

III. CASE STUDIES OF LOCAL PEACEBUILDING PRACTICES IN CROATIA

1. Creating a Community-based Security Structure in Eastern Slavonia: The Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights, Osijek, Croatia

For five years, the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek¹ (CZMOS, Centar za mir, nenasilje i ljudska prava), Croatia, has worked effectively to support local capacities for peacebuilding in eleven communities in Eastern and Western Slavonia and the cross-border region of Bosanska Posavina through two phases of the project originally called "Building a Democratic Society Based on the Culture of Nonviolence." The focal methods include catalyzing partnerships among a wide array of local state and non-state actors, education and mentoring support of local community organizers, mobilization of local peace constituents around conflict transformation and issues of direct community concern, and integration of participatory action research into each stage of its work from needs assessment to evaluation. The project is unique in the post-Yugoslav context as one of the most ambitiously envisioned community-based peacebuilding endeavors, undertaken by an indigenous peace organization and enriched by international, national and local partnerships.

Overview of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights 1991-2003

The Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights was conceived in 1991 in a basement during the shelling of Osijek when the people seeking shelter, who had mostly not known each other, began to discuss a peacemaking civic action in an environment directly affected by the horrors of war. From the very beginnings, the Center got connected with emerging peace initiatives in Croatia and solidarity groups throughout Europe. It was among the first self-organized peace groups to join the Antiwar Campaign Croatia in early 1992. One of the group's first mentors has been Adam Curle, a world-known Quaker peace activist. The initial goal of the group was long-term peacebuilding through peace education. However, immediately after their first public advertisement, when the group still had no office, a phone call from a woman in need, challenged them to take direct actions for the protection of human rights of vulnerable citizens who were, due to their Serbian nationality, an easy prey for confiscation of property through illegal evictions (Jegen1997).

Therefore, from its early days, the Center has taken a multi-faceted, integrated approach to peacebuilding that combines direct human rights protection, peace education, promotion of creative methods of conflict transformation at the individual, group and political levels, mobilization and capacity building of emerging civil initiatives, public promotion of the culture of peace and advocacy for policies and political processes conducive to human rights and peacebuilding.

On different occasions, CZMOS has partnered with other peace and human rights groups from Croatia and the region, among the first of which was the establishment of human rights monitoring and support presence in Western Slavonia during 1995, when activists from all over Croatia rotated to provide support to the Serbian population that remained in the region after the military operation "Flash". The Center was particularly active in organizing dialogues between more than 1300 citizens from Croatian and Serbian controlled communities in Eastern Slavonia, most of whom met even before the signing of the 1996 Erdut Peace Agreement. Many of these meetings took place at the Meeting House in Mohacs, Hungary through cooperation with Peace Bridge Danube, an international solidarity project and the Association for Peace and Human Rights, Baranja, an indigenous group at that time active in the Serbian-controlled part of the region. Through the "Coordination of Peace Organizations for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium" the civic initiatives from the both sides of conflict

¹ www.centar-za-mir.hr

within the region as well as from Croatia and the neighboring region of Vojvodina (in Serbia) demonstrated the ability of local actors to open communication across lines of conflict even before the beginning of the UNTAES mandate (Kruhonja 1996:11-12; Jegen 1997).

Over the past decade, the Center for Peace Osijek has transformed from a small, unstructured group of concerned citizens supported by local and international grassroots solidarity networks, into a network of its own, with more than 120 members, 30 full-time activists, more than 2 million USD annual budget and four major program areas: (1) Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, (2) Peace Education, (3) Peacebuilding and Community Development and (4) Support to Civil Society Organizations. It is the biggest indigenous NGO primarily focused on peacebuilding at different societal levels of intervention, with an administrative structure in place and partnerships with numerous local and international NGOs and agencies, including USAID (Academy for Educational Development, Mercy Corps), UNHCR, OSCE, EC, the Life and Peace Institute, the Croatian Government Office for NGOs, and municipal and county authorities. In line with the objective of creating a regional civilian security structure, CZMOS's programs are implemented throughout Eastern Slavonia and Baranja region, in Western Slavonia, as well as cross-border communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Protection and Promotion of Human Rights program provides legal aid through three local offices (Osijek, Beli Manastir and Vinkovci) and mobile teams covering most other communities where CZMOS's community-based peacebuilding initiatives are active. A special project for conscientious objection provides advice on civil service to military conscripts, organizes roundtables and effectively lobbies the Government, in collaboration with other similar projects affiliated with the Anti War Campaign Croatia in Zagreb, Poreč, Karlovac, Vinkovci and Vukovar. CZMOS's human rights activists are also active in public debates on the new law on health insurance, protection of tenancy rights and cross-border collaboration regarding refugee return process.

The Peace Education program area entails three specific multi-year education projects, focusing on integration of peace education into the school system ("Creative Workshops – Education for Peace"), introduction of mediation into schools, courts and other public institutions ("Conflict as Opportunity") and systematic education of trainers and facilitators engaged in community-based peacebuilding initiatives ("Education House").

The Peacebuilding and Community Development program is the richest in the variety of activities undertaken and the most complex in terms of field presence and mentoring required for sustained support to and facilitation of peacebuilding initiatives in six different communities in Eastern Slavonia (Tenja, Dalj, Bilje, Berak, Beli Manastir and Vukovar), Okučani in Western Slavonia and, until recently, three villages in the cross-border region of Bosanska Posavina (Kolibe Gornje, Zborište and Novo Selo). The core activity of the program is regular provision of training and mentoring to local volunteers who attempt to mobilize their own communities around identified needs and explore creative ways of opening communication between populations divided by war experiences. At present, CZMOS has daily field presence in Okučani, through its Peace Team that puts special focus on empowerment and social integration of war veterans, facilitation of inter-religious dialogue and support to the local youth peace activism. Special projects in this program area include annual summer camps for children from different post-war communities; a series of psycho-social workshops for trauma relief workers; a region-wide series of inter-religious workshops, meetings, prayers and international exchanges and a women's self-support group Femina in Osijek.

The Support Program for Civil Society Organizations focuses on provision of networking, logistical support, technical assistance and training in organizational development, promotion of volunteering

and enhancement of inter-sectoral cooperation and philanthropy throughout the region of Slavonia. Specific projects include NGO Incubator, Volunteer Project (creation of a volunteer database) and the setting-up of a regional foundation for civil society development.

In addition to regular participation in national advocacy efforts related to peace and human rights, CZMOS has recently intensified its involvement in highly politically charged public debates, as it started a series of public discussions named "Public Interest". At present, the Center is in the limelight of the regional and national media due to its courageous public statement and provision of additional evidence to the judiciary, in support of a recent public disclosure of evidence of murders of Serbian citizens, as well as members of the Croatian military and the police that took place in Osijek during the early war years and were most probably commissioned by the ruling clique around Branimir Glavaš, former Prefect of the Osiječko-baranjska County and one of the most influential HDZ politicians. The CZMOS activists hope that their demand for just and thorough processing of these long-observed murders and other severe human rights violations in Osijek, such as illegal evictions of Serbs conducted under death threats, may lead to a chain-reaction of public disclosures in other parts of Croatia and eventual dismantling of the corruption present in the processing of these crimes.

Since the late 1990's, CZMOS's organizational environment in Eastern Slavonia has drastically changed as a number of effective local peace organizations have developed. Among them, the Association for Peace and Human Rights Baranja, set-up during the Serbian control of the region, is a particularly important promoter of dialogue and protection of human rights among the local Serbian population who have decided to remain in Croatia. The group's energetic President Gordana Stojanović has become one of the key figures in national human rights and women's advocacy efforts. Other groups include the Center for Peace Vukovar, Youth Peace Group Danube, Vukovar; PRONI Center for Social Education, Vukovar Institute for Peace Research and Education (VIMIO), Center for Civic Cooperation in Vinkovci, and so on. Hence, CZMOS has additional responsibility of nurturing partnership relations as the strongest NGO in the region.

Despite unavoidable specialization and professionalization, CZMOS's core activists try hard to retain the principles of grassroots self-organizing, participatory decision-making and nurture the spirituality of nonviolence. So far, they have not seriously considered separating different programs into independent organizations, as was the process of restructuring of the Anti War Campaign in Zagreb, which led to the strengthening of a national network of local NGOs with different mandates but common core values. Hence, CZMOS remains the largest indigenous peace NGO in Croatia, committed to an integral, ambitious approach to peacebuilding both in terms of a variety of methods used and multiple levels of impact envisioned. In the future, it would be beneficial if CZMOS restructured in a way that would enable fuller autonomy of its well formed organizational units focused on different program areas and at the same time dynamize their mutual exchange of best practices.

A Closer Look at Empowering Communities for Peacebuilding

In 1998, the Center for Peace, Human Rights and Nonviolence Osijek partnered with the Life and Peace Institute from Sweden to obtain funds from the European Union and other private funders for the "Building a Democratic Society Based on the Culture of Nonviolence" project. The project followed on the efforts of the Erdut Peace negotiations on the status of Eastern Slavonia (autumn 1995) and the United Nations Transitional Administration in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES, January 1996 - January 1998). With a budget of 1 million USD, the project's first phase (1998-2000) had the overall goal of "contributing to a new, nonviolent security structure in Eastern Croatia through the promotion of people's skills and inner capacities to restore broken relationships and build a democratic society", by parallel stimulation of participatory community development around identified

strategic needs and enhancement of communication between social groups and actors, divided by war experiences, ethnicities and different positions of power.

The project established a network of Peace Teams, each made up of two to three local peace workers of different ethnicities, who lived in post-war communities with a multiethnic structure of inhabitants, supported by international volunteers recruited from European peace organizations. Local peace workers underwent a three-month-long residential preparation training.

After the departure of UNTAES on January 15, 1998, Peace Teams started to work in five local communities with a high risk of interethnic incidents (Tenja, Dalj, Beli Manastir, Vukovar and Okučani). Upon the invitation of OSCE, the work expanded to another location of high interethnic tensions and violent incidents (Berak). In May 2000, two locations across the Croatian border in Republika Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina, (Kolibe and Zborište, Novo Selo) were included in the project with a focus on enhancing the return of residents.

The project's basic peacebuilding tool was the "Listening Project." with its multiple purpose of facilitating peace team's entry into the community; identifying community needs and divergent perceptions of war; identifying peace constituents; creating a basis for community mobilization around visible development projects and providing a mechanism for community members to express frustrations and devise conflict transformation approaches upon violent incidents. Pairs of trained listeners visited the majority of households in a given community and listened to local residents' concerns, experiences, perceptions of war, and suggestions for the future.

More than 1800 semi-structured interviews, accompanied by empathic listening, proved to be a invaluable tool for opening communication and creating trustworthy relationships with local inhabitants. Exploratory or introductory interviews were carried out at the point of entry into a community, enabling the peace teams to learn about the current situation, past war experiences and possibilities of future peacebuilding work. Targeted or specific interviews helped the peace teams develop specific community activities that correspond with the needs identified in previous round of interviews (e.g. in Tenja, empowerment of Serbian pupils and parents to integrate into the Croatian school system); or to develop particular approaches to prevention of further inter-ethnic incidents and conflicts (e.g. in Tenja, upon a murder that took place and as a way of opening inter-ethnic community dialogue about the missing persons, mostly Croats, in Berak).

The analysis of the interview responses clearly indicated that the difference in perceptions among respondents was primarily determined by their post-war status of returnees, remainees or displaced. Ethnicity was correlated with these categories - most returnees being Croats; most remainees being Serbs and Roma, most displaced being Serbs from other parts of Croatia and B-H, while Hungarians and other minorities belonged both to remainee and returnee groups. The greatest overall convergence in perceptions between the two main two groups of returnees and remainees related to the construction of the memory of the pre-war life in the region as prosperous and harmonious and assessment of current community problems, focusing on lack of economic, social and educational opportunities, with shared concern for the future prospects of their children. The greatest divergence was present in the nature of war trauma and approach to the other group. While returnees were filled with frustration and anger towards the remainees, primarily Serbs, the remainees were mostly affected by the sense of fear of accusation and isolation. What was common to both groups was the fear that direct communication would create more pain, humiliation and anger.

The comparative analysis of the listening projects carried out over the first phase of the project, clearly points out that for local residents in these regions, the reconciliation process is strongly preconditioned by energetic state action against war criminals and identification of missing persons and social and economic community development through local government and civic actions. An overlap between

suggestions for community development and reconciliation was apparent. The comparison of findings across communities showed that the negative attitude towards interethnic cooperation depended on the degree of war atrocities and population ratio (Croats were more ready to cooperate with Serbs in places where the Serbs represented a definite minority). The Listening Project findings also indicated that communication targeted at practical exchange of information, goods and services would yield least resistance - exchange of seeds and plants; mutual support among neighbors; small talk about everyday topics such as cooking and shared concern for children. When combined with the shared concern for the quality of life and future of their communities, it became clear that using community development as a peacebuilding tool would be the most effective way of counterfeiting prevalent pessimism and triggering transformation of relationships, negatively affected by the war experiences. Community development also provided opportunities for identifying particular individuals who would be open to participation in workshops and dialogue groups where the difficult emotions and attitudes caused by traumatic war experiences would be communicated, healed and transformed.

At the same time, the Listening Project enabled early identification of potential peace constituents, that is those individuals who expressed greater readiness to interact with the other ethnic group at deeper levels as well as those who were interested in undertaking a personal healing process. Gradually, those local residents were included and appropriately trained to design, conduct, and interpret the findings of the Listening Projects in their own communities, thus creating a second tier of peace workers affiliated with the Peace Teams.

Community activities undertaken subsequent to the Listening Project included the *reconstruction of public spaces* (village clean-ups, tree planting, rebuilding a local cultural center); *education* (computer classes, peace education for teachers and students, women's leadership programs, psychosocial support groups for war veterans); *inter-religious and interethnic media and public dialogue series* (youth Internet and newsletter projects, the publication of the "Culture of Peace" journal); *cultural programs* (the establishment of an artist colony, the week-long festival "Days of Culture of Peace" in various communities), *social integration* (humanitarian drives and visits to the poorest community members regardless of nationality; self-organized Romani initiatives and joint activities with non-Romani community members); *voter education and mobilization* (local get-out-the-vote campaigns linked with national mobilization efforts); and *institutional change* (negotiating the establishment of local peace councils in partnership with local authorities).

Through partnerships with grassroots organizations, local churches, schools, and local government authorities as well as national NGOs, the OSCE, and international development agencies, the project gained remarkable visibility and served as a catalyst for communication between socially distant groups and institutions.

Internally, the project placed outstanding importance on continuous self-reflection, that is evaluation of relevance of specific methods of empowerment and capacity building, by means of "action research, which develops recommendations for strengthening further peacebuilding work", as was stated among the project objectives. Internal and external evaluations culminated in a comprehensive five-month impact assessment² of the first phase of the project. It included interviews with peace team members, community leaders and partners and focus groups with local residents. In 2001, the project published

² The author, Marina Škrabalo was a part of the external evaluators' team, responsible for the analysis of the Listening Project findings, a series of interviews with community leaders in all locales where the Peace teams were active and preparation of the historical context of the project. The other two evaluators included Jessica Jordan, team leader (internal capacity assessment) and Jasenka Pregrad, Society for Psychological Assistance, Zagreb (focus groups with project beneficiaries and community leaders). Jordan, Jessica and Marina Škrabalo. (2000). Impact Assessment. CZMOS:Osijek (organizational document).

the book *I Choose Life* in both English and Croatian, representing the final narrative of the project's first phase with evaluation findings and lessons learned regarding peacebuilding in the post-Yugoslav context — the first comprehensive report of its kind in Croatia. The key findings of the project impact findings show that Peace Teams have contributed to all major aspects of transformative peacebuilding, primarily positive impact on livelihoods, social integration, local social infrastructure and political structures:

(1) Through the organization of a variety of public activities (workshops, cultural events, discussions, sports, communal works), peace teams have helped restore a sense of meaning and dynamism in the local social life, which in turn motivate people to take a more active and constructive attitude towards their own and social relations.

(2) Peace teams have contributed to the healing of war trauma, by means of empathic listening, communication workshops for children and youth, creative workshops for women and children, additional education in psychosocial support skills for teachers and computer and English courses.

(3) Through organization of education programs, such as computer and English courses, peace teams have contributed to the learning process of youth and greater hope about their future.

(4) Most activities organized by peace teams, particularly those focused on community development, have yielded interest on part of both opposed communities (Croats and Serbs, returnees and remainees), hence creating numerous new opportunities for inter-ethnic communication and cooperation. In particular, the focus on children has created a safe link between the communities.

(5) By orderly and impartial organization of pre-election public panels and voter education, peace teams have contributed to the local people's confidence and activation in the national political process. In addition, by provision of information on political and social issues and options for their solutions (e.g. civil service, social security), peace teams have improved the level of local people's knowledge of their rights and control over their lives.

(6) Peace teams have contributed to the capacity building of local civil initiatives, in particular the Roma Association Baranja, Lipa in Popovac, Oaza in Beli Manastir. In particular, the remarkable support provided to the Roma community by the Peace Team Beli Manastir has helped tackle the most deeply engrained systemic discrimination of the Roma in Croatia and the region. In light of relative scarcity of consistent empowerment efforts to Roma organizations in Croatia, this endeavor is particularly outstanding. The attitude of respect (and absence of either patronizing attitudes or intimidation), combined with abundant and creative support has contributed to the swift growth of the Roma association's self-confidence and organizational capacity.

The main challenges identified during the first phase of the project related to inadequacies in managerial systems, primarily insufficient protection against secondary traumatization and burnout provided to the peace team members whose continuous and in-depth interactions with hundreds of local inhabitants, culminating during rounds of listening project interviews, resulted in over-identification with the community traumas.

Another challenge, typical of facilitation of community self-organizing processes, was the tension between the need for visible, palpable results indicating improvement of quality of life on one hand (correctly viewed as key for building support for the project on part of the most suspicious groups, i.e. adult men, particularly and returnee Croats), and the importance of prevention of dependency and a false impression of social change by doing the work instead of the community, on the other.

As expected, it proved to be harder to mobilize Croatian inhabitants who tended to be more closed to inter-ethnic cooperation, due to accumulated feelings of anger, pain and frustration with perceived lack of processing of war crimes, leading to projection of collective guilt onto the Serbian neighbors. It also proved to be much harder to mobilize adults, exhausted by stagnant post-war recovery, than youth who were eager to enrich their free time with learning and entertainment opportunities created by the Peace Teams.

The key lesson learned from the first phase was the importance of continuity of support provided to the nascent local social structures (individual leaders, informal groups, emerging NGOs, initiatives within local institutions) conducive to peacebuilding, through ongoing education, mentoring, as well as advocacy at the regional and national levels. It was also clear that peacebuilding should be viewed as a long-term process of generation and realization of an optimistic vision of the community development, through which the quality of social relationships is gradually improved as opportunities are created for a dialogue and collaboration about shared interests and, eventually, painful histories. Considering the degree of distrust and general depression, the focus should be kept on concrete community-development practices that can help people overcome hopelessness.

Due to funding difficulties of the second project phase, resulting from a lack of technical assistance available to the Center for Peace in terms of building its own capacity to negotiate and ensure adequate cost-share, the new phase started in September 2001, with some six months' delay, but with a thoroughly modified project design based on the evaluation findings. It is expected to last until September 2003, with possibilities of modification and extension of support provided to local community initiatives, as identified in the final project evaluation, to be conducted in October 2003. Current project funding comes from a variety of sources including the Croatian Government, Evangelic Development Service Germany, Presbyterian Church USA, Mercy Corps/USAID, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Ecumenical Women's Fund, Academy for Educational Development, and others.

During the second project phase, a capacity-building structure has been established to provide training, mentoring and technical assistance (such as fundraising and advocacy), to the local residents in 10 respective communities who are setting up and maintaining community-based organizations and initiatives (community-wide actions, war veterans' associations, inter-religious groups, a Roma association, youth clubs, a school mediation project, creative workshops for pupils as a preparation for inter-ethnic dialogue etc.). The project capacity-building structure includes a core project management team, including two senior peacebuilding organizers, a former peace worker who has become a specialist in the Listening Project and a participatory action research specialist; four experienced peacebuilding trainers, two Peace Teams (Okučani and Slavonski brod) who have continued their field presence, former Peace teams in Beli Manastir and Tenja, as well as local residents who used to act as affiliates of the peace teams and have in the meantime grown into experience community organizers themselves (particularly Dragica Aleksa in Berak and the leader of the Roma Association Baranja in Beli Manastir).

Through already established networks and a series of public presentations, additional groups of local residents interested in voluntary peacebuilding and community development work were recruited and provided with a tailored training that combined community organization and conflict transformation skills, exploration of personal motivations and identities, and overview of peacebuilding and civil society development processes. A special focus was put on personal empowerment for taking initiative in light of foreseeable resistances, such as critiques and defeatism expressed by one's neighbours, and challenges related to sustaining voluntary engagement despite scarce resources and other obligations.

The training was interconnected with organization of listening projects in each community, carried out by the local volunteers who used the findings to focus their peacebuilding efforts on the topics and needs of special community concern.

The exception from this process was the work in Okučani, where the Peace Team carried on its peacebuilding activities from the first project phase, supporting already identified groups of war veterans, community leaders, youth and volunteers engaged in community development.

All key community organizers have received regular mentoring from their trainers and other activists engaged in the project capacity building structure. So far, the volunteers group in the village of Dalj mobilized the whole village around reconstruction of an apartment, to be given free of charge to a volunteer fireman with duty of around the clock monitoring of fire alarms. An indicator of the community responsiveness is the collection of more than 2000 HRK (300 Euro), by volunteers' knocking on the doors of their neighbours, both Serbs and Croats. In Tenja, the volunteers successfully pushed the local authorities of Osijek to implement the municipal plan of reconstruction of a children's playgrounds in Tenja which were built with the help of voluntary labour of local residents of both ethnicities.

In Bosanska Posavina, volunteers from three ethnically homogenous villages (Muslim, Croatian and Serb), each of which used to be mixed before their total devastation during the war, jointly attended the volunteer training program organized by CZMOS (each session took place in one of the village, hence providing opportunities for mutual visits that were highly visible in the communities) and conducted parallel listening projects. As a follow-up in all three villages restoration of public spaces began, to provide villagers, especially youth, with opportunities for greater social cohesion (a youth club in Kolibe Gornje, a soccer and a children's playground in Zborište and a community center in Novo selo). Due to strong ties and mutual trust created during the training and participatory planning involving Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak volunteers, mutual visits and collaboration among the three villages has been spontaneously integrated in the subsequent initiatives in each village.

In Vukovar, the volunteers had to give up their original plans of restoring a bridge in the once-popular natural resort Adica on the river Danube, due to lack of support from local authorities, as well as the plan to advocate for greater transparency of the municipal government, as the authorities decided on their own to enable NGOs and other citizens to attend the city council sessions. Upon further planning, they have managed to start an ambitious project of a series of creative workshops with primary school students who attend ethnically separate classes, to prepare them for joint sessions and creation of inter-ethnic relationships. The greatest achievement of this initiative is the very fact that the three young local peace activists, supported by two local students and an international volunteer, managed to enter the ethnically segregated schools, gain approval from the headmistresses and recruit pupils who decided to join the workshops on their own initiative upon class presentations of the project. The activities over the school year have culminated in the summer camp organized for both Serbian and Croatian pupils on the island of Hvar in July 2003.

The impact and sustainability of these initiatives will be examined in greater detail during the final evaluation of the second project phase in fall 2003. The monitoring process indicates that provision of timely and appropriate personal and organizational support to the local peacebuilding actors is instrumental for their capacity to maintain their vision, motivation and ability to grapple volatile local conditions, often featured by resistance from local politicians and deeply-rooted sense of disempowerment among the local population. At the same time, CZMOS project management staff have at times felt that they themselves did not have the capacity to meet the needs for support sought by their partners in local communities. Continuous search for efficient and effective mechanisms of

providing support that do not create dependency remains the greatest challenge during the second phase of the project.

The following are more in-depth accounts of the achievements in Berak and Okučani, both of which illustrate the importance of long-term, approach to community-based peacebuilding and the utmost need for high sensitivity and responsiveness to arising opportunities and obstacles in the process of facilitating community dialogue and concrete actions that promote an alternative, constructive vision of the future.

Peacebuilding Initiatives in Berak

During the first phase of the project, CZMOS conducted a through listening project in the community of Berak, upon invitation of OSCE that was alarmed by the rise of inter-ethnic tensions which revolved around the issue of the missing Croatian villagers during the war period when Berak was a site of severe torture and imprisonment of Croatian inhabitants, many of whom were taken away by local Serbs, never to return. Croatian villagers who returned to the village after the peaceful reintegration were angered by the seeming lack of initiative by the Government in the search for their missing and by perceived lack of will on part of their Serbian neighbours to provide information on what exactly happened during the war. Serbian villagers were frightened of direct communication with their Croatian neighbours, which they perceived as accusations for crimes and tended to respond defensively, stating that those who committed the crimes had left for Serbia. Uncertainty, distrust, fear and inability to overcome the pain of war losses determined inter-ethnic relationships in Berak even ten years after the atrocities occurred.

The tensions escalated in the murder of a Serb by a Croatian villager. The implementation of the listening project soon showed that any attempt to bring the two communities together would only bring more damage, considering the gravity of protracted war trauma experienced by the Croatian villagers. The report of the listening project was presented to OSCE, a local office of the then active National Board for Trust-building, local authorities, bishop and the local Croatian priest. CZMOS took great efforts to organize a visit of the delegation of the Berak villagers to the Office of the Croatian president, with a request that the Government put greater efforts into pressuring the Serbian government to provide information on the missing persons from Berak who were deported to Serbia during the war. The major achievement was the fact that a Serbian villager joined the delegation, hence acknowledging the importance of the truth about the war crimes for the future co-existence in Berak. However, due to the insensitivity and ignorance shown by the Presidential office representative during the visit, the villagers returned to Berak even more frustrated with their general sense of powerlessness and neglect of their needs and trauma.

Considering the gravity of trauma and inter-ethnic distrust, the success of the follow-up initiatives to the listening project, facilitated by the CZMOS peace workers is outstanding. Instead of giving up, the Peace Teams decided to focus on the needs expressed by the residents, primarily the urgency of activities contributing to trauma recovery, lack of social activities for children and youth and extraordinary commitment to her community expressed by a local woman, Dragica Aleksa. During the remaining period of the first phase of the project, a mobile peace team, consisting of activists engaged in other communities and the Osijek headquarters, continued to focus on concrete needs. Center for Peace Osijek lawyers provided legal aid to 6 families. A family with a paralyzed patient was put in contact with the Center for Social Work. UNHCR and Caritas will be informed about local needs for humanitarian assistance. Center for War Victims in Osijek was informed about local needs for trauma-rehabilitation support and it decided to assign a mobile team to Berak. Peace Team took responsibility to revisit all respondents that expressed the need and compile a definite list of beneficiaries.

Special mentoring was provided to Dragica Aleksa, who first joined an education program on women's leadership, organized by CZMOS and the Center for Women's Studies from Zagreb and was supported in her idea to publish a booklet "Stories from Berak"³, presenting villagers' memories of their lives in Berak collected during the listening project, serving as a safe way of communicating different, personal truths of war, as well as positive aspects of the village history and a prevalent sense of belonging to the community. Dragica Aleksa has in the meantime grown into an outstanding community organizer whose renowned persistence and inspiration have been rewarded by the Government Office for NGOs Certificate for the Volunteer of the Year 2001.

During the second phase of the project, a group of five volunteers from Berak completed the training in peacebuilding and conducted a new listening project, which has shown that the villagers were more ready to engage in activities that would improve the quality of community life, especially for youth.

Hence, a youth club was successfully set-up, in cooperation with the municipal authorities who granted the youth volunteers free premises and a monthly sponsorship for the phone connection. The club is run by youth themselves, who gather around Internet, social games, music, exchanges and networking with other youth initiatives in Croatia and abroad, with prospects of initiating peacebuilding projects in cooperation with local authorities and organization of international youth peace camps. The first year of the youth club mostly relies on youth club, equipment sponsored by CZMOS and the premises and facilities secured by the local authorities.

The other project is focused on small-scale income-generation, through the purchase of a milk preservation machine that would be available to all villagers interested in selling their milk to the local dairies. The third project, initiated by Dragica Aleksa and named "From the Perspective of My Small Berak", entails a series of monthly public discussions on issues of community concern, accompanied by frequent individual visits to villagers with the purpose of facilitating community dialogue and encouraging villagers to take action to resolve their common problems. The project start-up has been enabled by a small grant from the CRONGO Support Program of AED.

Considering that there are not more than 350 inhabitants in Berak, the scope of these initiatives is significant, as well as their potential to help transform the painful remains of the war conflict by means of concrete positive change in the quality of the local social and economic life and new, non-threatening opportunities for communication between the Croats and the Serbs. With the help of her mentor Ana Raffai, Dragica managed to secure funds for the project from the World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Women's Solidarity fund.

An indicator of empowerment and trust built among local volunteers is the successful candidacy of Antun Pribojčević, a Croat volunteer, at the elections for village boards (the most basic level of local self-government in Croatia) held in 2002, who created an independent local list and invited a Serbian fellow villager and volunteer Mile Mrkobrada join in. The list won enough votes for Antun to be elected in the village board. At the micro-scale, this is an example of the potential of community-based peacebuilding initiatives to trigger changes in the local political structures, which are largely dominated by ethnic-based, strictly partisan political affiliations that reproduce political configurations prevailing in regional and national politics.

³ Aleksa, Dragica. (2001). *Priče iz Berka*. [Stories from Berak]. Osijek: Centar za mir, nenasilje i ljudska prava. www.centar-za-mir.hr/pdf/price_iz_berka2.pdf

The key lesson learned over the course of the past three years of engagement of the peacebuilding efforts in Berak is the value of continuous, sensitive support to outstanding individuals, such as Dragica Aleksa, to match their ambitious vision of transformed social relations with necessary leadership and community peacebuilding skills, access to information about potential resources and, most importantly, courage to continue despite all obstacles. As the new social dynamics and leaders emerge in communities with a history of disempowerment and trauma, new conflicts about ways to pursue goals and control over resources are unavoidable, so any external support structure needs to be ready to support the local actors to engage in creative conflict transformation. In addition, CZMOS's work in Berak demonstrates the importance of a long-term approach to community-based peacebuilding that looks beyond specific instances of immobilized communication and does not fall into the trap of accommodation to donor-driven project timeframes.

Emerging Community - Peacebuilding Structure in Okučani

The municipality of Okučani in Western Slavonia (former UN Protected Area West) was heavily damaged during the 1991-92 period when non-Serbian property was destroyed to prevent the return of Croats and in 1995, upon the operation Flash, when many Serbian houses and churches were devastated. At present there are around 4,500 inhabitants, including a large Croatian settlers' population, mostly from Bosnian Posavina as well as from Vojvodina. There are permanent tensions between the Bosnian Croat settlers whose representatives prevail in the local government structure and the local Catholic Church and domicile Croats who feel frustrated by the perceived dominance of the settlers' population. Serbian returnees are politically invisible due to their lack of political and economic resources and relatively low numbers. Due to the community conflict between the settlers and domicile Croats the latter tend to be more receptive to interactions with individual returnee Serbs whom they perceive less alien than the Bosnian Croats. Overall, the social landscape of Okučani is strongly featured by lack of collaboration among the three distinct population groups among whom the Bosnian Croats and domicile Croats compete for power, while the Serbs remain on the margins.

Okučani continues to be featured by high unemployment and lack of investment into industrial and agricultural production, as well as insufficient housing that would accommodate the settlers and enable the return of the Serbs. An important source of insecurity for all residents of Okučani, regardless of their post-war status and ethnicity, is lack of a proper municipal waste deposit facility resulting in ongoing pollution of the local river and its banks. As repeatedly reported in interviews with local residents affiliated with the Peace Team, a sense of distrust and lack of social cohesion are widespread and reinforced by susceptibility to political directives and fear of sanctions if disagreements with local power-holders are publicly expressed.

Peace Team of CZMOS, consisting of two local women (one from Okučani and the other from the neighboring town of Nova Gradiška) and usually an international peace volunteer who stay for approximately six months, to be replaced by a new person from the Austrian Peace Service, has been active in Okučani since 1999, without interruption between the first and the second phase of the project during 2001, when the peace workers continued their basic presence in the community on a voluntary basis. The work was intensified again in March 2002, once the project accessed financial support from USAID ECRA Program, managed by Mercy Corps. The current funding of 203,196 USD, including cost share, is available until the end of February 2004. The Peace Team's long-term goal is peacebuilding and community development of Okučani, presuming dynamic, equal and non-discriminatory relationships between war-affected individuals and social groups, particularly those that are instrumental for bringing creativity and initiative into the local social and economic development. In the context of the current two-year work cycle, special attention is paid to "empowerment, self-organization and sustainability", that is capacity building of local initiatives aimed at peacebuilding and broader community mobilization around visible public actions that help improve the quality of life in

Okučani, which are deemed inseparable from strengthening social cohesion. Community actions are undertaken as a response to concrete needs and problems related to the local infrastructure and social activities.

Upon its arrival, the Peace Team Okučani first faced the challenge of breaking the prevalent prejudice held by Croats that international and domestic NGOs are solely supportive of the Serbs, with the assumption that effective peacebuilding is impossible without identification and mobilization of potential peace constituents affiliated with the social groups and institutions that represent the majority and have greater access to decision making power. For that reason, in addition to the focus on the local Youth Forum (viewed as an investment into the future leadership and constructive inter-ethnic collaboration), the Peace teams have devoted considerable time and inventiveness to establish cooperation with the local school (a students run mediation project fully endorsed by the school management and teachers), churches (creation of an inter-religious peace forum) and three local branches of the national war veterans' umbrella association Udruga hrvatskih dragovoljaca i veterana domovinskog rata (UHVDDR). Considering the importance of the special positioning in the small town of Okučani, where public spaces are heavily marked in terms of ethnic and political affiliations, the Peace Team decided to move its premises from a Serbian-owned house to a space rented from the local war veterans' association, which itself required considerable amount of communication and trust-building with the local leader of the war veterans' association. As Ljubica Berić, the Peace Team coordinator accounts: *"If we wanted to achieve anything, we had to reach out to the war veterans, despite their suspicions. I am proud we managed to stay truthful to ourselves and never obscured our peacebuilding agenda. We gained their respect as they could witness themselves that we treated all our local partners, regardless of their nationality or war experiences, with equal respect."*

Changes in Community Life Since 1999

According to the interviewed respondents (15 affiliates of the peace team, representing all three main social groups), while the main structural problems in Okučani remain unaltered – high unemployment, lack of economic investment and slow property return process – there are visible improvements in the municipal infrastructure and public spaces (new traffic lights, flowerbeds, town park, marketplace, children's playgrounds) that have been restored thanks to the new municipal prefect's openness to cooperation with the international donor agencies (primarily USAID and EC). Despite the fact that he belongs to the Bosnian settlers' community, the respondents have commended the new municipal head for being more open to contact with all citizens than his predecessor. However, preferential treatment of Bosnian settlers is still present, as in the local government's sponsorship of a Croatia-wide folkdance festival of Croatian settlers' associations that mostly excluded domicile folk groups.

Since 1999, there has been an increase in citizens' initiatives, including the women's folk society Tkanica, founded by the school headmistress in order to bring together Bosnian settlers and domicile Croats, again with the tendency of continued exclusion of Serbs. Due to the frustration of several members of Tkanica with elitist practices within the association, an informal women's group has started meeting around creative workshops, supported by the Peace Team member. Over the past two years, the Peace Team has co-organized two summer Peace Youth Camps, together with the local Youth Forum, that brought together youth from throughout Croatia and Bosnia, as well as several members of the drug rehabilitation community Susret (located in the woods surrounding Okučani) who engaged in environmental clean-ups and a series of creative and peace education workshops. The residents of Okučani highlight the beneficial effects of the 2000 national elections that strengthened political pluralism in Okučani, as newly established local branches of the governing parties (former opposition to HDZ) provide space for interaction among all three groups - settlers, domicile Croats and Serbs.

Despite the fact that the respondents have observed a gradual decrease in tensions among the three groups, they have also highlighted that a weak commitment of the local residents to the community represents the main obstacle to Okučani's development – while Bosnian Croats tend to be centered on their own community within the community and the Serbs feel powerless, the domicile Croats tend to feel betrayed and frustrated. Nevertheless, through its permanent communication with all social groups and subtle identification of potential informal community leaders, the peace team has catalyzed the creation of an informal core group of volunteers (war veterans, school teachers, Serbian returnees, youth) who have also received basic training in community organizing and are currently transforming their frustrations into concrete actions, including the year-long plan of cleaning up the river bank of the polluted river Slobodina and advocating for the construction of the municipal waste facility. During conversations with the most active residents of Okučani, their sense of personal responsibility for the post-war development of their community was strongly present:

"If we went through the war, it does not mean that we have the right to poison our children with pain and hatred. They have the right to their own choices. We need to watch what we tell and how we raise our children, otherwise we will destroy their lives." (a war veteran at the joint workshop on prospects for peacebuilding in Okučani, November 2002) .

" We have just stopped talking to each other, caring. I can see that a place to start is my own street, my next-door neighbor. Just saying hello, asking her how she is doing, being ready to listen, can make all the difference in the quality of life in Okučani."

(a Serbian domicile woman, at the joint workshop on prospects for peacebuilding in Okučani, November 2002)

A Step into the Unknown: Supporting War veterans' associations

Supporting the capacity building of the local branch of the war veterans' association and its networking with the other two branches in the neighboring communities of Gornji Bogičevci and Stara Gradiška, represents the most unique aspect of the Peace Teams' peacebuilding strategy in Okučani. Namely, peace organizations and war veterans-associations in Croatia have minimum cooperation as they are perceived to belong to two mutually opposed parts of the political spectrum (nationalist right and liberal left), particularly regarding the key political issue of Croatia's cooperation with the ICTY and the extradition of Croatian military officials. For that reason, the case of vibrant collaboration between the two organizations established in Okučani represents an important model for future initiatives that facilitate the social integration of war veterans and deconstruct the highly politicized gap between the war veterans and peace and human rights-oriented civil society and political actors.

After more than a year of a gradual process of building a trusting relationship with the leaders, which was greatly facilitated by co-habitation in the same courtyard, the first and most important joint activity undertaken by the war veterans and Okučani peace activists was a series of four weekend-workshops for a group of thirteen war veterans, run by two experienced peace activists and therapists from Osijek, where veterans used the group setting to explore and process their war traumas, improve their communication skills and create a peer support network. All three leaders of the local war veteran branches enrolled in the workshop program, in order to set a role model for their peers who were still suspicious of the Peace Team, with whom they at that point had no direct contact. According to the evaluation, (including the analysis of the listening project conducted with all involved veterans, a focus group and observations on the part of the Peace team coordinator and workshop leaders), the following effects of the workshop series and enhanced peer support are visible:

- Increased self-control of aggression, hence reduced alcohol consumption; reduced interest in participation in verbal and physical conflicts.
- Enhanced capacity of direct expression of personal needs and emotions and active search for support in times of crisis (particularly relevant for PTSS survivors)

- Improved communication with family members (wife and children).
- Increased interest in community actions and hobbies.
- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence in the private, business and social spheres.
- Improved ability to engage in constructive negotiations with state institutions and other war veterans' associations, in respect to war veterans' social rights and resource mobilization for war veterans' associations.
- Enhanced ability and readiness to focus on particular as opposed to generalized understanding of war events - war veterans have repeatedly pointed out that the workshops have helped them think about individual situations and histories of the Serbian soldiers whom they fought in war:
"Now I can imagine that perhaps I was defending myself and at that time passionately hating a guy who was in the same position as me, forced to join the army in order to protect his family, perhaps he had no other choice. Not everybody was just fighting for a greater Serbia and for the extermination of Croats".

The war veterans strongly emphasized the importance of non-judgmental and empathetic attitude of the workshop leaders and the peace team member who encouraged the creation of group trust, support and respect, where, according to the war veterans, workshop leaders engaged in a two-way process of sharing – "as they would open up to us, we would open up to them". The war veterans' fear that the workshop leaders would attempt to "preach" was soon replaced by their experience of close friendship, firmly grounded in "real listening":

"We really liked the methods – drawing, listening, because they encourage people to open up and get them all involved, and that is really important. In the other methods, it is evident that the people are approached in a violent manner, without listening to them, while in this way, even those who would otherwise remain "invisible" get included and encouraged to participate. After the first workshop, everybody became active, able to speak openly, and that is important, because they could be listened to. That really matters to the people."

For the veterans, such an approach distinguished their collaboration with the peace teams from their previous experiences with psychiatric and psychological institutions:

"For the first time we felt that we were approached like human beings, as opposed to being numbers or patients. That was crucial."

As a support to war veterans' families, the Peace Team organized a weekend workshop for war veterans' wives only, a series of dance classes for war veteran spouses and a summer camp for their children. A new group of war veterans started with a series of psychosocial workshops in fall 2002. The most important aspect of the Peace Teams' cooperation with the war veterans is daily contact, firmly grounded in mutual trust, allowing for individual support in times of psychological crisis, provision of advice and joint planning with the leaders and mediation aimed at opening the dialogue between the associations of the Croatian Army veterans on one hand and Croatian Council of Defense (HVO, a Bosnian Croat military formation), on the other whose relations were strained by distrust and Croatian Army war veterans' fear that the HVO associations might take over some of their resources due to their ties with the local political structures. The flow of support between the war veterans and the Peace team is two-way – the core group of war veterans volunteered in the organization of the Days of Culture of Peace in 2002, the international Youth Peace Camp in 2002 and 2003 and the restoration of the Peace teams' office.

With the support of the Peace Team and CZMOS Support Program for Civil Initiatives, the three local branches of war veterans engaged in the process of strategic planning of their own activities, with the

aim of ensuring greater autonomy and more resources in respect to their umbrella organization, for the benefit of the local war veterans, their families and entire communities of Okučani, Gornji Bogičevci and Stara Gradiška. The war veterans decided to conduct a comprehensive Listening project with most members of their association, in order to learn why many members are passive, what are their acute needs for psychosocial support and to inform them about new plans of the association. Parallel to revitalization of active membership base, the war veterans' associations plan to set up an information center where war veterans, as well as all other citizens, could get advice on social benefits, self-employment and loans. They also plan to start computer classes for veterans and their children. The leaders of the three branches are determined to intensify their political engagement and advocacy within their umbrella association in order to combat corruption and neglect for the grassroots level. Systematic lobbying of political parties at the local and national level, combined with the creation of an independent local list for the next local elections, should result in greater attention paid to the war veterans' issues by the political structure in the future.

The shift in the war veterans' understanding of their own social role and opportunities for cooperation with other civil society actors is exceptional, especially in light of the prevalent top-down functioning of war veterans' associations throughout Croatia, which tend to be manipulated by the agendas of the right-wing political parties and the self-interest of their leaders. Such a dynamic has profiled war veterans' associations with the image of nationalist troublemakers and has resulted in a lack of resources and organizational support available to the war veterans' grassroots organizations, despite relatively abundant central government subsidies (UHDDVR received 3 Million HRK or 400,000 Euro from the Ministry of War Veterans in 2003). There is real hope that in Okučani, a bottom-up, inclusive model of war veterans' self-organizing will become a new norm.

At the same time, this cooperation has had a lasting impact on the Peace Team's peacebuilding agenda, as Ljubica Berić, the PT member who has been the main catalyst of trust established with the local war veterans' branches, is planning to set up a local center and a community foundation that would provide ongoing support to war veterans' social integration at the level of the Brodsko-posavska County. Networking with similar emerging initiatives, largely invisible to the public, which focus on the war veterans' potential to become agents of community integration, as opposed to treating war veterans as pathological remnants of war or untouchable, unpredictable war heroes, will be instrumental for making the argument at the national level that the government support to war veterans needs to be thoroughly reviewed.

Opening Inter-religious Dialogue

Considering the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Okučani, which has often espoused nationalist views and the influence of both the Catholic and the Orthodox church on the population, the Peace Team Okučani has been permanently working on opening a dialogue and encouraging collaborative relationships among the church leaders, including the Adventist Church, the inclusion of which helps break the polarization between the two other churches and helps deconstruct the perception that church affiliations are equivalent to ethnic identities. In parallel, with the purpose of facilitating horizontal dialogue among members of the three local religious communities the Peace Team activist Ljubica Berić (herself an active member of the Adventist Church) has encouraged the formation of a local inter-religious group and its participation in a seminar on faith-based nonviolence and peacebuilding. The group participants were identified through a series of public round tables on ecumenical topics, organized in cooperation with local church leaders. By keeping the Catholic and Orthodox church leaders involved and informed without letting them steer the whole process of inter-religious dialogue, the Peace teams have managed to break down their initial resistance. The visit to the Coventry Inter-Faith Center in the UK, organized by CZMOS in Summer 2002, has deepened the Okučani residents' motivation for faith-based reconciliatory activities and created new ties with

members of similar inter-religious initiatives in Eastern Slavonia. The enthusiasm expressed by the informal leader of the Bosnian Croat war veterans was particularly significant, due to his considerable influence on the Bosnian Croat community. Since his return from the trip, he has taken steps to open a dialogue and seek cooperation with the Croatian war veterans' associations.

Perhaps the greatest achievement by the peace team has been the transformation of an overtly hostile attitude towards peace and human rights' organizations, including the peace team, previously expressed by the catholic priest and the senior local nun – through careful search for opportunities to break through their prejudices and consistent message that despite rejections, the Peace Team remained open to communication, collaboration was established, culminating in the nun's participation in the inter-religious visit to all three churches, the first of its kind ever in Okučani, on the occasion of the 2003 Easter celebrations in 2003.

The Peace Team's facilitation of inter-religious dialogue in Okučani is probably the most illustrative example of the very essence of the community peacebuilding – the continuous identification of potential peace constituents and opportunities for transformation of relationships between divided social actors, which is contingent on well established presence in the community, familiarity with local codes of conduct, political dynamics and social stratification, none of which is possible if community-based peacebuilding is tied to short-term projects heavily burdened with activities requiring strong focus on logistical and managerial issues. The key to success is time to listen and observe the moments of openness, as well as moments when the mediators need to step aside and let other actors take over.

School Mediation Group

After the peace team organized a Summer mediation School in July 2002 for 20 pupils and 4 teachers from the primary school in Okučani, a mediation group was formed and included in the Annual Activity Plan of the Primary School, with the objective of becoming the school's official pilot project that would be presented to the expert bodies and other schools in the Brodsko-posavska County and the whole Croatia. The primary school principal and the teachers' board had been fully aware of the rise of violence among the students, which was demonstrated in survey findings that motivated the principal to integrate mediation into the school's educational process. The mediation group gave a special presentation of its work to the whole school and started the training of other pupils and teachers. The project was presented at the county working group of biology teachers, upon the initiative of an Okučani biology teacher who embraced the method in her work with children. The special success of this activity initiated by the Peace team, in close collaboration with the school, is its impact on the transformation of hierarchical relationships between the pupils and the teachers into collaboration, where pupils' understanding of intra-group dynamics among their peers and mediation skills are considered instrumental, while the teacher's role is to provide mentoring where necessary and even seek assistance from the pupils. Full endorsement by the school principal is a guarantee that the mediation practice will be sustained and communicated to the school's counterpart institutions. During Summer 2003, the Summer Mediation School was held for an additional group of pupils and teachers from the same school, while the future peace team's plans focus on mediation training for a select group of informal and formal community leaders and interested citizens, with the objective of integrating mediation into a variety of local structures.

Through its long-term focus on stimulating the peacebuilding agency of several key local institutions, organizations and individual actors – school, churches, war veterans' associations, youth, women and individuals with self-initiative, the Peace Team in Okučani has made considerable steps towards the transformation of social relationships in the community featured by divisions, prejudices and pessimism. The major factor of sustainability of these efforts has been the Peace Team's ability to

identify and take advantage of opportunities for changing the very functioning of the local institutions and organizations, none of which would have happened had not the Peace Team turned time into their priority resource and continued its work despite the interruption in funding. For funding agencies, the example of Okučani can serve as an important reminder that investments into community-based peacebuilding are meaningless unless they are approached from a strategic perspective and a minimum timeframe of five years.

CZMOS Community Peacebuilding Program: Policy Relevance and Needs for Future Support

Over the past four years of the project, the responsibility for community mobilization has mostly shifted from partial outsiders (Peace Teams) to insiders (local institutions, organizations, and individual leaders, such as Dragica Aleksa in Berak). In Okučani the members of the Peace Team have become fully integrated in the local civil society and there is a great chance that in the future they will pursue their own peacebuilding initiatives, such as the creation of a community foundation that will enable the political autonomy of the local war veteran's associations. At present, necessary support entails regular mentoring and specific training, combined with advocacy for broader institutional and donor support for the still-fragile community-based peacebuilding structure. Participatory action research has been integrated into the design of a comprehensive participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation system, where local residents actively engaged in different project components are fully involved in shaping and interpreting the relevance of project activities, thus ensuring that the catalyst and capacity-building role of the project continues to make sense.

A multi-year time-frame and flexible resources are instrumental for ensuring responsiveness and continuity of carefully tailored mentoring, training and technical assistance that takes into account the fact the supported peace constituents have other social and professional roles and obligations to their communities, which are instrumental for their effectiveness as peacebuilding agents. Long-term support to individuals with vision and initiative to transform their communities as they foster new networks of new relationships, is an investment with the highest value as well as the highest risk. There is always a chance that key community organizers might give up due to lack of support within the community, or might move out of their deprived communities, as they expand their social networks, skills and self-confidence. On the other hand, individuals with leadership and facilitation skills and a vision of social justice and peace will have a positive impact on institutions and organizations they decide to form or join. In contrast to many peacebuilding programs conducted by international agencies that are subject to shifting mandates and tight project timeframes, the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights Osijek has managed to stay committed to the greatest community resource – individuals of different ethnic and social profiles, who share the courage to imagine a different, more just and creative socio-economic landscape and engage in its gradual construction.

2. Challenges of External Support to Women's Self-Organizing in Post-war Settings: The Center for Counseling and Education of Women, Zagreb

The Center for Education and Counseling of Women (CESI) is a Zagreb-based women's NGO founded in 1997 by a group of experienced activists, previously active in the Center for Women War Victims, with a rich background in feminist-based psycho-social support to women refugees and non-formal education for potential women leaders and emerging women's initiatives in post-war areas. Over the past five years, CESI has maintained its program focus on the support to the self-organization of women in post-war areas in Croatia, with an explicit feminist and human rights value base, including solidarity, participation, promotion of women's human rights, economic independence and

community/political leadership as well as respect for diversity and promotion of inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation.

Over the past five years, CESI has undergone through significant organizational growth. In 2003 it numbers 9 fully employed staff (in comparison to 2 in 1997), 3 long-term associates (the same as in 1997) and around 10 part-time associates (compared to 3 in 1997). Surprisingly, CESI's budget has grown only 2.3 times (from USD 70 000 in 1997 to USD 160 000 in 2002), which is due to decreasing need for purchase of additional equipment over the years and more favorable employment taxation that has enabled CESI to expand its staff. In comparison to 1997, when CESI had one core program of providing technical assistance and education to emerging local women's initiatives, mostly in post-war areas, CESI currently manages three complex programs (Support, Education and Development of Women's and Other Civil Initiatives, Women's Human Rights and Building Gender Awareness) with a total of 5000 beneficiaries in the year 2002.

This case study focuses on CESI's provision of support, aimed at *strengthening and capacity building of local women's initiatives* in Dvor (6000 inhabitants), Vojnić (5900 inhabitants) and Gvozd (4 000 inhabitants) - three severely economically deprived post-war municipalities in the Banovina region (former Sector North), with large proportion of Croatian settlers, paralleled by a relatively high rate of Serbian returns, who make the majority of the population (47% in Vojnić representing a half of the pre-war percentage of Serbs, 70% in Gvozd and Dvor). In all three communities, only 5-10% of population are employed; there are almost 50% of (mostly Serbian) pensioners and a high number of unemployed Bosnian Croat settlers and a relatively small number of younger Serbian returnees who receive social welfare.

CESI's support has entailed technical assistance, education and support in implementation of community projects to three local NGOs – Women's Group Vojnić, Women's Initiative Gvozd (part of Serbian Democratic Forum) and Women's Club Dvor. All three groups are unique in their communities as they provide safe space for women of different ethnicities and war histories to get to know each other, talk openly about their war experiences and take actions for the benefit of local women, children and entire community. All three groups include a combination of Serbian and Croatian domicile women who either stayed throughout the war period or returned at different points in , as well as settlers from other parts of Croatia and Bosnia.

CESI's collaboration with the three women's groups support to the women's self-organizing in Dvor, Vojnić and Gvozd needs to be framed within CESI's long-term support to women's self-organizing and empowerment in post-war communities as well as CESI's responsiveness to different funding opportunities, which are primarily related to time-limited implementation of specific projects. Namely, for CESI to be able to maintain long-term communication with emerging women's initiatives in often-isolated areas, it needs to fundraise for specific projects as there are very few resources available for relatively unstructured support provision, driven by local demands.

In Vojnić, CESI has been supporting women's self-organizing since 1998, by means of computer courses and lectures organized for women and support to the local women's group throughout all of its changes of leadership and programmatic focus. In 2001 CESI established cooperation with women in the Dvor and Gvozd communities, through its project Education and Support to Women's Initiatives, particularly its component Integration and Democratization in War Stricken Areas (funded by USIS and OSI). In each community, featured by a high number of Bosnian settlers CESI's activists directly organized computer courses for women (total 182 participants), a series of three women's health lectures (total 100 participants), ad-hoc "development centers/workshops" where women produced New Year greeting cards and sold them in their communities and at the NGO fair (via CESI's support)

and a series of workshops aimed at stimulating women's self-organizing based on feminist principles and inter-ethnic cooperation (communication skills, planning, project development, violence against women).

Based on already established contacts in each community, familiarity with local women's needs and their expressed interest in stronger self-organizing, in July 2002 CESI conducted a needs assessment in each of the three communities in order to determine the most appropriate form of support to the emerging women's initiatives, as well as the specific activities that the women's initiatives could develop in order to respond to the most salient concerns in their communities. . Key stakeholders – representatives of local authorities, public institutions, local women and active NGOs – were interviewed about their views of the local quality of life, key challenges, the role of civil society and women's initiatives in particular. The findings showed a stagnant economic situation featured by severe unemployment and lack of investment, relatively high concentration of active international NGOs supportive of nascent local NGOs, reconstruction and small-scale development projects, prevalently positive general attitude to the role of civil initiatives in the community life, matched by lack of visibility of specific local NGOs and women's initiatives in particular.

In order to improve the women's groups' visibility and reputation in each community, considered crucial prerequisites for the women's groups' local agency, beyond serving as a valuable semi-private space for women's self- support, CESI agreed with the women's groups that each would develop one concrete project of obvious benefit to the whole community, i.e. Internet center in Dvor, multifunctional playground in Vojnić and an income-generation project for women in Gvozd, combined with the up-scaling of the already established children's playgroup. These projects have two other important functions - enabling local women's groups to gain experience in mobilizing resources for and managing complex activities and thus increase their financial and organizational capacity, as well as providing opportunities for the unemployed women's groups' members to make some, however modest, income, hence increasing their personal financial capacity and well-being.

Therefore, according to the logic of CESI's support program to the three groups, the local women's projects were considered as only one of the tools for the enhancement of the women's groups' capacity to act as agents of social cohesion and community reintegration, with a focus on women's active role in community life, promotion of women's needs and inter-ethnic cooperation. The three community projects do not represent the final project outcome from CESI's perspective. Other tools – education, technical assistance and networking – are deemed equally important in this process. The anticipated results of the support provided to the three women's groups specify the meaning of the project purpose – strengthening and capacity-building of local women's initiatives, – as increased *financial capacity* of the groups and their members; increased *managerial capacity*, improved *visibility and recognition* of the groups in their communities and *expanded social networks* instrumental for resource mobilization, as well as direct increase of *social cohesion* and community reintegration.

Increased capacity and strength of women's initiatives in these three communities are expected to contribute to increased reintegration of the communities in the areas of return and strengthened social cohesion, which are some of the major objectives of the overall ECRA program funded by USAID. CESI's engagement with each group includes provision of technical assistance, education and consultation; networking and exchange of experience and knowledge with other organizations; involvement in implementation of groups' projects based on partnership and evaluation and lessons learned. These activities are supposed to enhance the groups' capacity to act as self-driven agents of women's mobilization around those needs which women themselves identify as instrumental for the well being of women and their entire communities.

In February 2003. CESI commissioned an external mid-term evaluation conducted by the author of this research paper, in order to assess progress made towards the objectives of the support program to the three women's groups⁴. While the assessment took place only six months upon the beginning of their intense cooperation, that is by far too early for any definite conclusions of impact of the support provided by CESI as well as changes in the women's group's local agency, it has proved useful for identifying the main points of challenge encountered during the process of collaboration. The evaluation followed the criteria of success, or expected results, outlined in the original proposal, with additional attention paid to the exploration of the fundamental issue of women's motivation to engage in cross-ethnic community organizing and organizational development of their women's groups, indicating that external support organizations need to bear in mind that in isolated post-war communities, local women's initiatives primarily form as women's active response to the prevalent lack of communication and solidarity.

Improved Visibility and Recognition in the Local Communities

Dynamic Development of Women's Club Dvor

The active core of the Women's Club Dvor consists of seven women of different age (from mid twenties to early sixties, majority in mid thirties), different ethnicities (three Serbs and four Croats), different post war experiences (one stayed in Dvor throughout the war, two spent several years in Serbia after the exodus of the Serbs in 1995 and four settled in Dvor in 1998 coming from other parts of Croatia). Only one of them is temporarily employed while all others are unemployed, among whom the oldest member cannot get right to pension despite 23 years of work experience and no prospects of finding a new job. All of them attended different computer courses organized by CESI during the period 2000-01, which served as a valuable opportunity to break the prevalent social isolation:

"I stayed here in Dvor during and after the war. The town was deserted for a long time, there were strange people in the streets, and I did not know anybody and stayed inside my four walls almost all the time. Nobody would greet one another in the street, as if we were from India and Pakistan. I could not bear it. I knocked on the door of my settler neighbor, they accepted it well. For a while I was very depressed, there were some troubles in the family, I was crying every day. My husband encouraged me to enroll in the computer class. That was great opportunity to meet new people, the settlers, to socialize." (An elderly Serbian domicile woman).

" I am unemployed and despite the fact that I have a daughter and a husband, I could not sit at home becoming a housewife. We moved to this cul-de-sac of Croatia, as we believed the government's promises." (A Croatian settler)

In July 2002, they all met each other at the meeting summoned by CESI, where they discussed prospects of forming a new women's group. For them it was an opportunity to improve the quality of their personal social life and overcome solitude, building upon the positive experiences of attending the computer courses. It is apparent that all core group members feel very safe and connected with each other. It is particularly relevant to keep in mind the primary social function of the group, as the group gets increasingly engaged in management of different community services, such as running computer classes, an Internet café and children's playgroups, which rose out of the women's motivation to improve the overall quality of living in Dvor, particularly for the sake of their children – two women

⁴ The mid-term evaluation has included the following methods: document review (baseline needs assessment, project reports), interviews with a set of key stakeholders in each community, a combination of group and individual interviews with women's groups' members, a workshop and individual interviews with CESI project staff, as well as a follow-up workshop with the Women's Club Dvor, where evaluation findings were used further planning.

settlers stated that they were mostly worried about lack of learning opportunities for their children, which was in stark contrast to their personal growing-up experiences:

"It is tragic that my child lives in the 21st century and has nothing I had as a child – no ballet, no English classes, no kindergarten." (A Croatian settler)

In addition, the women's group provides opportunities for self-development – learning new skills and concepts, such as women's human rights, managerial skills, advanced computer skills, project development, as well as self-confidence –building, which is particularly important for unemployed women from marginalized communities, with little opportunity to prove themselves:

" I always feel like I do not know anything, and women's seminars are always a challenge for me. Last time in Topusko it took me a lot of courage to present in front of the whole group. Only later it feels good. This is very important to me." (A Serbian returnee).

Considering severe lack of personal income faced by most women, the women's group is also viewed as an opportunity to improve, however slightly, women's personal budgets, which is important for their capacity to be socially active and self-confident. Currently there is a high sense of fairness and solidarity among core group members, who make sure that opportunities for honoraria are equally distributed among the members, with special attention to those in greatest need. The future development of the group may create additional income generation opportunities for some women who might partially professionalize (e.g. as internet center leaders, project managers), but it will inadvertently create greater differentiation among the women in terms of paid or unpaid work for the group, an issue that the group has started discussing in search of just solutions.

The first six months of the group's successful set-up – registration, acquisition of space from local authorities, its renovation by ASB, intense and effective fundraising, creation of new partnerships, and a highly visible opening of the new premises, attended by key community leaders from all sectors – has filled the group members with the sense of pride and responsibility to perform in accordance with the community needs and their partners' expectations. Based on key stakeholders' feedback, it is doubtless that the Women's Club Dvor has made significant effort to create collaborative relationships with other NGOs and local authorities and promote their activities and plans, which has laid grounds for their acceptance and effectiveness in the community of Dvor. As the head of culture department stated: "I was fascinated that they had strength to start new initiatives in this difficult situation." The group has obtained space and some funding for their premises from the local authorities and the head of culture department is supportive of and informed about all aspects of the group's work (registration procedures, fundraising). Local authorities and SDF helped print posters for the Women's Club. The local school has been supportive of the group's survey with schoolchildren, as well as preparations for the after-school activities at the Club for schoolchildren who travel by bus. This is particularly valuable considering that the group has formed over the past six months, burdened with the legacy of widespread negative perception of a former women's group "Nada", whose activities were deemed superficial and whose leader was unpopular among the interviewed stakeholders.

According to the group members' and key stakeholders' feedback, WCD plans to open an internet center with computer classes and special activities for children are well known to the citizens of Dvor. On a daily basis neighbors and acquaintances approach WCD members and inquire about the enrollment in the computer courses and possibilities of becoming WCD members. The lecture on women's health took place on Dec 7 in response to the mid-December needs assessment findings and was attended by 25 women, which represents excellent turnout for Dvor.

Since April 1, 2003, that is only eight months after the establishment of WCD, the group has become capable of providing 28 hours of ongoing services to the community per week (or 112 hours per

month), based on the community needs assessment, including computer classes for adult women, Internet access to all citizens, structured activities for children, a weekly self-support gatherings of a broad circle of interested women.

In addition, Women's Club Dvor has become recognized as one of the key community organizers around issues of acute concern, such as the current campaign against the central government's plan to build a nuclear waste deposit in the neighboring mountain of Trgovska gora, which has united all residents of Dvor, regardless of their post-war status or ethnicity.

The core members of WCD are highly motivated to develop their women's group, as a space where solidarity, initiative and optimism overrule ethnic divisions and prevalent social and economic depression. Women's Club Dvor responds to different women's needs and motivations – it is a place where younger women learn new skills, experiment with new professional roles and engage in improvement of their community life; it also enables elderly women to break down their solitude and seek solidarity.

While the community of Dvor is still featured by post-war apathy, due to lacking economic development, emerging civil initiatives, such as the Women's Club Dvor, are making visible steps towards dynamization of community relations and decrease of inter-ethnic divisions among inhabitants who have started to focus on their common concerns, such as education of their children and environmental safety. Considering that the local authorities who are outstandingly open to cooperation with local NGOs have recently signed agreement with the Urban Institute Local Government Reform Project to devise a municipal economic development plan, there is space for optimism that community economic relations might be revitalized.

Women's Initiative Gvozd: Towards an Inter-ethnic Childcare Service

There are six core members of Women's Initiative Gvozd, including 2 Bosnian Croats and 4 domicile Serbs; 3 younger women below thirty, 2 women in their late 30's- early 40's and one woman in her 50's. All members, apart from the president (who is the local coordinator of SDF) joined the group through computer or sewing courses organized for women by SDF in 2000 and 2001, or through attendance of one of the March 8 celebrations. Their main motivation was primarily improvement of the quality of their social life and curiosity – *"to spend time with other women, have fun, get out of the house and learn something new"*.

Ljilja, a Croatian settler from Bosnia described how she found out about the group from Danica, current WIG president and local official of the Serbian Democratic Forum:

"I needed to take care of some administrative issues when I came to Gvozd. A policeman told me that I could try to get legal help from SDF, even though they were a Serbian organization. I did not mind and visited Danica. She accepted me very well and as we talked I noticed an announcement for sewing and computer courses and asked her whether I could enroll, too. She looked at me with surprise and asked me how come I did not know about the courses, did not I hear about them at the Association if Croatian settlers from Bosnia. I said that nobody had told me anything. Anyway, I enrolled and invited some other Croatian women. As I am a professional tailor, it was more fun than learning for me. Helena, the course leader asked me to help her with teaching the course. Later, Danica invited me to come to a small meeting. This is when Anamarija from CESI visited us. I was interested and involved my daughter, too. I do not live very far away and I like spending time with people. Those communication workshops we did on with CESI activist Anamarija were lots of fun; they made me forget about my other worries. I want us to get to know each other, I want us to do something together."

A young domicile woman described her interest in joining the group, as a way to break her daughter's isolation:

"Some two years ago my sister in law invited me to a small feast for March 8. I felt great there. Gvozd is filled with old people, it became really boring to spend time always on my own, playing with my daughter, so I suggested that we start a children's playgroup. Women were mostly meeting to drink coffee together and chat so at first they were a bit surprised by my idea of the playgroup but they accepted it."

The children's playgroup project represents the most important break-through regarding WIG's reputation as space for all children of Gvozd, regardless of their ethnicity. The project idea was developed into a proposal approved by CRS (2 900 Euro) in fall 2002, with support of a CESI member and great enthusiasm of the group's members who identified the need based on their personal and their friends' experiences as mothers whose children play alone. Ljilja, the Bosnian Croatian settler, described the difficult beginning:

"In September 2002, there were only 12 kids on our list, and we were in trouble, because we were supposed to have at least twenty to meet our obligations to the donor. Then I lost my temper and started knocking on the doors of my Croatian neighbors. I told them – if you don't let your kids go to pre-school playgroup with Serbs, you have not solved anything. They will meet the Serbian kids at school anyway. And if you think you can cut off from the Serbs altogether, then just move out of this community, this is not our future!"

Currently there are 40 children enrolled in the group, of both ethnicities. Even the local president of HDZ brought his children, despite his prejudices:

"When he came for the first time he told us that he expected us to treat his children just like all other. We told them that that was our way anyway. What can you tell somebody who comes up with such a sentence?" a group member said.

In order to overcome differences in wealth between children, the group members asked all parents to contribute 10 HRK per month for children's snacks. Now all children share food and even in that way, feel equal. The playgroups take place twice a week, for two hours in the mornings. There are even parents who drive children from the surrounding villages, for they are aware of the importance of structured social activities for their children, otherwise unavailable in Gvozd. Several parents have even offered to pay a monthly fee but the group has not taken that option further so far, since there are many parents who cannot afford to pay. In November 2002, local authorities decided to contribute a monthly amount of 266 Euro over the FY2003 for the honoraria for four WIG members who run the playgroup. Currently, the playgroup project team is well functioning as all four women share responsibilities and make decisions in the spirit of unity and trust. One of the members is motivated to professionalize as a nanny, while others seem to be satisfied with the current state of affairs.

It is apparent that the project has brought visibility and respect to WIG and has been recognized as a valuable community service. WIG members are highly motivated to act as agents of inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation, especially through their project of children's playgroups where improvement of communication among parents of different nationalities and break-up of prejudices is already visible. All members confirm that for the up scaling of the current projects, it is important to access enough resources to be able to provide decent honoraria to those members who would be intensely involved in the projects. Namely, several women live in nearby villages and they need to cover their travel expenses to come for WIG meetings and activities. There is a definite opportunity for up scaling the playgroup, especially after the group's move to new, more spacious premises. The main ambivalence present in WIG revolves around the need to consider professionalization and business-like management of activities for which there is realistic potential of market demand and revenue for the

group. Considering the fact that the group was created less than a year ago as an informal space for mutual support and sharing, it is no surprise that new opportunities fill the group members with fear of responsibility that may exceed their perceived capacity.

Women's Group Vojnić: Multi-purpose Public Space as a Peacebuilding Tool

The Women's Group Vojnić (WGV) currently consists of five fully active members (1 Croatian settler, 4 domicile Serbs) and other five recently more active members (2 domicile Croats, 2 domicile Serbs and 1 Serb originally from Kosovo), whose age ranges from early thirties to mid fifties, with majority in late thirties/early forties. Most group members have higher education and all core members are employed (one full time librarian, one self-employed shopkeeper, two temporarily employed school teachers and one as a secretary for municipal government). Over the past four years, WGV has had a history of ups and downs, which were mostly contingent on the commitment and integrity of official or unofficial but actual group leaders. During Summer 2002, the group was in deep crisis as the woman who had most control over the group missed to meet her obligations to other members and donors. She eventually stepped down and the group elected new leadership. CESI members have witnessed all of the phases and have stayed committed to the group as it strove to consolidate. The Women's Group Vojnić is an important reminder of the importance of synergy among individuals who take initiative and need for patience with fragility of self-created group structures in post-war environments where opportunities to experience power are scarce, resulting in greater chances of its abuse and mismanagement.

Since the group's renewal in July 2002, WGV has managed to develop a plan and fundraise for an ambitious project of building and then running a spacious multipurpose playground, that would provide opportunities for spontaneous interactions between Croatian, Serbian and Bosniak children, their parents and youth who could engage in various sports, such as roller skating, art workshops, poetry evening, concerts, summer parties and whatever else might stem out of their creativity. The group chose this project with full awareness of the need to improve the group's public image, burdened by past and offer something tangible to the community. The first sign of community acceptance has been the local authorities' official permission to use the public terrain for the construction of the playground. During Summer 2003, the construction is well underway, as municipal bulldozers have cleaned up enough space to build an additional swimming pool!

The following excerpts from interviews with core group members provide a vivid picture of the Women's Group Vojnić's primary motivation to bring about a positive change in the quality of life in Vojnić, especially for children and women. That desire is from their perspective inseparable from the motivation to break down ethnic divisions, citizens' overwhelming passivity and distrust of their neighbors.

Motivations for Community Peacebuilding: Personal Accounts

The current leader is a young woman Natasa who used to act as the group's treasurer and was willing to take up most administrative and coordination duties, since at that time she was unemployed. Her motivation to join the group was interest in some kind of social activity at the time when she had no job. Natasa is inspired to improve the quality of life in Vojnić, help bring people out of their houses and create new relationships. She sees this activity as a way of improving her personal quality of life, too. Immediately upon return from exile in Serbia, she approached her new neighbors, Croatian settlers from Bosnia: "I knocked on their door, they were a bit surprised. Now our children are inseparable. I wanted my child not to be alone. We are great friends now. I even have more friends among settlers than the domicile population. It is very hard to find people in Vojnić who are sincere and not envious. I am looking forward to the return of my best friend from Serbia, she and her partner eventually decided to come back. I am very excited!" After the past nine months in the leadership role, Natasa is additionally motivated to make the group's plans a success.

Dusanka, a librarian, is an experienced and highly competent woman who is single-handedly managing the town library, which is always crammed by schoolchildren who play on the computers and heaps of newly arrived books. Despite her challenging job, considering lack of space for appropriate archiving, lack of money for a professional computer database and an assistant, Dusanka is the extremely motivated and resourceful member of WGV. She joined the group officially only last summer, despite the fact that she had provided advice and support to the group during all of its previous phases. Her main motivation is to support less experienced women who were ready to pull the group out of the problems and create new projects. Dusanka is deeply involved with the current project of constructing a multipurpose playground and she uses every minute at her disposal at work to phone various construction companies for prices of equipment. She is filled with ideas and future plans for the group, such as an economic empowerment project or service delivery to the elderly.

Nasta, a Croatian settler for Bosnia and schoolteacher joined the group upon contact with Dusanka, who invited Nasta to help her in the library when Nasta was unemployed: *"Dusanka suggested that I joined the group. In last July, we all met spontaneously, it felt as if we had grown up together. Dusanka knew I had no job so she wanted to include me. Of course I agreed to anything that is good for the well-being of Vojnić"*

Nasta arrived to Vojnić in October 1997 as part of the governmental settlement plan of the post-war depopulated areas. She had no job until Fall 2002, when she started teaching Croatian in the local primary school on a temporary basis. Even though she is busy with her job now, Nasta continues to be active in the group:

"I want to help the children of Vojnić, there are many children spending free time in the streets. I also want to help myself. I want to help open communication between the people."

Nasta professional counterpart and fellow group member is Ranka, who teaches Serbian as a minority language in the same school, also on a temporary basis. Ranka returned from exile in Serbia in April 1997 and already in 1998 she joined other women who organized playgroups for children.

"I am always interested in anything to do with children. That is why I care so much about our current project."

Ranka has also been active as SDF community visits volunteer and as an independent political candidate who joined a Serbian political party since she had respect for the leader. Currently she is withdrawn from politics due to some disappointments, but might take up political activism in the future. Ranka and Nasta cooperate closely both at school and within the group.

"We hope to act as a bridge between the school and the WGV project of the multi-purpose playground, which we want to become a springboard for co-existence, cultural life, sports events, there are so many possibilities once we have it!"

Trust, openness and mutual support are evident between Ranka and Nasta, just like among other WGV core group members, who openly discuss their ideas, personal ambitions and past experiences, including war:

"In this patriarchal environment, you can get criticized for being a women's group, you are accused of being against men. Also, we have been criticized for being only a 'one nation-only group, which is obviously untrue. The five of us are not under pressure of nationalism; we do not consider ethnic background important. It is our ambition to break up these divisions in Vojnić."

CESI's External Support as Catalyst of Resource Mobilization

The most visible result of collaboration with CESI has been considerable increase of the local women's groups' access to external financial resources and, most importantly, new networks of contacts. In addition to core funding of approx. 4000 USD provided by the CESI Support Program (Mercy Corps) to each group, enabling them to cover their basic office and communication expenses, basic community project materials as well as small honoraria, each group has pursued several fundraising initiatives and new partnerships with international donors and local businesses, international and local NGOs that provide support to civil society development in the post-war areas, with whom the groups would have otherwise not been familiar with. For instance, the Women's Club Dvor was approved a 10,500 Euro small grant by the Academy of Educational Development, for six months of computer workshops and playgroups for children from surrounding villages who had to wait for transport after school and would otherwise hang out in the streets. CARE International and ZaMirNET have selected the group as one of their local partners for their year-long project "Sustainable Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons", funded by the European Commission, through which the Women's Club Dvor has received computer equipment, resources for operational expenses and most importantly, advanced ICT training for the future leader of the women's Internet Club.

Despite a long, frustrating period of applications for considerable funds needed to create a multifunctional playground that would serve as a tool of community integration, Women's Group Vojnić has been successful in accessing over 34,000 Euro from three international donors (AED, CRS and CNF - Cooperating Netherlands Fund) which have been sufficient for the beginning of construction of the playground, additionally supported by voluntary services and materials from the local authorities and businesses.

Women's Initiative Gvozd has been successful in setting-up a children's' playgroup that has been recognized by the local authorities and CRS as a potential community childcare service, worthy of basic financial support of a total annual amount of 6000 Euro. While the group's idea of commercial curtain production for kindergartens has proved to be unrealistic, considering the women's lack of entrepreneurial experience and limited mobility to explore potential markets, the members have decided to focus on less demanding small-scale production of bed-sheets, for which there is sufficient and accessible local market.

CESI has also facilitated exchanges between the three groups and their links with other training and networking resources, such as the organizational development course delivered by a trainers' NGO SMART from Rijeka. With IRC support, two WCD members visited the national NGO fair held in Zagreb in February 2003 where they found out about the work of the Association for Prevention of Breast Cancer from Velika Gorica and invited them to hold a public lecture in Dvor. CESI has also ensuring that the groups establish long-term cooperation with the Women's Network of Croatia, the main resource for national advocacy campaigns on women's human rights, solidarity actions and information on funding and training opportunities. For instance, the Women's Network Coordinator, located in the rich region of Istria, periodically organizes donor drives for equipment needed by women's groups in post-war areas, such as toys for children's playgroups. The Women's Network also has funds for public presentations on women's rights issues in small communities throughout the country.

The seminar on Women's Human Rights organized by CESI in Topusko for members of all three groups, was highlighted as particularly useful to the young women from Gvozd, who account how it helped them become aware of the lack of information available to women in Gvozd, which prevents them from demanding respectful treatment by various public institutions and private employers:

"That seminar had a great influence on me – I managed to get it my way with the electric company that switched off our power supply, at the unemployment bureau and at the housing commission. You know they treat us, settlers, as if we were completely ignorant villagers and just threaten us, for instance, they offer young women hard physical labor jobs at the sawmill or brick-factory and tell us that if we refuse, they would erase us from the list. They are plenty of women who have no health insurance, so they know people would take such heavy jobs just to get health insurance. Now I know they cannot do it, they cannot offer me just any job, with disregard of my professional background and health. And they cannot threaten me. After the seminar I keep the list of rights I got there with me and just act upon it. There are so many other women who would need that education."

CESI's role was instrumental in linking the groups catalyzing with potential pools of resources, which CESI combined with transfer of skills in effective marketing of the women's groups' needs (project proposal development, direct communication with funders) and direct lobbying on behalf of the local women's groups.

Finally, CESI's availability to the groups has been instrumental in unavoidable times of crisis that have mostly revolved around the issue of leadership – the slippery terrain considering the lack of experience in participatory decision-making and organizing. For that reason, CESI have gained deep trust of the three groups that goes well beyond their role of providers of seed funds and technical assistance.

Risks of External Support Provision

While the richness of established contacts with potential resource providers is impressive, the local women's initiatives, and Women's Club Dvor in particular, are increasingly facing challenges of becoming beneficiaries of inadequately coordinated support programs offered by different NGOs, themselves held accountable for efficient implementation of support projects by different donor agencies. The support providers should bear in mind that for the nascent civil initiatives in socially and economically deprived post-war areas, it might be difficult to assess which support they really need at a given time and take power to negotiate suitable time-frames and the pace of support. In the phase where local initiatives have considerably less experience in partnership development and still feel grateful for any external assistance, it is primarily the responsibility of support providers to make sure that their focus on the community-based initiatives does not result in programmatic and organizational confusion within the local groups that tend to adjust the focus and scale of their activities to what they perceive as expectations from their support providers. For instance, Women's Club Dvor members have mentioned a sophisticated training in monitoring and evaluation, which they attended at the time when the group was in a nascent phase and could not make any use of the training. Now that they might need such a training, it is not available.

Another example was the offer made to the Women's Club Dvor to be provided with expert assistance in business plan development for its Internet Café, the implementation of which was already underway in the context of the support program provided by CESI. While the group accepted the offer, the process of business plan development eventually failed due to colliding expectations about the nature of the Internet Café. The group viewed it as a small-scale community service, partially reliant on self-financing from Internet fees, while the consultant approached it from a commercial perspective and expected the group to conduct comprehensive market research. In addition, the timing of that exercise overlapped with the group's other activities – attendance of ICT training, organization of children's playgroups and computer classes. Little time was left to the group members to conduct a proper community survey, considering their other obligations in the group and their family settings.

Considering the hasty process of project proposal development submitted to major international funding agencies, such as the CARDS program of the European Commission or the ECRA program of

USAID, requiring early identification of community-based organizations that would receive technical support, international and national NGOs tend to focus on the same community initiatives which have been referred to by their counterparts, especially in light of the fact that there is a relative scarcity of local groups committed to inter-ethnic cooperation in the limited pool of municipalities which have been designated as principal recipients of foreign assistance. Namely, the two principal donors' (USAID and EC) selection of post-war municipalities that receive multi-year assistance for physical and social reconstruction has largely overlapped⁵. The overlap is also due to the fact that both agencies sign agreements with those municipalities that demonstrate commitment to the two-way return process, readiness to cooperate with NGOs and cost-share contribution to the reconstruction efforts. Croatian NGOs, such as CESI, ZaMirNET, OGI, CZMOS are hence at risk of reproducing mutual competition and collision of agendas, which they experienced in the role of beneficiaries during the 1990's when numerous international donors concentrated their assistance programs on a handful of peace and human rights-oriented local NGOs. Fortunately, all of these organizations are aware of the problem and have taken steps towards more timely and frequent exchange of information. This coordination is crucial at the time of program design, when there is still an opportunity for support providers to compare their needs assessments and hence achieve a more balanced and efficient outreach to the post-war areas of Croatia. In parallel, it is important to advocate greater coordination among the donor agencies, as has been done by CARE International, ZaMirNET and GONG in their mid term report on their joint implementation of the EC's Sustainable Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons- Civil Society Project in the municipalities of Dvor, Glina, Gračac and Knin, where they encountered uncoordinated overlaps with the USAID ECRA Program, of which CESI's support program is a part.

The example of the WCD's business plan development also sheds light on another key risk related to external support provided to emerging community-base initiatives in post-war settings – the overestimation of the groups' readiness to upscale their activities and implement their ideas with priority focus on effectiveness, which necessarily requires the local initiatives to increase their managerial responsibility and restructure their daily routines. As demonstrated in the internal analysis of the challenges in implementation of the curtain-making and playgroup projects the Women's Initiative Gvozd, external support providers need to be aware that women who get involved in community-based initiatives are primarily seeking safe space where they can compensate their sense of social isolation and hopefully make some little income that would suffice for covering their basic transportation, communication costs and minimum supplies for their gatherings, such as coffee.

Even though it may seem logical that chronically unemployed women would embrace opportunities for self-employment, it should be noted that the members of women's initiatives are often not ready to transform their organizational structure and culture in order to make income, as they do not perceive income itself as sufficient benefit, considering the cost of stress about meeting market demands. This is a rational position, considering that such income-generation projects are nested in voluntary, almost informal groups that have had moderate experience with running any kind of longer-term project and minimum responsibility for securing significant financial resources. The leap from that organizational profile to a profile of an effective, self-financed group that successfully operates in a highly vulnerable economy could be viewed as rather unrealistic, especially in the time frame of one year.

From its collaboration on the income-generation project with the Women's Initiative Gvozd, CESI have learned an important lesson of the need for a highly cautious encouragement of the nascent

⁵ USAID partner municipalities included in the CIRP and ECRA programs are Djulovac, Pakrac and Okučani in Western Slavonia, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Gvozd, Dvor and Vojnić in the Banovina region, Kistanje, Drniš, Obrovac in Dalmatian hinterland and Donji Lapac in Lika . All these municipalities, except for Kistanje, are also included in the European Union Program of Reconstruction for Return (EUPOP), in addition to eight other municipalities (Vukovar, Lovas, Ernestinovo and Stari Jankovci in Eastern Slavonia, Dragalic and Sunja in Western Slavonia, Glina, Karlovac, Knin, Ervenik, Biskupija, Civljane and Gračac).

community initiatives to engage in activities which require a high degree of internal coordination, mobility and tolerance to stress related to tight deadlines and uncertain availability resources. Considering that the women's initiatives bring together women of most different profiles, among whom only a few aspire to become entrepreneurs, while most of them primarily seek safe social space, the key to effective support provision in times of potential up-scaling is carefully exploration of motivation factors present within the group, as well as fears related to women's self-confidence and realistic danger of exposure to potential envy, typical for communities where resources and opportunities for visible success are scarce. Understanding and respecting the motivations and limitations present within the community-based initiatives in a given moment is the best guarantee that external support might help them eventually take additional steps towards achieving a greater community impact.

Similarly to the examination of the CZMOS peacebuilding program, the analysis of CESI's multi-year support provision to the emerging women's organizations in Croatian post-war areas points out the importance of time to establish trusting relationships with individual women, take the risk of making investments into emerging organizations and remain alert to their changing needs. All of that presumes a program design that enables flexibility in the timing and actual contents of specific support interventions, if the support provided were to be beneficial to the community peacebuilding initiatives. Such approach requires donor agencies to step out of their comfort zone of assessing potential effectiveness of support provision based on tight time-frames, detailed activity plans and allegedly predictable outputs, which are far more appropriate for house building, rather than peacebuilding endeavors.