

## Misplaced Charity Undermines Kosovo's Self-Reliance

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For ten years, the international community has sent large, expensive missions to rebuild war-torn societies-without considering their impact on local civil society. At a time when civil society is seen as a pillar of development, this is an alarming omission.

It is particularly striking in Kosovo. The world has made a huge investment in the province following the withdrawal of Serbian forces. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spent almost \$90 million during 1999. The first year of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) will cost \$456 million.

Yet very little of this windfall has gone to strengthen Kosovar civil society. This is surprising when one recalls how Kosovo's Albanians took control over their own lives after 1989, when Belgrade revoked their autonomy.

Kosovo's "parallel society" was an impressive demonstration of what civil society can achieve, even in the most difficult conditions. Moreover, it stayed intact throughout the war. Although many of its leaders fled, they continued working in the refugee camps and quickly regrouped after returning to Kosovo.

This reservoir of local talent should have been the centerpiece of UNMIK's reconstruction strategy. Instead, it was squandered on a foreign-driven emergency relief operation that has undermined Kosovo's indigenous capacity for recovery.

How could this happen? What is the impact of large U.N. missions like UNMIK on civil society? What are the strengths of civil society as it emerges from war - and how can they be nurtured by international peace missions? These are important questions. After Kosovo, they demand more attention.

### *Civil Society in the Aftermath of Crisis: Survivors Not Victims*

International aid officials brought a profound misconception to their work in Kosovo. They viewed the returning Kosovar refugees as victims in need rather than survivors with strengths. Perhaps it was hardly surprising after so much brutality, yet nothing could be further from the truth. It required extraordinary resilience and skill to survive three months of aerial bombing and rampaging militia. In some respects, Kosovo's civil society emerged tougher and more mature from the ordeal.

This was not the way it looked to Geneva and New York. From the start, the international agencies assumed they were dealing with a "humanitarian emergency." At first sight this was not surprising. Sixty thousand houses were destroyed. Heating, water, electricity had stopped functioning. Over 10,000 Kosovars were missing. Mass graves were being found. Kosovo's minorities - the gypsies (Roma) and Serbs-were isolated and frightened. It is easy to see why governments threw humanitarian aid at Kosovo, and why so many seasoned international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) responded. As of December 1, two hundred and eighty-five NGOs were registered in Prishtina.

Throughout the second half of 1999, UNMIK, NATO, and their NGO partners mounted a classic relief operation. They delivered food aid, handed out shelter kits, and dispatched patrols to guard Orthodox churches and rescue individual families. But by December, there was little to show for the effort. Garbage was still piled high in the streets of Prishtina. Electricity, water, and heating were intermittent. Only one class of Kosovar police had graduated from UNMIK's police training academy. Most Serbs and Roma had fled or were in hiding. None of this is to underestimate the difficulty of rebuilding Kosovo. But it is to argue that reconstruction would have been put on a more solid footing if it had been built around civil society instead of humanitarian commodities and services. The "humanitarian challenge" was certainly less than apparent to Kosovars than to the United Nations. Many would say that after ten dreadful years, they could survive another cold winter. At least they had their freedom.

### *The Impact of Aid*

The massive concentration of international aid in such a tiny country has had a devastating impact. By December, car accidents had overtaken landmines as a source of injuries. Less visible, but equally damaging, was the inflation caused by agencies snapping up houses at prices way beyond the means of Kosovars. Unable to pay rents, and with their families on welfare, many students were forced to sleep in classrooms. But nothing caused more distortions than UNMIK's policy on salaries. Kosovar teachers, doctors, and police officials receive between \$100 and \$150 a month. But a Kosovar can earn over ten times as much by working for an international agency, as a driver, watchman, or interpreter. One UNHCR driver said sadly that he had given up his job as a public health expert, after training for six years.

Every time a Kosovar is lured away by a foreign agency, it chips away at civil society. Nazlie Bala is one of Kosovo's most experienced human rights activists. During the 1990s, she helped to establish a women's legal aid center and attended two lengthy human rights training courses in Norway and Geneva. But as a "local employee" of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) she now translates for international staff with a fraction of her experience.

Officially, Nazlie is unable even to take testimony from victims. It is a scandalous misuse of local talent.

### *Capacity Building: Rights and Wrongs*

"Local capacity building" is one of the mantras of international aid - and the professed goal of virtually every international agency. But how can it be done without imposing foreign values and suffocating local initiative? Kosovo suggests that before civil society can be nurtured, its real strengths have to be understood. Often, if the need exists then so will the strength. Women's centers are proliferating in Kosovo because they offer a place for women to meet, drink coffee, and sew - in other words, a place of their own. This is good therapy for women who might have been traumatized by rape or who lost husbands. It also hastens their emancipation in general. But will such centers need international help? Not necessarily, and even if they do, money may not be the answer. Indeed, it might do more harm than good. In one example full of potential pitfalls, the United States has provided \$10 million for a Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI) that is to be spent within a year. This is a huge sum for groups that are strong in spirit, but weak in management. It has also provoked jealousy and competition between long-time allies among Kosovo women's groups. Several new groups have formed with no other purpose than to apply for KWI money. Looked at from afar, the existence of these groups will give the impression of donor money well spent. But the mere existence of NGOs in the Western mold, created with the sole purpose of obtaining donor money, is no guarantee of a strong civic base. These newcomers are entirely dependent on donor funds that may well dry up within a year, leaving them stranded. In the meantime, they will have to handle an avalanche of paperwork that comes with being an NGO. This is not strengthening local capacity. In the end the best contributions from donors to civil society might be indirect. Kosovo's civic associations are excessively dependent on inspired individuals, who desperately need help in delegating and other management skills. Here is a role for foreign expertise. Kosovo's media could also benefit. After playing a key role in the parallel society of the 1990s, Kosovo's media is vibrant and independent, and certainly does not need direct subsidies or even journalist-training. But it would benefit from help in improving advertising and identifying commercial sources of income. In other words, there are openings for an imaginative donor in Kosovo - and plenty of ways in which foreign money and expertise could promote reconstruction. But such opportunities tend to be inexpensive, unglamorous, and very labor-intensive - not the kind of assistance that wins plaudits at home. The question is whether donors are prepared to subordinate their own agenda to the good of Kosovo. If not, they will be throwing good money after bad.

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