

Conflict Resolution Catalysts (CRC)

MOTT FOUNDATION ASSESSMENT OF CRC PROGRAMS IN BOSNIA

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The Issue, Problem, or Conflict

Bringing peace and democracy to Bosnia is a daunting task that requires multiple levels of intervention, but perhaps the greatest opportunity for overcoming the violence that has divided Bosnia's ethnic groups is at the community level. One of the key challenges in building a civil society in this devastated region is to bring together people from different ethnic groups on a neighborhood basis. To do this, it is necessary to create structures that allow people to work on common concerns, to develop their capacities for integrating into a new society, and to learn how to discuss the complicated issues they are facing as individuals and communities. Since the Dayton Peace Accords were signed and implemented in 1995, there have been many attempts to create community centers of one kind or another to offer services and to begin the long and difficult reconciliation process. Many of these programs have been under the auspices of international organizations (UNHCR, OSCE, UNDP, etc.) and others have been under the purview of NGOs. Some community centers focus on job training, others on housing, others on advocacy. The challenge of creating neighborhood programs that take root in the community, are viewed as being of genuine value, and contribute to the process of building a civil society is enormous. In fact, Bosnia in many ways appears inundated by such efforts—to the point where the proliferation of internationally funded programs, many of which have been marginally effective at best, has been a source of cynicism among Bosnians.

Every community in Bosnia has been gravely affected by the war and is in need of assistance, and each community poses a different set of challenges. The focus of the CRC programs were Banja Luka, the major city in the Republic of Srpska region of the Bosnian Federation, and Ilidza, a community on the outskirts of Sarajevo that is part of the predominantly Muslim section of Bosnia.

Banja Luka, while not the center of major fighting, was the location of some of the worst "ethnic cleansing" activities during the war. A predominantly Serbian community, it had been the home to a significant Muslim population before the war. (In Bosnia, numbers, percentages, and ethnic identification criteria are themselves extremely politicized.) However, the mosques were destroyed, Muslims attacked and driven out of their homes, and a long and brutal campaign of intimidation and violence was carried out against minorities. Most (but not all) Muslims fled; some of them are now trying to return. Banja Luka is considered to be the heart of the more moderate Bosnian Serbian groups and is the seat of government of the Republic of Srpska. However, the ethnic conflict and violence that occurred there was extreme and the process of reconciliation is incipient at best. There are major concerns about housing, education and

employment. Unemployment is estimated to be as great as 80%, perhaps more among youth. There is a mixture of pessimism about the future with a profound desire to put the past behind in Banja Luka (as in much of Bosnia).

Ilidza, a suburb of Sarajevo, is primarily Muslim, but located very close to parts of the Republic of Srpska (15 minutes). Ilidza lies on the opposite side of the airport, and the infamous “snipers alley” from Sarajevo. It was under Serbian control during the war, but became part of the Bosnian Federation after the peace accords. At that time, a majority of the Serbians living in the area fled to nearby communities that became part of the Republic of Srpska. Many of the vacated houses were occupied by Muslim refugees from Eastern Bosnia. Unemployment is very high here as well.

Grantee

Conflict Resolution Catalysts (CRC) is a conflict resolution organization located in Montpelier, Vermont, and directed by Gary Shapiro. CRC works towards promoting collaborative approaches to the resolution of conflict, citizen empowerment, reconciliation, and an appreciation of cultural diversity. CRC has worked in the former Yugoslavia since 1994. CRC administered these projects through the entire period of the Mott grant, although both have since become independent and have created their own organizational structure. The Banja Luka program has become Youth Bridge International (YBI) at the end of December, 1997. The Ilidza Center became Danas za Bolje Sutra (DBS) on March 1, 1998. There were no formal local partners during the course of these grants, but both programs worked closely with local and international NGO's as well as international organizations.

Goals

CRC's goals for these projects were to begin the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation on a community level and to provide a focal point for bringing the different ethnic groups together to work on issues of personal and communal concern. While the distinct hope of the project organizers was to introduce mediating structures and skills into the local community, they realized that community members in both locations were not ready to begin addressing their conflicts directly and that mediation as practiced in the United States was not yet appropriate for the Bosnian conflict. Therefore, as an intermediate goal, they wanted to establish programs that brought together local people to address their personal and neighborhood concerns. CRC felt that the first step towards reconciliation was to find a way of encouraging interaction among different ethnic groups in safe and non-threatening ways.

Approach

The approach taken by the two centers have some similarities and many differences as well. The

common approach was to establish a location, a house, in the community to serve as a center for a variety of activities. These included classes, discussion groups, and group activities such as crafts, dance, and excursions. In both locations, the most popular classes seem to be English language and computer applications. Both centers rely heavily on volunteers to provide the centers with staff and instructors. Both centers utilized a combination of American staff (trained in community building, conflict resolution, and cultural dynamics by CRC) and local staff. Vehicles seemed to be an important asset for the two centers because they promoted inter-community (which often translated to interethnic) interaction and programs. In both cases, the strategy was to initiate the programs on somewhat of a shoestring budget, with the expectation that success would breed more funding.

The Banja Luka Program

The Banja Luka Program has focused primarily on youth. The approach of the Banja Luka program is based on a belief that youth are both the most needy in terms of education, employment, and socialization and the most open to developing more constructive attitudes about members of other ethnic groups. There are many specific programs for attracting youth to the center—classes, publications (they put out their own newspaper), social activities, informal counseling, and job referral. But by far the most effective means of bringing in youth is a radio station, which broadcasts approximately 18 hours a day from a studio in the center itself. This is a remarkable attraction for youth of all ethnic groups (different ethnicity does not seem to have resulted in different musical taste) who can work side by side in running the station. Although the range of the station is quite small, the activity seems extremely meaningful to its participants. Some news and interviews are broadcast, but the vast bulk of the programming is musical.

The Banja Luka Center has taken on a number of interesting projects in service to the community as a whole. One that was especially meaningful to the community involved setting up volunteer programs for center participants to work with children in a local orphanage. Many of the children in this orphanage, who come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, were displaced by the war.

The Banja Luka Center does not emphasize multiethnic work or conflict resolution as primary goals. It promotes itself more as a youth center that seeks to establish bridges to other groups. This has been a source of some tension between the local center and the CRC staff. The bulk of the participants (almost all) were from a Serbian background. There are a number of programs that are designed to promote cross-ethnic interactions, such as exchanges with the Ilidza program, but these are clearly secondary to the emphasis on providing services to youth in Banja Luka.

The director of this program is a remarkable man, John Crownover, who has a background in social work and youth work in the United States. He lives in the youth center and has been a focal point for its many activities. John has also become a major figure in the larger community of Banja Luka. He was repeatedly described as an internationalist who was genuinely trusted and respected by all elements of the Banja Luka community. Representatives of international organizations repeatedly referred to him as a valued intermediary between the local community and them. He is seen as someone who is committed to the community and its people and who

gets things done. In the words of one of the youth who is active in this program, John is “wine spritzer cool.” The Banja Luka program revolves around him and this is both a strength and weakness. The Center is repeatedly referred to as “John’s center,” and he is clearly the major focal point and organizing force there. While universally positive about John, a number of local participants suggested there was a need to develop a stronger local staff. John has been developing and assigning more responsibilities to local staff, but there is very little money to pay them, and they are clearly not seen as central to the program in the way John is. For quite a while, John has not received a regular salary either and has had to do his own fundraising to support himself. He plans on diminishing his role in the Center in the near future.

The Ilidza Program

The Ilidza Center focuses on adults, especially those who are unemployed. The Center offers some classes and activities for youth—such as dance and theater classes, but the bulk of its activities are adult oriented. The Ilidza Center makes a real effort to be multiethnic in orientation, and in fact has a multiethnic staff. It has an outreach program for bringing people from a nearby neighborhood in the Republic of Srpska area to the program. The recently acquired center van is a major asset in this regard. Staff members were quite candid in stating that attendance at the Center for some residents of the Srpska neighborhood was mainly a means for entering into the Bosnian Federation areas in a secure way. It is through the Center that many displaced former residents of Ilidza have returned to their communities for the first time since they fled.

While this Center clearly aims at interethnic interaction, it has been very leery of taking on divisive issues directly. Only recently has it begun to have some discussions of the most divisive issues for this community. It has recently started a housing discussion group, a women’s group, a youth group, and a human rights group, each of which were attended by citizens of both the Federation and the Republic of Srpska. These groups are very new, but staff were quite excited that they had received such a positive initial reception. Despite the intention of the Center to focus more on interethnic work, it is clear that without the vans as outreach mechanisms (and this only works once or twice a week) participation would be primarily Muslim.

One interesting and important issue that has gotten some attention in this center was a source of intra-ethnic conflict. There is often considerable tension between Bosnian Muslims who remained throughout the war and those who fled the country and have since returned. The former group feels more entitled to consideration for special programs than the latter, while the latter feels discriminated against. These discussions were happening mostly informally around the center. It may well be that the most difficult issues are best addressed informally in such a milieu before formal efforts to take them on are initiated.

There has been a great deal of turnover in the staffing of this Center, and its future stability seemed to be quite up in the air. When this assessment was conducted, there were two local staff (the director and the program coordinator) who had been on staff for about two months—although the program coordinator had been a Center participant before that. In addition to these staff, there were three Americans who were there on a volunteer/intern basis for several

months. The Americans were helping with fundraising, teaching courses, and overall center management. All were intending to leave within the next few months. Thus the staffing at this Center is very unstable. There is very little money for staff expenses, or for anything else for that matter. Unless this Center can identify stable new sources of funds, its future is very much in doubt at this point.

Transition to Local Control

As CRC's grants from the Mott Foundation have ended, the plan has been to turn over the Centers to local control and to assist them in becoming independent. This has been a very rocky process in both Centers to say the least. Both are trying very hard to raise money independently, with varying success. The Banja Luka Center appears to be more stabilized and established—and appears to have a greater likelihood of finding ongoing funding. It was very obvious that relations between both these programs and the CRC staff in the United States were extremely strained. The Center staffs felt that they had not been adequately supported by CRC. A number of them expressed the opinion that CRC was “long on ideas and short on follow-through.” They expressed concern about the failure of CRC to help them obtain adequate funding, about the unrealistic expectations and strategies of CRC for introducing conflict resolution programs into the local context, and about the lack of good communication between Center staff and CRC personnel. A number of local staff said that they felt personally unsupported by the CRC leadership. Local staff repeatedly said they felt totally unprepared for what to expect once they arrived on the scene (as if they were thrown into a pool and told to swim). Some of the feelings expressed were quite bitter. CRC, on the other hand, viewed the problem in terms of a lack of local willingness to be accountable for how resources were spent and a desire to take the Centers off in directions for which they were not funded. The CRC staff was sympathetic to the financial problems of the Centers, but felt that their role was as catalysts, not as long-term administrators of funders. It is not the purpose of this report to sort out all these issues or to assign responsibility for these problems, but it is clear that this conflict has been a major source of concern and stress for these projects. It is important to consider how to fund programs in the future in a way that minimizes the likelihood of such divisions between international and local organizations.

Impacts

The impact of programs like these are not easy to measure because they occur in subtle ways in the lives of the many individuals who participate in them and in the collective result of such impacts on the lives of communities. These Centers do not seek to arrive at particular agreements, settle specific conflicts, or obtain quantifiable social results. Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which their impact can be assessed.

In terms of utilization by the community, both appeared to be well attended. The Banja Luka program in particular appeared to have no down times at all. Of course, the radio station was almost always in operation, but in addition there were almost always people attending classes,

working on the computers, and just “hanging out.” The Center had a well-used appearance and an inviting and comfortable feeling. People clearly considered it “their place.”

There were people in attendance at a variety of classes in Ilidza as well, but there were clearly more “down times” and people seemed to participate more for specific activities. Our sense was that the community is much more tentative about its involvement with this Center, perhaps correctly identifying its less secure status. Bosnians are very leery of internationals and international programs that have not proved their durability and commitment.

Many individuals testified to the value of the centers for them as individuals. Clearly, the personal relationships established with center staff were important to people. Center staff played a mentoring role for many individual participants. In Ilidza, the neighborhood women seemed to particularly identify with and feel supported by some of the American women volunteers—and some women expressed doubt about whether they would want to continue to participate in the Center after these women had left. On the other hand, for the very immediate neighborhood within which this Center was located, it provided an important communal focal point, despite the staff turnover.

The Banja Luka Center seems to offer a major point of hope and a positive focus for many youth who have no jobs, nor job prospects, and whose world is filled with considerable pessimism. Motivating youth to build for their future and for their community’s future is extremely difficult under the circumstances that the Bosnians face, but this Center seems to be making a significant impact in this regard.

The Banja Luka Center has also become a valuable resource for other international organizations. Center staff have helped create bridges between these organizations and the community. They have been valued consultants on how to meet community needs, and they have helped community members figure out how to best use the resources provided by the internationals.

The impact of these centers on the development of civil society is a much more problematic issue. It is not clear that there are well-established programs aimed at addressing issues of ethnic tension, diversity, reconciliation, or conflict. The Banja Luka program is very largely Serbian in ethnicity and orientation. The Ilidza program is mainly Bosnian. There have been some tentative efforts at addressing issues like housing and refugee resettlement, but these are a very small part of the overall picture. There were no reports of ongoing work in teaching democratic values, citizen advocacy and participation, communication, problem solving, diversity appreciation, or conflict resolution. No systematic efforts to help individuals deal with the traumas of the war or with the need for reconciliation were reported. In many ways, the programmatic goal of building a civil society was given lip service at best by the local staff, although this was clearly the goal of Mott and CRC in funding these efforts.

This being stated, however, it is also important to consider this in the Bosnian context. Many people suggested that the very best way to get at these goals was indirectly. The reason that the CRC programs were accepted far better than many other internationally funded efforts was

because they projected a concern for the people first, as opposed to some externally driven message.

“UNHCR and many of the internationals have had problems because of their lack of cultural sensitivity. They try to make people cooperate at the local government level who were responsible for the problem to begin with. CRC focused locally—not on ‘political stuff.’ CRC said in effect ‘we want to help the people of Banja Luka’ not ‘we want to establish multicultural cooperation’, and then they did help the people.” A Professor at a University in Banja Luka

Repeatedly, the credibility of the Banja Luka Center with the local people was seen as its key asset and the basis for it to promote interethnic dialogue. The more forums for such dialogue the better. Clearly these Centers are playing a role in providing such forums.

The strengths and limitations of such programs in this respect were illustrated by an interesting incident, which occurred during the assessment process. The Muslim interpreter who accompanied the assessors and who had experienced many traumatic experiences during the course of the war had not been to Banja Luka in nine years prior to this trip. He was nervous about going, but perhaps also excited. On his first evening there, he went to a tavern with a young Serbian woman who was active in the Center’s programs. In the course of their discussions, he started to share some of his experiences, but she wanted “to forget the past and live in the present.” This was an extremely upsetting interchange, and there was no clear place either could go to talk about it in the Center. This initially left the Muslim feeling alienated, upset and angry. However, in an informal discussion with two Serbian youth the next day, the Muslim found that they were very interested in hearing his experiences and he in theirs. This proved to be a very healing time for him for which he was grateful. So the informal interaction has the potential of providing profound healing, but without a clear mechanism to encourage this or guide it, it is a somewhat haphazard process.

Another impact of these programs is as pilots and demonstrations for how to utilize the community center concept for building a civil society. Taken together with the other community centers that Mott has funded in Bosnia (in Travnik and Livno), these provide an interesting spectrum of approaches for promoting civil society in this way. Since reconciliation and civil society development need to occur on at least three levels (national, regional, local) and since many people seem to think the most important and potentially successful work can occur locally, it is critical to refine our understanding for what makes such efforts effective. The program-specific lessons learned are summarized below.

There is an important issue concerning the value of having an international presence in local communities. One of the functions of such centers is to provide a meeting ground between internationals and locals. Bosnia in many ways appears to be a country occupied by the international community. There are UNDP cars, SFOR troops, human rights monitors, NGOs galore, OSCE personnel, etc., everywhere. While many Bosnians see these organizations as protectors, there is also a sense of isolation and alienation from the international community as

well. The centers are a genuine intermediary structure between communities and international organizations. Furthermore, important friendships have clearly developed between international staff and locals. This has been one important motivating force for people to continue to attend center activities. The Ilidza Center is located near one of the major bases of SFOR troops, some of whom volunteer at the Center during their off hours. People were clearly excited that they showed this kind of interest in the community, and enjoyed the opportunity to interact on a personal basis.

Another role of internationals is as a protective cover that makes it a little bit safer for people from different ethnic groups to interact. One person told an American volunteer that she would not attend the program if it were not for the presence of international staff, because “everyone else is from a different ethnic group.” Internationals also represent a sense of hopefulness and optimism to people who have a hard time trusting that they have the potential for a safe and secure future. Sometimes this optimism may seem naïve, but it is welcome nonetheless. Internationals have some significant skills to bring to the projects as well, including English language, fundraising, community organizing, and facilitation. Of course, these programs have profound and perhaps lifelong impacts on the international staff as well.

There is also a potential negative impact from these programs that is important to address. As mentioned, Bosnians are very suspicious of international programs that appear to be more for show than substance. They often talk of internationals “parachuting in and out of Bosnia” who are interested in Bosnia only for the money they earn or for the “war stories” they can then tell. Thus all such programs are initially approached with suspicion and resistance. When Bosnians really do invest in a program aimed at helping them relate better to each other, it is a very significant step. If the staff of such a program is unstable and the program itself is on shaky ground, the impact can be a more entrenched attitude of suspicion and resistance to international efforts aimed at building a civil society.

Recommendations

Creating centers in which people come together for educational, social, and counseling purposes is an approach that is worth continuing, however it is critical that such programs be set up for a stable existence. This is not just a matter of funding but of obtaining a grounding in the local community. The Banja Luka Center has proven that it has become grounded in this way. It is a resource that is valuable and should be supported. The Ilidza program is at an earlier stage of development. Without a stable staff and a history of continuity of personnel and programming, it is unlikely to obtain this grounding. Local institutional sponsorship would greatly aid in obtaining this stability and continuity.

The Banja Luka program is well able to take the next steps toward achieving the fundamental goals for which it was created. Two things can help it do this:

1. A major effort should be made to encourage local leadership to play a more prominent role in

the management of the Center.

2. A strategy for beginning to address the more key issues of reconciliation and healing should be established. This can well occur within the context of the existing programs of the Center, but if there is no clear strategy for how to begin working on these issues, many opportunities will be lost.

Lessons Learned from CRC Project Review

Community centers provide a valuable service but their impact on developing a civil society is indirect and gradual. To have focused the centers' activities on dialogue groups, diversity training, conflict resolution or reconciliation would probably not have worked. This approach would have reflected the goals of international organizations but not the readiness of the Bosnians to engage in such activities. The approach that these centers took of providing desired services and a welcoming milieu was more appropriate to their context. The real success of these centers was the degree to which they were embraced and utilized by the communities. By the same token, they only approached the issues of reconciliation and civil society development indirectly, gradually, and perhaps even hesitantly. The challenge is to organize a center to meet the expressed needs of a community and then to find a way to utilize the Center to bring people together to address the more difficult issues they face for purposes of reconciliation and civil society development on a grassroots level. It is a special challenge to do this in a transparent way that garners genuine community support for such activities. It is unlikely that this will become the major focus of such community centers, but will at best be a secondary activity. Nonetheless, this may be one of the best ways to begin to encourage people from different ethnic groups to relate to each other in a constructive way on a neighborhood basis. Therefore:

- **Funders of community centers should be willing to support them for what they are best able to accomplish (or not fund them).** This may seem like an obvious conclusion, but these projects were examples of where the communities' needs and the project goals were in some ways in conflict. It is important to avoid a situation in which community centers have to justify their funding by pushing activities that are at best peripheral to what the community itself wants from the program. Otherwise, the Centers could easily become alienated from the community or manipulative of the funders. It is also important that these issues be discussed early and openly in planning such centers with the implementing organizations, the staff, and the community representatives. If a funder is not willing to allocate resources to the kinds of programs that are more likely to be at the core of what such centers can offer, it would be best to put their resources elsewhere. If they do want to support such centers, then it is important that this be done with the flexibility to allow the centers to fulfill their genuine potential.
- **Community centers, by the nature of their structure, have to be flexible, responsive to changing community needs, and accountable both to the community and to the**

funding organizations. In many ways the mission of the Center will be defined by the people it attracts to its programs. No matter how carefully thought through the project is, if it is to be responsive to the community, its basic approach may well be altered—sometimes to the point where it is hard to recognize the proposal in the reality. Hopefully, such developments will not change the basic purpose or values upon which the program was founded, but what communities want and what outside organizations think they need are often very different. Also, there are many subgroups within each community, and it is not always clear how a particular group is attracted to a program. However, in this respect such centers need to be opportunistic and work with the needs of the group they have attracted, rather than the groups they may have wished to serve. This is not meant to discourage active outreach efforts, but to emphasize the importance of flexibility in center program design.

- **The relationship between international partners and local staff is hard to maintain and critical for program success.** Perhaps the most amazing thing about these centers is how well they have done despite the poor relations that existed with the American organizers. All involved (both at CRC and in Bosnia) deserve credit for this. However, these relationships were clearly a major drain on everyone and may have something to do with the instability of at least the Ilidza program. What are some of the specific lessons to be learned about how to maintain relations across such wide geographical and cultural gaps?
- **From the very beginning, the nature of the relationship needs to be negotiated and attended to.** One key element in this is to work early on to develop a local steering group that represents the community served. This provides a local mechanism for planning and accountability with which the program goals and structures can be negotiated. The key is that this group be representative and credible with the local community. Proposals that do not adequately address how the community will be involved in developing and operating the project and that do not provide for a process for adapting the plans to local conditions should not be funded.
- **Project organizers and local staff should spend plenty of time together early on for purposes of training, relationship building, and goal clarification.** This should not be limited to advance training before the commencement of the project. Too often, it seems, considerable efforts were spent in advance training, but not enough in ongoing support and dialogue. Perhaps the most significant time for project developers and program staff to spend with each other is in the early months of project initiation.
- **The role of international partners has to change fairly quickly from project managers to consultants and reviewers.** Particularly for these types of programs, if managerial control is not taken over by local entities, there will be a structural set up for contradictory goals and directions and therefore for conflict.
- **Even mediators (maybe especially mediators) need conflict resolution assistance from time to time.**

- **International staff have a positive role to play in such centers.** Although there are certainly problems with trying to introduce an international presence on a community level, almost everyone affirmed the value of doing so. Without international staff, it would be harder to bring ethnic groups together, to take advantage of the dialogue potential as it arises, to secure ongoing funding, to gain entry to international organizations, and to provide stability and security in a rapidly changing environment. It is best if core international staff commit themselves to participating for longer than several months at a time. Part of the regard that the Banja Luka community has for John Crowover stems from the duration of his work there, as well as its quality. Despite the importance of developing local staff and management, there should be a mechanism for keeping international staff involved over a significant period of time.
- **Funding the development period of a program before committing to long-term funding for the program itself should be considered. Once long-term funding is granted, it should be at a level that allows for stable staffing and programming.** The advantage of developmental funding is that it allows for the kind of community involvement in the beginning that such programs demand. Furthermore, the best laid plans will not always work, and asking that a program prove itself in action before long-term funding is committed makes sense. This can also be a motivator for community involvement in developing a center. Even if a grantor is going to make a basic commitment to fund the ongoing phase once it has committed to a developmental phase, by providing funding in this staged process, a different kind of relationship between international NGOs and local participants can be encouraged. If the community is involved in developing a long-term proposal for funding, program, and structure, it is more likely that sustainability will be established as a goal from the outset.
- **Working with youth is an effective focus for community centers.** It is not the only appropriate focus by any means, but youth (16-24) seem particularly appropriate targets for these kinds of programs. This is particularly true in a location with the high unemployment rate that these communities are experiencing. Furthermore, youth may be more open to reestablishing meaningful cross-ethnic relationships than their elders.