

SUNFLOWERS OF HOPE: Some issues in social work with refugees and displaced persons in Croatia.

Nina Pečnik, Baljit Soroya and Paul Stubbs.

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the work of 'Suncokret', a Non-Governmental Organisation working in refugee camps in Croatia. The focus is on the history, philosophy and objectives of 'Suncokret' and situates them in a broader political context. In the process, some issues concerning the provision of social work for vulnerable communities more generally are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

The series of wars in the countries making up what used to be Yugoslavia and the ensuing refugee crisis must appear to many people in Britain as an unfathomable and unremitting disaster. Yet, out of the most tragic and inhuman of situations, initiatives have emerged which combine practical help in the here and now, with hope for the future and, indeed, with lessons regarding social work services for vulnerable people in the so-called advanced societies, including Britain.

There are currently more than half a million forced migrants in Croatia who have the status either of displaced persons (from Serbian held areas in Croatia) or refugees (mainly those who have fled from the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina). This article derives from original research undertaken by two of us on social work services for refugees and displaced people in Croatia. As a result of the crisis, there have been a large number of initiatives and a large number of Non-Governmental Organisations have been formed. Many of these involve the participation of international agencies and funders. The research is a pilot project seeking to address the range of models and approaches regarding social work services currently being utilised by agencies in Croatia, as well as addressing issues of co-operation and co-ordination. The research is active and participatory, with the researchers becoming involved in a range of work with some agencies.

'SUNCOKRET'

The current article derives from collaboration with one such initiative 'Suncokret' which describes itself as a Centre for Grassroots Relief Work. 'Suncokret', which means 'sunflower' in the Croatian language, was formed in late 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, employing a large, and growing, number of Croatian, Bosnian, and foreign nationals in service delivery and co-ordinating positions. It receives funds from numerous organisations and, from January 1994, has received core funding from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Despite the organisation's rapid growth, it still calls itself a grassroots organisation. Its founders talk of the importance of walking a tightrope between being an ineffective, disorganised, ad hoc series of initiatives, and becoming a rigid bureaucratic institution. A Suncokret team of one or two workers supported by long-term and short-term volunteers, from Croatia and abroad, works in each centre developing and maintaining programmes. These programmes aim to meet the needs of refugees and displaced persons in order to improve the quality of their lives in an uncertain situation where many do not know if their friends, partners, or relatives are still alive.

Increasingly, Suncokret's work involves encouraging and supporting the initiatives developed by the refugees and displaced persons themselves. 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. The emphasis is on mobilising the resources, such as community networks, skills and knowledge, which already exist within the transitional refugee community. Many of the refugees and displaced persons have been in the centres for a long period of time, sometimes for over two years. Hence, it is no longer enough, and may be counter productive, to have the main focus of activities, as it used to be, on short term activities to give the children something to do. This can take responsibility away from existing family and community networks. The objective is to help to create an environment which is safe and predictable, thereby providing for 'normality' to the highest degree possible, and through this promoting recovery from distressing experiences. In addition, programme activities aim to promote learning, develop competencies, provide fun and joy and encourage self-expression. In the process of implementing its objectives, Suncokret is involved in collaborative activities with other NGO's and with governmental agencies.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

Suncokret is guided by a number of principles which are central to its work and it is through these principles which it clearly sets out its stall. Suncokret is a political movement, in the sense that it is committed to grassroots work, to peace and to principles of non-violence. Suncokret works with, or alongside, people rather than for them and values the importance of cultural diversity and challenging oppression. Its principles are based on an ideology which seems in marked contrast to the expert-led, top down, emphasis of a number of organisations. The dominant model for social work services in Croatia currently is framed in terms of the delivery of appropriate psycho-social interventions, based on particular psychological understandings about large numbers of refugees and displaced persons suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD). There is an ongoing debate about the relevance of this term to 'normal' populations suffering, in fact, from the 'abnormal' experiences of war and displacement. Whilst it may

have some limited value, there are real dangers of using it, in a clumsy fashion, as a technical, scientific concept which only experts understand, and tending, in the process, to label service recipients as, in some ways, mentally ill.

As a displaced person said to one of us: "It hurts that no-one comes to the camp for a year, and then they come to look at our psychological problems and symptoms. We have lost everything, but not our dignity. We are not crazy." Sometimes, the terms 'refugee' and 'displaced person' can themselves become administrative categories implying the notion of 'patient'. The people referred to in these categories come from the general population and have to cope with a refugee situation which itself often puts their self-esteem on trial. Inappropriate psycho-social assistance programmes may undermine this further. A number of people playing a crucial role in 'Suncokret' were themselves students from war areas, or lived and worked in Bosnia and Hercegovina before the war.

The organisation does not dismiss notions of psycho-social support per se. There can be no denying that the war has had serious effects on people in terms of past and continuing disruptions and losses. Some of these effects have psychological consequences of differing intensity for different people. It is possible to work in ways which do not pathologise and do not continually emphasise the ways in which refugees and displaced persons are different, but do not shy away from the necessity to help people who may be severely stressed. 'Suncokret' does not present its work as psycho-social therapy but, rather, emphasises the potential therapeutic effects of the ways in which activities are organised, the ways in which Suncokret workers and volunteers relate to people in the centres, and the importance of actually living in the centres alongside refugees and displaced persons.

In a number of camps, refugees and displaced people play a major role in 'Suncokret's activities. In one camp, for example, the majority of activities are managed by refugees with little or no input from foreign volunteers. This includes sewing and wood workshops, a library, and the kindergarten. A school on the camp, begun by 'Suncokret', is now entirely independent of the organisation and run by people who live in the camp who are teachers, or graduates, from Bosnia and Hercegovina. The refugees who work with Suncokret, in this and other centres, have expressed how important this work is in providing a sense of purpose. The model of intervention is much closer to a community work or community development approach which avoids seeing refugees and displaced people as victims. It is vital to move away from a dependency model of helping which is precisely that which has dominated interventions in the developing countries and which has been heavily criticised there. The ways in which humanitarian aid arrives in camps and is distributed by donors and agencies can be inappropriate and reinforce dependency.

In another centre, 'Suncokret' has worked alongside a team of psychologists and social workers from a Young Persons' Centre in New York, who spent six weeks in Croatia trying to address the problems faced by young people in the camps. What could have turned out to be a crude example of foreign experts claiming to know best and undermining existing patterns of helping appears, instead, to have stimulated creative thinking and the democratisation of a number of processes within the camp, including the

setting up of a youth council overseeing the building and running of a centre for teenagers. Recent video projects have encouraged young people, and others, to document their lives and display creativity in ways which allow for communication with people outside the centres.

There have been a number of initiatives which have involved working specifically with women, informed by feminist thinking but, at the same time, not importing what may be inappropriate western models of feminism in a different contextual setting. They have rejected a narrow, voyeuristic concern with women only as rape victims and have, instead, encouraged self-organisation, empowerment, and the promotion of schemes for income generation. Work has begun with older people involving them in recreational activities and ensuring that those older people who are isolated receive regular visits. There is a growing awareness that Suncokret needs to work with men who are now present in the centres in greater numbers than before, and activities are beginning which gives men a sense of having a role once again.

Whilst it is possible to make a list of these, and similar, activities, there is a danger that this simply reproduces a model of problem groups who need particular projects in order to help them. In fact, 'Suncokret's' emphasis is much more on supporting those helping mechanisms, and family and community networks, which already exist rather than fragmenting them, as well as helping people to engage in what may best be described as social action which transforms their relationships, with each other and with those who hold power over their lives. This is not a crude imposition of a political perspective onto a vulnerable community but is, rather, concerned with promoting self-organisation and empowerment in relationships, for example, with centre management and representatives of government agencies. Volunteers and workers are also changed by their experiences in the centres and this provides a network of awareness and action abroad about the situation of refugees and displaced persons in Croatia.

Increasingly, work is being undertaken which seeks to encourage communication and co-operation between communities of refugees and displaced persons and local non-refugee communities. There are a number of ways in which degrees of integration can be encouraged which avoids mutual suspicion and hostility. This work, and work which addresses issues of conflict resolution, physical reconstruction, and social renewal are likely to take on an increasing importance when the fighting actually stops. The end of the conflict will raise a different set of agendas concerning issues of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, and identity within Croatia and elsewhere, as well as in terms of its relationship to "Fortress Europe". This agenda will, no doubt, affect future social policy and the delivery and development of social work and social welfare provision within Croatia.

THE POLITICS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The political situation in Croatia must also be addressed, since it poses significant problems for 'Suncokret's' work. It is important to see 'Suncokret' as primarily a Croatian organisation which is part of the crucial development of civil society, of activities independent of government. This is taking place, however, in a post-communist society

with an impoverished war economy, which has taken prime responsibility for responding to the refugee crisis produced by the wars in the former Yugoslavia. There is some suspicion of the work of Non Governmental Organisations from Government agencies which, in part at least, appears to be related to the absence of a tradition of independent social work activity in Croatia. It is also true that the ways in which foreign NGO's have operated has produced a distortion of services in favour of short-term, prestigious, projects at the expense of a social work and social welfare infrastructure within Croatia. The vital role which Croatian NGO's such as 'Suncokret' play in developing creative forms of work might be undervalued and inhibited by a renewed attempt, by Government, to control and direct service provision.

It is also important to recognise the significance, in Croatian politics, of new forms of nationalism and ethnic chauvinism which embraced anti-Muslim sentiments after the fracturing of the Croat-Muslim alliance in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Recent developments, including a Croat-Muslim federation in Bosnia, and a confederation with Croatia, appear unlikely to change this, at least in the short term, and are more examples of peace-making from above than peace building from below. All of this adds another tightrope for 'Suncokret' to walk along, documenting and protesting at the effects of particular policies and practices on refugees and displaced people, and seeking to inform political, social and professional debates within Croatia.

Developing non-discriminatory practices and models is incredibly difficult in a situation where divisions between local communities, displaced persons (mainly Croats), and refugees (predominantly Bosnian Muslims) are exacerbated by national and international interventions. This is much more complex, involving questions of power relationships, than is suggested by a dominant stereotype of endemic ethnic conflict. Notions of endemic ethnic conflict legitimate the actions of dominant power groups which confer deviant status on particular groups, in this case, the Muslims from Bosnia. Through this process territorial aggression has become legitimised as ethnic cleansing. Further, identifiable groups such as Muslims come to be seen as having fixed values, identities, and cultures. This is by no means peculiar to this region, and has, of course, been a feature of racial stereotyping and racism in Britain. In terms of non-discriminatory practices, a human rights approach has much to offer both educationally and practically for other countries where such issues have become fragmented or dislocated from a unified, common, struggle against oppressive and discriminatory practices.

Work with refugees always has one key dilemma, how to encourage a feeling of belonging so necessary for any healing without undermining the wish to return home, once it is safe to do so. This dilemma is posed more acutely in Croatia since it is less of a safe haven and more of a territory whose government remains an actor in the complex power politics which continue to deny any real home to Bosnia's Muslim population. Indeed, currently the construction of peace between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia is being used to force Bosnian refugees back to situations which remain difficult both in terms of physical and social security.

These political dilemmas are compounded by professional dilemmas which inevitably arise for a young organisation having to compete in the market place of non governmental activities in the bureaucratic maze of relief work in Croatia. Simplistic platitudes, a faith in experts, and clever slogans, are clearly inadequate for the task in hand. 'Suncokret' has proved that grassroots relief work offers a different model of intervention giving hope for the future in a region in which, for many people, lives have seemed without hope for too long.