

Going Home

WORKSHOP
REPORT

A Day Workshop on the Problems of Return

by Kathleen Shepherd

Listen to the voices of people on all sides of the problem! In keeping with this first caveat for the work of conflict transformation, CCTS members did some intense listening on 16 January at Friends International House. We had gathered to explore the personal and political obstacles to the return of refugees and internally displaced people after violent conflict. Members who work within NGOs to transform conflicts in former Yugoslav republics and the Caucasus region, as well as in Africa and in Latin America, began the day of exchange by hearing the perspectives of two guest panellists who have administered repatriation programmes for UN agencies.

The guests were Larry Hollingsworth, who has worked with UNHCR in a number of refugee return programmes, and Philip Peirce, who has recently worked with UNDP in Central Bosnia. Their on-the-ground accounts of their work to return hundreds of thousands of wartime refugees to their former homes gave a picture of the imperatives governing these programmes. There is pressure from donors and host nations to return people home as soon as possible. There is an expectation that the allotted budget will be spent within a specific time period no matter how circumstances may change. There is an assumption that money is the engine of redevelopment. Under these conditions, the voices of the refugees, whose lives are at the center of the turmoil, are not readily heard.

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In evaluating the success of UN repatriation programmes, the panellists emphasized good timing, careful preparation and sufficient money. Larry Hollingsworth showed how all three contributed to the successful return of Ethiopian refugees from Sudan by UNHCR. The timing for return was right because the war was clearly ended. Fifty eight thousand men from Mengistu's defeated army agreed to be disarmed by their Sudanese "hosts" and were airlifted by UNHCR to Addis Ababa. This was managed in just seven months. Good planning was evident in the thought given to the refugees' needs after their return to their capital city. The differing needs of urban and rural dwellers were considered, and the latter were provided with immediate transport to their villages along with a package of appropriate supplies to help them start making their living once more. The subsequent return and successful reintegration of 340,000 other refugees of the conflict was achieved at a total cost of \$154 million.

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Balkan Peace Team *continued from the Back Page*

changed from exuberance to inhibition. Without a friendly foreigner to escort them, I suppose the Belgrade students would have tried to catch a taxi -- but maybe the Prishtina students would have decided to stay away.

* In June, an Albanian woman from Prishtina and a Serb from Pancevo (Vojvodina) agreed at a workshop in Budapest to set up a mixed Albanian-Serb workshop together in Prishtina. However, back home, neither of them could find Kosovo Serb women willing to take part -- until they asked the BPT.

* One particular feature of a continuous presence is that the team can follow up other international initiatives. For instance, Pax Christi International's Link programme periodically brings together young people from all over former-Yugoslavia, including Serbs and Albanians, while the Nansen Peace Academy in Lillehammer, Norway, has by now had perhaps 20 people from Kosovo (Serbs and Albanians) on its courses for people from former-Yugoslavia. At several levels, it's been useful for participants in these projects to have a sympathetic international ear back in their home situation: to reflect and to think about possible developments. We are currently investigating starting a second team working on Kosovo.

"Volunteer but not amateur"

BPT has high standards for its volunteers. We expect them to make a commitment of a minimum of one year, and choose them after a three-day assessment. Before they go to the field, they take part in a 10-day training (which is normally now co-facilitated with trainers from the region), and, once in the field, the first month includes daily language lessons. In May this year we were in the exceptional position where all three volunteers in FRY could speak Serbian fluently and could read and make themselves understood in Albanian.

The commitment our volunteers show to the particular situation they are in brings a response from locals that is quite in contrast to the common attitude to bigger and better-funded international agencies. Each team has a sub-group of people with a continuous and long-term engagement in the situation, giving regular feedback on the team's bi-weekly reports and advice on questions that come up.

As well as evaluating the work of the volunteers (after three months and upon leaving), BPT also has periodic evaluations of the team's role with input from local reference people. The wars in former-Yugoslavia have attracted many well-meaning people to go there as individuals, and many people have designed peace-building projects -- some of them attracting big money. In BPT, we feel that our rather modest project -- currently two teams of three volunteers in Croatia and one in FRY -- has continuity, a team culture, and a sense of accountability that others would benefit from.

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By contrast, the return of Georgian IDPs to Abkhazia seemed to be weak on timing and planning. In spite of the reluctance of some of the refugees, and the warnings from various quarters that return was premature, 200 people were sent back, only to be intimidated and to retreat. In addition, money was insufficient. Larry's conclusion from this experience was, "You've got to know it's right. You have to have the courage to stop it if it's wrong."

In a third case, unforeseen difficulties for repatriation arose from plans to house refugees from Chechen with host families in Dagestan. During the war, the local economy was disrupted by the presence of relief food on the market. After the war, many refugees chose the advantages of Dagestan's regular food supply, schools, and clinics, over return to their home area. Larry concluded that UNHCR's policies in this case had the effect of discouraging their return home.

Philip Peirce's account of his work with UNDP to return displaced persons within Central Bosnia stressed the development of different plans for different areas, with sensitivity to the political differences. In terms of timing, there is tension between the people's need to feel secure and the risk that delay may lead to further entrenchment of community divisions. Philip described some regions as currently incapable of reintegration, and others in which an abundance of resources are now being invested. Philip administers a civil society grants program which funds projects in media, small business, and home repair, focusing resources in a limited geographic area in the hope of effecting measurable change. The available budget for redevelopment is huge -- six times more per capita than the Marshall plan -- and geared mainly to rebuilding infrastructure. But the tasks of assessment, planning, and building are difficult in the towns which have separate and recalcitrant Bosniac authorities, and by corrupt and separatist mayors who came to power in the fighting.

Having listened closely to these perspectives from UN agency experiences, CCTS members

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followed with questions focused on the refugees' experiences -- their real and perceived security, their ability to overcome the trauma of war and to rebuild their lives, their willingness to coexist alongside former enemies.

David Lord's question hovered over the discussion: "Do conflict resolution organisations have any actual impact?" The answers were not quick in coming, perhaps because of the different lenses used by UN and NGO workers. But some of the spaces in which conflict transformation is essential to the successful return of refugees emerged in discussion. First, there are neglected places. Certain war-torn regions such as Ossetia receive little international support because they have less strategic importance to donor nations. Second, psycho-social needs are neglected everywhere. Any existing social welfare structures of countries were destroyed by war when social sector workers fled or were killed. For example, in Bosnia 70 per cent of children have witnessed a traumatic event and many women have suffered rape, but no official provision exists to help with their psychological recovery. Cross-community reconciliation programmes are without funding. Third, preventive work is neglected. The seeds of future wars are in the unhealed wounds of past violence, but there is no wide awareness of this relationship, and major funds are spent neither on social welfare nor on the prevention of future conflicts.

From the discussion, facilitators Diana Francis and Alan Pleydell developed three areas of questions, dilemmas, and conundra for smaller groups to consider.

1) What is the "right" intervention, and how is it affected by problems of power, money and mandates? How can analysis and mapping help determine when and how it is "right" to repatriate refugees? How can we assess perceived threats to security as well as objective danger to the returnees?

2) What account must be taken of refugees' perceptions, hostility and trauma? How are they affected by media and propaganda? How are fears for security at the psychological level to be considered?

3) How is the right timing and situation for intervention determined in view of socio-political group relations, ethnicity, local power structures,

and war crimes tribunals? How can refugees' security be ensured?

Participants divided themselves into three groups and spent the remainder of the morning and early afternoon airing and sharing their experiences around these themes. The day concluded with a final plenary in which each group shared its central observations with the others. Diana Francis pointed out that the people who are most affected-- the refugees themselves -- have the least say in the decisions about return. CCTS members made a continuous effort throughout the day to include the refugee voices they had heard during the course of their work.

Peter Jarman supported the value of listening to people on the local level, but reminded us of the need for a larger awareness which seeks to influence people and agencies at different levels. To this end, efforts to define what different NGOs are able to do and to coordinate their work would benefit refugees.

An effective permanent international tribunal geared not to specific conflicts was thought to command more respect and power to deter future violations.

In keeping with that concern, the "short-termism" of donor agendas was criticised as destructive to a problem that demands a long-term perspective and long-term engagement.

The merits and dangers of war tribunals were raised in an effort to assess their potential for reconciliation versus exacerbation of the conflict. An effective permanent international tribunal geared not to specific conflicts was thought to command more respect and power to deter future violations.

Someone summed up the day's work: To be more questioning is wiser -- it increases the chance of doing some good. Implicit in this thought is the wisdom of listening as well, particularly to the refugee voices of those who are most affected.

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Grappling with the issues

Participants entered groups whose themes were derived from the morning's initial exploration of issues affecting returnees, refugees, and survivors of war. Kathleen Shepherd provides the highlights of one group discussion.

The psychological problems: perceptions, hostility, trauma, insecurity and fears of return

The need to heal the psychological trauma of war was seen to be at the heart of recovery and readjustment of refugees. Without such help, people who have suffered, lost homes and familiar social structures, and been humiliated, remain permanently vulnerable to manipulation by propaganda and exploitation by dictators.

Individuals are the focus of healing work, which involves listening and witness to restore their human dignity, and being present alongside in order to provide them with release from their own hurt. Emotional health of the individual needs to be rebuilt before reconciliation can occur. The psychological need for the "enemy" outside must be confronted before people are able to work with the guilt and bigotry that fuels both sides of the conflict. Single-community work which restores confidence and positive forms of solidarity must precede cross-community work. Such work may include engaging survivors in work to help their own people (requires some outside support for salaries and materials), which empowers them to be effective in using their own abilities.

Cross-community work which enables former enemies to co-operate for common benefit is the eventual goal. Cultural exchange may become possible. In a project based on these principles, a women's election observation project proposed for Sierra Leone will provide training for each community separately in the first phase and for both communities together in the second. A multicultural "road show" in local languages will go from county to county.

Reconciliation happens at the level of the individual. For reconciliation to occur, each side needs to take responsibility for their part in contributing to the conflict. Staying in the "blame game" only produces stalemate. Cross-community work can permit people to develop a joint account or common memory of what happened in the conflict, as a platform for reconciliation. Individual acts of public apology can also be very influential on willingness for reconciliation.

Media effects and potentials

Media are often state-controlled and used to foment and perpetuate fears and hatred in order to inhibit return. Independent media in post-war settings is

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vulnerable to government shut-down or at least criticism as outside interference. The socialisation of people by their governments to accept media messages uncritically continues as a problem in Africa, former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Possibly some resistance to propaganda is restored by the work of healing. Radio talk formats which air alternative views may also help. Radio can be used to good effect in post-war settings to inform and empower specific groups such as rural women. One of our group said, "Propaganda succeeds when the people are broken." How can they become "healthy inside"? There is a great need for a restoration of self-respect.

Criteria for outside intervention

Do no harm! Outside intervention must be cautiously applied. On the level of material aid, attention to the needs and culture of the recipients is demanded in order to give them the food or material they need, not what the donors want to get rid of. Ill-informed intervention is worse than none, creating cynical attitudes toward the donors.

Time and money

The time scale required for beneficial assistance depends on the goal of the intervention. Short-term workshops were seen as severely limited for any purpose; to change attitudes may take a lifetime of witness and healing work. Germany and the UK were observed to have gone from war to co-operation in a generation -- what made that possible and are there lessons for former Yugoslavia? Time-limited refugee resettlement may force people back into situations they fear or which are actually unsafe.

Some money is needed even for small interventions, but larger sums distributed to NGOs for example cause problems of competition. If used insensitively to the local economy, payments can make return to the home region unattractive to refugees. Large international donations were judged unlikely to go to rebuilding much-needed social services or other interventions for individuals. But one case of Swedish support for local Chechnya health- and child-care workers is working well by paying modest salaries which create jobs without producing envy.

A problem of scale

The work of reconciliation can be motivated by the workers' spiritual concerns and commitments to heal individuals one by one. Large scale refugee return projects are directed to physical relocation and material aid. How can this gulf be bridged? A search should be made for persons of vision within large organisations, who may be approached as individuals. Dialogue should be developed between organisations serving in one region in order to co-ordinate their efforts. Workshops should be conducted with funders, "who are human, too." People in small organisations should take time to understand the constraints and structures of the large ones, as this workshop has helped us to do.

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“Right interventions/right conditions”

by Nick Wilson, Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb

This group mapped out the problems of power, money and mandates involved with deciding when and how it is "right" to repatriate refugees. A first obstacle was to define who we were talking about. Refugees (taking shelter in another country), displaced people (displaced into another part of their own country), asylum seekers, and those "in limbo". All have different needs and different rights under international law. We then brainstormed the "ideal" conditions in which returns might take place, from the point of view of the refugees. These included actual safety, the level of safety as perceived by often fearful refugees, housing, trusted information about the situation in the home environment, and financial help or the means to support themselves once returned.

However, we also acknowledged that many of these conditions cannot be assessed with a yes/no, but are variables. Acceptable and perceived levels of risk vary from case to case. For example, displaced people in Bosnia fear for their safety when returning, while refugees who might have spent the war abroad and "missed" the war may fear a loss of financial security.

Ring-fenced money is often given for refugee return programmes in a certain period, linked to the donor nation's own needs...

From this "wish list", we moved naturally onto the reality that UN agencies and NGOs are often under pressure to effect returns quickly. Refugees are also under pressure to leave their host countries or areas. Displaced people are at risk of summary deportation, while refugees can be pressured to return by cutting off benefits. We also noted that in Bosnia, pressure to return against the advice of UN protection officers has led to fatalities.

We questioned the right of, and ability of, "programme officers" to decide when the risk to returnees is acceptable. We also considered how the policies of nation-donors to the UN creates a false urgency for staff to act in the short term. Ring-fenced money is often given for refugee return programmes in a certain period, linked to the donor nation's own needs (for example, in the case of Germany, to empty Germany of Bosnian refugees).

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Those with UN experience noted that funds unspent by the end of such fixed funding periods are lost, and that funds which are unspent by the accounting deadline are deemed to have been "mismanaged".

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Next we discussed how the priorities of donors, including donors to NGOs, often do not reflect the needs on the ground. For example, the great but underfunded need in Bosnia for internally displaced people to return home before the return of refugees from abroad. Balanced against these concerns, we noted that well-expressed local knowledge could sway funders in some circumstances. Also, for NGOs, and especially for refugees themselves, there is always the possibility of avoiding the donor trap by finding grassroots-up approaches which do not depend on project-funding. For example, the declaration of free zones by some local authorities in Bosnia.

The ideal versus the possible

Moving on, we compared how, faced with urgencies, whether real or funding-created, those facilitating returns could juggle the moral dilemmas of reconciling the ideal with the possible. In particular, we noted that, for some of us, our own personal agenda will determine whether we, for example, work through democratically elected yet corrupt and extremist local authorities which disempower and manipulate refugees, or bypass them creating parallel power structures. We questioned our right to do this, and similarly, the difficulty of avoiding the manipulation of angry, traumatised and dispossessed people by their own politicians.

In addition, we acknowledged that current models of return neglect the fact that the needs of individuals, their families and the ethnic or national group as a whole may be divergent. For instance, those with skills and education most needed for rebuilding and return are the most likely to be able to work abroad, and therefore often least willing to return, especially if it would involve being drafted or taxed retrospectively.

Theoretical match

The group also identified a difference in experience and approach between those who began work in a period of UN-sponsored mass return in the South, and others whose experiences are of areas where such mass returns are either not feasible, unfunded, or resisted by the refugees themselves.

In theory, the particular mandates of NGOs and the macro-concerns of the UN could create a well-covered complementary approach to return issues, with both UN and NGOs covering items which the other is not mandated or powerful enough to do. Yet, we were forced to admit that experience shows that distrust, and competition for funding, or even funding-led-existence means that this rarely occurs.

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organisations**

**International
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Reconciliation,
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**War Resisters
International,
London**

**Richardson Institute
for Peace Research,
Lancaster**

**Quaker Peace and
Service,
London**

**Responding
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“Volunteer but not amateur”

Balkan Peace Team in FRY

by Howard Clark

Nobody should expect too much of citizen dialogue projects in Kosovo -- not before the fighting, and certainly not now. However, they remain essential to establish at least the minimum basis of goodwill and understanding necessary for future co-existence and tolerance between the Albanian and Serbian communities.

The basic roles of the Balkan Peace Team in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) are to promote unofficial dialogue between Serbs and Albanians and to be an independent channel of information, both at the level of international peace groups and locally. We try to maintain a team of three volunteers based in Belgrade, but spending about half their time in Kosovo. The work is sensitive and low-key. Volunteers spend a lot of time "networking" -- they need to know, both in Serbia and in Kosovo, enough about useful contact points to be able to play the role of go-between. The first step is to identify any interest in dialogue or contact: usually that's a matter of volunteers responding to what they hear, but occasionally they also try to awaken that interest. Then comes checking if there is interest on the other side, and helping arrange a first meeting. Quite often people then need continuous encouragement and even escorting to make sure that it happens.

Five illustrations of BPT at work:

* Nis, one of the major towns in inner Serbia, lying between Belgrade and Prishtina, is where most of the Kosovo Albanian political prisoners are held. This seemed a natural base to try to make connections between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. However, when the Centre for Nonviolent Conflict Resolution first discussed the question, it brought up all sorts of tensions. The next step was for them to ask BPT to find someone to lead a "prejudice workshop". After this, BPT arranged the group's first visit to Kosovo. By October last year, when Albanian students resumed nonviolent protest for the right to education, members of the Nis group went to Prishtina to monitor what transpired and published a report describing the police brutality and the Albanians' nonviolence.

* BPT got to know many of the Belgrade students active in the pro-democracy demonstrations in the winter of 1996-97. When in October 1997 Albanian students at the "parallel" University of Prishtina (that functions out of makeshift private buildings) began to protest, BPT contacted the Belgrade students to ask what they felt. After the first demonstration, some of the Belgrade students issued a statement of solidarity, condemning police violence and supporting the right to education. Before the second, BPT arranged for a deputation of Belgrade students from various groups to go to Prishtina for separate dialogue meetings with Serbian and Albanian students. Some unfortunate remarks at a press conference later threatened to damage this process, but subsequently Belgrade students successfully backed Albanian students for the Nasa Borba Prize for Tolerance, and some of them are at the heart of the new Anti-War Campaign in Serbia.

* Visiting in Prishtina in May, when the BPT volunteers were away, I substituted for them in accompanying four Serbian students in their visit to Albanian neighbourhoods to the seat of the "parallel" university, their attitude

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