

NONGOVERNMENTAL PROJECTS “RETURN AND TRUST REBUILDING—PAKRAC” AND “THE BENCH WE SHARE”

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1. Introduction

Rebuilding multiethnic communities in Croatia is a task of Herculean proportions. It is a complex issue with economic, political, logistical and psychosocial dimensions. Under the best of political and economic situations it would be no mean feat.

Indeed, for the displaced in Croatia, be they Serb or Croat, these are not the best of times, politically or economically. And if one is of a minority ethnicity, the problem of return is compounded by the general mood of intolerance and bigotry, which is promoted, at least tacitly, by the state. While the peace agreements signed at Dayton and Erdut call for the Serb and Croat States to ensure the human rights and return of minority populations to their prewar domiciles, the lack of political will being exhibited by governments has raised grave concerns in the International Community. At issue for the purposes of this case study are the estimated 350,000 Serbs who fled Croatia during the 1991–1995 war.¹ The Croatian government has made it less than easy for returning Serbs to secure the necessary documents for citizenship and to claim property rights. Croatia continues to struggle with enacting legal guarantees of minority rights and with establishing and maintaining policies and standards toward minorities that are acceptable to the international community. Where legal guarantees exist, they may be ignored or overridden on a whim of the legislature. For example, in 1992 the Croatian legislature passed the Constitutional Law on Human Rights and the Rights of Ethnic Communities or Minorities in accordance with international standards. In 1995 the Parliament suspended certain legal guarantees that were directed at districts in which Serbs constituted the majority population. Local human rights experts suggest that these activities are indicative of a general climate wherein the concept of human rights is not a firm part of the political culture.

The issue of return is compounded by logistical problems as well. Thousands of Croats remain in temporary housing waiting to return to their own homes, which are presently

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¹ While this case study specifically addresses the situation in Croatia, this is not to suggest that Serbs are fulfilling their end of the agreements. I have comment on the Serbian situation because this study concerns itself with the situation in Croatia.

either occupied by Serbs or other Croats, who are refugees from Bosnia. Another factor in the equation is that Serbs and Croats alike are hesitant to move back into their neighborhoods, harboring fear and lingering mistrust for the “other” nationality, worrying about what it might mean to go back to living as neighbors with “the enemy.”

Economic conditions in many cases are also less than optimal and the return of anybody of working age looks less than likely in regions where there is virtually no industry, no jobs and little hope for economic recovery in the near future. Croatia is losing its middle class as a result of the war and the transitional polity and economy. Under the best of circumstances, that is, in cities and towns that have no war damage, average citizens are strapped for cash, some working for firms that have been unable to pay them their salaries over a period of months, others for a fraction of what the monthly cost of living has become. In war-damaged areas where the prewar industry has not returned and, in all likelihood, will not return, prospects are grimmer yet. These circumstances affect both Serbs and Croats.

Thus the social and political climate for multiethnic communities in Croatia is not very promising at the outset. The deck seems to be stacked against the rebuilding of multiethnic communities in Croatia due to the lack of political will and economic infrastructure, the problematic social situation and the logistical problems of return. Yet despite these odds, there are people trying to do just that.

Because local governments have virtually no independent power in the new democratic Croatia, initiatives promoting interethnic relations at that level are almost nonexistent at the present time. These efforts are to be found almost exclusively within the purview of nongovernmental organizations. This case study examines two such initiatives. Both projects, which are under the auspices of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights—Osijek, are implemented in two of the most problematic and war-affected regions of Croatia—Western Slavonia and Baranja. In particular, the case study provides details of the project *Return and Trust Rebuilding—Pakrac* in Western Slavonia, and *The Bench We Share* in Baranja and the city of Osijek.

2. Background of the Research

Research for this study was undertaken in May 1998. After making initial telephone contact with the project coordinators of both projects, we arranged to personally meet with them and others who were involved in the project.

One Saturday afternoon, we met the coordinator of the Pakrac project, Ms. Spasenija Moro, a German-language professor who resides in the city of Osijek, but who has strong ties to Pakrac and surrounding region and who, in her personal life, has friends and colleagues of different ethnic backgrounds. Pakrac is located approximately 90 kilometers to the east of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, where we reside. The remnants of Pakrac's former charm and character are detectable, despite the empty streets and dangerously dilapidated buildings in the middle of town. Situated on the Pakra River, the landscape around the town and along the roads winding off the highway suggests the pristine beauty with which Croatia is endowed. But there is little occasion for reverie, as the bombed and burned out villages along the way and in Pakrac itself speak of the ferocity of the war here.

The city, like many of the surrounding villages, was ethnically mixed, with large numbers of Serbs and Croats and smaller numbers of Hungarians, Italians, Czechs and Slovaks. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the people of the region lived in ethnic harmony or that ethnic boundaries were seamless and insignificant. Nevertheless, mixed marriages were not uncommon, and while smaller villages were dominated by one ethnic group or another, the population distribution in the town of Pakrac was much more even. War broke out in Pakrac in 1991 and the town was divided between Serbs and Croats along two main streets, Gundulic and Strossmayer. People fled. In 1995, with a swift military blitz, Croatia reclaimed the city and region.

Prior to the war, there were some 8,000 inhabitants in Pakrac. A casual visual survey as one drives along the edge of the town suggests that one in five homes is occupied now. One must look carefully for signs of inhabitants to spot a dwelling which has them. More dominant in the landscape are the shells of buildings, gaping holes and crumbling, charred black walls with trees growing through them. The ruins are an apt metaphor for the social infrastructure.

Initially, we met with Ms. Moro at the current center of town, where the municipal building is located, on the periphery of what had been the prime business district and former center of the town. In the kitchen of her mother-in-law's house we met three other members of the project team and talked about the history of the war in the region and about individual experiences of return to Pakrac and attempts to reestablish a viable community there. We talked for almost eight hours. Our hosts were candid with us. There were no dramatic success stories, no Pollyanna-like predictions of what can be expected in Pakrac from this or other projects. Nevertheless, there was hope and there was a sense that progress was being made, however incremental and small the steps. Subsequent follow-up interviews in Croatia were conducted by telephone with Ms. Moro and one of her colleagues in Pakrac, Mr. Dusko Vujanic.

Researching *The Bench We Share* involved an overnight trip to Osijek, where the coordinator of the project, Ms. Dusanka Ilic, resides. Ms. Ilic is a school teacher who has spent most of her life living and working in Osijek and Baranja and thus has friends and colleagues belonging to both the Serb and Croat ethnic groups. We were invited to participate one Saturday in an afternoon session of a workshop being conducted by Ms. Ilic for individuals preparing for a trip to Birmingham, England. The workshop was held at the Student Center in Osijek, a very comfortable and accommodating facility that provided a friendly, nonthreatening atmosphere in which people could share their feelings and opinions. We were quickly integrated into the group after brief introductions. Group participants were very welcoming to us. We were expected to participate honestly, like the other members of the workshop. Ms. Ilic managed the workshop with great skill, moving participants easily from one activity to the next, eliciting participation gently but firmly. Activities were well paced, with serious work on the issue of prejudice alternating with games and lighter activities that helped to build a cohesive group spirit. The workshop proved to be a very intense and highly personal experience.

The next day, Ms. Ilic took us to two villages in Baranja. Unlike Pakrac, Baranja is a very flat region. Agriculture in Baranja's highly fertile soil is its traditional livelihood. There is relatively little massive property destruction, although some repairs need to be done. The greater problems in Baranja are the logistics of return and the sentiments Serbs and

Croats have about living with each other. Some of the participants in the previous day's workshop described how they are unable to return to their homes in Baranja because they are occupied by Serb families who are still unable to return to their homes in the Krajina region of Croatia, either because they are occupied or have been destroyed. These property owners must stay in temporary housing, either in Osijek or in a neighboring town where a small settlement has been built for the displaced. Another recent case that was described to us exemplified the emotional tensions in these mixed communities. A Serbian woman married to a Croatian man returned to her home and found their possessions had been stolen. The woman, seeing a Croat neighbor walking down the street, accused her of theft. The Croat woman told her that this was *her* country now and that the other woman should go to Serbia if she wanted to find her things. This was followed by an exchange of epithets.

These are the types of tense situations that returnees must face and ultimately work through, if reconciliation is to be sustainable. *The Bench We Share* deals with such situations, as do other offshoot peace groups like *Oasis* in Beli Manastir, which was founded on the example of *The Bench We Share*. In Beli Monastir we met with founding members in a private home. They talked about their personal experiences both before and after the war, as Serbs, as Croats, and as members of Serb-Croat mixed marriages. They explained the work *Oasis* is doing in helping the elderly, trying to develop cottage industries and reestablishing communication with sometimes less than willing neighbors who were returning. They discussed the difficulties of finding adequate funding to create programs that would meet the needs of the members of their community.

3. Addressing Problems

Both of these projects, *Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac* and *The Bench We Share*, are geared toward promoting dialogue at the grass-roots level. If multiethnic communities are to be successfully reestablished, Serbs and Croats must become willing and able to live as neighbors. As small-scale, community-based projects, endeavors such as *Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac* and *The Bench We Share* can easily be overlooked, particularly in national and international politics. Yet such projects are vital to the fulfillment of the agreements reached at Dayton and Erdut, in as much as government programs do very little to facilitate the return of displaced persons, especially if they are Serbs. In some cases the problem is due to the lack of adequate legislation toward these ends, and in other cases it is the lack of political will among national and local officials to fulfill their obligations under existing law.

3.1. *Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac*

Return and Trust Rebuilding addresses questions concerning how to build trust in a town where Serbs and Croats fought each other in war, destroyed each others' property and sent each other into exile. The return of residents is contingent on the repair and rebuilding of homes, on the creation of jobs in order to attract families and returnees of working age, and also on creating an atmosphere in which different nationalities are

able to live as neighbors and work together. The project is aimed, on the psychosocial level, at providing a forum for Croats and Serbs to meet with each other and voice their concerns and overcome their fears and differences so that they can find common ground. On the economic and material level it is aimed at providing residents with small-scale economic opportunities which may lead to other similar economic opportunities, such as small home repair services free of charge, lawn care and gardening services, services to the elderly and a children’s camp program in which the parents of both ethnicities participate.

Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac was started in 1996 under the support of the Die Schwelle Foundation, Bremen, Germany, and later with the support of HEKS of Switzerland. It focuses on two streets in the town of Pakrac, Strossmayer and Gundulic, which prior to the war, had residents of both the Serb and Croat ethnic groups. With this project, participants hope to stimulate and facilitate the return of residents to the two main streets. These two streets were the lines of demarcation that divided the city between Serb and Croat in 1991 when war broke out and during a UN occupation in 1992. Consequently, people had to abandon their homes. The return of peace has not brought all of the people back, however. One problem is that many of the houses on the two streets are uninhabitable. Some need major repairs and, in a number of cases, are irreparable. Another problem is that because of the lack of economic infrastructure, few jobs and little money are available. There is virtually no industry operating in Pakrac. Only public servants receive regular salaries. The economic circumstances affect both Serbs and Croats alike. Consequently, those who have returned are retirees on pensions, and in many cases the amount they receive is not sufficient for repairing homes and maintaining daily life. The project has taken some small steps to provide services to the residents and to promote modest income-generating projects. Apart from the economic and material issues is the question of trust. To date most returnees have been Croats. Only a small number of Serbs have elected to return. One of the primary goals of the project is to instill or reconstruct a level of trust between the two ethnic groups so that they might again feel secure enough to live as neighbors. In this way project workers hope to also affect the climate of the rest of the town.

According to the 1991 census of the Republic of Croatia,² in Pakrac County, roughly 35% of the inhabitants had declared themselves Croat and 46% Serb. Italians, Slovaks, Hungarians and Czechs comprised about 7% of the population. The town of Pakrac had a prewar total of 8,197 people, of which 37% had declared themselves Croat and 42% Serb. According to data collected in autumn 1997, about 800 Serbs were reported to have returned to Pakrac County. As noted earlier, there was a great deal of property destruction in Pakrac, but some of the neighboring villages were completely or practically destroyed. The town of Lipik, a few kilometers to the southwest of Pakrac, formerly a resort town renowned for its healing springs, appears empty and abandoned.

On the two streets targeted in the Pakrac project, there were about 226 residences prior to the war. Less than half of the residents have returned to them. On Strossmayer, out of 80 homes, 39 have been fixed and are inhabited, while 22 have been fixed but

² State Institute of Statistics, Zagreb.

remain uninhabited. Twenty, mainly Serb, houses are deserted ruins. On Gundulic, out of some 146 homes, 43 have been repaired and are inhabited, while 26 have been repaired but remain uninhabited. The 77 homes which are in ruins belong mostly to Serbs. So far, five Serbian families have returned to Gundulic and only two have returned to Strossmayer.

The return of the Serb population to Pakrac has also been affected by former policies of the local government which obstructed their return. For example, archaic property laws were being invoked to deny Serbs their prewar property rights. Another tactic to keep Serbs away was to delay the processing of paperwork for residency and citizenship. There were also instances of police harassment of Serb residents in the early and mid-1990s. Since the implementation of the project, relations between Serbs and the local government have been strengthened and there has been a modicum of cooperation between local authorities and project workers, particularly in the implementation of the first phase of the project.

3.2. *The Bench We Share*

The Bench We Share project developed as an offshoot of the *Meeting House* project, which focused on organizing meetings in neutral Hungary between families and friends from the formerly divided regions under UN administration (UNTAES) in Croatia. In Baranja, *The Bench We Share's* main objective is not dealing with property destruction but rather creating a climate in which Serbs and Croats are able to resume living as neighbors. Another key problem is the fact that the homes of many Baranja Croats are currently occupied by Croat refugees from Bosnia and displaced Serbs from other parts of Croatia who as yet have no place to go or return to. *The Bench We Share* attempts to build communication links between all concerned parties in an attempt to reduce ethnic prejudices and tensions and alleviate stresses associated with war and displacement. *The Bench We Share* takes its name from a village tradition, common to Slavonia, of neighbors meeting and stopping to chat at benches placed in front of domiciles.

Project leader Dusanka Ilic, a school teacher by profession, is a longtime resident of the region, having lived and worked in Osijek and Baranja during the past couple of decades. She was active in an earlier project, *Meeting House*. As the political situation changed and the two "sides" in Baranja and Osijek opened to each other, the latter project, *The Bench We Share*, was started in 1996. Despite the establishment of geopolitical relations, problems persist between ethnic groups and the project attempts to address these by fostering communication and social support at workshops where participants are trained in communication skills and conflict resolution. As more returnees come home to the formerly ethnically mixed villages in Baranja, ethnic tensions rise. As in the rest of Croatia, there is a great deal of economic distress, with high levels of unemployment, a rising cost of living and firms that are unable to pay their employees for their work. According to some project team members, gaining employment in the region is more difficult for Serbs because they face covert discriminatory practices in hiring.

The Bench We Share addresses the question of how Serbs and Croats can live together despite their differences, particularly in Baranja's villages, where Croats and Serbs alike were displaced at different times during the war. Anger, suspicion and fear continue to wedge the two apart. From the outset the aim of the project has been to establish and

reestablish contact and begin to build bridges across the great ethnic divide that the war forged among people who lived as neighbors, friends, family and colleagues prior to the conflict. As families begin to return to their homes, tensions flare among neighbors and misunderstandings occur even among family members. *The Bench We Share* project workers attempt to open dialogue and to provide mediation.

Individuals involved in both projects and members of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek, all had friends, colleagues or relations across ethnic divisions or across the geographical partitions that supported the divisions. In some cases they themselves are, or they know people who are, in interethnic marriages. They had a wish to develop projects that would help to bridge the divisions. It was recognized that rebuilding a community requires that attention be paid to both economic and psychosocial issues. As members of the communities in question, the project leaders and organization members are as personally invested in the issues as those whom they would like to involve in their projects.

4. Objectives and Strategies

As community level projects, *The Bench We Share* and *Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac* are focused primarily on facilitating dialogue between people of different ethnic groups, particularly Serb and Croat. Funding material relief projects is not their main objective, but project leaders do recognize that material needs are often foremost on people’s minds. Small-scale economic projects have been introduced and project leaders try to assist people in helping themselves.

The main objectives—promoting dialogue, providing a nonthreatening forum in which to allow dialogue and facilitating the removal of attitudinal and psychic barriers to dialogue—are simple and straightforward, but results may not be readily quantifiable. Yet these objectives are fundamental to a durable solution to ethnic conflict in the region. Promoting dialogue, and all that it entails, is a small but necessary step in the process of peace-building and reconciliation in extremely troubled and volatile regions. As tensions between individuals subside, the prospects of an enduring peace increase.

4.1. *The Bench We Share*

The ultimate objective of *The Bench We Share* is to reconstruct the multiethnic community in Baranja and to reestablish trust among its residents. This is to be accomplished by establishing dialogue between groups in conflict and by implementing local peace initiatives. The project gives psychosocial support, endeavors to reduce emotional tensions and provides mediation between neighbors, friends, colleagues and temporary residents and homeowners. It provides peace education, education in the skills of nonviolent conflict resolution and helps local people to establish their own peace and community assistance groups. It provides support in the development of small businesses in Baranja. The project also provides assistance toward the return of displaced persons and refugees to the region, in cooperation with local peace groups in Baranja and Yugoslavia (Serbia).

The evolution of the project reflected the changing political circumstances of the region. During the transition period, in 1994, when Baranja was being administered by UN forces, the *Meeting House* project—the predecessor to *The Bench We Share*—facilitated meetings and visits primarily between Croats who were displaced from their homes in Baranja and their former friends, neighbors, relations or the current occupants of their homes in Baranja, who were usually Serbs. Preparatory workshops for groups on “both sides” were held prior to the meetings. The topics covered in these workshops were: war experiences, anger, grief, fear, prejudice, learning about differences, using active listening and methods of nonviolent communication, discovering mutual interests and preparing for the future. Nine workshops involving approximately 180 participants were conducted.

After the 1995 peace settlement and the impending return of control of Baranja and other regions to Croatia, the focus of the project shifted and *The Bench We Share* was launched in 1996. Attention was then placed on preparation for the return of people to their homes and former neighborhoods. Workshops were geared toward working through both sides’ anxieties about return.

Participants were pooled from the initial workshops for further training in peace education at workshops that lasted several days. The goal of the workshops was to empower participants to take an active role in peace-building and the development of the local community through organizing local peace groups. Workshop topics covered were: trust-building, tolerance, “from division to community-building,” plans for the future, “living together in spite of our differences,” tolerance, nonviolent communication and how to establish a peace group and mediation.

Out of these activities and workshops, the Oasis Peace Group (*Mirovna grupa Oaza*) was established in Beli Manastir. *The Bench We Share* provided support and advice in assisting it to become a fully independent group. Formally recognized in February 1998, Oasis has established a program for the care of the elderly, organized children’s workshops and started English- and German-language courses. The group plans to implement additional aid programs and small economic projects, as funding permits.

The Bench We Share project established a working relationship with the Methodist and Anglican Churches of England, in Birmingham, because it had expressed interest in supporting the project. An additional partnership was established with an ecumenical organization, Circuit, also from Birmingham. In March 1997, 23 persons with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, of varying ages and sexes, most of them displaced persons, fourteen from Osijek, nine from the region under the transitional administration of the United Nations (UNTAES), visited Birmingham for ten days as guests of the Methodist Church. The recruitment of participants occurred in conjunction with the Association for Peace and Human Rights–Baranja. In Birmingham, three joint workshops were held on trust-, tolerance- and community-building, and there were numerous meetings with members of various local churches. Being in a foreign country on neutral ground—away from the demands and distractions of their everyday lives, not to mention the involvement and hospitality of their hosts—proved beneficial in promoting dialogue between the two groups. On one occasion, men who were soldiers in opposing armies shook hands. Another outcome of the Birmingham trip was the formation of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights–Bilje by some enthusiastic participants.

In October 1997 eight members of the Methodist Church in Birmingham visited Osijek and the former UNTAES region. They met with members of local, nongovernmental organizations and churches and participated in two workshops.

The Bench We Share is planning another exchange with Birmingham. Preparatory workshops were conducted in the spring of 1998. Peace education workshops for members of local peace groups were organized. There was a series of workshops called “Alternatives to Violence,” conducted by Mr. Steven Angell. Other workshop themes were nonviolent communication and giving help to helpers.

In 1998 *The Bench We Share* continued conducting workshops designed to alleviate fear, prejudice and anger, promote active listening and nonviolent communication techniques and reach common ground on which to build. The workshops were quite effective and helpful, focusing beyond ethnic issues so that participants were not reduced to merely their ethnic affiliation. They were able to see multiple dimensions of themselves and each other, and each member was given an opportunity to be appreciated in the group. The workshops are broad enough in scope that they could benefit all kinds of people, and not only those in war areas. They provide a supportive environment in which people are encouraged to express their viewpoints, reactions, opinions and interests. Participation in the workshops is a rejuvenating experience.

Project coordinator Dusanka Ilic also directly mediated 25 cases in 1997, mainly between temporary occupants and homeowners in Baranja and between former colleagues who worked together in Baranja before the war. Through these mediation activities new participants for dialogue meetings and workshops were pooled.

4.2. *Return and Trust Rebuilding—Pakrac*

The main objective of the project *Return and Trust Rebuilding—Pakrac* is to aid the repopulation of the town and ultimately the region. The return of Serbs is of particular concern, as a great number of Croats have thus far come back to the area. The ethnic make-up of the project team, consisting of two Serbs, two Croats and one Croatian refugee from Bosnia, reflects the goal to assist both “sides” equally. The project is concerned primarily with the rebuilding of trust, but also with economic rebuilding. Because resources are limited, only small-scale efforts have been undertaken so far, particularly in the way of economic rebuilding.

The project focuses on two streets, Gundulic and Strossmayer, where Serbs and Croats lived as neighbors before the war. The project attempts to provide help and services equally to Serbs and Croats of the town. *Return and Trust Rebuilding*, begun in 1996, was initiated in two phases. In the first phase project workers wanted to gather information and assess the situation in the town, including the condition of the houses of the 50 residents who had returned to the two streets. Local authorities were included in the project. They were contacted by project leaders and introduced to the project. The initial phase of the project was assisted by the Croatian Office for Refugees and Displaced Persons, which provided demographic data.

At that time about 94% of the returnees were Croats. Project workers collected information about where people had gone during the war, how they had managed to find

a place to live, how they returned, what the condition of their houses was and what kind of assistance they needed. They also queried them on their sentiments regarding the return of Serbs to the neighborhood and gathered information on residents who had not yet returned. The interviews revealed an overall mood of tolerance among the returnees. Most said they would not mind if Serbs returned, but only those who had not committed war crimes. Two were opposed to the return of Serbs, but they were at least welcoming to the project members. Over the duration of the project, even those with reservations about the return of Serbs relaxed their attitudes as their trust in the peace workers grew. According to personal accounts, this is a marked difference from the climate of several years before. Early Serb returnees had trouble with Croat residents. Even those they had known before the war would not speak to them or acknowledge them and the police would arrest Serbs on various pretexts.

Early in the project, the project team began organizing meetings in the Croatian and Serbian parts of town to create a communication link between the two groups. They started by creating situations in which Serbs and Croats could interact by working cooperatively on small service-oriented programs such as minor home repair, lawn mowing and garden cultivation.

Then, still in the early phase of the project, three workshops were held for the adult population of Pakrac. The focus was on restoring confidence and beginning dialogue. Workshops on active listening were also conducted for young people. The results of the workshops were very positive. They spawned future meetings and several initiatives were started by the population residing in Pakrac: the purchase of three plastic greenhouses for three families on Gundulic Street, a sewing course for women, paying for the electricity connection for a family on Gundulic Street, equipping an office on Strossmayer Street and the purchase of tools for repairing chain saws.

The second phase of the project consisted of five areas: (1) providing direct legal aid, (2) opening communication, (3) psychosocial support, (4) a program of economic assistance and (5) sewing and tailoring courses. A total of nine workshops involving 191 participants were held, covering topics such as active listening, nonviolent communication, peace-building and conflict resolution. Manuals for each of these areas were published, as was a bulletin describing the project. Meetings were held between the present inhabitants of Pakrac and their former neighbors who were displaced in the former UNTAES region. A total of 35 persons participated in the meetings and in the preparatory workshops that preceded the meetings. 33 persons were provided legal aid concerning various aspects of civil rights. The donation of Klaus Vack allowed for the distribution of presents to primary school children, holidays on the coast for children, the purchase of a cultivator for the inhabitants of Gundulic and Strossmayer streets and the purchase of a flock of sheep with the intention of breeding another flock to pass on to another family.

A program to send children from different ethnic groups to a summer camp at the Croatian seaside is in its third year. In 1998, 170 children from Baranja and Osijek participated, along with 38 children from Pakrac. The program has become increasingly successful over the years. In the past parents were hesitant about sending their children to a multiethnic camp, but in 1998 they were calling organizers to see how they could register their children.

Return and Trust Rebuilding undertook projects exclusively for women, hoping that, through women, the community would be beneficially influenced. A dozen women participated in recent workshops. In January 1998 eight sewing machines were given to women for small economic projects.

5. Implementation and Development

5.1. *Funding and Material Aid*

Funding is an ongoing problem for the two projects in this case study. As small-scale, grass-roots initiatives, they do not garner the interest which is given to larger, more dramatic projects. Economic projects—such as those of purchasing sheep for breeding, buying greenhouses and sewing machines—occur on a very small scale and assist only a few individuals. More resources, economic subsistence projects and cottage industries would be able to involve more people more quickly. Indeed, as one member of the Pakrac project team noted, because of limited financial resources, the material help that can be provided is for people who already have roofs over their heads. Funding is too low to help those who are in the greatest need, i.e., those who are unable to move back into their damaged or destroyed homes. In Pakrac, it is typical for people to have private houses rather than apartments or flats and people’s homes are of great importance to them. Thus solving small-scale material problems is seen as vital to solving other sorts of problems.

Project team members believe that economic ventures are also one way that cooperation can be established between Serbs and Croats of the town. In Pakrac, both ethnic groups were hit equally by the region’s loss of economic infrastructure and there is mutual benefit from the arrival of any economic stimulus. An ongoing difficulty has been motivating people to take positive steps for themselves. This is partly because many current Pakrac residents are elderly and partly because people have grown accustomed to receiving free aid from the various humanitarian agencies that have come and gone. They are not motivated to help themselves. Through the workshops and by attending to small material needs, the project team hopes to enable and empower people to get back on their feet.

Project coordinator Spasenija Moro believes that, despite the fact that most people are more interested in receiving material aid than in finding a means to earn a living, the greater need is psychosocial. She has persisted in offering such programs. Small economic projects and services have also been provided, offering some material relief, but the larger goal to affect change at the attitudinal level remains. Mothers were influenced positively by gaining experience working with children at summer camps. Moro hopes that focusing attention on women in the community will similarly have a positive effect on the wider community.

For *The Bench We Share* funding is needed to support the formation of local peace groups, which, in effect, often take the role of organizations which help the needy to help themselves. For example, *The Bench We Share* sponsored and supported the Oasis Peace Group, which has begun a program of social services. This program consists of providing laundry services for the elderly and English- and German-language lessons to the children of the village of Beli Manastir. The group would like to implement cottage industries, such

as sewing and tailoring, which would give people avenues for earning income, but this will require an initial, although relatively small, investment for equipment and supplies. Expanding such businesses would mean establishing offices. One of the main objectives of *The Bench We Share* is to establish peace groups which also function to assist self-sufficiency at the village level. New sources of funding for this, as well as for the seed money that fledgling businesses require, will have to be found.

5.2. Attitudinal Barriers

Another obstacle to the successful implementation of the programs are attitudinal barriers of prospective participants, but it is precisely these barriers that the projects are designed to address. Nevertheless, project team members must be able to overcome the initial barriers if they are to be able to proceed with the goals of establishing dialogue between members of the two ethnic groups. Project team members must first deal with the prevailing view among Croatians that peace organizations are primarily interested in helping Serbs. To some extent this is overcome by having members of both ethnic groups in the core project team and by the policy of extending aid universally. However, in the beginning phase participants in peace group activities are sometimes treated with suspicion, even by members of their own ethnic group. One way of overcoming this suspicion and circumspection is by being able to offer some material aid or assistance for economic projects. This gets the attention of some people, who are then willing, at least temporarily, to suspend some of their preconceptions. Once they become participants in a workshop or seminar, the work of reducing negative feelings and stereotypes toward the other ethnic group can begin. Participants are often present in body yet still unwilling in mind. For example, in *Return and Trust Rebuilding* people attended workshops but were initially unwilling to openly discuss their thoughts and feelings. They claimed that they were not in need of psychosocial help but really needed material aid. Project team members found that people would complain that they were not getting enough material help and were comparing what they got to what their neighbors got. Everybody was looking out for themselves and was not interested in neighbors' needs. Overcoming such attitudes is a difficult and slow process and team members must maintain realistic expectations if they are not to become discouraged and burned out. Consequently, it is not realistic to have expectations of building a community based on "brotherly love" in these areas, but rather to have hope for finding ways that people can begin to live as neighbors, *despite their differences*.

In workshops emphasis is placed on dealing nonthreateningly and nonconfrontationally with the feelings people have as a result of the war and displacement. If such emotions remain unexpressed, they fester and add to the climate of hatred and distrust. With the help of foreign trainers from peace organizations, workshops provide training in alternative ways of viewing past and present reality and in handling and expressing complex emotions, as well as building for the future, rather than focusing on the past.

Workshops that are comprised of people who differ in ethnicity, age, religion, gender and war experiences offer opportunities for breaking prejudices, once a communication link is established. Dusanka Ilic, project coordinator of *The Bench We Share*, notes that

one of the best solutions to communication problems is the simple “hello.” Workshops must begin at this basic level, by simply opening a communication link. Then, meeting face-to-face, people are able to see how much they actually have in common. In these workshops people learn the fallacy of their stereotypes and prejudices, while at the same time recognizing that having them is part of the human condition and that we are all, to some extent, both victims and victimizers.

The war has taken its toll on people in “mixed” marriages as well. In some cases, people were urged to divorce their spouses, sometimes under threat, either explicit or implicit. In Pakrac, Baranja and the neighboring city of Osijek, interethnic marriages were not uncommon. Indeed, many people did not view their marriages in ethnic terms. Ethnicity did not have such rigid borders in their minds prior to the war. Perhaps because they have the most to lose and gain, perhaps because ethnic boundaries are more permeable to them, those most interested in participating in workshops, at least initially, often have interethnic relationships, be they at work, in marriage or other social circumstances.

6. Results and Achievements

Because the two projects, *The Bench We Share* and *Return and Trust Rebuilding–Pakrac*, are focused on attitudinal change that will bring about the normalization of social relations for communities, results are typically modest when viewed from the outside. Project leaders note that although these steps do not look like much to people on the outside, but to those on the inside, some of the results are quite dramatic. Though no grand statistics can be presented, the results are seen through stories of reunited family members, friends and colleagues, of former soldiers in opposing armies shaking hands, of people who enter a workshop seeing only differences and leave recognizing some common ground and being able to take a step onto that ground.

The steps that have been taken in these two projects are remarkable perhaps because they are so modest. Yet, given the situation in Pakrac and Baranja, it is precisely such small steps which can be the most effective. While people might like to have unlimited funds to repair and rebuild their homes in Pakrac, and while jobs and generating income would ease economic stresses, such benefits would not necessarily contribute to rebuilding social relations and overcoming psychosocial trauma associated with war and its disruptions. Attention must be given to both material and psychosocial needs, which the projects attempt to do.

Through projects such as *Return and Trust Rebuilding* and *The Bench We Share* and through other local peace organizations that are cropping up, people are able to find other people who share their fears and concerns and who are likewise interested in taking a proactive approach to problems, which, at times, seem unfathomable and insurmountable.

In small communities results can only be achieved as individuals become willing to participate in finding solutions. Thus the amount of participation in the workshops is one measure of success. Another is when Serb and Croat neighbors become willing to talk to each other again. Both projects are realizing these results.

In Pakrac, for example, project team members have noticed a marked change in the attitude of some of the men of the area, who initially said they were not interested in, nor

in need of, psychosocial support. In recent months, however, men have been indicating that they have been helped through these programs and are requesting more of them. They are saying that they feel they need this more than the fixing of their houses. Also in Pakrac, parents, who three years ago were reluctant or unwilling to send their children to a free summer camp program because they would be with children of other ethnic groups, are now asking project leaders how their children can attend.

In Baranja, another example of success was when families, who were ready to leave the area, decided to stay after participating in a workshop called "Making the decision to stay or leave." Those who stay are given an opportunity to talk, listen and come to terms with their emotional distress in additional workshops. In total, more than 400 persons have been involved in workshops of *The Bench We Share* and its predecessor, *The Meeting House*. The workshops have been geared toward reuniting friends, family and colleagues, first from across geographical divides and then from mental/emotional divides.

Other results of *The Bench We Share* are the organization of two local peace groups. The creation of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights–Bilje, which is affiliated with the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights–Osijek, is the result of the desire of participants in the Birmingham, England, visitation project to continue the good will they had established while in England. The Oasis Peace Group in Beli Manastir, established as an independent organization in February 1998, was created under the supervision and assistance of *The Bench We Share*.

The Bench We Share is also concerned with mediation between Serb and Croat families in Baranja, taking a proactive approach to contacting recent returnees and neighbors who appear to have troubled relations. Project coordinator Dusanka Ilic has personally mediated more than 25 cases.

7. Conclusion

Small-scale, grass-roots level projects such as the two highlighted in this case study provide a means in highly volatile situations to relax relations between ethnic groups. The forum of the workshop provides a nonthreatening environment in which individuals can meet with members of other ethnic groups and develop their communication skills as well as give voice to troublesome feelings that have developed as a result of the war. The workshop forum provides an opportunity for people to get to know each other as individuals rather than through the lenses of a particular set of prejudices. The workshop environment, with its trained leaders and foreign guest trainers, provides an alternative reality to the ethnic hatred that is often promoted in the media and which many encounter on a daily basis. Participants develop skills in communication, peace-making and mediation, as well as those skills needed to organize and implement their own programs. They also meet others who are interested in finding creative solutions to formidable problems. The small economic projects affirm the importance of economic realities in rebuilding communities and provide a means for individuals to help themselves and their neighbors.

In situations where social relations have broken down almost completely, remedial steps that address the psychosocial dimensions of these relations are quite necessary. Overcoming ethnically based fears and animosities must be done gradually, in small steps

and with great care. Small-scale, grass-roots projects organized and implemented by members of these communities seem to be quite effective at reaching people and getting them involved in the process of healing themselves. These projects require a relatively small amount of funding and should be encouraged and supported so that activities can be expanded to reach a greater number of community members.