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Community Relations Work with Young People in Vukovar, Croatia: An Exploratory Study in Coexistence Building

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of non-governmental organizations in promoting peace education, coexistence, reconciliation and dialogue among young people in Vukovar, Croatia. We argue that reconciliation cannot be imposed from above, but must be built, nurtured and sustained from the bottom-up. Much of this work of dialogue building is carried out at the community level by grassroots organizations. We describe the types of civic organizations, the peacebuilding approaches used, as well as the sustainability, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers for youth participation in these organizations. A number of in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of civic organizations in Vukovar. Moreover, the methodology involved an analysis of programs and activities promoted by the community organizations. Findings illustrate that different strategies and activities are used by community organizations, which involve a relatively small number of participants and which do not have a developmental plan to follow young people after the termination of a project.

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN VUKOVAR, CROATIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN COEXISTENCE BUILDING

Ankica Kosic and Sean Byrne

Abstract

This article discusses the role of non-governmental organizations in promoting peace education, coexistence, reconciliation and dialogue among young people in Vukovar, Croatia. We argue that reconciliation cannot be imposed from above, but must be built, nurtured and sustained from the bottom-up. Much of this work of dialogue building is carried out at the community level by grassroots organizations. We describe the types of civic organizations, the peacebuilding approaches used, as well as the sustainability, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers for youth participation in these organizations. A number of in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of civic organizations in Vukovar. Moreover, the methodology involved an analysis of programs and activities promoted by the community organizations. Findings illustrate that different strategies and activities are used by community organizations, which involve a relatively small number of participants and which do not have a developmental plan to follow young people after the termination of a project.

Introduction

This study explores the role of civic organizations in promoting inter-group dialogue among young people in Vukovar, Croatia. We describe the types of civic organizations in this context, and the opportunities and barriers toward civic participation in Vukovar, a small city in Eastern Slavonia close to the Serbian border. Soon after Croatia proclaimed independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991, conflicts escalated in those areas of Croatia populated by a large percentage of Serbs. Nationalist leaders such as Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, and Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, were not motivated to create political and socio-economic reforms in the former Yugoslavia in a peaceful way (Bennett, 1995; Cvii, 1996; Maass, 1996; Zagar, 2000). Milošević, with the support of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), sought to encourage the efforts of the rebel Serb communities to secede from an independent Croatia. The JNA leadership also aimed to decisively cripple or

overthrow the new Croatian state. A key element in this plan was the use of military forces to capture the Serb-populated region of Eastern Slavonia, and then to advance west from there to Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia, putting Croatia under military occupation (Kadijević, 1993). Militant propaganda from both Belgrade and Zagreb added to the tension, radicalizing many of the local population and encouraging each side to view the other in the worst possible light (Sremac, 1999; Thompson, 1999).

The city of Vukovar underwent a three month siege in 1991 by the JNA, supported by Serbian paramilitary forces (Sikavica, 1995). The city was almost completely destroyed and the majority of the Croatian population was forced to flee (Cohen, 1998; Daalder, 1996; Zagar, 2000). Fighting in this town alone accounted for over 2500 dead (Silber and Little, 1997). The city fell to Serbian forces on November 18, 1991, and most of the non-Serb civilian survivors were expelled to other parts of Croatia. Approximately 800 men of fighting age were imprisoned in Serbian prisons. Many of the Croatian patients in the Vukovar hospital (around 260 people) were taken by Serb paramilitary forces to a nearby field of Ovčara and executed there. In 2005, Serbian courts sentenced 14 former militiamen to jail terms of up to 20 years for the killing of at least 200 prisoners of war seized at the Vukovar hospital.

Serbian authorities ruled the territory of the self-declared *Republika Srpska Krajina* (RSK) until November 1995, when as part of the Dayton process, Eastern Slavonia was reintegrated into Croatia with the Erdut Agreement. The Agreement outlined the terms of a twelve month period of transition under the control of the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) during which time between sixty and eighty thousand Croats, expelled from the Eastern Croatia Region between 1991 and 1995 returned to their homes (OSCE, 2002). In January 1998, UNTAES left and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) remained as a monitoring mission.

Vukovar itself was inhabited by approximately 40,000 people at the beginning of 1991. It is estimated that there were more than 25 ethnic groups and at least ten religious groups in the region. Croats constituted 52.9 percent of the city's population, and Serbs constituted 37.4 percent with Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and not declared making up the remainder (Zagar, 2000). Prior to 1990, the town's population was characterized by a high percentage of mixed marriages. It was estimated that at least 80 percent of the population had at least one first or second generation relative of another ethnicity (Zagar, 2000). In Croatia, Serbs and Croats lived in mixed communities, sharing schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods (Cardzic and Byrne, 2007). Rural villages were more ethnically homogenous, and in these areas the interaction between Serbs and Croats was limited usually to the work and trade spheres (Judah, 1997; Thomas, 1999).

Possibilities for Inter-Group Reconciliation in Vukovar

According to the last census conducted in 2001 by the Croatian Institute for Statistics (<http://www.dzs.hr/>), the city's registered population was 31,670, consisting of 57.5 percent ethnic Croats and 32.9 percent ethnic Serbs. Thirteen years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, it is still difficult to reconstruct multiethnic communities in this war-torn region. In the present situation in Vukovar, most Croats and Serbs work in different places, frequent separate shops, café bars, and primary schools. Since 2005, secondary schools are semi-integrated, in the sense that youth belonging to different ethnic groups have been going to the same schools but attending separate classes. In Serbian classes, the whole teaching program is implemented in the Serbian language, and students are also required to learn the Croatian language and alphabet.

The ethnic conflict left a legacy of anger, bitterness, and hatred among the belligerent groups that is difficult to dissolve (Byrne, McCloud and Polkinghorn, 2004). Children and youth are particularly unable to protect themselves from the effects of trauma, and the trauma experienced by adults is transmitted to the next generation (Polkinghorn and Byrne, 2001). Children and youth living and growing up in families with war experience are subject to attitudes and prejudices along the ethnic lines of their parents that fill them with hatred (OSCE, 2002; Tauber, 2004). There are few opportunities for children and youth to find other positive role models, ask for help, and express their problems and how to deal with them (Senehi and Byrne, 2006). Many young people are characterized by depression, passivity, apathy; some become embedded in the drink culture and some display aggressive behavior.

In 2003, a National Program of Action for Youth was adopted by the Government of Croatia, which includes the fundamental principles of government policy toward youth, the strategy of policy implementation, and the action plan of the program (The State Institute for the Protection of Family, Maternity and Youth Croatia, 2003). The Program emphasized that satisfactory democratic transformation depends to a great extent on the degree of youth inclusion in the actual socio-economic and political processes in Croatian society.

In 2000, the Program of Cooperation between the Croatian Government, the non-governmental and non-profit sector was defined. Volunteerism is not particularly valued, and people are unwilling to volunteer, despite a high level of unemployment, a lack of activities, as well as the opportunity to obtain new knowledge and skills through volunteering. Croatian legislation does not recognize the idea and contribution of volunteer work, and the Government

has not ratified the Convention on the promotion of International Long-Term Youth Volunteer Work, of the Council of Europe. The status of foreign volunteers in Croatia has not yet been resolved because their work is considered to be another form of work according to the Employment of Foreigners Act. Non-governmental groups and associations of, and, for youth, as well as the third sector as a whole, are a relatively new phenomenon in Croatia. In 2007, there were approximately 360 associations registered in Croatia dealing with children and youth.

Community Empowerment, Capacity Building and Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a multi-faceted idea built on truth, mercy, justice, and peace (Lederach, 1997, 1999). Ryan (2007, p. 82) argues that the key elements of reconciliation are, “investigation, recognition of victims, closure, restitution, forgiveness and amnesty”; Lederach’s (1997) definition of reconciliation involves an integrative model of interpersonal and structural transformational and peacebuilding strategies that include, truth, justice, mercy and peace. Fundamental to the reconciliation process is the restoration and rebuilding of relationships (Galtung, 1996, 2001). This highlights the need for improved communication and better understanding between groups, which could lead to greater co-operation and co-existence at the individual and political level. Reconciliation requires a change in the emotional orientations of fear, anger and hatred to hope and a positive outlook of the future (Bar-Tal, 2000; Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal, 2006). The constructive conflict resolution and reconciliation approach involves the development of an interactive interdependent web of activities and relationships among elites, professionals, and the grassroots organizations. Grassroots non-governmental organizations may play a significant role in the process of reconciliation as facilitator and mediator of cross-community relations.

The international community works with community NGOs to develop a conceptual, analytical and systematic multi-track peacebuilding process (Jeong, 2005). Building a sustainable long-term coordinated and integrated peace process combines development with reconciliation, security, and political transition to achieve goals, empower the grassroots, heal from the traumatic past and restructure relationships (Byrne, 2001; Jeong, 2005). Local voluntary NGOs assist communities assume responsibility for change and in shaping their future (Senehi, 2008a). Community capacity building is connected to the development of interdependent relations with others. NGOs use their knowledge and expertise to work with grassroots communities to develop needed expertise by sharing and transferring knowledge (Goodhand, 2006). Capacity building assists people to empower themselves and their

communities in people-to-people interaction to build cooperation, repair relationships and structures in order to transform their environment and improve the quality of their lives by building sustainable peace (Lederach, 2005). According to Connie O'Brien (2005) community development: (1) promotes a people-centred, people-driven approach to development, (2) does not rely only on professional external intervention as a catalyst for developing action, (3) facilitates local leadership capable of encouraging participatory approaches, (4) enables people of various persuasions to work together to achieve fundamental human needs, and (5) incorporates conflict resolution strategies to facilitate development.

Community capacity building engages the local community in sustainable peacebuilding as confidence-building measures and contact to promote hope, justice, respect and equality emerge (Senehi, 2008b). Community capacity building also provides new knowledge and resources to build self-esteem and self-efficacy in multiple sectors of society simultaneously (Lederach, 2005). NGOs use their experience and expertise to facilitate interaction and collaboration to build bridges of understanding and cooperation (Byrne *et al.*, 2006). Capacity building empowers people to utilize human and physical resources and establish local networks to creatively transform society (Ryan, 2007). Webmakers weave relational webs integrating horizontal and vertical capacities across socio-economic and political spaces (Lederach, 2005). An inclusive peacebuilding approach energizes the grassroots to visualize and imagine peace as they believe in their own personal power, think critically about issues, and participate to build capacity in their communities to promote coexistence, a peaceful future and prevent the re-emergence of conflict (Boulding, 2000).

NGOs also work to empower groups to create shared space that promotes a cycle of healing and respect that nurtures reconnections and new relationships through sustained dialogue (Lederach, 1997). Acknowledging the past constructively affects the possibilities of forging a future culture of peace (Senehi, 2008a, 2008b). Constructive conflict resolution involves partnerships between NGOs, local communities, external funding agencies and governments to relate to a new vision of thinking and doing (Byrne *et al.*, 2006). Action thinking and the reform of institutional structures provides avenues to realistically transform conflict by changing negative attitudes and perceptions, socio-economic and political development, and the restoring of relationships in a process of shared responsibility (Byrne, 2001).

One of the best lessons on cross-community work through local civic organizations has emerged in Northern Ireland (Byrne, 2001). Many of the organizations, especially in Belfast, have focused specifically on the preventative mechanisms that include: (a) preventing/reducing anti-social behaviour among youth, (b) improving the socio-economic situation, (c)

education, training and personal development, (d) promoting inter-group contact through a variety of initiatives, including arts and cultural activities, sport, and mass media, and (e) inter-church work (Kosic, 2006). Many organizations who work to improve community relations among young people in Belfast base their projects primarily on the theory that friendly and cooperative contact with people and groups from the antagonist community will lead to tolerance and understanding (Gidron *et al.*, 2002; Morrissey *et al.*, 2001; O'Brien, 2005). A significant part of inter-community programs in Belfast concerns work on "sensitive issues". It includes themes which focus on the differences between communities and the problems arising from within them (for example, cultural diversity, politics, human rights, and coexistence). Some programs bring groups of young people from the two communities together to listen to each other about their personal experiences related to the conflict. These initiatives give young people the opportunity to begin to see the other side's point of view. They try to educate young people that different cultural and religious perspectives, and even political preferences can co-exist within a society, and that no group should regard it as their right to dominate or intimidate the other into adopting alternative beliefs and practices.

This study aims to explore civic organizations and projects which were designed in more recent years to assist community relations work with young people in Vukovar, with the objective of supporting reconciliation, breaking down enemy images, and reducing fear and distrust towards "the other side". We describe below the types of civic organizations, their projects and initiatives, as well as of the sustainability, strength, weakness, opportunities and barriers for peace education through community relations work in Vukovar, as well as making some comparisons to cross-community work in Belfast.

Methodology

In 2007, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen representatives of civic organizations in Vukovar, active in the field of volunteerism, cultural and sport activities. The interviewer stressed her interest in the personal experience of the interviewees and they were assured of the protection of their anonymity. The respondents were different from each other by virtue of gender, age, spatial milieu, and experience of the conflict. The interviews were loosely structured around a set of topics; the wording of the questions and their sequence followed the flow of the interview itself and not some pre-defined order. The interviews addressed themes such as: (1) opportunities and barriers for dialogue between the young people belonging to the Croatian and Serbian communities, (2) strategies used by civic organizations to promote peace education and reconciliation, and (3)

problems experienced by civic organizations in terms of funding, planning activities, and motivating young people to participate.

The face-to-face interviews lasted between 80 and 120 minutes, and typically took place in the individual's workplace. All interviews were taped in order to draw upon the participants' experiences, transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to discourse analysis. The analysis concentrates on discourse constructed around the aforementioned themes starting from a description of the activities undertaken in last five years. The analysis is followed by a description of strategies and methods used to promote dialogue among young people in Vukovar, and their perception of obstacles to community relations in that part of the world. Our analysis seeks to discern the perceptions of respondents in their own words in order to better understand how civic organizations impact upon the peace process and reconciliation.

Findings

Vukovar is a small city, and it was not expected that a large number of civic organizations would be found there. Most organizations were created in the last few years with the initiative of people active in NGOs in Western countries, who have worked to transfer their experiences, skills and knowledge to local communities and mainstream partners. Nowadays, most international organizations have left the Vukovar-Sirmium County led by the belief that mainstream organizations can now do the majority of the peacebuilding work. Moreover, international donor agencies have gradually left the Vukovar area. As a result, youth and volunteer organizations must now provide their own financial resources, competing for international and national funds to fund the activities.

The activities of non-governmental organizations in Vukovar are mostly structured around:

- (a) Promotion and protection of human rights, with an emphasis on the rights of persons belonging to ethnic minorities, and on the resolution of refugee/displaced people problems
- (b) Education for interethnic, inter-religious and inter-cultural tolerance as a base for forging a culture of peace and nonviolence
- (c) Development and strength of the preconditions for sustainable social-economic development and the reduction of unemployment
- (d) Improvement of people's quality of life, which also includes leisure activities
- (e) Healing from the psychological traumas that emerged as a consequence of conflict.

Most NGOs in Vukovar are led by young people. Their activities are planned and implemented through several short-term and long-term projects,

through which NGOs try to bring together people from different ethnic, religious, professional, age, gender, and interest groups.

Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

Human rights problems in Croatia have been noted in several local and international reports (Amnesty International USA, 2007; Center for Peace, Legal Advice and Psychosocial Assistance, 2004) with reference to some isolated violent incidents and problems with the local bureaucracy. For example, the Centre for Peace, Legal Advice and Psychosocial Assistance was established in 1996 with the support of the humanitarian organization OXFAM based in Oxford, Britain. The Centre is active in the promotion and protection of human rights of national/ethnic minorities. Basic activities of the program are oriented towards: providing legal assistance to people in need, in particular to returnees; monitoring the implementation of the return process and local integration; analyzing and reporting on the progress and/or obstacles; and providing recommendations to change of negative practices. The Centre also tries to increase public awareness about human rights, and human right violations, and to improve interethnic understanding. Activities implemented by the Centre include legal assistance, the organization and conducting of seminars, public discussions, informing and monitoring of the situation, and advocating for minority rights and cooperation. All of these activities are not addressed only to young people, but to a larger category of people, which may have hopefully an indirect positive effect on the quality of life of young people as well.

Education for Interethnic, Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Tolerance

A wide and varied spectrum of activities was undertaken by NGOs with the aim of restoring contact between young people belonging to both ethnic groups. These activities are aimed to teach them new knowledge and skills with regards to nonviolent communication and conflict resolution through seminars and creative engagement (for example, role-playing and theatre groups). A high percentage of young people in the region are characterized by limited communication skills, lack of knowledge of nonviolent techniques of conflict resolution, and how to communicate without passion and anger.

Most of the existing projects have tried to bring children and youth from different national backgrounds together, with the aim of supporting a new generation without ethnic division and to sharpen their sense of criticism. These objectives have been implemented through communication skills,

human rights, and environmental protection skills, workshops, and through some creative activities.

The project *Conflict Transformation Through Dialogue in Croatia* was created by the NGO *Vukovarski Institut za Mirovna Istraživanja i Obrazovanje* (VIMIO – the Vukovar Institute for Peace Research and Education) in 2002-2003 with the objective of improving knowledge about conflict transformation and communication skills among secondary school teachers (who are divided by ethnicity, and do not communicate between themselves even when they share the same school building), and among the parents of high school students. The project was conducted through three four-day seminars on issues of conflict resolution through partnership life skills (Dudley Weeks' method), and the development of an action plan for the community. Moreover, nine one-day follow-up workshops for the participants were organised, as well as a lecture "Partnership Among Citizens and Local Authorities". Furthermore, another project, *Vukovar Together for High School Students in Vukovar*, was implemented during the period 2003-2004. It was also aimed at the development of cooperation amongst secondary schools, and in providing an opportunity for students to work on personal and community development through the expression of creativity, cooperation and team work. Eighteen students were trained to edit and publish a youth newspaper for two years. Moreover, some workshops with students were organized on such diverse issues as contraception, addiction prevention, and leisure activities.

It is not always easy to convince schools to collaborate as they have a heavy work schedule. School principals also tend to be suspicious when they read the project proposal, especially if they do not personally know or trust the leader of the project. It is much easier if some of the teachers are open to collaborate and are willing to give a portion of their time toward the implementation of the project. Through these projects, children from different ethnic groups spend time together and with their parents, who would perhaps not otherwise have an opportunity to meet and be in touch with each other.

Some NGOs have residential programs especially during the summer time. The project "Run Without Frontiers" (named with symbolic reference to the river Danube) promoted by *Europski Dom Vukovar* (EDVU - The Europe House Vukovar), involves a group of ten young people from high schools in Vukovar and ten youths from a high school in Serbia who were brought together to an ecological farm in a Croatian village not far-away from Vukovar. They participated actively in the work of the farm, and in a series of seminars on socio-psychological themes such as the formation and reduction of stereotypes and prejudice, ethnic/national identity, and the nonviolent resolution of conflicts. Some children from primary schools also participated in a summer camp organized in Rakovica by the EDVU program, which also brought children together from the former Yugoslav republics; in 2006 seven children from Vukovar

spent time at the camps. The Director of the EDVU noted that, “if you take children out from this context – from Vukovar – then they are absolutely different. They do not care about divisions and borders; they do not need to think what their parents would say if they see them in the company of others”.

However, in comparison to Belfast, very few initiatives have been promoted on the discussion of “sensitive issues”, such as cultural and political differences, human rights, reconciliation, and forgiveness. The problem is that it is difficult to find the funds to carry out such programs, and to find experts able to focus on the development of such programs. An exception to this project “Dealing with the Past” was implemented by the Nansen Dialogue Centre through a radio program entitled “Examples of Noble Deeds During Wartime”. This radio program was broadcasted on a local station, Radio Dunav presenting some examples of good and heroic people who, during the war in the former Yugoslavia, helped their neighbors, friends, and unknown people of different ethnicities. Further, a conference “Goodness and Truth: Basis of Togetherness” was organized in November 2007 in collaboration with the Europe House Vukovar, the Union of Families of Imprisoned and Missing Croatian Defenders, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The participants discussed examples of the humanity expressed between Croats and Serbs living in Vukovar during the war. Their constructive stories provide a basis for building dialogue and reconciliation in society and positive examples for teaching the younger generation.

Another program that needs to be mentioned concerns the series of forums, called “*Tribina*” organized by the Europe House Vukovar (EDVU). Experts from Croatia and other neighboring countries discussed themes of interest for a Vukovar audience. During the first couple of years, only ten to twenty people used to come but more recent forums reached an audience of more than 200 people. A large crowd attended a forum in 2005, when the presenter Mr. Zivorad Kovacevic, the President of European Action in Serbia delivered a speech on the theme “Vukovar, Please Forgive” or *Vukovare Oprostite*.

Development and Strength of the Preconditions for Sustainable Social-Economic Development and Reduction of Unemployment

Respondents perceived that unemployment and other economic factors contribute largely to the pathology in individuals and in the community. Several projects by different NGOs have focused on reducing unemployment, through education and prequalification, and in promoting entrepreneurship. These initiatives were designed to raise young people’s expectations and aspirations assisting them through education and professional training to increase their capacity and skills to cope with a life of social disadvantage. In the post-war period, Vukovar is an under-developed area with a high unemployment rate and with little promise of economic improvement over the

next few years. Almost all industry in the region was destroyed during the conflict, and has not since been rebuilt. Since 1991, technology has advanced and almost all of the old factories would need to be redesigned. Another problem is the transition from Communism to capitalism as new methods of work and management would need to be learned, such as self-initiative, critical thinking, and a positive work ethic. The NGOs organize different courses, starting with teaching young people foreign languages and basic or advanced computer skills as well as how to undertake entrepreneurial activities. They emphasize that in promoting peace and education, the first step is to restore the self-confidence of individuals in order for them to have confidence in others.

The PRONI Centre for Social Education (*Centar za Socijalno Podučavanje*) has worked in the Republic of Croatia since 1997 and gives special attention to youth. It was established by support from PRONI in Sweden, and supported financially by the Swedish International Developing Agency (SIDA). Besides many other projects on inter-community contact in 2007, PRONI started the project “*Ricochet*”, together with the Croatian Employment Service, the Chamber of Crafts and Trades, the local economic development agency, and the Technical College of Vinkovci. Ricochet aims at reducing unemployment, through education and prequalification, and at promoting entrepreneurship among 120 young women.

Improvement of People’s Quality of Life and Leisure Activities

Similarly to Belfast, young people in Vukovar can spend their free time watching TV programs or hanging out in café bars. Civic organizations in Vukovar are aware of the need to help young people to improve their quality of life through involvement, for example, in cultural and sport activities, but very few initiatives have been promoted because of the difficulty in securing funds to organize these programs. For example, PRONI is devoted towards the implementation of a two-year university program for youth workers, and the development of a network of Youth Clubs throughout Croatia. Today, Youth Clubs in Croatia have attracted more than 1300 regular members, and are active in promoting various cultural initiatives such as concerts, dance, informal education and debates, and sport. Many concerts and music festivals have attracted young people across borders. Project leaders are convinced that the constant exchange of new people, especially young people, from other cities and countries can positively influence the youth in the Vukovar area. Visitors bring new ideas and have a positive impact in the local community.

Related to this ideal, most NGOs consider that the perspective of future integration with the European Union (EU) can have an important psychosocial

impact on the respective societies and serve as an incentive for peace education and democratic reforms. A high percentage of these inter-cultural projects emphasized the need to develop an awareness of European identity, and an understanding and acceptance of multiculturalism. In relation to this objective, several thematic seminars and awareness raising campaigns were organized by local NGOs.

Healing From the Psychological Traumas Emerged As A Consequence of Conflict

Several respondents pointed out that community revitalization and development starts with the healing of psychological problems (trauma), which emerged as a consequence of the conflict, to the reestablishment of each individual's self-confidence. Psychological traumatization is at very high levels throughout the region of Baranja and East Slavonia where the city of Vukovar is located. Many people experienced frequent shelling for five years, separation from loved ones, destruction of homes and other buildings, poverty, homelessness, loss and bereavement. However, very few organizations and experts in Vukovar have dedicated their attention to counselling children and families through individual and group work, and through workshops for parents and teachers. NGOs need to assist people in their searching for psychological healing and peace within their inner-being and consequently with others. The problem is that it is difficult to find the funds to carry out such programs, and there are not enough professionals to provide psychological support. Moreover, many people will not ask for professional assistance as psychotherapy is culturally stigmatised in the former Yugoslavia.

In sum, all NGOs in Vukovar promote initiatives oriented toward the improvement of communication among youth through joint activities and education directed toward the appreciation of differences, multiculturalism, tolerance, and the nonviolent resolution of conflicts. In carrying out the aforementioned activities, youth-oriented NGOs face numerous obstacles to their work.

Obstacles to Community Relations Work By NGOs in Vukovar

During the first post-violence years, the representatives of local government as well as ordinary people have perceived NGOs with suspicion, as they received money from funding agencies from abroad. There is little openness from local governmental institutions towards cooperation with

NGOs. In a few cases, local government wanted to place obstacles in the path of NGO projects for reasons which were unclear to the NGOs' leaders. However, in more recent years a few representatives of local governmental bodies have started to appreciate the work done by NGOs and have even started to support their efforts.

As far as financial sustainability is concerned, the future of NGOs in Vukovar remains questionable. Most project funding spans only a few months, and NGO leaders are forced to spend considerable time on proposal writing. Respondents perceived that the increase in short-term funding over the past ten years has ushered in a spirit of competition into youth work practice. They underline that the funding application processes are often cumbersome and time consuming. Their capacities are overloaded and it often happens that they have several activities taking place at the same time and it is complicated to coordinate these efforts.

Croatia's law on foreigners and volunteers also presents a problem. The law, in effect since the beginning of 2004, makes it practically impossible to have foreigners present for more than 90 days within a six month period. Although the law makes an exception for students registered at the university, NGOs have even had problems obtaining visas for people who wanted to attend a course offered by NGOs in Vukovar.

The banking systems also remain a barrier with high bank charges and difficult regulations making NGO work difficult. For example, it is not possible to withdraw more than 5000 Euros per month from a bank in Croatia without the permission of the National Bank. Neither are NGOs with foreign status able to obtain credit cards for their organization.

A limited number of cultural activities are offered to the youth of Vukovar, who would not generally organize events of their own. Many young people are subject to apathy and fail to recognize the opportunities to have an active role in societal changes. Youth free time is disorganized and there is also a lack of education among young people regarding the management and production of culture. Even more crucially, children and young people do not have the time to participate in extracurricular activities. They spend an average of seven hours in school almost every day and they feel overburdened by the amount of homework they have to do. In Croatian schools, the orientation toward learning facts still prevails, and optional programs and extracurricular activities through which children could develop their potential and express their creativity are neglected (The National Program of Action for Youth, 2003). There seems to be little awareness among young people for the need for ongoing life-long education and training once they complete the formal education process.

Due to poor socio-economic standards in the region, most young people have limited possibilities for educational, cultural and tourist mobility outside

of the area. A high level of youth mobility is a prerequisite for being open to communicate with other societies and thereby to learn about their cultures, and about tolerance of cultural differences. In secondary schools, recreational excursions, graduation trips and other travels are non-compulsory extracurricular activities. Only a few schools define overseas travel as part of the student's educational program, and this is reflected in a much lower level of tourist activity among young people in Croatia in comparison with other European countries.

Conclusions

The enormous effort which individuals and organizations put into these projects should be saluted and recognized. People working in NGOs and other organizations who are active in promoting inter-group dialogue are those citizens who have committed themselves to work for the revitalization of civil society. The NGOs working in Vukovar in Eastern Slavonia are now mainly mainstream organizations as the international community has slowly withdrawn from this region over the past seven years. Despite being deprived of substantial support, all NGOs in Vukovar persist in pursuing their goals for the well-being of the society.

The aim and objectives of the NGO projects and activities considered here are to improve relations between ethnic groups in Vukovar through the encouragement of greater contact and, more widely, through the development of mutual understanding and respect for different cultural traditions. With regard to peace education and reconciliation approaches, a wide and varied spectrum of activities was undertaken with the aim of restoring the self-confidence of individuals in order for them to have confidence in others with the aim of bringing people together. A number of community projects have been undertaken in the last number of years to promote inter-group dialogue among youth. These initiatives involve people from both ethnic groups in the hope that their contact can reduce negative stereotypes and promote dialogue and reconciliation.

There are several factors mitigating against the achievement of such goals (some of which are elaborated further in the article by Parker in this volume). First, the respondents in this research perceived that unemployment and other economic factors play a major part in exacerbating individual and community conflict. Thus, many projects have focused on helping socially disadvantaged people such as the unemployed. Such initiatives are designed to raise young people's expectations, hope, and to assist them through education and training to increase their coping skills.

Then there are the specific limitations that these projects share with most cooperative contact programs. For example, we do not know if contact

per se produces positive attitudes toward others, or if individuals who already engage in contact have had a certain level of positive attitudes toward relations with the other group. It is possible that those individuals who become involved in community relations projects are those who would already uphold the values of a peaceful and equitable society. Moreover, as work from Northern Ireland has indicated, even if participants do come to view one or a small number of individuals from the other group more positively, they will not necessarily generalize their positive attitudes and perceptions beyond the specific situation in which the positive contact took place to the group as a whole (Hewstone and Brown, 1986). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the quality of contact, and the conditions under which it takes place, are important determinants of successful outcomes. Contact, to be a useful tool in promoting tolerance and coexistence must be more than the casual meetings that occur in much of everyday life. Close friendly relations are more likely to reduce prejudice. Contact is also more effective when it has broader institutional support, even if that is just a supportive social atmosphere. In Vukovar, some positive changes have occurred at the crucial institutional level, such as a growing propensity towards integrating high schools. However, it is absolutely evident that much more community-based peacebuilding work is in urgent need of support and development if future generations are to escape the devastating legacy of violence and division.

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PRONI Centre for Social Education

VIMIO - The Vukovar Institute for Peace Research and Education

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