



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

Issue 8: Village Democracy, May 25, 2000

Contents

- **From the AP Editorial Desk**
- **Underdevelopment, Nor Reconstruction**
- **Setting Priorities**
- **Information and Community Democracy**
- **The Case for Subversion**
- **Investment – It’s All in the Mind**
- **Across the Ethnic Divide**
- **Interethnic “Success Story” – Same School, Separate Classrooms**

From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

The introduction to this series asked how international aid agencies can help civil society without imposing their own agenda and undermining local self reliance. USAID's Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI) has gone one stage further than this in Kosovo, and tried to create civil society from scratch.

It works as follows: whenever OTI receives a request for assistance from a village, it invites the village to elect a community improvement council, or CIC. The CIC then identifies the community's needs and sends a project request to OTI. CICs have turned into the backbone of USAID's program. By mid December, 160 had been established by OTI in Kosovo, involving some 2,400 villagers. OTI had spent over \$2 million on projects identified by these new councils.

>From a donor's perspective, this is intelligent aid. It helps OTI to direct money direct to beneficiaries, and also increases the chances that a project will be sustainable after OTI's funding dries up. If a community has designed and owns a project, it is more likely to make a long-term commitment.

But while this may underline the value of the CIC model to the donor (OTI), what is the impact on civil society? OTI hopes that these councils will trigger a small revolution, and bypass the traditional mould of top-down, hierarchical decision-making that has traditionally existed in the villages of Kosovo. This in turn will promote more democratic decision-making.

If all this happens, then the benefit for civil society could be enormous. But no matter how laudable the intention, CICs are still conceived by the donor, for the benefit of the donor. Cynics might conclude that such creations are unlikely to survive. At worst, they could seriously disrupt village life.

Can CICs encourage democracy in the villages and help Kosovars to develop a sense of community? Are they developing an indigenous capacity? Or are they imposing another donor obsession in a rather more sophisticated guise? Last December I visited the region of Gjilan with David Savard, from OTI, in the hope of answering some of these questions.

From Iain's Diary

I travel to the area of Gjilan with David Savard, from USAID (OTI). On the way we pass through two roadblocks that are manned by Americans and Russians respectively.

The American roadblock is all tanks and armor. The Americans wear their nerves on their sleeves in Kosovo. Recently, a vehicle from the Czech branch of the agency Caritas came roaring up to a roadblock, and turned around at the last moment. Jumpy American soldiers fired one warning shot in the air, and then another directly at the vehicle. No one was injured, but there were red faces all around. What makes this surprising is that the Americans are definitely on friendly territory here.

The same cannot be said for the Russians, who are detested by the Albanians because they are seen as being sympathetic to the Serbs (who are also Slavs). At their roadblock outside Rogacica, the Russians seem more relaxed than the Americans but also wary. They are shot at so often by the Albanians that the Americans call them "bullet magnets." They also shoot back, and have killed several Albanians. Difficult work, but not nearly as difficult as Chechnya.

Underdevelopment, Nor Reconstruction

Prior to joining OTI, David Savard worked with a large nongovernmental organization that is helping to deliver housing repair kits in Kosovo. The experience convinced him that the traditional form of emergency assistance was a failure. Most of the housing kits consist of plastic sheeting and strips of wood, and were intended for repairing window frames. Unfortunately, many families used them to rebuild rooves - a task for which they were totally unsuitable. It would, says David, have been better to hand over money or wood to villagers and let them decide how to use it.

Adding to David's sense of disillusionment with conventional emergency aid was the fact that the emergency in Gjilan has been greatly exaggerated. Of the 370 villages in the area, only 120 are in need of physical repair, he said. The area is also unusual for the number of Serbs who still remain. Some 20,000 Serbs live in 65 villages, and none of their villages were damaged in the war.

These figures suggest that the real challenge in Gjilan is not the emergency or even reconstruction. Rather it is underdevelopment. And development, to David, requires self-government. He is convinced that Kosovo's villagers have to decide their own needs in a democratic manner.

Setting Priorities

One of David's democrats, Musa Rrudhani, is a figure of some authority among his 360 fellow villagers. Last year he produced over a ton of potatoes, which he sold at the local market. This helped his large extended family to weather the crisis. Prior to the war, Musa was president of the committee which governed the village. (The committee was affiliated with the largest Albanian political party, Democratic League of Kosova, or LDK). Now he has assumed yet another responsibility - as a leading member of the new Novo Selo community improvement council, or CIC.

It was time for David to attend the second meeting of the Novo Selo council and see how far Musa and the other members have come in identifying possible projects. This council had started like all the others - with a request to OTI for assistance. David's response was that the villagers would need to elect a council before the request could be considered.

Sixty of Novo Selo's three hundred inhabitants then came to the inaugural meeting to elect the council. They chose eleven councilors, including two fourteen year-old boys and several women. This was encouraging because no women had sat on the LDK council that ran the village's affairs under the parallel society before last year's war.

The second meeting of the Novo Selo council was now being held in the schoolhouse, and it was well attended.

Following the local custom, we left our shoes at the door and crowded into the small schoolroom, elbowing to get close to the wood stove without being rude. The faces were mainly young and expectant. Several belonged to well-dressed young women.

The first task was draw up a shortlist of the community needs. For many of Kosovo's villages that means rebuilding war damage, but the war barely lapped at Novo Selo. There were no Serbs in the village during the 1990s. Indeed, the closest these villagers came to Serbs in the 1990s was through intermittent contact with government postal workers or tax collectors.

But the villagers knew what they needed. They built the schoolhouse at the end of the 1980s, but it had never been used because there were no chairs and tables. Now the village needed the school badly, because the village children go to school in the town of Rogatica, several kilometers away. Along the way, they have to skirt a dangerous stretch of road which has resulted in the death of several villagers. The risk to the village children would clearly be reduced if they were able to use the Novo Selo school. As a result, the acquisition of tables and chairs had become a high priority.

It is not uncommon to find schools at the top of CIC wish lists, explained David: "Schools are at the center of community life. They're solid, and often used for meeting. Everyone agrees on their importance." Moreover, teachers are usually village leaders. In Novo Selo, the local teacher is president of the local LDK committee which was the nearest thing to a local government in the 1990s.

Once they have equipped their school, the villagers of Novo Selo would like to improve their supply of electricity. Out here, they said, they are at the very end of the grid. They also wanted to provide piped water to the soccer field and to the rest of the village. They had heard that water wells were stuffed with bodies by the departing Serbs. This did indeed happen in Kosovo, but not in this region. On the other hand, common pollution has certainly taken its toll of the rivers. Musa and his friends had set themselves another goal: they would like to pave a key stretch of road in the center of town, and build a bridge over the stream that runs besides the school-house.

Information and Community Democracy

It did not take long to identify these needs and grade them according to importance. Now, the meeting had to delegate a council member to go with David to Gjilan and take up some of the issues at a higher level. This was a critical decision and Musa Rrudhani has no hesitation in volunteering. It was agreed that he would go into Gjilan and talk to UNICEF, which had chairs and desks in storage, but apparently no schools to put them in.

First, however, Musa needed to know what I was doing here. He was not awed by the presence of a foreigner, even one who asked so many questions. I explained that I was trying to find out more about the CICs, and that Novo Selo's was said to be one of the best. "If you are getting it right here, then others need to know about it." That sort of thing. Not very sparkling.

It occurred to me that by merely by visiting Gjilan, Musa would advance one of the goals of the CIC. He might or might not return with desks, but he should be able to report back, and this might turn out to be more important than it first appeared.

For example, everyone in Kosovo was suffering from a lack of electricity, but no one knew why. Was it something to do with those two massive power stations above Prishtina which seemed to produce very little other than pollution? Was it that the spare parts could not get through customs at the border with Macedonia? Or was it something to do with UNMIK?

No one really knows in Kosovo, and this just feeds the rumor mill. Just getting some straight answers from Elektrokosova (the electricity utility) would help. It would also mark a break with the past, when villages like Novo Selo had been the last to hear about anything. Information - or the lack of it - is central to democracy and transparency.

The Case for Subversion

How do the CICs score as a model of aid? At first sight, as noted above, they appear to score high. They offer a way of channeling money directly into communities, where it can have a real impact. One might also assume that if a community has designed and owns a project, it is more likely to maintain the project after OTI funding withdraws. In the jargon of aid, this makes it more "sustainable."

But at the same time, CICs are - like microcredit - very expensive to administer. It takes repeated visits by OTI officials like David Savard to coax a CIC into existence, and several more visits to help identify a project. Even then, the project might turn out to be no more than the purchase of

school tables. Each grant has to be carefully tailored to the individual community. As such it will require intensive oversight.

What of the CICs' impact on communities like Novo Selo? This is what excites OTI officials like David Savard. David is convinced that the entire process - of electing councils, of identifying priorities, of delegating, and of public discussion - is sparking a small grassroots revolution:

"It gets them thinking of the community needs and think of the public good - something that rarely happens in the Balkans. Usually, decisions are taken at the top and dissenters keep quiet. Communal decision-making is the start of real democracy. Once that is in place, they can move on to petitioning the government - something else that is completely alien in the Balkans. They need to learn that you can make a difference by campaigning and lobbying."

If this sounds subversive, it is meant to be. In some parts of Kosovo, UNMIK (the UN mission in Kosovo) has boycotted CICs on the grounds that they are trying to set up an alternative form of government. This, fears UNMIK, might pose a threat to UNMIK's own authority as Kosovo's de facto government.

In practice, however, it may be much less subversive than either UNMIK or OTI imagines. Those elected to the CICs are usually village leaders or elders. This is the case in Novo Selo, where the main form of government since 1989 has been the LDK committee. This comprises representatives from each of the village's 40 major families. Musa was the president before the war. He has since ceded the position to a bus driver, but remains the vice president. Even though the new CIC has elected several women - and there are no women on the LDK committee - it has reinforced the status quo by electing Musa.

To Michael Stechow, an official with the International Crisis Group in Peja, this is the biggest problem with the Community Improvement Councils. Michael organized a program to clean up the town of Peja, which was managed rather successfully by a CIC. It helped that the CIC's members included local professionals, like the pre-1989 sanitation chief who knew the town and how to run it.

But Michael also feels that this cross-fertilization between CICs and local elites can be stultifying and stagnant. OTI, he argues, needs to find a way of replacing CIC members and getting more outsiders involved. That would make them much more subversive - and more effective.

Investment - It's All In The Mind

To the villagers of Novo Selo, their new community improvement council was less about self-government than about foreign aid. As befitting his role as village spokesman, Musa posed the question on everyone's lips: how could the international community help to revive the local economy?

In a sense, this is the key question, because the task facing Novo Selo is not about rebuilding after war, but jumpstarting an economy that slipped back into the dark ages during the 1990s,

when it was isolated from European markets and ignored by Serbia.

The crisis last year added salt to the wound. Before the outbreak of hostilities, twenty villagers had paid employment. Now, the number has fallen to four: the bus driver, the teacher, the doctor, and a gas-pump attendant. Musa himself formerly worked in a ceramics factory, which is not producing because it has no propane and only one oven is functioning. But he still puts in an appearance every week to register for work. This ensures that he remains nominally on the payroll and entitled to any benefits. It also allows him to claim that he is employed, which is a mark of distinction in Novo Selo. But it's not really work.

Yet Novo Selo's unemployment statistics are less dramatic than they might appear, because the villagers long ago ceased to place their trust in formal employment. Their hopes are pinned to the rich loam that stretches out beyond the houses. Here, Musa grows potatoes, peppers, tomatoes and cabbage, all of which he sells at the local market. The cash goes under his mattress. The villagers have neither used, nor trusted, banks for years.

Musa earned about 3,000 DM (\$1,500) from his 6,000 kilos of potatoes in 1999, and provided his large family with income and food. But he could earn far more if he linked up with other farmers and formed a small cooperative to build a silo. This would permit the farmers to store potatoes and sell them out of season at five times the price. There is one silo in the nearby town of Kamenica, but its heater is broken. Building a silo in Novo Selo would put more marks under the mattress and make a lot of sense.

OTI would love to finance such a proposal, and the opportunities for microloans here in Novo Selo would seem to be endless. One could picture the young women who were elected to the new council being among the first to apply. They seemed uninterested in sewing classes, but their eyes brightened at the mention of compact disks and clothes.

Musa himself was unconvinced. It did not seem to matter that he'd lived among friends and relatives for years: Musa has grown used to working alone and competing at the market. I found myself in the strange position of arguing the merits of cooperatives with this former Communist. A Community Improvement Council might or might not help Novo Selo, but the real revolution has to begin in the minds of these farmers.

Across The Ethnic Divide

One way of assessing the success of CICs is to ask whether they can unite Serbs and Albanians.

It's seems a logical question, because more than any other aid donor USAID has tried to use aid to bring ethnic communities together. The temptation has been particularly strong in Bosnia, where war divided communities and severed their water, electricity and telephones. Restore these utilities, goes the thinking, and you restore some degree of interethnic cooperation. Or so it might seem.

The wounds are too raw and the divisions too deep to attempt this in Kosovo. But if it is to happen anywhere it might well be in Gjilan. There are still 65 Serbian villages in the area.

The door seemed to open slightly when the inhabitants of one Albanian village, Nasalj, realized that they needed water. The easiest and cheapest way would have been to dig a well in a Serb village, named Partes, that lies two kilometers away and run a pipeline between the two villages. The alternative was a 7-kilometer pipeline to the nearest Albanian village.

Nasalj appealed for OTI assistance, and Gail Long, David's colleague from OTI, helped the villagers establish a council. Several meetings were then held to discuss the central question - whether or not to approach the Serbs of Partes. Eventually, the decision was taken, and Gail was asked to act as intermediary.

For OTI to be involved would have required a council in Partes as well and Gail persuaded the deputy mayor to call a meeting. But only twenty villagers attended. The meeting was then disrupted by an elderly farmer, who denounced Americans and his own village leadership for not inviting more people, in vituperative tones. Everyone grew angry and two women walked out. Gail tried again on four occasions, each time without success. Every meeting foundered on the same sense of grievance and entitlement that aid officials have come to expect from the Serbs of Kosovo. It was unfortunate, agreed Gail. Behind the anger, the Serbs had some good ideas.

Interethnic "Success Story" - Same School, Separate Classrooms

Later in the day, on the road back to Prishtina, we visited an interethnic "success story." The village is called Pones, and eighty percent of the villagers are Serb. The rest are Albanian.

One hundred and fifty Serbs from Pones worked in Gjilan before the war. Today they farm their land or pass the time in the picturesque village square, isolated from their former lives and from the Albanian families in the village. They understand the reason for this, but lament the fact that they depend on emergency aid. Czech Caritas comes regularly, as does KFOR. Twice a week, the UN provides a bus which takes them to Serbia, under KFOR escort, to buy food. This cannot make up for the fact that they are foreigners in their own village - casualties of the murder and mayhem launched by their own government.

Remarkably, only five Serb families have fled from Pones. Evidently, some spark of communal life remains and perhaps it could have something to do with the school, where 90 Serb children and 40 Albanians attend classes at the same time, but separately. It is the nearest thing to interethnic education in Kosovo, and the only school where children from the two communities are going to the same school at the same time.

OTI has constructed one of its community improvement councils around this school. It happened more by chance than design. The villagers asked for OTI help. Gail Long, who speaks Serbian and (more importantly) understands Serbs, went through the same process in Pones that David had gone through in Novo Selo. She called for a meeting to elect a community improvement council.

When the time came, Gail arrived in the village and found twenty people milling around in the front of the school. They decided to hold the first council meeting on the spot. Eight women and

two men were elected, and like their counterparts in Novo Selo, they identified the school as being a priority. OTI provided a generator which now provides heat and light - and so makes possible a modicum of interethnic education.

It is a measure of the deep ethnic divisions in Kosovo that the Pones council is spoken of with awe, as a huge success. It is surely too modest for that. In addition, there are no Albanians on the Pones council, even though a fifth of the villagers are Albanian.

But OTI has succeeded in doing something important. It has identified a need that is shared by both of the communities in Pones provided some practical support. By the time we visited, no one had tried to blow up the school or even pulled their children out. By stressing practical benefits, and eschewing all talk of promoting ethnic reconciliation, OTI might just be able to keep this tiny flame flickering.

From Iain's diary

I attend a meeting between NATO commanders, and the mayors of thirteen of the Serb villages in the Gjilane area. It takes place in a school, and there is barely room for everyone. The NATO contingent of American officers sit on one side. The Serbs line up on the other. Each side seems intent on staring down the other. Outside, humvees and APCs have blocked off the streets.

These meetings are usually acrimonious, and this is no exception. A large local quarry is about to reopen, and NATO commanders have asked that seventy jobs, as well as a manager's post, be reserved for Serbs. But the deadline for applying is just three days away and only twenty Serbs have applied. NATO wants the mayors of the Serb villages to put the word out - and make it clear that there will be few other openings if this is turned down.

Some of the mayors reject the proposal out of hand. They argue that before the war, 90% of the quarry workforce was Serbian, and they will accept nothing less than fifty-fifty. They are right to say that the pre-war workforce was largely Serb, but this was because Albanians were prevented from working. Irritated by this intransigence, the NATO team starts lecturing. It comes out strangely. "Cut off your nose to spite your face" does not translate well into Serbian.

The tone begins to deteriorate. I notice that guns are placed on the school tables. The Serb mayors reply with deep, choking cigarette smoke. This is what happens when a third party tries to impose ethnic cooperation on two groups that loathe each other. Before you know it, the third party gets drawn in - its neutrality gone up in smoke.