

Reflections on Peacebuilding from Croatia

A Response by Goran Bozicevic

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69

1. Introduction

Writing a comment to Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina's article is both an honour and a challenge. Fifteen years after the term was introduced in the *Agenda for Peace*, the 'peacebuilding' community is being tested. "Whose peace are peacebuilders working for?" is for me the most important question raised by Fisher and Zimina.

I loved the text immediately.¹ "This is real food for thought", I thought, "the most important contribution to this field after Lewer/Ramsbotham's "*Something must be done*" from 1993 and Lederach's *Building Peace* in 1997". I know that I am not doing justice to many other important books and texts, but I am just naming my personal cornerstones. This text unexpectedly joined them this year.

Why, you may wonder, did I so much welcome its arrival? Probably because the authors clearly articulated many concerns and sources of headaches which I have had in my own peacebuilding work during the past decades. The distinction between 'technical' and 'transformative' peacebuilding, in particular, resonated with my own experiences.

¹ When I read the longer version of this text, first published as an 'Open Letter to Peacebuilders' on the web (available at <http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com>), I signed up to the forum right away and I decided that we should translate the text into Croatian.

2. 'Technical' vs. 'Transformative' Peacebuilding: From Personal Experience

Five years ago, one participant on the Peace Studies programme in Zagreb asked me what had been most difficult in my work at the Volunteer Project Pakrac, in the destroyed and divided town of Pakrac, Croatia between 1993 and 1995.² My answer then was: “peace activists/workers coming from the West and telling me/us what we should do and what local people need. Coming with brilliant instant solutions and ideas, ready to be recorded with their cameras.”

Fisher and Zimina are not exactly talking about this bunch of people – naive idealists who are sometimes a danger with their lack of cultural sensitivity, but mostly lack the resources or influence to do real harm. Still, these people were able to suck away energy while visiting others like us, who were living and working on the ceasefire line, fixing ruins while actually using that as an entry point to a wounded community and for trust-building.

But to tell the truth, my most difficult conflicts were not with these visiting idealists. Surprisingly, they were not even with political extremists, radicals, aggressive war veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or anyone else who expressed hate towards me/us – people working across the line of separation, working on peace with former enemies, helping the other side who had hurt them most. The relationship with them, my value-system opponents, was not always smooth or caring, but I always looked at ‘them’ as one of the main reasons for my peacebuilding work.

No, the deepest wounds were inflicted by conflicts with colleagues subscribing to a ‘technical peacebuilding’ approach. I will give you two examples describing the tensions that may result from different and incompatible approaches.

2.1 Flexibility and Planning

In spring 1999, the peacebuilding organisation I worked for was contracted by a big United Nations (UN) agency to conduct a series of peacebuilding trainings for municipality leaders in Bosnia. Problems (with the UN agency) started during the first three-day training. Half an hour before the start of the training, we (i.e. the trainer team) were warned by UN staff (i.e. the organisers) that when the participants from the two towns had arrived, something bad had happened: “they didn’t greet each other at all in the hotel lobby (even though they know each other). It was a bad idea to organise this seminar...” After a day and a half of training, the participants themselves asked us: “is it okay if we *all* go to visit town B today after lunch? We’ve realised that many people haven’t been there since the war. They are still afraid, but we invited them to show it is safe for them to come. If we are late for the afternoon session, we could always finish later this evening...” (The topic of the session was ‘Nonviolent Conflict Resolution’!)

We – all participants and trainers, some 23 people in five cars – made the visit to the nearby town. In my opinion, it was the best part of the whole training. People were entering shops and cafes, we all had a drink together on the terrace of one cafe. It was an important visit, not only to break down

² The Volunteer Project Pakrac (VPP) was the largest project of the Antiwar Campaign Croatia. It started in July 1993 and finished in February 1996. In that period, over 400 volunteers from over 20 countries came to Pakrac, mostly for three-week shifts, to work on social reconstruction projects. Pakrac at that time was a town of 2000 to 3000 inhabitants, located in the UN Protected Area – Sector West in Croatia, divided into a ‘Croatian’ and a ‘Krajina’ side by the UN ceasefire line. 75% of it had been destroyed in the war in 1991. VPP worked in cooperation with the UN Office Vienna (UNOV) and, on the ‘Krajina’ side, the Centre for Antiwar Action, Belgrade, Serbia – at the time perhaps the only cooperation between Croatian and Serbian organisations. The founders and first coordinators of the project were Wam Kat from the Netherlands, Vanja Nikolic and myself from Croatia. Philip Peirce, in cooperation with UNOV and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), later transferred VPP experiences to the Bosnian towns of Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje and Travnik.

fear, but to put the hosts in the active role of prejudice- and fear-breakers. We all felt excited, fulfilled and proud. We returned to the hotel and continued the training with a new group spirit.

The ‘punishment’ came after dinner: a senior UN official confronted us trainers for changing the agenda and schedule of the training. We were not supposed to go for that trip and just have a good time there. Our common task, as he put it, was to work on agreed workshop topics. We argued with him: “don’t you see the value of this single trip to the whole group? What is the point of having a session on conflict transformation in the hotel, while avoiding any group initiative and a real test of trust?”

He was not prepared to accept our arguments. In the end, participants from the group got involved, defending the trainers’ decision passionately. “Don’t you see the training is a big success already?” participants asked. But he could not. This UN official had been under great pressure for months, and now he could not cope with the fact that not all was going exactly as planned.

This example of cooperation between a local/Croatian NGO and international/UN agency shows a heavy clash between the two approaches Fisher and Zimina contrast in their article: a strictly ‘technical’ and a flexibly ‘transformative’ one. Most issues were resolved after a common meeting, but the question remains: what is the relationship between technical and transformative approaches in peacebuilding? If it is coexistence, what kind of coexistence can it be – peaceful or with latent aggression? Competitive? And if it is competitive, what are we competing for – money or glory?

I see a very profound dilemma here: how can someone with limited resources but infinite commitment trust others with limited commitment and infinite resources?

2.2 Cooperation and Funding

Let me share another personal story, one of my first experiences with this form of conflicting approaches. It could be labelled ‘form’ vs. ‘content’ or ‘bureaucracy’ vs. ‘field work’, but in light of this Dialogue I see it as ‘technical’ vs. ‘transformative’. The Volunteer Project Pakrac employed shifts of volunteers, who worked on physical and social reconstruction. They stayed for three weeks per shift. There were always between 15 and 25 people working in the project (a lot for a town with 2000 to 3000 inhabitants). We had been told that we were a pioneering peacebuilding project and that the UN was very proud of us. That was flattering to hear, but still most of the money for project needs (food, accommodation, utilities, travel, project coordinator’s fee, etc.) was coming from the volunteers themselves, who were engaged predominantly through Service Civil International³ and paid 200 German marks⁴ for food and accommodation.

Many representatives of INGOs visited – and admired – us: “what a great job you do, amazing, working in a divided town, across the line, re-establishing broken communications, wonderful. Bravo! Why don’t you send us a project proposal, we can fund you.” To which we would reply: “why would we write and send a project proposal to you when you can see, here on the spot, what we do, what we need the money for, how we spend it, how we manage our work? On paper we can write anything, but here – an hour and a half’s drive from the capital, Zagreb – you can always come and check directly, on the spot, our work and the way we use the money.”

I know many of you will laugh now, reading about naive peace activists who are ready to get up at 6 am to work on building sites, cleaning bricks from destroyed houses along with local people. This also includes many ‘pausa’ – coffee pausa, cigarette pausa, rakija pausa, lunch pausa... But what it means in reality is also that you bring the breeze of normal life to a devastated post-war community. In the afternoons, there were children’s activities, women’s groups and a lot of listening and talking to each other. Looking back, I have to say: we were really good at field work, but bad at bureaucracy.

³ Service Civil International (SCI) is a peace organisation that coordinates international voluntary projects for people of all ages, cultures, religious and economic backgrounds. For more information, see www.sciint.org.

⁴ At that time, in 1993, a teacher in Croatia would have earned half of that (100-150 German marks) in monthly salary.

Later this did change, and a skilled manager and fundraiser turned up from one volunteer group. However, the story about the two paradigms which never meet remains: “if you want us involved, you need to follow *our* procedures” was actually the message coming from both sides.

3. Who Belongs to the Peacebuilding Community – and Why?

There are many people who do not see their actions as peacebuilding, yet they are peacebuilders, because they change existing relationships. I have met dozens of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina who were naturally born peacebuilders. Some were returning hundreds of displaced persons/refugees to villages with no resources, no phone at home, no office, no NGOs, no cars. They made up for it with a lot of personal determination: “when you need a phone, you will find it and use it.” I heard from a woman in Derventa, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1999, whispering to me in order not to be heard by the leaders of returnee-NGOs: “if you want to prevent displaced persons from returning – create an NGO.” It was meant as a joke, but at the same time it was not just a joke.

Peacebuilding nowadays requires a shift from *what* towards *how*. It is about changing unjust relationships, recognizing hidden oppression, empowering and enabling people to start getting at the roots of conflict. Transformative peacebuilding, in my opinion, deals with the roots of conflict; technical peacebuilding (too often) deals only with consequences.

I agree with Fisher and Zimina that there is a peacebuilding community – one whose purpose is to be open, open to everyone “who can make a change”.⁵ Open to include all parties involved in conflict: they are not ‘clients’ or ‘beneficiaries’ – they are all potential partners/allies. I know that often there is a huge amount of traumatising, simplification and political extremism among victim groups, war veterans, returnees, local authorities and youth. But if we look at these obstacles as a heavy mist, interfering with our communication and cooperation – perhaps soon we could start seeing human beings eager to learn how to deal with violence constructively. We can start seeing our future colleagues in the peacebuilding field.

3.1 Professionalisation: ‘Peacebuilders International’?

These days, we encounter many more ‘peacebuilding professionals’ than we used to... Many of them enter the field with great dedication and willingness to learn. At the same time, we hear the term ‘peacebuilding industry’ referring to those for whom it is ‘just a job’. I am asking myself why it is so attractive for ‘internationals’ (meaning: those who do not come from post-war areas, but usually from developed countries) to work in the peacebuilding field. I have come up with a list of potential features:

- a) Peacebuilding is a new field, not many people are even aware of its existence – so activists can consider themselves as pioneers, even as making history.
- b) Peacebuilders are supposed to bring about change, or at least manage it, which gives a powerful feeling.
- c) We can earn quite a good income from working ‘in peacebuilding’. Plus, if we count more than money, we earn huge benefits: experience, exposure to different cultures, contacts...
- d) Peace work takes place in situations at the edge of danger, which means that it is emotionally demanding (so we have the rewarding feeling that we are doing a hard job).

⁵ I am quoting Brian Phillips, Joseph Rowntree Trust Fellow in 2002. The qualities he names in the internal paper *Five Defining Qualities of Quaker Global Witness in the 21st Century* are: 1) Identifying those who can make a change; 2) A ministry of presence; 3) Continuity of commitment; 4) Acts of faith; 5) Pragmatic approaches to reconciliation.

- e) We have the privilege of being part of big, powerful, dominant structures, but we are also distant from them. What I mean is that our passport is – often – protecting us; established, functioning, efficient health and social care systems are backing us up. If the situation should worsen, evacuation will be organised for us. Our kids have access to all the resources ‘those kids in the field’ do not have. We are/feel like ‘normal’ people – but in the ‘field’ reality, we are not.
- f) We consider ourselves as ‘good guys’, even though we never say so. As we are fixing what ‘bad guys’ have done, we must be the good ones. This feeling creates individual and collective ‘identity’.
- g) Wherever you work, whatever conflict you are managing (they are ‘*all the same*’ or – well – ‘*similar*’) you always find someone you know from some other crisis – an old friend. The more you work and travel, the more people you know. In the end, we are one (relatively small) community.

3.2 The Unusual Suspects: Working with War Veterans

This year’s *Miramidani*, the Peacebuilding Days in Groznanj, Istria (Croatia) dealt with the potential of former combatants for peacebuilding. The title of the gathering, held from 11 to 14 September 2008, was: “The role of war veterans in peacebuilding: inclusion, linking and dialogue inside civil society”.⁶ This topic is still unusual for great parts of the peacebuilding community. Most of the work that has been done with war veterans is about DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration). But here, in the post-Yugoslav countries, we have actually moved some steps ahead. War veterans are active in peacebuilding, at least in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Some readers may ask: what do war veterans have to do with peacebuilding? Are they not the ones carrying the main responsibility for violence in the conflict, the use of weapons, the killing? But the role of war veterans can also be looked at from quite a different angle: many of the war veterans joined the army due to their strong interest in peace. Their motivation was usually about confronting some other (enemy) army, about defending a home country or at least a village, a home, family and friends. If they have been lucky and survived, their PTSD is allowing them to function no worse than the majority of the population. Most of them did not commit war crimes. After losing their illusions about the noble causes they fought for (few fight for bad causes), most have started thinking about what sense their course of action made.

If ‘the peacebuilding community’ is not automatically excluding them, these war veterans may become curious. If the doors of peacebuilding are open, war veterans may want to come and join in. And sometimes, they turn very unexpectedly into most motivated peacebuilders. Here are three examples:

The first example is that of a war veteran and participant in a 1998 peacebuilding training in Travnik, Bosnia-Herzegovina, who said: “I came on the first day to destroy your training. What, [I thought], can people from Croatia tell me about peace? Then I realised that you [the team of trainers] are enabling us [the participants] to talk about our war experiences and peace dilemmas and that mostly you are staying aside. Now I get up one hour earlier, so I can finish my work and come on time to our workshops.”

The second example concerns one of the strangest presentations I have ever given of my peacebuilding work. It took place on the ceasefire line in Pakrac, in spring 1994. At the time the Volunteer Project Pakrac was renting a house in an isolated street on the line of separation between

⁶ Themes addressed during *Miramidani* included: “What is peace work nowadays?”, “The relationship of dealing with the past and peacebuilding”, “Visibility of peacebuilding and struggle against elitism: Peacebuilding which includes all of us”, “Working on war trauma as enabling potentials in peacebuilding”, “War veterans and peace workers: similarities and differences”.

the communities, near the forest. We and a dozen Croatian policemen were the only residents of that street. As those men had no other job besides watching the mined forest and deterring intruders, they became curious about our peace project. As they were bored and obviously missing information, there was also increasing tension between us. One day I decided to approach them and present our work, ideas, beliefs and values. I was talking for about one hour – about nonviolence, conflict transformation, pacifism, peacebuilding, who knows what – to a group of fully equipped, armed men in uniforms who were on two-week, 24/7 shifts, far away from their homes and families. When I finished, there was silence. I immediately regretted my stupid naivety – why was I talking to them about these things? After all, they were armed soldiers. Their response took me by complete surprise: “what you were telling us is amazing. Thanks a lot. We guess that we can’t fully follow what you were saying now – our reality is very different. But we see the value in what you are doing for our children, for building a peaceful future. Go ahead. Don’t give up.” That was perhaps the first encouragement I personally had from men in uniform.

Finally, in April 2005 in the Croatian coastal town of Selce, Gordan Bodog and myself, supported by Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW) and a few other colleagues, organised a gathering called “The Role of Croatian War Veterans/ Defenders in Peacebuilding in Croatia and its Neighbourhood”. The Selce meeting attracted some 35 people, from the left to extreme right, across the whole spectrum of political opinions, war experiences and roles. These included many true leaders, some of them heading influential NGOs and associations, some of them public figures, highly ranked in military terms or award-winning in the peacebuilding field – all of them were capable of ensuring that the impulse of the meeting in Selce would be carried on into other organisations and levels of society. For about two days we were on the brink of a physical incident. Tensions were extremely high. It remains the most difficult meeting I ever attended (and even facilitated). Some people were shocked to realise that there were participants from Serbia among us. Others were astonished at the intensity of hatred stated by some individuals. But on the third and last day we all realised that only two people had left the group (who had not been active in discussions anyway); all the others were still sitting and talking.

Immediately after the Selce meeting came an invitation from the war veterans’ side: “could you please teach us how to do this?” “To do what exactly?” was our response. “To communicate with other people who don’t share our values. This was happening in Selce, wasn’t it? It was amazing. Such a diverse group and we were listening to each other.” This is the beginning of the story of IZMIR – Initiative for Peacebuilding and Cooperation. One of the participants in Selce was Bruno Cavic. He remembers: “we were curious to see who was talking about Croatian war veterans and about peacebuilding – after noticing the announcement on the Internet. So we sat in a car and went to Selce, ready to return that very same day. Instead we stayed. After Selce, I was asked by the fellows from my own war veteran organisation: ‘so, how was it there, among our ‘enemies’, the peace activists and Serbs?’ I responded simply: ‘guys, we’ve got a lot to learn from peace/civil initiatives’.” Bruno, who is a retired Croatian Army Brigade Commander, has since finished a programme in Peace Studies in Zagreb. Now he is president of IZMIR, an NGO gathering together Croatian war veterans and peace activists. He keeps repeating: “this is exercising democracy. This is what we do. This is what we have to do. There is no other way.”

At the end of the day, peacebuilding is done by many individuals and groups. Most of them would not call it ‘peacebuilding’, most of them are not even familiar with any concepts of peacebuilding. But they do transform social relations, they do contribute to shifting the power distribution, they do widen the space for dealing with the past, for truth and tolerance, and they challenge authorities. If we think deeper, the ‘peacebuilding doors’ have only one purpose – to be

open. Because peacebuilding must be open for everyone. Otherwise it is not peacebuilding.⁷

4. How Do we Deal with the Dilemmas?

I like Fisher and Zimina's article because it is so provocative. At the same time, I think that the authors are still not critical enough towards technical peacebuilding. Writing this comment I realised what is missing in the field of peacebuilding: a minimum of accepted standards. Some kind of base: "from here you start. But you don't start before here, okay?!"

Peacebuilding has to be guided by the 'Do No Harm' principle, the ethics of n+1 party intervention and a clear commitment to nonviolence. It should include the courage to resist and challenge power structures, no matter whether these are based on economic, cultural or gender differences. And peace work needs to build on individual conflict transformation skills.

I remember very vividly the messages from Lewer/Ramsbotham's book "*Something must be done*". I was lucky to be given one page from it only a few weeks after the book was published in 1993 ("Some Questions Non Official Intervenors Should Be Asking Themselves"). It has been my 'Holy Page' ever since.⁸ Let me share some of the questions with you:

- Have I the right to intervene (i) without being asked, [and] (ii) without being 'wanted'?
- Is my methodology appropriate to cultural traditions?
- What are my motivations, e.g. religious, political, humanitarian? What difference does that make? [...]
- Have I considered the broader implications of my intervention?
- Have I long-term commitment?
- For interventions such as 'active mediation' can I guarantee confidentiality, e.g. pressure from funding/academic institutions?
- How covert/manipulative can I be?
- To whom am I accountable for my actions, e.g. need for support/advisory/evaluation group?
- How closely should I become involved with the 'official' level?
- Is there any point at which I should withdraw from the conflict? [...]
- What are motives of protagonists in inviting external intervention?
- Is my intervention 'content' or 'process' based?
- Do I consider myself truly impartial or have I sympathy with one side? [...]
- Why have I chosen this particular conflict, at this time?

Source: "*Something must be done*". Nick Lewer and Oliver Ramsbotham, *Peace Research Report No. 13*, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, August 1993, page 72.

These questions are amazing, but they are still – questions. One may hope that peacebuilders will continue to strive to find innovative, creative, transformative and constructive answers to them. Yet let us be real: a readiness to constantly raise questions and at the same time being a good active listener is more than a good start.

⁷ Here, a clarification is necessary: I am not saying that mere will for peacebuilding is enough. It is welcome, but far from enough. I am saying that anyone who wants to be involved in peacebuilding has to have an opportunity to do so.

⁸ Oliver Ramsbotham, one of the authors, responded half-jokingly after I told him how often I use that page: "well, this is bad feedback – you use only one page out of the whole book."

5. References & Further Reading

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See also...

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- Martina Fischer and Beatrix Schmelzle, *Introduction*
- Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, *Just Wasting Our Time? Provocative Thoughts for Peacebuilders*
- Louis Kriesberg, *Making Good Use of the Time: Contributions and Dilemmas of Non-governmental Actors in Peacebuilding*
- Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow, *Envisioning and Pursuing Peace Writ Large*
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Please note: An online forum for further discussion has been established by Lada Zimina and Simon Fisher at www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com.