

The Volunteer Project Pakrac

**An Attempt at Grassroots Civilian Peacebuilding in
Croatia July 1993 - March 1997**

**Research Report to Department
for International Development**

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A Background and Objectives

The Volunteer Project Pakrac (VPP or 'the Project') took place in the town of Pakrac, Croatia from July 1993 to March 1997. It was led by the Anti-war Campaign Croatia (ARK) under the security and political umbrella of the UNOV Pakrac Social Reconstruction Project (UNOV PSRP) - an ad hoc structure within the UN Office Vienna.

Pakrac, in West Slavonia, was one of the early flashpoints in Croatia in Spring 1991. It was heavily destroyed and divided between Croatian control and the Republic of Serbian Krajina in fighting between 'Croatian' forces and the Yugoslav People's Army and 'Serb' irregulars from July 1991 to January 1992. Both 'sides' were then under the mandate of the UN Protection Force and its successor UNCRO, within UN Protected Area West, from January 1992 until May 1995.

In late 1992, UNOV PSRP and UN Civil Affairs invited ARK to co-operate on peacebuilding in the area. The VPP idea initially used international volunteers and ARK activists for basic physical reconstruction and social assistance. International volunteers were recruited using systems already in place for work in refugee camps run by Suncokret, another NGO in the ARK network. None of the Croatian Anti-war Campaign activists involved had previous peacebuilding experience, and the Project's loose structure reflected this.

Originally planned as short term experiment, VPP expanded beyond the Summer of 1993 to fill social development and 'empowerment' roles with Pakracani, using Long Term Volunteers. By 1994 it had developed a concept of integrated grassroots peacebuilding which sought to combine physical reconstruction assistance ('hardware') and social assistance / social development / empowerment ('software'). In responses to the war in Croatia, as in many other contexts to that date, these naturally linked pre-requisites for constructing a future at the grassroots were rarely delivered by the same intervenor, or even co-ordinated between different actors. Instead, they were artificially separated by specialist agencies. Operating at the grassroots in a distinct geographical area, VPP was able to experiment with reuniting these strands of the peacebuilding process.

VPP also referred to its integrated work as 'social reconstruction'. Although this can be confusing, as other bodies use that term to denote purely 'software' work, for VPP it encapsulated the idea that physical reconstruction is no guarantee of peace unless communication and trust are also re-established.

The Project was handicapped by its political and military context. Changes in UNCA leadership combined with hardening attitudes between the local authorities and central governments of each 'side' to close the 'window of opportunity' which had existed in 1992. As a result, VPP was restricted in its access to the RSK 'South Side' of the ceasefire line.

ARK and UNOV PSRP also diverged, as UNOV PSRP had budgets skewed to physical reconstruction, and neither organisation had foreseen VPP's growth. VPP therefore created its own funding base, and co-operated with UNOV where possible, although expectations still clashed. The Project also suffered from poor internal organisation, lack of parallel experiences, burnout and underfunding.

Yet by 1995 VPP was engaged in significant physical assistance with local 'Work Brigades' and elsewhere, as well as through a 'Small Repairs' Programme. This linked to social assistance to vulnerable groups through 'Community Visits'. These activities in turn created bases of trust and respect which were explicitly used for social development and 'empowerment' work in a Women's Club and Youth Club, Youth Development Programme, email and internet training, and miscellaneous educational, recreational activities. In their mature forms, these activities had an interacting, synergistic quality.

Most of this activity took place on the North Side of the Line, but activists of MOST, a Serb NGO, travelled from Belgrade to work with international volunteers who were able to live for short periods South of the Line.

On 1 May 1995 the Croatian army overran the West Slavonian sector of the Republic of Serbian Krajina. Most Serbs left the Pakrac area, with some killed en route. After the offensive, VPP volunteers accompanied remaining Serbs and provided a bridgehead for INGO and LINGO responses.

In a rapidly changing demographic and funding environment, the Project then sought to develop joint activities with 'Serbs' and 'Croats', with limited success. It also laboured under the risk of being seen as assisting forcible Croatian 'reintegration' of the former South Side. Lacking capacity to adapt enough to tackle the issue of returning Serbs, the Project now also faced the problem that lack of economic development held back its social development achievements.

However, VPP continued to develop its activity on both sides of the Line, albeit increasingly concentrating on social development and aiming for sustainability of the strongest of its local 'seeds'. Although the Project closed in March 1997, long term developmental support put in place by VPP allowed several offshoots to continue, including the Women's Group and Youth Club. New initiatives continue to appear in the town, based on links and 'empowerment' as a result of the Project

Almost 300 Croatian, Serbian and international volunteers worked on the Project in rolling teams of ten or so during its life, at a monthly cash cost of just around 10 000 Deutschmarks (around £4000). The Pakrac Project consequently became a major learning experience for a generation of local and international peacebuilders. Its lessons have been passed on by the direct involvement of ex-Pakrac volunteers in similar projects in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

However, only two short commentaries had been written about the Project, covering only its first two years. This study was therefore designed at the suggestion of the Centre for Peace Studies (CMS) Zagreb. CMS, founded in 1996 by ex-VPP activists, supports the next generation of peacebuilders in the region through Peace Studies courses, 'MIRAMIDA' peripatetic trainings and peacebuilding consultancy.

General Objectives:

To help the grassroots peacebuilding movement in Post-Yugoslavia to **refine and develop its ongoing, groundbreaking work** by drawing out and disseminating the lessons of the seminal Pakrac Project

To **inform and influence** UN, UK government, and International NGO policy makers by meeting the need for a detailed **case study** of a civilian peacebuilding response to the complex post-war situation in Post-Yugoslavia

Specific Objectives:

- 1) To abstract **lessons, best practice and recommendations** based on the Pakrac experience
- 2) To **communicate the lessons** of the Pakrac Project to a wide activist audience **within Post-Yugoslavia** via the indigenous ZAMIR e-mail network and the webpage of ARKZIN, the popular commercial magazine of the Croatian Anti-war Campaign.
- 3) To **communicate the experiences** of the grassroots volunteers and townspeople who lived and worked on the Pakrac Project, in order to make their voices heard in the **worldwide** debate on the usefulness of civilian peacebuilding initiatives. To do this via the webpage of the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and up to three articles in relevant journals.
- 4) To place the Pakrac experience in a **wider context** of civilian peacebuilding initiatives elsewhere in Post-Yugoslavia and worldwide. This is important as a way to encourage Post-Yugoslav peacebuilders to recognise their **common experiences** with their counterparts abroad.
- 5) To raise **public awareness** of civilian peacebuilding achievements **within Post-Yugoslavia** via an article in ARKZIN (see above).
- 6) To pass on findings to the **new generation of Post-Yugoslav peacebuilders** via teaching within the Peace Studies Program of the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb

B Methods

Main components of research July 1998 - June 2000:

- Interviews with key townspeople, local and international volunteers and other actors (UN, agencies, funders...)
- Processing of interviews (transcription of most relevant parts, annotation)
- Physical retrieval, analysis and annotation of scattered written primary sources
- Selective reading of most relevant secondary material
- Writing up results
- Dissemination
- Archiving data and primary sources in Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb

Researcher

Nick Wilson conducted all the research. A Croatian speaking UK citizen, he was involved with the Pakrac Project in its first year and is an Associate of the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb. His links to the town and the Project of course influenced his research, but the benefits arguably outweighed any loss of objectivity. It is often difficult for outside researchers to gain insight into long-term grassroots projects such as the Pakrac Project. In addition, life in Pakrac 1993-97 was traumatic for many people. This made it vital that the researcher could speak and read Croatian and was known and trusted by all concerned.

Supervision

The research was supervised by Judith Large, Fellow of the Dept of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent.

A mid-point report was copied to the Board of the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb, and all funders, including DFID.

Approach

The research aimed to be consistent with the approach of the Pakrac Project. This entailed allowing interviewees to describe the benefits and limitations of the Project in their own terms at their own pace. It also meant collecting a diversity of views and giving them equal weight, whether they were UN

officials or peasant farmers. In addition, the researcher tried to be sensitive to the fears of interviewees, in some cases choosing to avoid certain questions or even not interview people if it would put them in intolerably insecure positions.

Interviews

Fifty-four interviews were conducted with sixty-four key local and international actors involved in the VPP, who were traced all over the world. Open-ended interviews were based on a standard guide, from which topics were selected to draw out an interviewee's particular expertise on particular aspects of the Project. Interviews with key actors lasted several hours, sometimes over a few days.

The key parts of all interviews are transcribed, though some interviewees in Pakrac refused to be tape-recorded out of fear.

Primary Sources

Five hundred and eighty-four primary sources (permissions, maps, financial reports, minutes, emails, databases, publicity, and media reports) were boiled down from a chaotic mess of several thousand documents scattered in different parts of Europe. This will form an indexed archive of the VPP which will be deposited in 2000 with the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb.

Obstacles

A six month slippage occurred due an under-estimation of the labour-intensity of interviewing and processing interviews into a manipulable form, all of which was done by the researcher.

An obstacle predicted in the planning stage was how to approach Serbs who remained in Pakrac and those who fled after the Flash Offensive in 1995. The few Serbs left in Pakrac live with insecurity, and adopt a low profile. Persuading them to talk openly about a period in which they were in open rebellion against the Croatian State was always going to be difficult.

It was made much more difficult by the NATO bombing of Serbia which began while the researcher was in Pakrac. Many interviewees were explicitly scared of NATO triggering a wider war, and the Serbs felt more exposed than ever within Croatia. For these reasons, and because the researcher is British, several key Serbs refused to be interviewed.

The researcher was also planning to travel to Serbia to interview activists and to trace Serbs from Pakrac. NATO bombing made it impossible to get a visa for Serbia for a significant part of the research period. The NATO bombing also dangerously reduced the space to be both anti-Milosevic and anti-war.

This meant that several Serb activists who were scheduled to be interviewed were forced underground. Many left Serbia and became difficult to trace. Yet the input of these Serbs activists would be valuable. It therefore might be possible to conduct interviews with them during 2000, using DFID dissemination funds.

However, some ordinary Serbs from Pakrac had been resettled in Kosovo since 1995. Many of these people moved to Serbia as the Yugoslav army left Kosovo, for fear of Albanian/NATO reprisals. Locating them would have been extremely time consuming. It is also unlikely that they would have prioritised speaking with a British researcher at that point.

C Findings (from Section 6.5 of the Report)

The VPP initiative was too early, too isolated at the grassroots and too specific in its make-up to single-handedly effect 'reconciliation' in Pakrac. The complex political-military context in which it operated was also extremely hostile to this aim both during and after the ceasefire period.

However, the Project did have value as an experiment in mobilising local, semi-local and international civilians and a wide international 'constituency' of supporters with the aim of contributing to a peacebuilding process in a localised area with the co-operation of the UN.

Given the 'cross-cutting' nature of grassroots peacebuilding, participants were often out of their depth. Poor organisation in the initial phase, and ad hoc funding throughout, also hampered its efforts. However, these factors, along with close listening to local needs carried out in informal settings, arguably also prevented it from 'doing harm' by 'implementing' alien models.

Yet better organisation in the initial phase, along the lines of established civilian 'peace' interventions such as Peace Brigades International, would have gone a long way towards reducing burnout among participants. It would also have helped the Project to adapt strategically to changing conditions in the long term, and made it less prone to self-perpetuation.

VPP's assistance in physical and social reconstruction was probably greater, relative to its resources, than the efforts of much better resourced actors working in the same area. These activities, and its 'empowering' and 'normalising' initiatives, were generally well-conceived as they were again based on long term informal listening to local needs.

The integration of physical and social assistance with social development and empowerment activity was very beneficial to the Project, in that the more 'concrete' initiatives created a broad base of contacts, respect and trust. The logical integration of these two often artificially separated strands of peacebuilding also bore fruit in terms of reciprocal and synergetic relationships between different activities.

The successes in this arena by non-professionals working largely on intuition and with minimal resources raises the question – who is competent for interdisciplinary peacebuilding at the grassroots? It raises questions about ‘expert’-driven ‘NGO development’ and ‘civil society building’ activity in IGO and INGO interventions and suggests that a new focus on humble listening and the empowerment process itself may be more in tune with the tempo of grassroots peacebuilding than focussing on short term tangible results.

Expensive in terms of effort expended, the Project was cheap in cash terms. However, better ‘vertical integration’ with IGOs, NGOs and domestic officials operating at levels other than the grassroots would have enhanced the Project’s impact. Ideally, this might have amounted to an integration of reconstruction and social development on a larger scale, not just within the small VPP initiative. This was hampered by the limited capacity of VPP participants, IGOs and INGOs to co-operate comprehensively on an area-based peacebuilding ‘push’ at all levels.

It may therefore be most appropriate to see VPP overall as a ‘holding project’, providing stop-gap assistance while waiting for a political and military stand-off to resolve itself. While at the same time developing communication, openness, and self-organising capacity in local people as a long-term investment in the aftermath of that resolution. Another possible view is to see it as ‘peace-tending’. In the sense of exerting a low-level influence ‘tending’ towards a non-violent yet just solution, and also tending a slow-growing and fragile plant in very hostile circumstances.

Policy Recommendations:

- ‘Reconciliation’ is too unrealistic and loose an aim to apply to grassroots peacebuilding, other than as an ultimate motivating ideal. ‘Normalisation’ or ‘Social Reconstruction’ also have limitations as concepts, but are at least easier to break down into mid-term achievable aims.
- A case can be made for a limited short term role in cross-cutting, integrated peacebuilding for minimally trained international ‘concerned citizens’. This might include humanitarian aid activities, basic reconstruction and social assistance. Using ‘non-expert’ internationals appears to have benefits in terms of ‘solidarity’, internationalisation of the conflict, and the introduction of ‘difference’. However, such interventions are likely to set their aims too high, and therefore have the tendency to perpetuate themselves and incur high human costs. An executive structure with parallel experiences can guard against these risks.
- Physical reconstruction and social assistance, if integrated into a wider peacebuilding agenda, can provide a basis for more ambitious social development and activities aimed at ‘empowering’ members of a community. Such assistance can create opportunities for humble listening by intervenors, give insight into the specifics of a local situation, and

ultimately provide pretexts for cross-entity communication at the grassroots level. Aid, growing into developmental aid, can assist this process.

- ‘Expert’-driven peacebuilding interventions commonly artificially separate physical reconstruction and social development. A localised response which restored the naturally integrated state of these two strands of activity on a small scale, the VPP experience suggests that there are ways to better integrate these activities – even where they are currently the responsibilities of different intervening bodies.
- Integrated grassroots peacebuilding must therefore seek to build broad co-operation with intervenors and local actors operating at different levels of the conflict. Without this co-operation, integration of physical reconstruction and social development will be piecemeal, and advances at the grassroots may be hamstrung by blockages at political, military, economic and institutional levels. Integrated peacebuilding on a large scale will also require a radical shift in the mindset of many INGOs and IGOs to seeing local actors as more than clients. It is not adequate to regard INGOs as ‘filling in’ for larger intervenors, or to see local populations as beneficiaries.
- Grassroots peacebuilding may appear to be cheaper than expert-driven interventions or the violent alternative. But would-be supporters should be aware that this work is extremely long term. It requires funding which runs in cycles more attuned to building trust than producing quantifiable results in the short or even mid-term.

D Dissemination

There are seven dissemination actions. All except number two were suggested in the Objectives of the original Project Proposal (see italicised quotes). **Some are conditional on dissemination funding.**

1. Report

*“...abstract **lessons, best practice and recommendations** based on the Pakrac experience”*

*“...inform and influence UN, UK government, and International NGO policy makers by meeting the need for a **detailed case study** of a civilian peacebuilding response to the complex post-war situation in post-Yugoslavia”*

The attached report fulfils these objectives. It forms the basis of the dissemination described below.

2. Feedback Meeting

“... help the grassroots peacebuilding movement in post-Yugoslavia to refine and develop its ongoing, groundbreaking work...”

During the research, an opportunity appeared to disseminate the results regionally through the new Regional Centre for Culture of Peacebuilding, an offshoot of the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb. This new, indigenously-initiated institution aims to build links between grassroots peacebuilding activists across the region.

This led to the idea to have a ‘meeting’ in Autumn 2000, including:

- named activists from the Volunteer Project Pakrac
- named indigenous activists who are engaged in, or are considering similar work elsewhere in the post-Yugoslav region (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo)

This research would be used as a ‘jumping off point’ for a partly structured, partly open discussion focussing on the lessons learned and their relevance to grassroots peacebuilding initiatives in the region.

The results of this discussion, plus the results of the research may be published by the Regional Centre for Culture of Peacebuilding, ideally in local languages.

This meeting is conditional on dissemination funding. A draft proposal for the idea was approved in principle by the ESCOR Unit of the Department for International Development in November 1999. A full proposal will be presented in Summer 2000, although logistical problems have so far delayed the start of the Regional Centre.

3. Articles

“... up to three articles in relevant journals.”

- The Life and Peace Institute (LPI) in Sweden have requested an article for their magazine-journal *New Routes*, to map out the main issues of this study.
- The Centre for Conflict Resolution in the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University has also suggested that part of the research might constitute one of their *Occasional Papers*, which are intended to reflect research-in-progress.

This dissemination will take place over the year 2000 - 2001.

4. ARKZIN / Online ARKZIN

“To raise public awareness of civilian peacebuilding achievements within Post-Yugoslavia via an article in ARKZIN.”

“... and the webpage of ARKZIN...”

ARKZIN is a Croatian magazine available in kiosks throughout the country, and in Serbia, Bosnia and abroad through kiosks and subscription. It is also published online in Croatian and English. Originating as ARK's newsletter in 1992, it covers politics and culture of civil society and is widely read by the intelligentsia in the region.

This action would be particularly relevant as it gives ARK an opportunity to draw attention to the efforts it made under the hard-line HDZ government. This would contribute to the re-assessment of that period and the atmosphere of new hope since the government changed in Croatia in January 2000.

However, that same change, as well as the Kosovo crisis, has caused ARKZIN to lose its funding. This dissemination is therefore likely to consist of a short article on the ARKZIN website, without publication in the newspaper itself.

5. Teaching in Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb

“... to the new generation of post-Yugoslav peacebuilders via teaching within the Peace Studies Program of the Centre for Peace Studies, Zagreb”

This teaching is planned for the Autumn 2000 semester. **It is conditional on dissemination funding**, which will be sought in Summer 2000.

6. ZAMIR Internet publication

“... to a wide activist audience within post-Yugoslavia via the indigenous ZAMIR e-mail network”

This report will be published on the Zamir Transnational Network, an email and bulletin board service operating throughout the post-Yugoslav region since 1992, and a member of the ARK network, during Autumn 2000 / Spring 2001.

7. UNRISD internet publication

“...via the webpage of the UN Research Institute for Social Development...”

It is now likely that this report will be posted on the INCORE website instead, (Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity, a joint programme of the United

Nations University and the University of Ulster) during Autumn 2000 / Spring 2001.

ends