

## **Working with Refugees and Displaced Persons in Croatia: from dependency to development?**

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### **Introduction**

This article attempts to examine some of the issues concerning how one Croatian NGO, Suncokret, responded to the needs of refugees and displaced persons as a result of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. This response has to be understood in the context of the situation of Croatia as a newly emerging post-communist society without a tradition of NGO activity. We attempt to describe, in broad outline, some of the salient features of the situation in Croatia, before looking at Suncokret's work, and its distinctive features in terms of aims and objectives and human resources. In a more tentative final section, we think through some of the issues involved in seeing Suncokret as a development project rather than as a humanitarian aid or psycho-social project, in terms of the attempt not to promote dependency. This enables us to share some thoughts about possibilities for the future.

One of the most distressing consequences of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia & Hercegovina is that enormous numbers of people were forced to flee their homes. At the peak of the war in Croatia which started in Spring 1991, nearly 15% of the Croatian population was driven from their homes. Since the outbreak of the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina in April 1992, the number of forced migrants has grown continuously, reaching a high point of over 700,000 registered refugees and displaced persons accommodated in Croatia at the end of 1992 and beginning of 1993. Croatia, a country with a population of approximately 4.5 million, still provides shelter for some 500,000 forced migrants who have the status either of displaced persons (from Serbian held areas of Croatia), or refugees (mainly those who have fled from the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina).

One of the general features of the response to the crises in Croatia has been the setting up of a large number of NGO's. A number of organisations specifically collate information about these NGO's and, indeed, seek to encourage co-operation and collaboration between them. A directory of psycho-social projects for victims of war in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina produced, in December 1993 by the European Community Task Force, lists 76 NGO's and GO's, be they national, local, or foreign.

### **Suncokret**

Suncokret, which means sunflower in the Croatian language, was one of the first NGO's to respond to the crisis. It was formed in summer 1992 by a small group of Croatian and foreign people, mainly students, most of whom were actively involved in the anti-war movement. It became clear that, as well as political activities against the war, practical action was needed to support refugees and displaced persons in some of the emerging

camps (or collective centres) throughout Croatia. The group began by recruiting volunteers to work for short periods organising activities for refugees and displaced persons in a number of centres. The first work camps took place in the largest, and most deprived, collective centres in Croatia where basic needs were being barely met, and there were no social or recreational activities whatsoever. From small beginnings, the organisation has grown and now operates in some nineteen collective centres. It receives funds from numerous organisations, mainly foreign, and, from January 1994, it has received core funding from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

In each centre, a Suncokret team develops and maintains the programmes. These programmes aim to meet the needs of refugees and displaced persons in order to improve the quality of their lives. Our aim is to support already existing social and psychological protective factors in the people we work with and to diminish the impact of stressor factors to which they are exposed whilst living in collective centres. In a document produced by the European Community Task Force, Inger Agger describes 8 stressor factors: economic hardship, social disruption or separation, physical or psychological violence, ethnic persecution, loss of home/country/family/friends, danger/abuse during flight, reception, and the cumulative effects of living in collective centres or private accommodation. In terms of protective factors, she notes: individual coping abilities, family strength and unity, social networks, and ideological/political/religious consciousness (Agger 1993). We work through specific programmes, for pre-school children, children, young people, adults (including a well-developed women's programme), and older people. Programmes vary according to the specific circumstances, such as whether the centres are large or small, and how isolated they are in relation to centres of population. We adopt a family and community-based approach which emphasises mobilising the resources, networks, skills and knowledge which already exist in the transitional refugee community. A great deal of the work in the centres now resembles self-help programmes and activities in which the refugees and displaced persons are actively involved and increasingly in control. In many collective centres, refugees are employed as a part of the Suncokret team.

Suncokret is, in many senses, an unusual NGO, differing in terms of its aims and objectives, and in terms of its human resources, from most NGO's and social work agencies working in this field. In addition, much of our current thinking involves an attempt to become a development-oriented organisation, underpinned by our criticisms of those programmes which can be described as 'humanitarian aid' or 'psycho-social'.

### **Aims and Objectives**

Suncokret's aims go beyond the attempt to develop a technical program of assistance to refugees and displaced persons. It defines its aims as social engagement, rather than the provision of humanitarian relief or crisis oriented psychological intervention. Most importantly, it still describes itself as a grassroots organisation - a word/concept that does not exist in the Croatian language ("grass?" , "roots?", "Suncokret/sunflower?", an agricultural organisation?), so no one is quite sure what it means. For us "grassroots" seems to have to do with values, rather than definite, fixed models. It reflects our philosophy about how to put a human rights perspective into practice in changing

circumstances. Above all, our values concern transformation rather than imposed interventions. We are aiming for change from below with the agricultural metaphor being useful in terms of our commitment to organic processes in which we grow and emerge rather than transplant models from elsewhere. "Grassroots" is there as a reminder, which, maybe, cannot be understood fully, capable of being constantly problematized; reflexive and constantly questioning rather than complacent and content.

If we define politics in terms of power, then Suncokret is a political initiative, perhaps a movement, in the sense that it is committed to grassroots work, to peace and to the principles of non-violence. Suncokret works with, or alongside, people rather than for them and values the importance of cultural diversity and challenging oppression. Suncokret seeks to provide opportunities for people to exercise their right to choose and make decisions, to take more control over their lives and the use of resources available through international aid funds for improvement of the "war victims psycho-social well being". We experience that this is a way in which individuals, groups and communities empower themselves.

Suncokret operates according to an explicit mission statement and objectives which have been accepted by everyone who works with them. The Mission Statement is as follows:

"War damage goes far beyond easily observed human and material losses. Suncokret addresses the psychological, social, cultural and environmental consequences of war in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. As an organisation committed to community development, it aims to mitigate the effects of war and enable local and international participation in post-war reconstruction, rehabilitation and peace-building."

Suncokret's objectives are currently being amended to reflect changing circumstances. The following 7 objectives of work with refugees and displaced persons best represent our current thinking:

1. To promote a safe and predictable environment in the collective centres which provides for normality to the highest degree possible.
2. To promote learning which develops abilities, skills and competences.
3. To promote active coping strategies and support self-help initiatives which improve the quality of life in the collective centres and, for the future, empowering people to take control over their lives and act independently.
4. To promote integration wherever possible between refugee and displaced communities and the local community through communication and co-operation.
5. To treat people with respect and dignity, recognising their individual worth and respecting family networks.
6. To develop social awareness and social action, and contribute to the transformation to a civil society.
7. To identify individuals and families who need professional psychological, medical or other assistance and to facilitate their access to it.

## **Human Resources**

The second unusual feature of Suncokret, in the context of work in Croatia, is in the kinds of people who carry out its aims and objectives. Initially, the model for work was, very much, the idea of a 'work camp' including foreign and domestic volunteers giving up three or six weeks to work in a centre. Increasingly, the balance of the work is changing towards longer-term personnel, including foreign volunteers. We are a Croatian NGO, involving workers of various ethnic identities, from within Croatia as well as Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Involving international volunteers has many advantages and disadvantages. In terms of advantages, there is a sense of solidarity and of adding something to the context in which refugees and displaced persons interpret their experience, not least in terms of challenging the feeling that they have been abandoned by the world. In relating to foreign volunteers, refugees can take on new roles, becoming hosts and representatives of their culture. Discussions occur which reinforce positive identities other than the imposed identity as a 'refugee'. Our work is carried out in teams which include people of many nationalities. This provides a practical expression of our principle that difference and diversity are welcomed and provide richness. It provides a model of how different people can work together.

There are a number of disadvantages or problems which we face in using foreign volunteers. Most importantly, many are short-term so that it is very difficult for them to be effective in their work in a different cultural setting. Many face language problems which also inhibit their effectiveness. There are problems of recruiting and selecting enough volunteers. We co-operate with organisations which are more familiar with recruiting volunteers for different kinds of development work. It is difficult to find volunteers willing and able to make a meaningful contribution to our work (in the camps) and to stay longer than three or six weeks. In addition, our volunteers are not well prepared, in the host country, or upon arrival in Croatia, for the work which they will perform.

Finally, the motivation of foreign volunteers is an issue. Many have the all too familiar 'need to be needed', and want to feel they made a unique contribution in the time they were here. This can interfere with the self-help approach which takes more time, and can create dependency and a patronising approach to 'giving'. Many of these criticisms are, actually, not specific to foreign volunteers. The motivation of domestic volunteers is often financial (they receive a small remuneration), although this is unsurprising in an economy affected by war and distorted by the presence of foreign agencies. As a Croatian NGO we see our future as mainly dependent on committed domestic staff. We have found that this commitment, combined with some post-school education, seems to be more important in making for the most effective members of staff, rather than, for example, University qualifications in psychology or social work.

This leads into the second issue in terms of our use of non-professionals. Whilst we do have some professional staff, including trained psychologists and social workers, most of our work is undertaken by non-professionals or para-professionals, people with no qualifications in the "helping-professions". There are a number of advantages to this.

Firstly, it ensures that needs are met which would not be covered if we relied on professionals alone since there are not enough of them. Secondly, it reinforces the idea that refugees in general are normal people in abnormal circumstances, unlike when approached by a psychiatrist where there is a danger of pathologising or medicalising what may be a normal response to abnormal circumstances. In many cases, Suncokret workers and volunteers live in the camps and this provides for closer contact with refugees and displaced persons. Our approach is framed by the principle that it is easier to establish contact with a person who becomes a 'helper' as a result of a crisis, rather than someone who is defined as a professional 'helper'. Receiving help in a relationship bounded by professional-client relations seems to present much more of a threat to self-esteem and identity. Of course, there are some disadvantages in using non-professionals. Above all, there is a danger that borders and roles are unclear and non-professionals may find themselves involved in tasks for which they are not prepared, are uncertain how to help, and can do damage. The problem of over identification is also an issue, and there is a real danger of high levels of stress and burn-out. Still, most Suncokret teams live in the centres in which they work. Initially, this was helpful in establishing good contact with refugees and showing solidarity, but we are increasingly aware of the importance of the time and space away from the centre.

This division between professionals and non-professionals in many ways misses the point. For us, the real issue is about what people need to have in order not to pathologize but to have the know how to help people in extreme pain. Our experience suggests that knowledge, life experience, personal qualities, commitment to Suncokret's approach and responsibility are most important in determining who should be doing the helping work in a situation of conflict, mass forced migration, and change. We see consistent supervision, taking care of staff and the provision of appropriate training as vital.

In struggling to achieve our objectives, both in terms of means/process and ends/outcomes, we are stumbling over a number of obstacles. Some of them are related to context, organisation and evaluation.

The context in which Suncokret operates is determined by the fact that there were very few NGOs in Croatia before the war. The government is suspicious of NGO activity and the general public is reluctant to engage in new civil initiatives. NGOs are facing numerous problems related to complexities of devising a new legal framework. In addition to that, there are distortions produced by foreign agency involvement.

The notion that organisations engaged or created in conflict situations react in an ad hoc way rather than planning coherent responses to conflict is valid for Suncokret. In terms of dealing with internal organisational issues, Suncokret suffers from unintended consequences of its own rapid growth in response to the needs of refugees. Being task focused rather than personnel and processes focused, Suncokret neglected putting time and resources into developing its own organisational structure that would facilitate long term, consistent, work, rather than emergency crises responses. Also we are changing from a non-hierarchical into a hierarchical structure, which should provide support and

also ensure flexibility. However, this has been a painful process in which leadership and power issues are constantly being worked on.

The issue of evaluation relates to the fact that it is vital to address whether Suncokret's objectives fit with needs and priorities, and to examine how effective we are in implementing our objectives. We have not carried out the kind of evaluation necessary for the development of an effective long-term approach. This is mostly due to lack of funding for research from supranational agencies which emphasise only emergency relief. There is also an issue about how appropriate is the dominant research methodology within psychosocial projects in Croatia. Available evaluation models are almost exclusively quantitative and imply linear causality. In addition, links among NGOs which would enable the co-ordination of evaluation efforts are lacking.

### **Humanitarian Aid, Psycho-social Programmes and Development Projects.**

In Croatia, the work done as a response to refugees and displaced persons is referred to either as "humanitarian aid" (distributing material assistance) or "psychosocial project" which seems a very wide category including everything which is not humanitarian aid. Actually, "psychosocial projects" in general tend to focus on the psychological difficulties of individuals, families and certain groups (conceptualised in terms of having experienced trauma), using approaches and methodologies from psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry. This has led to inappropriate medicalisation of the consequences of war.

One way in which we have organised our thinking about Suncokret is to contrast the positive features of developmental projects with the negative features of two other ideal types, 'humanitarian aid work' and 'psycho-social programmes'. Of course, these ideal types are in danger of, actually, being stereotypes. There is also the danger that we fail to recognise some of the problems of developmental projects, and that because no one who works for Suncokret has a development studies background, that we see this as some kind of panacea or magical solution. Nevertheless, we attempt to present some of our thinking here, diagrammatically, in a form which may be of interest to readers of the journal. Our overall feeling is that 'humanitarian aid work' and 'psycho-social programmes' can promote dependency rather than self-help, growth and empowerment. This is not to deny the relevance and positive effects of either of these forms of help, delivered appropriately and with some consciousness of possible negative effects. Rather, it is to place ourselves firmly in a particular political and policy position which can help us to develop and change as an organisation.

**FIGURE ONE**

<b>HUMANITARIAN AID</b>	<b>PSYCHO-SOCIAL PROJECTS</b>	<b>DEVELOPMENTAL PROJECTS</b>
Dependency Patronising Demeaning Distorting of National Economy Needs of Donors Not Recipients Divisive Disrespectful Emergency Undermining Local Communities Distributive Effects - ? Reinforcing Inequalities Unaccountable Self-Maintaining Business Part of a War Game/Reproduces War Disempowering Unjust Fosters Mistrust Prevents Local Solidarity Actions	Expert Pathologising Medicalising Distanced Professionalising Inflexible Prestigious For Workers Not Users Needs Defined by Experts Not Communities Disconnected from Community Needs Self-Maintaining Disempowering Labelling eg PTSD Creates Elite Foreign Experts - Unaccountable Local Experts - Accelerated Promotion and Salary Self-Fulfilling Evaluation - Narrow; Quantitative Uncoordinated Temporary Duplicating	Flexible Empowering Engaged/Social Movement Community Based/Localised Integrating Transformative Links/Connects Different Levels Human Rights Develops Skills Democratic Civil Society Action Research Long-term Planning

**The Future of Suncokret.**

Preparing and writing this article has stimulated our own thinking. In particular, we would see 'humanitarian aid projects', 'psycho-social projects' and 'development projects' as discourses which allow for particular ways of seeing conflict, of identifying the population affected by the conflict, as well as determining possible responses. In terms of a development discourse, three issues seem to us of prime importance. They may all be discourses in their own right:

**Peace-building**

There is a clear recognition that peace-making from above is unhelpful unless it is combined with peace-building from below. We have identified the need for problem solving and conflict resolution skills at a grassroots level which derive directly from the work we do and the activities which we develop. This work is a response to requests from the people we work with rather than another specialism imposed from above. We need to develop confidence in addressing unequal power issues and building trust and a feeling of safety. The personal dimension to peace-building is important, in which people are enabled to integrate their own experience of conflict and reconstruct their lives. Of course, we also wish to connect the personal with the political in terms of emphasising the importance of debates about, and a movement towards, a just and sustainable peace.

**Integration**

One of the most important issues in our work is the development of tensions between refugee communities, internally displaced people, and local communities. Some of these may be 'real', in a sense that the wars are related to particular antagonistic constructions of ethnicity, but they are certainly exacerbated by the ways in which different services are provided, by different agencies, to different groups. This reinforces artificial and problematic divisions about who are the 'victims of the war' in a country where everyone has been affected by war. Above all, the importance of developing a social welfare infrastructure and social rights based on need rather than arbitrary criteria, should not be underestimated. Of course, there are many obstacles to this and, currently, Suncokret is simply beginning to explore this issue and move away from being focused solely on collective centres. We are addressing ways in which barriers between different groups can be broken down, addressing their shared needs, and facilitating co-operation and communication. In Croatia, some 80% of refugees and displaced persons live in 'private accommodation' in communities although, often, their material needs are not met. There are also real financial problems faced by members of local communities. The opportunity to promote integration, in the context of a shared language, is clearly present. We have begun to devise skills training course for refugees and local people, to look at developing social centres for refugee, displaced and local children. and to employ local people in our work.

**Social Awareness and Social Action**

The importance of building citizenship as an active task, in the aftermath of an authoritarian society, cannot be underestimated. Social awareness and social action are crucial components of the attempt to build civil society from below. We are increasingly concerned with questions of rights and representation which, inevitably, take us into a

difficult political arena. Our concern is to facilitate forums within collective centres to promote the articulation of needs and access to resources. We attempt to facilitate ways in which refugees and displaced persons can find a voice in the wider community, promoting confidence in developing self-organisation and self-representation. In addition, of course, we encourage local people to be involved in issues faced by refugees and displaced persons and to demonstrate active citizenship. These themes seem to us to present the most important challenges for the future.

### **Reference**

Agger I. (1993) Directory of Psycho-Social Projects in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. European Community Task Force.

### **Biographies**

**Nina Pečnik** is a founder member of Suncokret and an Assistant Lecturer in the School of Social Work in the University of Zagreb. She has an MA degree in psychology.

**Paul Stubbs** has worked for a year with Suncokret in various capacities, in a collective centre and in the central office as a supervisor. He has combined this with research work funded by Leeds Metropolitan University. He has a PhD in social work.