

Faith-Based Peacebuilding in the Former Yugoslavia

by David Steele

An examination of regional, civil society peacebuilding in the former Yugoslavia provides an excellent opportunity to examine reconciliation efforts and evaluate both methodology and success in light of lessons learned during the ensuing years. In this article, I will evaluate projects I personally directed from 1994–2006.

As a fellow with the Program on Preventive Diplomacy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington (1994–2003), I directed a conflict resolution training program for religious communities in the former Yugoslavia. This project began exclusively as a training program for clergy and laity in Croatia, Serbia, (including Kosovo at that time), Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro (which was at that time still part of Yugoslavia). As time progressed, the project's focus evolved in many ways, including an emphasis on influencing policy making by political actors.

From 2003–2006, while serving as a program manager, then interim executive director at Conflict Management Group (CMG), and finally a program manager at Mercy Corps, I led a project on building inter-ethnic community in Macedonia. This project included religious persons, as well as many other civil society and governmental actors.

Objectives and Methodology

The basic goal of these projects was to train and equip local people, especially the clergy and laity from all religious communities, to be better agents of reconciliation. The three objectives were to build relationships among people from different ethnic/religious communities, resolve disputes by applying problem-solving skills used by heterogeneous groups, and build capacity to affect the structural changes necessary for sustainable peace. The religious values of staff and participants provided primary motivation and contributed significantly to the content of specific project activities. Those invited to participate included representatives of all religious communities

Dr. David Steele is adjunct faculty in the Graduate Program on Coexistence and Conflict at Brandeis University. He has a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics and Practical Theology from the University of Edinburgh and has written numerous publications on faith-based reconciliation. Dr. Steele has 23 years of experience facilitating conflict transformation in violence-prone situations, including time spent as a Reconciliation Facilitator with U.S. Institute of Peace in Iraq.

within a given context, most often mid-level people (though occasionally both hierarchy and grassroots) who were open to inter-faith dialogue and had some degree of influence within their societies. Despite these criteria, most participants were influenced by nationalist mentalities that had affected their respective ethnic and religious identities.

The conflict resolution training program for religious communities in the former Yugoslavia began with workshops held in eastern Croatia following the war there and in Sarajevo during the siege. The training adopted the approach of problem solving patterned after the principled negotiation strategy developed at Harvard under the aegis of Roger Fisher.¹ In Croatia, the approach resulted in what we deemed to be possibilities for cooperative action among Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslim refugees. In Sarajevo, however, inter-religious problem solving in the midst of bombardment felt like the impossible task of pulling a tooth that was not yet loose. We concluded that the major accomplishment was simply bringing together the entire spectrum of religious communities—Muslim, Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Jewish, and a variety of Protestants—in Bosnia-Herzegovina’s capital city. Relationships were clearly re-established and in some cases initiated, though not without difficulty or, as it turned out, cost to some participants.

Two later developments demonstrate both the unexpected negative and equally unexpected positive results of our efforts. On the negative side, a Croatian newspaper violated our clear guidelines regarding confidentiality by printing comments by an imam, who demonstrated an unusual empathetic understanding of the needs and fears of the Bosnian Serb population, though not their actions. As a result, his Bosnian Muslim community chose to ostracize him, and he was forced to leave his mosque. This incident led us to adopt regulations prohibiting journalists from attending workshops and preventing all

participants from revealing or publishing any personal information about what transpired at these events. A number of years after the war, participants in a workshop requested media presence and we again allowed media presence with close supervision.

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On the positive side, when I returned to Sarajevo one year after the end of the war, the president of the Academy of Sciences and Arts Dr. Seid Hukovic handed me his book on conflict resolution in the Bosnian language. Hukovic then indicated that he learned the entire problem-solving methodology described in the book at our workshop. He described how he used this methodology to convince the Bosnian Muslim political leadership to accept the ceasefire that led to the Dayton Accords that ended the war. Hukovic concluded by asking if I could set up a meeting between leading Serbs in Belgrade and himself in order to discuss how to resolve ongoing conflicts between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Despite this unexpected success at training in problem solving, we decided to continue an emphasis on training in relationship building. The purpose of what we came to call Level 1 workshops was to assist victims (from all sides of the multiple wars in the former Yugoslavia) to turn away from a revenge mentality and begin a process of building trust, understanding, and empathy.

The workshop methodology followed a six-

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step approach to help transform participants' attitudes toward others:

- Process grief by listening to the stories of all participants and ritualizing processes of lament using each religious tradition.
- Share fears and ways in which faith helped people face them.
- Identify the needs of other groups and help to re-humanize them.
- Admit wrong attitudes or actions done by oneself or one's group.
- Turn from captivity to the past by giving up all hope of changing it (i.e., through forgiveness open oneself to a positive vision of the future).
- Envision an understanding of justice that is bigger than punishment, retribution, or revenge and focus on restoring relationships and meeting the basic needs of all people.

The basic *modus operandi* for this approach included storytelling, sharing personal experiences, listening, and utilizing one's own faith tradition to come to terms with a traumatic past and rediscover a hopeful future. We were, in fact, surprised by how ready people were to share their experiences. When kept to personal sharing, without accompanying assumptions or conclusions about the behavior of the "other side," there was seldom any dispute. Instead, bonds were created among people who realized they had experienced much the same suffering.

Yet, we were frequently surprised by how long it took, sometimes requiring repeated retelling of their stories, before some (though not all) people were ready to move on. Trauma recovery is a very individual and, often, slow process.

At the same time, there were people who were ready to engage in joint problem solving. Therefore, we developed a series of Level 2 workshops focused on skill development in dispute resolution. Many inter-religious working groups were formed over the next ten years. These groups initiated numerous joint projects to address a variety of social problems including ecumenical prayers and inter-religious sports programs for youth in Croatia; religious clerics leading refugee return programs; using public media to highlight problems of corruption in Bosnia; interfaith cooperation on developing curricula for religious education in Serbia; Serbian Orthodox and Albanian Muslims working together to coordinate and improve education, medical care, and governance in Kosovo; inter-ethnic/religious cooperation on environmental challenges in Macedonia; and other joint projects too numerous to name. In fact the efforts generated by these interfaith-based efforts to address common problems began to have a carry-over effect on other components of society.

Slight adaptations of the methodology enabled us to work with a variety of civil society and political actors to resolve even larger problems. After attending one workshop, a political advisor to the Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Kosovo facilitated introductions, followed by brainstorming sessions, with officials in the Milosevic regime, resulting in a back channel of communication between the Yugoslav and U.S. governments, which each side credited with hastening the end of the Kosovo war. In a second example, the success engendered by working together on environmental problems enabled Albanian local government officials and a Macedonian women's organization to

successfully mediate rising tensions in the city of Struga that appeared headed toward reigniting another civil war in that country.

Efforts to accomplish structural change began to happen as a natural result of the activities of the working groups that formed at the end of the Level 2 workshops. Structural change became part of the task confronting the imam in Fojnica, Bosnia, as he assisted 1,600 Croat families to return to their homes in that post-war, Muslim-controlled city. Structural change occurred as Serbian workshop participants, as well as some of the government officials with whom we worked, took part in the demonstrations and behind-the-scene confrontations and negotiations that toppled the Milosevic regime. Structural change took place in 2006 as we assisted some leading Kosovo Serb clerics and politicians to realize the inevitability of Kosovo independence and engage in dialogue with some Kosovar Albanian politicians who realized the need to include Serbian politicians and Church leaders, thus paving the way for some cooperation within the new Kosovo government.

The greatest impact on structural change, however, came as a result of our efforts to create indigenous multi-faith organizations in each country. The Centre for Religious Dialogue was established in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, Bosnia, in 1998 and the Inter-Religious Centre in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2000. In addition, a new program on inter-faith reconciliation was added to the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights in Osijek, Croatia. In each case the mandate was to continue the training and cooperative efforts of religious people in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

The former local consultants to the CSIS project became the new directors of the respective new entities. The CSIS staff assisted in the transition to local leadership that occurred quite rapidly in Croatia, where there was an established institution, but took three

years in Bosnia. In each case, the staffs of these organizations began leading workshops on their own and implementing new cooperative ventures. For example, the new director in Sarajevo helped negotiate the creation of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a body composed of the leaders of the Muslim, Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in fundraising efforts (especially after the Balkans were no longer in the headlines), both new organizations in Bosnia and Serbia have now closed. At the same time, some inter-faith organizations and professional networks, established by other participants, continue to flourish. One such example is the Face-to-Face Inter-Religious Service established by Franciscan priest Ivo Markovic in Sarajevo.

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An Assessment: Both Concurrent and Retrospective

Throughout the implementation of both of these projects, we learned and made many adjustments. Many more lessons can be ascertained now in retrospect:

- The need to employ an elicited approach that is culturally sensitive and utilizes local religious traditions.
- The need to relate inter-faith conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts to both development and policy making.
- The need for ongoing analysis and assessment, monitoring, and evaluation.

- The need to evaluate the criteria for assessing success or failure.

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I visited each region in the former Yugoslavia before attempting to hold any workshops in a given location. In some cases, especially Serbia where there was the most intense anti-American sentiment, I spent three years prior to initiating the CSIS project, plus two years at the start of that project (five years total) just getting to know people and learning about them, their faith orientations, and their cultures. I firmly believed that listening and observing were prerequisites to offering anything. At the same time, in retrospect, I am sure that my actual approach when beginning the training was heavily influenced by my own Western assumptions. I gradually came to realize there were different ways of understanding and knowing, as well as different norms for acceptable behavior. One small example came to my attention after attempting to inform Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians about the need to use “I” statements. Finally, someone told me that it made no sense to them since in their language they typically omit the pronoun “I,” which, like in many languages, is inferred in the form of the verb.

Regarding use of the local religious traditions, the project began with some awareness of this need. Opening spiritual messages were offered by a different religious tradition on each day of each workshop.

However, there was still a set perspective presented in the content, very much influenced by my own Christian background. There were some efforts at inclusion of other traditions as we Western leaders became more aware or as participants and local staff interjected their own insights. One such poignant occasion occurred when a deputy to a Serbian Orthodox bishop picked up on a call to acknowledge wrongdoing on the part of one’s own group by telling a story that set my request in the context of a Serbian Orthodox practice of confession of sin. The effect was powerful.

At the same time, lack of sensitivity to differences in Muslim tradition only began to dawn on me much later. For example, the need to deal with justice (both retributive and restorative) before turning to forgiveness is a lesson I learned only later, after working in a predominantly Muslim society. As outsiders, we must be very careful not to impose. We must carefully use our outside perspective to occasionally and with sensitivity confront sometimes flagrant cultural patterns of disrespect and even abuse. If we have truly gained trust as outsiders, and worked long enough in that context, we will likely find local people willing to support such concerns.

While implementing these projects, we also expanded to include both development and policy making onto conflict transformation. These efforts became more central over time, resulting in much greater emphasis on them in Kosovo and Macedonia where we later worked. It became very clear that by their very nature working groups involved work on development—economic, environmental, or governmental—as in policy related to refugee return and the formation of new governments. What also became very clear was that our small budget limited the kinds of development or policy making we could implement. As a result, we began teaching fundraising to working groups, especially environmental groups in

Macedonia.

When the Macedonia project was taken over by Mercy Corps as a result of the merger with CMG, I thought this union of conflict management and development would be the ideal solution. However, differences in organizational culture appeared (one large organization focused on quick humanitarian response, and the other smaller organization focused on detailed examination of process). Differences in mandate also became apparent. Was the mandate of the combined organization to serve both parties to a conflict with equal sensitivity, or was priority or exclusivity to be given to the disadvantaged party? Was the priority to start with development and ask how conflict management could contribute to the goals of community mobilization? Or was the priority to start with conflict transformation and then resource the working groups that are generated in this process, regardless of whether they fit the priorities of the development agency? What about controversial issues normally addressed by conflict transformation specialists, yet might endanger the ability of development programming to continue in that context? Or vice versa? Which discipline's mandate should prevail? Which should be sacrificed or at least placed second in priority? All these are difficult questions, as development and policy-making issues are placed alongside conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

The need for analysis and assessment are ongoing, as was certainly the case during these projects. However, at the turn of the century, the entire peacebuilding field received a shock when told by the donor community that there was insufficient monitoring and evaluation taking place within our discipline. I was made aware of this at the start of the Macedonia project in 2003. For the first time, the donor assigned an outside evaluator to assist with the project. She and I initially clashed, as she attempted to set up a typical monitoring and evaluation procedure

as practiced at that time in the development community. It was not clear at all to me, as project director, that the indicators she proposed would effectively measure the accomplishments of my project. Would measuring the degree to which local Macedonian and local Albanian media accurately represented the view of the other group say anything about the results of my project? My project might never even be reported by the media, in which case, it may totally miss any effective impact the project has had. Conversely, if my project did have a positive effect on media but nowhere else in the society, the result would still skew the conclusions.

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We ended up developing an evaluation approach that is very similar to Michael Quinn Patton's "developmental evaluation."² According to Patton, the changing, complex, turbulent conditions encountered when dealing with violent and post-violent societies frequently call for very adaptable, nonlinear, evaluation methodologies. In this context, measurable objectives, an explicit change model, and precise, unchangeable indicators tend to inhibit, rather than enhance, the search for successful programs with sustainable impact. What we need is monitoring and evaluation methodologies that assist project staff and participants to develop a creative process that utilizes reality testing to facilitate and support dynamic innovation. In order to complement the traditional monitoring and evaluation

approaches, staff should:

- Focus on attaining major impacts regarding big problems, rather than predetermining smaller goals and objectives.
- Aim beyond perceived possibilities, rather than identify what is provable.
- Discover unanticipated, emergent outcomes, rather than predictable, preprogrammed ones.
- Explore options, rather than assume fixed interventions.
- Utilize feedback, rather than rely solely on traditional generic monitoring and evaluation standards.
- Gather lessons learned, rather than critique compliance.
- Apply these lessons to a specific context, rather than generalized best practices.
- Interpret, rather than just collect data.
- Enhance internal accountability, rather than answer primarily to external authorities and donors.
- Give priority to building local capacity in monitoring and evaluation, rather than in getting measurable results.

In Macedonia, we decided to track the perceived changes in attitude and behavior on the part of project participants following each of seven consecutive workshops for the same 50 leaders. At one point in the evaluation process, our data indicated that the sectors of the participant group experiencing the greatest change with respect to ethnic cooperation were middle-aged Albanian men and Macedonian women. As a result, we began consciously to encourage these two groups to join together in inter-ethnic cooperative projects of their own

choosing. One result was the environmental working group described above that not only developed a waste disposal system in multi-ethnic villages, but also used the relationships they developed to temper the escalation of conflict and, according to them, prevent the restart of a civil war.

Such an outcome was way beyond the stated objectives for the project and was only possible because of the real-time feedback provided to project staff and participants. It was an example of the double-loop learning that is the goal of developmental evaluation. It went beyond identifying a problem and finding a solution. It involved questioning assumptions (for example that youth would be most open to change), altering objectives (to include development of environmental programming), re-perceiving system dynamics (interfacing male Albanian politicians with female Macedonian civil society leaders), and intervening in ways that modified underlying system relationships and function. The result was not just improvement of a specific, pre-determined outcome, but systemic changes that prevented a recurring escalation of violence. This kind of evaluation process, I believe, should be integrated more fully into the way monitoring and evaluation is performed within conflict management and mitigation in general.

Finally, the question of criteria for success, an issue related to monitoring and evaluation. At the beginning of the Yugoslav project, I asserted that success was not to be determined by the degree of change that resulted from implementation of the project. Rather, I made the case that in faith-based peacebuilding, success is determined by faithfulness to one's understanding of God, an assertion which certainly would fly in the face of current monitoring and evaluation perspectives and most donors. Yet, I would like to lift up some things such a perspective can offer. Trusting the transformation process to a higher power (yet

one with which we can participate) has the potential to free the peace actor from the need to control or manipulate the outcome. If one sees oneself as part of the action of God, then one can perceive one's role as enabling, not determining. One can also be spared the negative assessment of failure to succeed at something that might well be impossible in the first place. What would happen to the U.S. military budget if the Pentagon were denied any further funding until it demonstrated it could function 10 percent better than it has in Afghanistan? Or take some other examples. Some would say that Mother Teresa failed significantly in her aim to make the world concerned about poverty in India. One might also ask if Nelson Mandela was really successful given the sad shape of South Africa today. These observations highlight the question of appropriate criteria for measuring success, and what is the role of failure? Are failures, perhaps even more important than successes, due to what we can learn from them? When I look back at my work in the former Yugoslavia, I see much that I have already learned and would now approach differently. At the same time, I do not regret the effort I made and even the mistakes along the way. My strong belief is that God guides us, despite our mistakes, even using them to teach us. That, I believe, is the lesson. What have we learned? And how will we keep learning from those whom we wish to serve and from those colleagues in related fields with whom we need to learn to collaborate most effectively?

Conclusions

We must keep asking how we might achieve greater impact. These projects never reached their potential. To do so would have required more time and resources. It is simply not realistic to expect that a small team of eleven people at its peak, spread across six countries, with minimal financial support could bring about a stable peace within seven years (in Bosnia) or three years (in Macedonia).

To nurture effective peacebuilding within populations struggling to overcome the effects of traumatic violence, sometimes experienced over generations, requires much more than a mandate that says "get in and get out" as quickly as possible. This may be appropriate for the military, but not when attempting to transform attitudes, build relationships, engender inter-group cooperation, and facilitate structural reform in the context of the traumatic aftermath of war. Donors and policymakers need to offer more sustained, long-term support for such projects. At the same time, conflict transformation practitioners should utilize monitoring and evaluation processes that enable them to continually reassess their programming in such a way as to make it as flexible, culturally sensitive, holistic, and successful as possible. **IAJ**

Notes

1 Roger Fisher, William L. Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, revised edition, Penguin Books, New York, May 3, 2011.

2 Michael Quinn Patton Ph.D., *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, The Guilford Press, New York, June 15, 2010.