



## PUTTING PSYCHOSOCIAL HEALTH BACK ON THE AGENDA

“Everyone dreams of going back to their childhood. That is what takes you back to Somalia.”

Dr. Ahmed Hersi joined the Somali army and left for Russia in 1982. He finally settled in London where he completed his doctorate in public health. Now, for the first time in 30 years, Dr. Hersi is back to work in Somaliland.

As part of Transition Initiatives for Stabilization’s (TIS) Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) programme, Dr. Hersi is embedded within the Ministry of Labour as a psychosocial health professional. The programme facilitates the return of the Somali diaspora to increase capacity in the region.

Addressing psychosocial health is a huge challenge in Somalia, because according to many people, it doesn’t exist. Trauma is not recognized. “People see mental health as a physical problem that can only be cured by doctors, prescriptions or detention,” says Dr. Hersi.

Conflict has ravaged Somalia for over 20 years: “Many people have faced death, lived in perpetual fear, watched their relatives die, and lived in refugee or internally displaced people (IDP) camps. Their mental welfare is repressed, it is not given a voice,” Dr. Hersi adds.

Nimo (left) with Habibah (right) at Stadium IDP camp



“How can we achieve peace if there is no space for healing and psychosocial health? I believe I can make a lasting change.”

Dr. Hersi is training 14 professionals on psychosocial health, many of which already have a solid background in nursing, law or community outreach. Nimu Usman Nur is one such student.

Nimu lives and works as a community outreach worker in Stadium IDP camp, which is home to over 4,500 displaced people. Sexual and gender-based violence is common. Between February and March 2012, a one-year-old child was raped and died from her injuries, ten men from a neighbouring community raped a 15-year-old girl and a young woman doused herself in petrol and set herself alight because of a rape she couldn't talk about. "People have traditionally hidden their problems. Sexual violence and domestic issues are suppressed and rarely reported," says Nimo.

With Dr. Hersi's assistance, Nimo is helping families throughout Stadium IDP camp. "Nimo welcomed me on the day I arrived," says Habibah. She left Mogadishu in January 2012 after she discovered her husband had died. "It took me four days to

find his body. I immediately sold my land and left with our five children. Nimo has given me hope. She connected me with the community, told me how to get work, and listened to my problems."

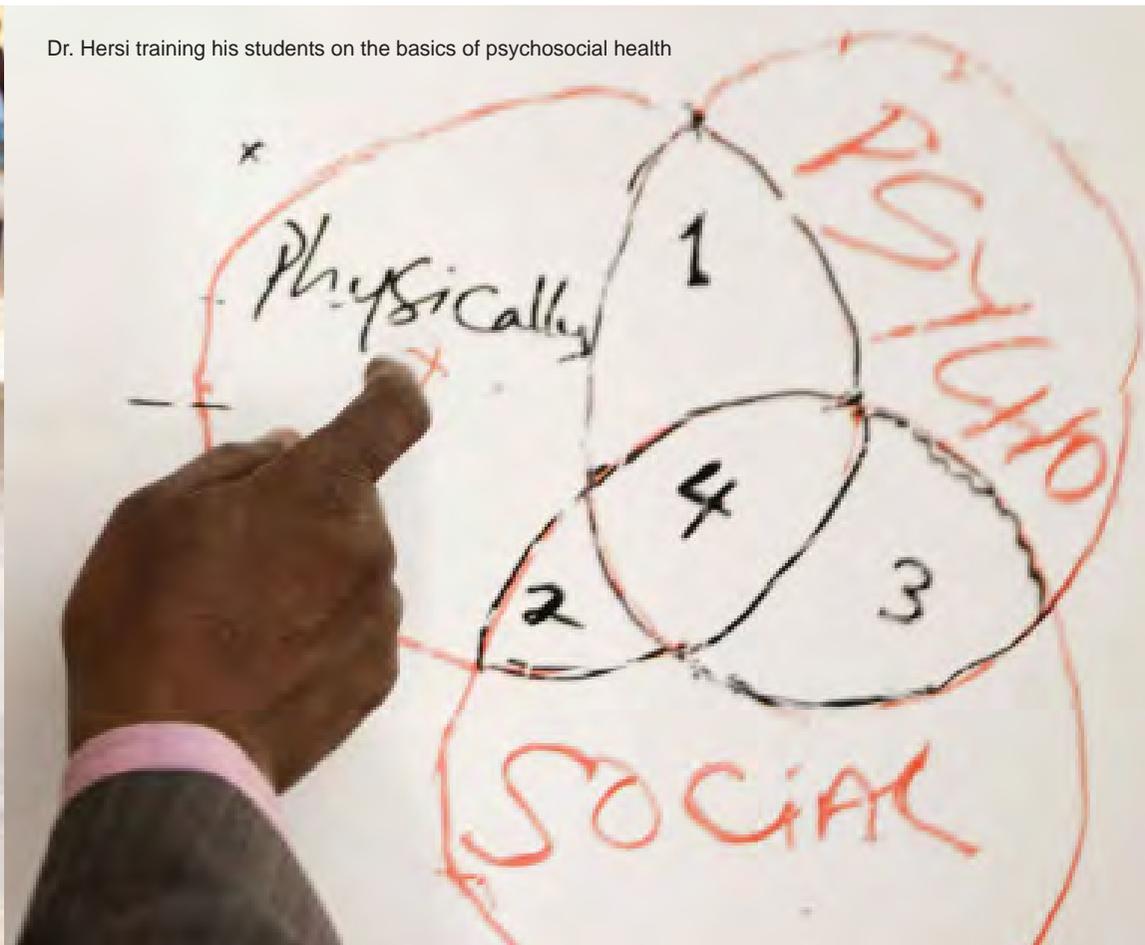
Another Stadium IDP resident, Ifrah, is also being supported by Nimo: "I came to Hargeisa during the drought. I am from rural Somaliland, but I had to leave when all my livestock died. I find things difficult here because my husband is sick, there is no employment and we have nine children to look after. Nimo gives me advice and listens."

"Dr. Hersi is training us how to empower people. To show them that helplessness is not the answer. We have been using role plays to practise how we can deal with women who have been abused and how to help diffuse domestic tensions," says Nimo.

Dr. Hersi talking to a patient at Hargeisa Mental Ward



Dr. Hersi training his students on the basics of psychosocial health



Trauma may not be recognized, but mental health is still big business in Somaliland. If a person is seen to be mentally unstable then their family will often pay for them to be detained in a privately-owned facility. "A family member who is mentally ill can stain the clan name so they send them away. These facilities often chain people to walls... to beds. There is no regulation and no human rights protection. These places are not care facilities, they are enterprises. This must change," Dr. Hersi reiterates.

As well as advocating for "chain-free" mental health hospitals, Dr. Hersi will be working two days a week at Hargeisa Mental Health Ward. Over 40 patients reside within the ward, many of whom suffer from severe depression, stress and addictions to khat (a herbal stimulant). The director of the hospital, Dr. Mustafa Hussein, says: "Dr. Hersi's assistance is undoubtedly needed. Instead of injections, we must start to provide counselling. By providing such a service many people would not be in this hospital today."

Dr. Hersi will also be lobbying for psychosocial health to be taught in schools: "A new generation must be formed whereby everyone is aware of mental health. It has to start with the youth. This will help determine the behaviour of our next generation."

"Peace comes from the people. How can we achieve peace if there is no space for healing and psychosocial health? It is a big job, but I believe I can make a lasting change."