



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo – Rebuilding After the War

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

Next month, Kosovars will go to the polls to elect local municipal councils. These elections will be quite unlike any previously organized by the international community.

Some will see them as a diversionary tactic by the international community to keep Kosovars happy without giving them self-government. Others will see the elections as a tacit admission that the traditional model of top-down peace-building has failed in Kosovo, and the only way forward is at the local level.

Either way, it is an appropriate moment to assess international efforts to rebuild Kosovo.

Over the past four months in this series, we have looked at reconstruction through the eyes of Kosovar advocates and at their contribution.

In the first issue we argued that Kosovar civil society was well poised to assist the international peace-builders when they arrived in the province in June 1999. The reason was that during the 1990s, Kosovo's Albanians responded to their own crisis -- Serbian rule -- with vigor and experience. By creating their own 'parallel society,' they took advocacy to a new level.

We also argued that the spirit of the parallel society survived last year's war. It represented an asset for the international community.

In this final issue, we ask whether the international community has made use of this asset.

The answer, generally speaking, is no. This is a missed opportunity because Kosovo has none of the conventional checks and balances of a normal society. Everything is in flux -- its government, its economy, and its politics. Advocates can help fill the void and provide some legitimacy, but to do this, they need the right backup and support. It is, of course, easy to criticize. International officials in Kosovo are doing a difficult job with commitment and bravery. They are also justified in asking how it could have been done differently. As we noted in a recent issue, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have made many concessions to the media in Kosovo, only to find their trust misplaced.

There are also practical limits. How can a large international peace mission find the time to work with civil society when it faces so many day-to-day difficulties -- not least organizing itself?

We have tried to give some answers to this question throughout this series. The advocates profiled were chosen as broadly representative of civil society in Kosovo. They included groups that were prominent during the parallel society as well as organizations that emerged to take advantage of the space created under the U.N. Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

They were the Humanitarian Law Center, the women's group Motrat Qiriazi, Handikos (the association of handicapped), the Young Ecologists, a new Ashkali political party, a community improvement council, and the Internet Project Kosovo (IPKO). We have also looked at the Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI), and the media.

The issue is based on material collected by Iain Guest, from the Advocacy Project, in July 2000. This was Guest's third visit to the province in the last year.

By way of a postscript, this issue also pays tribute to three advocates with whom the Advocacy Project has worked -- and will hopefully continue to work. These are Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazi, Guri Skodra of the Young Ecologists, and Halit Ferizi of Handikos.

Like so many Kosovars, they are remarkable people determined to make a difference. Which is why, in spite of the many obstacles that have been placed in their way, this series can end on a positive note.

The Power of Advocacy

There have been some successes in Kosovo over the past year, but all have been dwarfed by one profound and overwhelming failure. This is the failure to produce a common vision for Kosovo's future.

Kosovars do not believe in their country, as Cambodians, Salvadorans, or Timorese believed after emerging from their own nightmare. This central vision has certainly not come from the international community. Yet without it, there can be no reconstruction and no peace in Kosovo.

Why the failure? Some will say it is just too soon. Too many people died. The hatred was too great. And as Bosnia shows, such wounds take years to heal.

As in Bosnia, the war in Kosovo polarized Kosovo's population and left them with contradictory ambitions. Albanians want independence, but the Serbs want to be part of Serbia. Most of Kosovo's minorities, like the Roma and Ashkali, are not sure they want to be part of either, but they cannot see any alternative. And all the while, the ethnic violence continues. Three Orthodox (Serb) priests were shot during our visit in July.

Kosovo's local politicians have not risen to the occasion. The LDK (Democratic League of Kosova), which directed Kosovo's parallel society, is playing a waiting game and losing touch with Kosovo's young population as a result. The LDK's two principal rivals are apparently engaged in a murderous feud to wipe out each other's leadership.

Outside Kosovo, there are powerful destabilizing forces at work. President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia has defied international opinion by sentencing hundreds of Albanians to prison terms and by manipulating the Serbs in the divided city of Mitrovica, knowing that this will increase the turmoil in Kosovo.

But Kosovo has also been badly let down by the international community, which has insisted that the province remain part of Serbia while dangling the lure of independence in front of Kosovo's Albanians to ensure their cooperation.

This is disingenuous. In the long run, Serbia matters more to the world than Kosovo, and Serbia's opposition parties will stand no chance of dislodging Milosevic unless they can keep Kosovo in Serbia. As a result, the international community cannot afford to promise Kosovo independence.

European governments understand this, even if the United States appears not to. And still neither the Europeans nor the Americans do anything to discourage the dream of independence. This condemns Kosovo to a legal vacuum that may eventually trigger furious protests by the Albanians.

Meanwhile, the West's policy in Kosovo remains vulnerable to the antics of the U.S. Senate, which has twice held up U.S. dues to the United Nations in Kosovo in recent months. (One example was examined in OTR #9, on the Kosovo Women's Initiative.)

Buffeted by these formidable forces, the UNMIK has shown itself to be dangerously out of its depth. UNMIK has had some successes. Helped by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it has done a better job of demilitarizing former fighters and training a local police force than previous U.N. peace missions. But in general UNMIK has been far too weak to impose its authority on the void. The proudest boast of the latest (July) UNMIK report to the U.N. Security Council is that no one died of cold last winter.

What is clear is that Kosovo presents the most intimidating set of obstacles that has faced a U.N. peace mission since the modern era of peace-building began in 1989 in Namibia. The fact that

some of the obstacles are self-imposed gives even less cause for reassurance.

Investing in Peace from the Bottom Up

The problems just described have one important consequence. They make it impossible to impose any of the conventional top-down solutions on Kosovo that have been employed by other U.N. missions.

There has been no attempt to get the squabbling politicians around a table and impose a political blue print, as happened over Cambodia and Bosnia. No national (or provincial) elections are planned; no government of national unity is in the offing.

This traditional approach to nation-building would have been difficult because of Kosovo's peculiar status. But it was also rendered impractical by the lack of a central vision just described. Instead, the approach has been to start from the bottom up and try to coopt Kosovo's political parties into administering their province. Twenty departments, or ministries, have been set up, and municipal elections will be held in October.

The hope is that by acquiring some political legitimacy in local elections and working together to provide water and electricity, the politicians can be encouraged to entertain some larger political ambitions. Perhaps they might even move toward some kind of national government. If successful, this strategy might eventually even resolve the legal contradictions referred to above.

It goes without saying that civil society is an essential partner for such a bottom-up approach to peace-building. Not simply because civil society helped to run Kosovo for a decade, but because it forms around issues rather than ethnicity.

Not one of the advocates profiled in this series set out to promote ethnic unity or reconciliation. Instead, they focused on practical tasks, such as linking Kosovo up to the internet, cleaning up the streets, or getting women's issues taken seriously.

In the process, however, several were forced to confront ethnic divisions. It was through working with Albanian women in Prishtina that Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazi became aware of a Serb woman who is caring for displaced Serb women in the Serb suburb of Prishtina (Kosovo Polje). The Kosova Women's Union, which Igo helped to form and which now meets monthly, will probably start fundraising for their Serb associate.

This sort of thing happened repeatedly in Bosnia in the immediate aftermath of the war. Community initiatives, based on common interests, made the initial breakthrough in divided towns like Gornji Vakuf and Mostar and provided an opening for a larger international effort. They showed that in ethnically divided societies, civil society acts like a social lubricant, ungluing the divisions. In other words, to invest in civil society is to invest in peace.

A Role for Advocates

This is particularly true of advocates. Consider Kosovo today. It has no government. Its politicians are irresponsible. Its businessmen are corrupt. Its U.N. administrators are floundering. Its 20 new ministries are struggling to define their role. Its laws are being redrafted. Is it possible to conceive of a better environment for the kind of advocates profiled in this series?

Goodness knows, there are plenty of openings to exploit. Each of the 20 government departments is supposed to have two 'co-heads': one Kosovar, the other international. As of July, the environment department was the only department still without a Kosovar co-head. This scandal cried out to be exposed, and it was left to young Guri Shkodra, the 15-year-old founder of the Young Ecologists, to make the running. Guri heard of the problem by accident during a visit to the department and made immediate plans to lobby UNMIK's head Bernard Kouchner.

Then there are women's rights. UNMIK has been struggling to raise the profile of women in its administration. As was noted in OTR #9, this has given Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazi a challenge and a target.

Then again, consider health. UNMIK is trying to build a new health system from scratch. Halit Ferizi, the energetic head of the association of handicapped (Handikos), will never have a better chance of getting the needs of his constituency -- the disabled -- into a national policy. He is also determined to make sure that disabled people are able to vote in the forthcoming municipal elections.

These advocates hold out the best chance of keeping Kosovo honest during this confused transition. Never has the contribution of advocacy to peace been more clearly demonstrated. But has the international community understood this?

In general, we would have to say no. Over the last year, the UNMIK and international agencies have pursued a series of policies that have -- wittingly or unwittingly -- served to undermine their partnership with civil society and weakened the local capacity of Kosovars.

Humanitarian Invasion

In our view, the problem started after June 12, 1999, when international agencies began to arrive in Kosovo after Serbian forces retreated. They were funded by donors who acted from a powerful sense of guilt at having abandoned Kosovars to the Serbian killers.

When we suggested publicly that this single-minded focus on humanitarian relief had undermined local civil society, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) responded angrily. This was understandable, because UNHCR and its nongovernmental partners were putting a tremendous effort into a difficult job. It was a humanitarian tour de force. And with winter approaching, and 60,000 houses needing repair, who could dispute the need? To question was to criticize.

At the same time, however, nothing could have been more disruptive than the army of

international officials and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that poured into tiny Kosovo last summer to deal with the humanitarian emergency. At one stage, no fewer than 285 international NGOs were working in Kosovo -- a huge number for such a small area.

Again and again, local organizations complained to us of the crush of international vehicles, the pollution, and spiraling inflation. They particularly criticized the way that international agencies hired their best people at irresistible salaries and then put them to work on jobs with little responsibility -- as drivers, guards, or interpreters.

One of the most extreme examples we found was that of Nazlie Bala. Nazlie learned human rights activism the hard way. She founded the women's group Elena in the early 1990s and took human rights courses in Norway and Geneva from some of the world's leading experts.

She was certainly more qualified than most of the OSCE human rights monitors who arrived in Kosovo last year. But, as a 'local employee,' the only job she could find at the OSCE's human rights unit was that of an interpreter. Her job description meant that she was unable to initiate interviews with victims of abuse.

The real problem is not that the aid agencies took the emergency in Kosovo seriously -- that was to their credit. The problem is that no one ever considered the distorting impact of their work on local Kosovars. To raise the question was to question the very basis of the emergency relief effort.

From Relief to Development

One of the problems with emergency relief is its impermanence. UNHCR and its NGO partners are certainly aware of this, and in several programs they tried to address the emergency in such a way as to promote reconstruction. But in general, we saw little evidence that the humanitarian relief operation has strengthened the capacity of Kosovar civil society.

In one example, UNHCR asked one of its most reliable NGO partners, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), to establish a network of legal aid centers. The hope was that they could help former refugees through the post-war legal chaos and in the process help to revive the legal system.

UNHCR also contracted with the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms -- one of the central bodies under the parallel society -- to help monitor returning refugees. In a third example, UNHCR worked with Mercy Corps International to strengthen the Mother Teresa Society (MTS), whose network of village centers were being used to distribute food aid and other relief.

In each case, the hope was that by strengthening the capacity of these local partners, UNHCR would not only make it easier for them to administer emergency relief but also to work on long-term reconstruction.

Were they successful? We did not conduct a detailed assessment by any means. We visited

Peja/Pec and found that the UNHCR/NRC lawyers were taking testimony from victims of war crimes -- something that was also done by the Peja branch of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms. Surprisingly, there was no contact between the NRC lawyers and the Council staff.

It was clear that MTS benefited hugely from the input of resources and training from UNHCR and Mercy Corps. This undoubtedly made MTS better able to distribute relief aid. But it remains to be seen whether it will help MTS play a role in long-term reconstruction.

It is always difficult to change course midstream and adapt emergency programs to development. This is partly because donors are reluctant to let go of the humanitarian label and permit any adaptation, and partly because developmental plans have their own entirely separate genesis.

One casualty has been the Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI), which was profiled in this series. The KWI was intended to be an emergency response to help traumatized women, but it quickly became clear that the needs of women were in fact much deeper and could not be forced into a short-term aid program that was conceived and directed by outsiders.

In spite of this, the KWI's principal donor (the U.S. government) has been unwilling to convert the KWI into a open-ended fund. As we argued in OTR #9, this may have stifled not just the potential of the KWI but other women's initiatives.

Halit Ferizi, from the handicapped association Handikos, gave another example of just how difficult it is to fold relief into development. For ten years, Handikos has been trying to encourage communities all over Kosovo to provide consistent support to all disabled people, regardless of the cause of their disability. This is a key development goal.

But it clearly does not square with the mandate of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) which was set up to assist mine victims. Halit complained to us that the VVAF was giving 'discriminatory' preferential treatment. In one village, he said, the VVAF provided support for one young mine victim, while ignoring his handicapped neighbor.

Overall, it could be argued that the preoccupation with emergency relief was less justifiable in Kosovo than elsewhere, precisely because of the resiliency of Kosovars. The Kosovo refugees returned in June 1999 of their own free will, and after a decade of Serbian indifference they were probably capable of riding out another grim winter.

This is not to say that emergency aid was not needed. Indeed, even one death from cold would have brought a deluge of criticism on UNHCR. But it is astonishing that there was so little self-appraisal by the main donors, who poured money and people into Kosovo as if there was no tomorrow. One year later, in July, they were still suffering through power cuts and walking through filthy streets -- and wondering where their money went.

Donors on the Retreat

They have been generous to a fault in addressing Kosovo's humanitarian emergency, but donors seem disinclined to invest in Kosovo's future or civil society.

Based on predicted income, UNMIK has drawn up a budget of 562 million DM (\$250 million) for the current fiscal year. Of this, 200 million DM (\$100 million) is coming from donors, the rest from local revenues.

The \$250 million figure is not much when it comes to covering the cost of a government, including the salaries of 70,000 public sector employees. The main reason for the low figure is the lack of locally generated income. Up to now, the main source of revenue -- in addition to aid -- has been import duties and sales tax. It has not yet been possible to broaden the tax base to include income tax, because so many Kosovars work for the United Nations and are exempt from tax. This makes it impossible to tax those few Kosovars who do hold down a (non-U.N.) paying job.

In addition, very few Kosovars or even companies are paying utility bills. This came home in spectacular fashion recently, when the OSCE closed down the media building, purportedly because so many tenants were failing to pay their electricity bills.

In spite of this, the international community has decided that Kosovo will 'live within its means' and not incur debt to cover the costs of reconstruction.

This could have serious consequences for social programs. For example, it puts a very low cap on welfare payments for the elderly, single women, and the disabled. These payments are handed out on a monthly basis from centers for social work in municipalities. But instead of supporting individuals who qualify as vulnerable, every single member of a family will have to qualify as vulnerable before that family can receive any support. This will be limited to a maximum of 120 DM (\$60) per household per month.

Perhaps the small size of the budget would not matter so much were it not for salary distortions. This has been a sore spot since the U.N. mission arrived. The blunt fact is that for most of last year, doctors and teachers earned an average of 300 DM (\$150) a month, while Kosovars working as interpreters for international agencies could earn between 1,500 and 2,000 DM. Added to that, public sector salaries have been held down.

This has produced bizarre contrasts. At one point, Kosovar police recruits were being paid 280 DM a month, while their international police trainers could earn up to 20,000 DM a month. Local salaries have slowly inched up, but even today it is possible to find the Kosovar co-head (co-minister) of a government department being driven around in a UN car by a Kosovar chauffeur earning twice the salary.

This has a profoundly distorting effect on the way Kosovars think of money. The greater fear, of course, is that it gives government employees no financial incentives to perform well and encourages black marketeering and even crime. To everyone's surprise, there have been almost

no reports of extortion by new police recruits and no overt pattern of doctors selling their services to the highest bidder. But that is probably only a matter of time unless the international community can establish a more equitable policy on salaries and (equally important) do a better job of justifying the policy.

The easiest way would be for donors to pump more money into budgetary support, but the trend is definitely in the opposite direction. Last year, the British government basically wrote Kosovo a blank check worth 110 million pounds (\$160 million). This year Great Britain expects to spend nearer 5 million pounds. That excludes a generous contribution to the European Union's Kosovo budget, but it still represents a shocking reduction.

Shortchanging Civil Society

It has to be worrying for civil society that almost all of Britain's bilateral money for Kosovo will go into supporting the public sector instead of civic initiatives. Britain will probably spend no more than \$1 million on small initiatives.

The British example is extreme but not untypical. Earlier in this series, we praised USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) for supporting the creation of community improvement councils (CICs) in villages that could design projects that were appropriate to their communities. This allowed OTI to ensure that its grants would be useful and also sustainable.

But OTI has now drastically cut back its budget for CICs, leaving many communities struggling to fund initiatives that they thought would be funded by OTI. OTI aid is by definition limited, but this phase-out has been so abrupt that it has apparently sparked protests from some international NGOs.

These are harsh reminders that civil society in Kosovo would be unwise to rely on the generosity of donors in the months ahead.

There are some honorable exceptions. One is the Canadian government, which is spending \$2.5 million (Canadian) on a small projects program that is priming the pump for Kosovar civil society. The maximum grant is \$50,000 (kosovopsu@hotmail.com). The Canadian program is particularly noteworthy because it makes few reporting demands. Indeed, the program administrators help beneficiaries to draw conclusions. In spite of this, the program requires just two administrators. It helped to fund the recent meeting in Prishtina of the Kosova Women's Union (OTR #9). But few other governments are investing in Kosovar civil society.

The Kosova Foundation for Open Society (luan@soros.org.mik) and the Kosovo Civil Society Foundation (LulPeci@yahoo.com) both give small grants. (The latter made an important grant to the Kosovo Young Ecologists of \$10,000.) Kvinna Till Kvinna, the independent Swedish foundation (maria_tropp@hotmail.com), supports several important women's groups including Motrat Qiriazi.

Together, this dwindling group is keeping civil society alive in Kosovo. The bigger picture is distinctly gloomy. After their initial humanitarian profligacy, donors are now turning to the other

extreme and slamming the door shut after just a year.

At the same time, ironically, they continue to encourage the indiscriminate creation of new NGOs that depend entirely on foreign funding.

NGO Registration: Smothering Advocacy?

When asked how the U.N. Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is supporting civil society, UNMIK officials usually refer to the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that UNMIK has registered.

Judged by numbers, they have a point. As of July 12, 2000, an astounding 642 NGOs had been registered by UNMIK. Of these, about 400 were Kosovar. This is an eight-fold increase on the 50 or so local NGOs that were registered in August 1999.

It seems impressive. Yet these figures give a grossly distorted picture, because they equate civil society with organizations. Many of these NGOs were encouraged to register by UNMIK before they had a serious work plan. This is not the way to build civil society.

Successful advocacy groups start with a clear objective and then evolve into organizations as the need becomes clear, like the group of students known as Peshorja, which is profiled at the end of this issue.

At the same time, many groups will not need formal registration as an NGO to make a difference. Indeed, many of those currently being registered as NGOs by UNMIK would probably be more effective at achieving their goals if they steered clear of registration.

The reason is that registration carries with it administrative obligations such as the creation of a board, statutes, and reporting to UNMIK. The reporting requirement is so onerous for small groups that international NGOs are being hired by UNMIK to give 'capacity building' courses in how to report to UNMIK. There are reports that UNMIK will postpone the deadline for financial reporting.

NGO experts in Prishtina told us that UNMIK's mistake has been to exclude local and international NGOs from the registration process and to squabble with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). We would say that the problem is more fundamental: far too little attention has been paid to weighing up the pros and cons of formal NGO status in the first place.

The main advantage of NGO status is that it permits the group to open a bank account, receive international funding, and eventually to import tax-free goods. But if a group is composed of volunteers and there is no international funding to be had -- as seems to be increasingly the case -- NGO registration is probably the easiest way to smother its advocacy.

This is certainly the message from Bosnia, where the number of functioning NGOs has fallen from over 900 in 1996 to around 300. One shudders to think of the money and energy that has

been wasted in the meantime.

If UNMIK is seriously concerned about the future of civil society, it should be more discriminating in registering NGOs. To the extent that UNMIK does ask tough questions, it is to ensure that applicants are not trying to exploit the NGO tax-exempt status and avoid paying import tax.

Some would object to the idea of a government body regulating NGOs and vetting NGO work plans. They might even defend a system that sprinkles small amounts of aid around rather like venture capital, in hopes that the fittest will survive.

That, however, is a strategy. What is happening in Kosovo today is a substitute for a strategy and is in its own way another broken promise. It makes no sense for UNMIK to go on registering NGOs in the full knowledge that donors are increasingly unlikely to fund them.

The OSCE's NGO Centers

The OSCE has almost no money for programs, but it does have a mandate to promote democracy and nurture civil society. For the last year, it has tried to combine the two, by trying to impose democratic values on Kosovo's growing army of NGOs.

The OSCE has established seven NGO resource centers in towns, where NGOs can meet and use computers. Several more are being planned. We visited the Prishtina center. It has a staff of five, a meeting room, and a large basement where training courses take place. The center also has two computers (but no email).

The staff in the OSCE center see themselves as a sort of bridge between potential donors and groups that need money. But only one proposal had received so much as a nibble, and even that was not firm.

One reason for this was the declining interest of donors in funding civil society, which was just noted. Part of it has to do with the presentation of the proposals, many of which are amateurish and unrealistic.

But still another part of it also had to do with the fact that the OSCE center had not yet attracted a loyal clientele among NGOs or donors. It was not responding to a local demand from local Kosovar civil society.

As a result, it came across as an OSCE implant. There was no sense of local ownership -- no sense that great schemes are plotted here to build a brave new Kosovo.

Building NGO Democracy

The second part of the OSCE's NGO strategy has been to organize NGOs into a democratic structure, in the hope that this would generate support for the democratic process and for ethnic reconciliation. (This is separate from the process of NGO registration, which is UNMIK's

responsibility.)

The OSCE first attempted to organize a local NGO Council. This fizzled completely. An attempt was then made to attract local NGOs to meetings held at the Humanitarian Community Information Center in Prishtina. That too failed.

The OSCE then took a different approach and tried to organize a new representative body from the bottom up. It held a series of coordination meetings for various sectors of civil society (women, human rights, etc). This led to an NGO Assembly, which in turn elected 13 organizations to an Executive Council. At the insistence of the OSCE, two of the 13 seats are reserved for minorities.

This Council has fared much better than the previous attempts. Some very respected figures have been elected to it, including the head of the Mother Teresa Society (MTS), a co-director from the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, and Halit Ferizi, from Handikos, the association of handicapped. These are leaders of local civil society.

Halit Ferizi, certainly, takes the Council very seriously. But he was also quick to voice his frustration. For Halit, the Council's biggest failing has been its apathy. The NGO Council could do a lot to unify NGOs behind reconstruction, coordinate their involvement in the forthcoming municipal elections, and even intervene in the media war. But this has not happened.

Halit's charge has a familiar ring to it -- the NGO Council would not be the first elected body to stand accused of apathy. The real question is whether an outside institution like the OSCE can hope to organize Kosovar civil society and impose a democratic process on its members -- and whether this structure should be expected to support the international dream of a multi-ethnic Kosovo.

UNMIK and OSCE officials obviously believe so. They also need a structure to deal with. But civil society cannot be reduced to meetings, any more than it can be measured by the number of NGOs registered by UNMIK. And tolerance and multi-ethnicity can no more be imposed on civil society than they can on the media.

The key word, again, is imposition. Earlier this year, Kosovar women's groups delivered their own verdict on the OSCE approach by boycotting OSCE meetings and by putting together a new coordination group of their own called the Kosova Women's Union. Not everyone is as determined as these women, but many share their view that the United Nations and OSCE should have done more listening than talking.

Finally, it is fairly clear that everyone would benefit from more coordination between the coordinators. In addition to the Kosovar NGO Council just mentioned, international NGOs and Islamic NGOs have their own 'Coordination Councils.' The Office of the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator (OCHA) still maintains its splendid 'humanitarian coordination center,' to coordinate among NGOs working in emergency relief. Adding to the list, a new NGO Forum has started to promote NGO projects and seek funding from donors.

Five 'coordinating' councils/centers is a lot for the market to bear, and it suggests that coordination -- like NGO registration -- has become a goal in itself. If all five were to pool their energies and work together, they might play to each other's strengths and start to create the kind of synergy that the OSCE is seeking. This, in turn, would probably breathe some life into the OSCE's NGO resource center in Prishtina.

Capacity Building

To a greater or lesser extent, all of the aid agencies in Kosovo are trying to build the capacity of their local partners. 'Capacity building' has become, for many, a goal in itself. It is also one of the few activities sure to attract donor funding. Some agencies even measure their success by the number of trainers they have trained.

Is this kind of programmed 'capacity building' making civil society stronger or more effective? Or is it obscuring the real needs?

This question is not asked often enough. It should be clear from the foregoing analysis that 'capacity building' does not happen in the abstract. In the first place, it only makes sense if those on the receiving end already have a capacity. That requires a goal. Unless a group has a clear goal and a clear work plan, it will not benefit from a training course aimed at 'building its capacity.' And as noted above, many of the NGOs registered by UNMIK formed before they had a real agenda.

As a result, the first aim of 'capacity building' should probably be to help organizations set clear goals and define their mission. If this proves elusive, it probably means the organization has no reason to exist. In that case, the best contribution of the 'capacity builder' is to advise against going further.

Capacity building will be least effective when it is conceived in the abstract and deals in broad concepts. It will be most effective when it is custom made for an individual group, particularly if that group is practicing advocacy. Guri Skodra, Halit Ferizi, and Igo Rogova need no lessons in how to lobby and present a message. But they do need help in making their organizations more effective, and this can mean something as basic as delegating authority. They will also have technical needs. Handicapped people like Halit can make better use of email than most.

People Power

Ultimately, advocacy is about people. This is what makes it effective. This is what makes it so very difficult to support in an organized manner.

The advocates profiled in this series share one feature in common -- they are all charismatic personalities, driven by a powerful ambition to make their own corner of the world a better place.

And they do it so well. While everyone else predicts doom and gloom, Halit Ferizi's face is wreathed in smiles. He would come bounding out to meet visitors with a spring in his step -- if only he could walk. So, from his wheelchair, Halit does the next best thing. He makes you feel

important and welcome.

This is deeply seductive. You leave convinced that UNMIK would be crazy not to build its entire reconstruction plan around the needs of the handicapped.

The others have this same ability to draw you into their dream. It is impossible not to like Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazi, with her smoker's cough and her wide smile, because she likes everyone -- including the U.N. officials she taunts. Dr. Bernard Kouchner, the head of UNMIK, may writhe when Igo complains that he treats her like a Barbie doll. But Igo is Kouchner's friend. By speaking out forcefully, and taking the time to challenge UNMIK at every twist and turn, she gives UNMIK credibility.

As for Guri, the man-child who founded the Young Ecologists, you cannot but admire his networking skills and his intuitive sense of what would constitute an event. A chance cup of coffee with one official from the Mines Advisory Group and within minutes the two were plotting to send off young ecologists to preach the dangers of mines to Kosovo school kids. World Aids Day, Earth Day, World Environment Day -- all were on Guri's calendar this past year. Now, we hear CNN wants to include him in a series on heroes.

We also hear that Guri has given up hope of securing the funds to open an office. Undeterred, his group has decided to rent a vacant garage. Each member is contributing another 4 DM for its rent.

These are truly remarkable people. As the clock winds down on UNMIK, the long-term contribution of these advocates to Kosovo becomes more apparent. But woe betide any donor who tries to impose capacity-building on them.

Striking the Balance

What started out as a dull and tedious discussion about Kosovo NGOs turned into a passionate exchange about the psychology of aid.

It took place in mid-July in the OSCE's NGO center in Prishtina (which was rather harshly described above as an 'OSCE implant.') I had drifted over to meet the staff, but without any particular expectations. I expected to find educated Kosovars earning an international salary and doing basically nothing.

This turned out to be partly true and partly not. It was true that the officials at the center did not have a lot to do. But they were fabulous people, who wanted desperately to be doing more.

Neshat Shaqiri, the manager, was a teacher for five years under the parallel society, when he taught in basements.

Before Loni Ramadani, the receptionist, was recruited by the OSCE, she worked as a weather announcer for a small local station, TV AA. She drifted into the job rather like a summer shower, but in the dead of winter. This was tough because it meant climbing 13 unheated floors to the TV

AA studio in the Rilindja building. Even so, Loni loved the work and acquired quite a following among viewers. But TV AA did not pay a salary. Now she does less work for far more money. At least she feeds her family.

The day after my visit, a delegation of university students arrived to seek funding for a new NGO that they had registered three months earlier.

The students have latched onto an explosive issue that has received almost no attention outside Kosovo, namely the complete disintegration of Prishtina's university.

The university was once at the heart of opposition to the Serbian regime and the focus for student activism. It was here that Albin Kurti, the leader of the student union, launched peaceful mass demonstrations, and (successfully) demanded educational autonomy for Kosovo's Albanian population.

Today Albin languishes in a Serbian jail and his union has collapsed, leaving the students bereft of a champion at a critical moment. Of the university's 23,000 registered students, only 8,000 attend classes. Students find it so difficult to pay the minimal costs of tuition (140 DM a year for the law faculty) and lodging that some professors are speaking to empty classes.

Several months ago Sevdie Sadiqe, at the faculty of law, and several of her friends, decided to conduct a questionnaire of how their fellow students saw the crisis. They spent seven months studying their university's dizzying decline and collected 3,000 signatures asking for reform.

Based on their findings, they decided that this message needed to get out, but that it required them to be more organized and businesslike. So they called themselves Peshorja (which means 'Balance'), registered as an NGO, prepared a budget, and began to seek funding.

Up to this point, they had done everything right. Their first mistake was to assume that donors would put their money where their mouths were. If the U.S. State Department can pay American NGOs millions of dollars for 'youth projects' in Kosovo, it can presumably help young Kosovars reform their own university.

Not so. Peshorja brought their proposal to the OSCE's NGO center in Prishtina, where it was translated and entered into the folder. During the three months that followed, not one donor responded.

Reading the proposal, I had to admit that the language was a little weird. More to the point, the budget was wildly distorted: Sevdie and her friends were asking for much more money than the unlucky professors at her university.

I also felt that Peshorja was also missing a trick by not engaging more students in collecting the data -- something that might have helped to raise morale. The proposal could have benefited from more follow-up.

But the main problem was that Sevdie was putting the cart before the horse. Her proposal was all about Peshorja's organizational needs, instead of the work it wanted to do.

Sevdie grew taught-lipped as I tried to make these points. She clearly did not appreciate the advice.

'I've made sacrifices,' she said with a touch of petulance. 'We've been at this for seven months.'

'It's wise not to talk to donors of sacrifice in a country where 10,000 are missing,' I replied. 'Try to think of what will impress donors.' As soon as I'd said it, I felt lousy. But Neshat, who manages the center, agreed. 'I've told her the same thing. She doesn't listen.'

It lasted for two hours. Then we suspended hostilities to take a photo. Looking at it now, I notice Sevdie's tight little smile. She was hurt that a foreigner had trashed her beautiful idea. What did I know?

The bottom line, of course, is that she is right. If Western governments are serious about reforming higher education in Kosovo and getting a bang for their aid bucks, they must invest in people like Sevdie, who are willing to shake things up and rock the boat. Like so many of Kosovo's current problems, the crisis in the university feeds on resignation and silence. A dollar spent on Peshorja will probably do more for peace than ten dollars spent on youth projects through an international NGO.

Peshorja was finding it hard to make this case. Still, they don't give up. Just recently, we were pleasantly surprised to receive a new proposal from Peshorja, which makes more concessions to donors. It might just shame someone into responding.

We at the Advocacy Project will do what we can to help. Certainly, when it comes to civil society, persistence is the name of the game.