in the current Discussion, but not in as direct and coherent a manner as I think is necessary for the paper to have meaningful impact. For instance, it is noted that more homogenous grouping of intervention participants by trauma exposure may be warranted. My reaction to this would be: well it sounds like it might be in some contexts, but not others – how do you decide? And, more crucially, if you do group on this basis, how does this relate to issues of stigma associated with targeting and the goal of mainstreaming preventive interventions? I think addressing such question explicitly, though demanding, would help the reader engage in the implications of the paper more readily.

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests