

Ankica DRAGIN

No-Small-Issues

World:

EHO YRM—CBC Project, a Reconciliation Experience

In 2001, while just a novice in the reconciliation field and preparing for a seminar on church and society in South-East Europe, I received an email asking for photos of reconciliation. More than a little confused and lacking experience, I replied: "I would be glad to provide them, but please tell me first what reconciliation looks like." After three years of working in the field, it became quite obvious that this exchange concerned one of the crucial, still unanswered – or unanswerable – questions: that of the "form" of reconciliation.

There is an impressive amount of literature on reconciliation dealing with its various aspects, approaches and experience of people working on and towards it all over the world. It is a very common topic at university departments dealing with peace building, social, political, historical and theological issues: but what about everyday life? There is one common starting point for reconciliation work in practice: we all have one life – our own. Regardless of all our experiences and the circumstances we live in, one thing must not be forgotten: it is God-given.

Project Background

The territory of the ex-Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was no exception to the rule of the post-socialist social, economic and political turmoil that happened all over South-East Europe during the last fifteen years. It was, though, one of the more drastic examples of what social transition processes could turn into in an ethnically and religiously very mixed region: all ex-Yugoslav countries were faced with a terrible civil war and its consequences, directly or indirectly.

One of the major consequences was the large number of refugees. Many of them had difficulties coping with the fact that the region they were driven out of and the one they were heading to used to be in the same country as recently as the day before, and today they would have to cross an international border between them.

The formal, administrative, or even international border, however, was a smaller problem; the newly-erected mental, cultural, national and religious walls became a trouble indeed once again – just as they were nearly half a century ago during and after World War II. In a region where not a single generation lives a life without a major armed conflict, the issue of the “domicile” and the “newcomers” became a burning one once again, before even the previous generations had time to deal with it on a personal level.

After the second and the biggest wave of refugees came to Vojvodina in 1995, the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation (EHO) was one of the first NGOs to develop projects towards assisting the newly arrived refugees and their integration into society. This is how the first Youth Reconciliation Meetings (YRM) project was devised in 1996.

Its overall aim was to work towards a more successful social integration of refugee and domicile children in the settlements that hosted most refugees. Between 1996 and 1998 meetings were held from time to time, depending on the available funding; whereas between 1998 and 2002 the meetings turned into yearly cycles with funds provided for 10 two-day weekend meetings.

The programme of these meetings involved various communication-oriented activities helping children to make friends and learn about each other, simultaneously fighting barriers of prejudice and mistrust that may have arisen from the participants' different experiences and backgrounds.

Forty children, aged 10–14, from two neighbouring settlements came together, accompanied by their teachers, for socializing, creative games, fun, arts and crafts and a party. The activities focused on immediate personal contacts and emphasized the values of mutual help and support, cooperation, tolerance and acceptance.

The point was to provide the children with an experience completely different from what they might have been experiencing at home, and a space for activities and feelings unaddressed elsewhere. Though aware of the fact that the children came from different backgrounds, their teachers and parents were already too burdened with their own everyday problems to have time to devote to their children.

One of the saddest, but yet most precious, experiences of the project staff was that of a little refugee girl from Krajina in Croatia, for whom a YRM sometime in 1998 was a chance to sleep in clean bed linen for the first time ever since she had become a refugee. For many of the children – *domicile* as well as *refugee* – these meet-

ings were the first time they had gone on an excursion, slept away from their homes or even had a properly cooked, two-course-and-a-dessert meal.

Nevertheless, these meetings were a huge success both with the children and with their teachers and parents, most of them ending in tears and with evaluations, of which 90 per cent had the following three sentences: it is a pity that the meetings do not last longer, do not happen more often and do not involve more children. There were 48 meetings between 1996 and 2002, involving more than 2,800 children from 25 settlements all over Vojvodina, 42 primary schools and 12 refugee collective centres.

YRM Cross-border Cycle (CBC)

The YRM–CBC project is a sequel to the YRM that started in 2003 as the first initiative of its sort in the region. With the overall atmosphere loosening up a little bit, borders opening on all sides and the first hints of the process of European integration heading South, the project staff decided it was time to try and change something about the project – i.e. to move forward.

It was decided that the project would try to bring together children from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro for the first time since the conflicts of the '90s broke out. Although a pioneering and risky venture, the reasons for such a decision were numerous. The age group of the involved children implied they were all born during or just before the war.

There was little chance that they had ever travelled anywhere outside their own countries, or even their own towns. The media in the region were much (ab)used on all sides, and there was a great chance that these children might already have prejudices against the “others.” Most of the children might have been completely oblivious to the fact that these states were once all in one country, remembered by many today as the “good old” one.

All regions involved were devastated by the war, and there was little chance the parents could provide for even an excursion abroad. Finally, all of them shared a language that used to be one single language in the ex-Yu country. The name of the project indicates its origins and its overall aim: crossing borders of mistrust, ignorance and prejudice among children in the region.

The CBC is actually just an approximate translation of the French “*sans frontières*” (without borders), which came from the “*Jeux Sans Frontières*” (Games Without Borders), a French TV show from the '70s, where representatives of about 10 countries from

Europe would travel all year round to a town in each participating country and compete in rather silly-looking but fun outdoor games with only one topic and aim: to learn more about the culture and tradition of these countries, establish mutual links and advocate for values of friendship and sharing.

The aims of this project are advocating for reconciliation work and regional cooperation; and promoting tolerance by establishing mutual cooperation, increasing mutual knowledge and facilitating social integration of children. Bearing in mind the age of the participants, the project is essentially about *teaching, learning and practicing forgiveness*.

The meetings last for three days, from Thursday till Sunday. The structure of each meeting is the same. The children arrive on Thursday at the Leuenberg Home in Feketić, a facility of the Calvinist-Reformed church used by EHO for activities involving large groups of people, and participate in the introductory part of the programme.

In the welcome part the leaders introduce the project, themselves, the facility and the programme, while the participants introduce themselves personally, establish ground rules and list their expectations. For purposes of monitoring the learning process during the meeting, all participants fill in an anonymous multiple choice test of knowledge about each country (with questions from geography, history, sports, music and art).

The two groups present their country, region, town and school in a way they find the most appropriate (through formal presentations, drama, dance, poetry reading, music or singing). The correct answers to the test questions are mentioned in the presentations. Friday is dedicated to arts and crafts creative workshops (theatre, carpentry, glass painting and origami/paper crafts).

We get the children to communicate more immediately and to create a sense of belonging to a recently formed informal group without feeling threatened and abandoned by their everyday peer group. Each workshop is a process leading the children from “nothing” (raw material) to “something” (their creations) and making them realise that they all have the seed of demiurge within themselves.

The joy and enthusiasm of the children, after they have completed their work and while showing their friends what they have done, is a reward in itself. The cherry on top is the play prepared by the theatre workshop participants; it also reflects upon the burning issues of the children, their implications and possible solutions. The evening is reserved for an outdoor teambuilding workshop with the whole group, a beauty contest (for both girls and boys)

and a party. By this time the group usually becomes so mixed that the adults can tell the origins of the children only by their accents.

Saturday morning is reserved for the non-violent communication, conflict resolution and cooperation building workshop. Just like with the teambuilding, the children spend another three hours with the same workshop hosts, experts in these issues themselves with 14 years of work with children and teachers in Bosnia behind them, dealing with the issues of conveying messages, fighting prejudices, establishing communication and cooperation without causing negative feelings within the group or causing conflict.

One of the most interesting evaluation facts is that the children refer to these workshops as “games in free time.” They do not even perceive them as an organised activity and they are deeply impressed by them because that may have been the first time ever that someone had asked them about their personal feelings and offered them a chance to talk about them without fear of saying something wrong or hurting anybody.

Saturday afternoon starts with preparation for an excursion to Novi Sad, the regional capital. All participants get the same YRM–CBC T-shirts to wear during the excursion, primarily for easier identification in the crowded city streets. From the onlookers’ point of view, it is always interesting to see a bunch of happy children in the street, ask them where they come from and why they are all wearing the same T-shirts.

In Novi Sad the children first visit the Petrovaradin fortress, the second-biggest fortress in Europe, where by courtesy of the City Museum they have yet another chance to learn about the history of the whole region: its multiculturalism, multiconfessionality, geopolitical and cultural significance, as well as to visit a section of the 16-kilometre underground labyrinth and to hear more about the old ways of fighting a battle.

The whole story is once again structured to point out that much more effort is needed to (re)build something than to destroy it. The excursion ends with a stroll down the town centre and some free time in the park. The group is back to Feketić for dinner, and the evening is usually reserved for watching a film and informal socialising.

Sunday, the last day of the meeting, begins with a grumpy morning greeting. After energisers, it continues with evaluation and choosing the best works from the arts and crafts workshops, followed by a specially designed general knowledge quiz with three mixed groups of participants, the jury, the timekeeper and the cheerful audience.



The final activity for the morning is the “Your Five Minutes” game. The whole group, adults included, is divided into four smaller groups and all participants are invited to express their feelings about the meeting by singing, acting, poetry reading, music, pantomime and drawing. Each group is to present its work, and it is usually the most dynamic part of the whole programme with a lot of laughter and cheers.

Finally, the children fill in the test they got on Thursday once again without prior notice, in order to measure how much they have learnt during the meeting, and a formal final evaluation sheet for the whole meeting. At the very end all participants get a group photo and a list with addresses, phone numbers and emails of all participants as a present.

They are once again encouraged to keep in touch with each other and informed about the future prospects of a return visit. The departure home is after lunch and it usually takes about an hour to get all the children on the right bus, since by that time they are all wearing the YRM–CBC T-shirt, most of them are crying and stalling with the departure by purposefully entering the wrong bus to make it obvious that the two groups do not want to part.

After the Meeting

The evaluation and comparison of the two knowledge tests indicates that the number of 90–100 per cent correct tests increases on average by 20 per cent, while the 70–80 per cent category increases by up to 10 per cent, with no tests with less than 60 per cent of correct answers. The overall increase in the results is usually about 25 per cent.

The participants’ narrative evaluation shows that over 96 per cent of them would like to come again to the meeting, and the comments are exactly the same as with the previous (ie. local, refugee and domicile) cycle. Being informed and instructed about it before they have come to the meeting, the participants and their accompanying adults are bound to do a bit of promotion work in their school and local community.

They are supposed to make a billboard with photos and texts about the meeting in their school, or to organise a peer meeting with other children and to share their experience. They are also supposed to have an article about the meeting published in the school or local newspaper, or to arrange to appear on a radio or TV show and share their YRM–CBC experience.

Within two months’ time they should have reported back to the project staff about it, and the materials from the meeting, along with the press clippings, letters of support and children’s texts are published in the *Bez granica (Without Borders)* meeting newsletter. Three hundred copies of the newsletter are published after each meeting. The project has a far-reaching effect in the respective local communities after such an extensive promotional work, thus reaching all target groups of the project: peers in school and the wider community, teachers and children’s families.

Small Issues to Conclude With

YRM–CBC has been a one-of-a-kind initiative in the whole Balkans region. Seemingly daring, it proved to be a very much needed and appreciated initiative in the communities its participants came from. From the formal project point of view, it reached the expected results and obtained 50 per cent funding until the end of 2006.

Like any other NGO initiatives, it still needs recognition and affirmation on higher levels, regionally and nationally. No matter how much the media are informed about it, not more than three articles about it get published in more prominent regional or national newspapers. Radio stations seem barely interested in it, whereas no TV station has showed any interest whatsoever. Only one

regional ministry sent its representative to one of the meetings to express its support for the project.

From a Christian point of view, the recognition has already arrived: through the meetings and participants themselves. Upon seeing their faces right after the first YRM–CBC meeting, it was obvious that at least forty people – matured before their time – will not wait fifty years to forgive.

Talking on the phone about the meeting to a newspaper journalist from Belgrade (an ex-imam from Sarajevo who has been a refugee himself for several years), we ended up discussing the right time to start with reconciliation work, whether it means prevention, intervention or spiritual healing and how effective it is on a larger scale. There is one part of the conversation that may just as well serve as a conclusion:

Journalist: I have made the common, stupid journalist's mistake of considering personal stories irrelevant, unless they were those of some celebrities, for too long. Thank the Lord someone is at least trying to do something in this respect, reconciliation. Of course the story your kids have to tell does matter, and I shall try to persuade my editor that it is relevant. Nothing we, the journalists, usually deal with matters in the greater scheme of things, but that is what sells the papers and TV shows.

YRM–CBC: Do not get me wrong, but no matter how small the thing you do may seem, you have to start somewhere, don't you?

Journalist: Exactly. And don't you people grow too old without realising that "*there are no small issues in life.*" If for nothing else, then for the fact that God must have had a reason for his first utterance. As for the last, we shall see, eventually.

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EHO is a Church-related charitable organisation founded in Novi Sad in 1993 on the initiative of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Its founders are from five local churches: the Evangelical-Lutheran Christian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Greek Catholic Church, the Calvinist-Reformed Church and the Slovak Evangelical-Lutheran Church. It is an NGO operating by Christian principles and values and assisting a vast number of refugees, displaced people, the poor, old, ill, disabled, unemployed, marginalised groups and children in Vojvodina regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender or race. The new YRM–CBC project started in 2003 with three staff, including Stevan BĂTORI as project assistant in charge of logistics. The email address of EHO is ehs@eunet.yu.

