

## **DOING THE RIGHT THING**

*In the aftermath of each Balkan war, the International community has repeated the same mistakes, legitimating ethnic cleansing and neglecting reconstruction's best practices. Will it make the same with Serbia?*

Nobody really knows the recipe. As the end of twentieth century has brought such an extent of instability and war, each humanitarian crisis has systematically posed new challenges: in the management of emergency as well as in the difficult exit phase. Post-conflict reconstruction and development is today a young doctrine in need of slow pace, broad experimentation, continuous testing and a dramatic rate of creativity: each case is peculiar and requires an ad-hoc approach, what seems very difficult in an era so prone to “quick fixes” and standard solutions.

Certainly, the political agenda does not normally allow much space to such a wise approach: either the affected country is not “interesting” and crises may languish for decades, while resources for addressing the problems are poor; or it is in the centre of many interests and then solutions must be quick and possibly easy.

Paradoxically, the former situation may sometimes be more favourable to overcome a crisis: when there are lesser interests in play, the lower political pressure allows more time for a gradual stabilisation, and more space for bottom-up processes. Peace and reconciliation become a natural advancement towards “normality”, the civil society recovers its dynamics, traditional rule re-emerge playing a sedating role.

Reconciliation processes have been successful in Central America and Mozambique as well as in South-East Asia; and a spontaneous stabilisation process is occurring even in Somalia, a non-country completely neglected for seven years after the failed International intervention. In the meanwhile no reconciliation is in course in the Balkans, where different and conflicting international strategies are confronting, and the pressure of economic and strategic interests imposes tighter timeframe, enormous budgets, a paternalistic approach and, finally, giving up some good principles. The nation, like in Bosnia, sees the foreigners take the lead, its sovereignty seized by the International community, its economy being transformed by foreign economic interests in the framework of the “integration in the market”, while the civil society languish passively. At the same time international donors are competing for influence and access, while fuelling local powers.

### **Conflicting strategies**

All post-war programmes, in the last years, have shifted between these two approaches, with the latter prevailing in the Balkans: more or less strong investments in housing, infrastructures, production and market-oriented activities. This type of programmes has normally been concentrated in big urban areas and has privileged foreign private investment. The philosophy behind this method is the trust in the market's capacity to be a regulator for all social life: give people a house and a job, and everything will pass. This showed not true; nonetheless it is likely to occur also in Serbia. The end of Milosevich has created the conditions for sewing the tissue of Balkans and opened the possibility for the political integration of Former Yugoslavia. This pushes economic and political interests up, as the European market could expand to unprecedented limits. But timing is a problem: enormous resources are available and investments demand a prompt return, stability is not consolidated and a fast growth is seen as the means to prevent new crises.

But it is not this simple. The essence of reconstruction in the Balkans is normalisation of the society and the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to their home of origin. Besides the technical aspects, the process of return constitutes political and humanitarian problems of enormous dimensions as they pervade the entire fabric of the Bosnian society. A special report on refugee return and minority repatriation<sup>1</sup> in Bosnia-Herzegovina tells the reason for refugees not returning is essentially due to a lack of confidence in the post war settlement, little or no political will and commitment by the local authorities and the international community to the idea of returns; continued threats to the safety of returnees; absence of an effective human rights protection regime; ethnicity-based discrimination in employment etc. Since the Dayton Agreement, the International community has accepted (and therefore legitimated) the logic of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia as in Kosovo and given up any idea of reconciliation between communities, the latter resulting a too long and complicated process to be pursued. Without reconciliation there will be no return.

### **Working in the grey zone**

In the last decade, one of the major concerns for the humanitarian and development communities has been developing a strategy for the post-crisis "grey zone". During the nineties, institutions, academics and practitioners, have explored this issue, producing a set of "best practices".

The EC itself, after broad consultation, produced in 1996 a comprehensive and sophisticated methodological paper as guidance for EC actions in post-conflict situations, which was never coherently implemented in the field. Recommendations were:

- Global policy frameworks should draw together economic, social, (including gender,) and political (democratisation, human rights and the rule of law) factors in development and define more clearly linkages between relief, rehabilitation and development.
- Increasing prominence needs to be given to conflict prevention, with the ultimate goal to reach a situation of "structural stability" (i.e. a situation involving sustainable economic development, democracy and respect for human rights, viable political structures, healthy social and environmental conditions, with the capacity to manage change without resort to violent conflict).
- Conflict prevention should be considered within the broader sense of "peace-building" and be treated as an intrinsic element of these global policy frameworks. A policy of peace-building necessitates the adoption of a peace-building approach in the sense that all measures should take the structural root-causes of violent conflicts into consideration, and should be targeted at the stabilization of societies;
- Political analysis capacity must be enhanced, in order to focus on structural root causes of conflict, identify potential trouble spots and translate analysis into timely political actions at the level of the Union
- Rehabilitation planning strategies must be developed, and accompanied by the application of appropriate rules and procedures allowing rapid and flexible response to ensure effective bridging with relief assistance.
- People - both victims and participants in violent conflicts - must be reintegrated into civil society, in its economic, social and political aspects. In other words, the human dimension is an essential feature of rehabilitation.

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<sup>1</sup> USIP Special Report on Balkan return: An overview of Refugee Return and Minority Repatriation, December 1999

- As a basic prerequisite of democracy, the development of political dialogue should not await the arrival of better times before being put in place. From the very beginning, particular attention must be given to allow various groups and minorities to express themselves.
- The actions should extend beyond the period of reconstruction itself and be incorporated into longer-term development plans. Such actions are essential if external assistance is to have a sustainable impact in the long term. More support is needed for the longer term operations of international and local NGO's which were present at the time of the humanitarian crisis, by associating those which are able to do so with the programming of rehabilitation funds, in the basic sectors, and by insisting during implementation on an approach emphasising viability of actions in the medium term and use of local structures.
- Community actions in these areas can only play a catalytic role in assisting governments to start the ball rolling. Priority must be given to methods that maximise the involvement of the local population, and make use of small-scale credit for the private sector.
- Operating with the term structural stability rather means to give expression to the fact that working towards economic development alone is insufficient for an effective policy of peace-building and conflict prevention, that the policy goals sustainable development, democracy and human rights, viable political structures, healthy social conditions and healthy environmental conditions are interdependent which implies the need for a comprehensive approach.

Putting a rehabilitation strategy which encompasses all the elements above at the fore, calls for an involvement of a wide range of actors, complementing each other according to their capacity, expertise and ability to influence. Strategies that respond to various issues such as the integration between displaced people and the host population, the coordination between relief and development agencies, the collaboration between international and local organisations, the utilisation of displaced population's skills and knowledge, etc. should be produced and implemented. This is particularly important if one acknowledges that activities should be tailor-made in line with the specifics of the area of intervention. Unfortunately, this level of analysis seems to be largely forgotten by donors' policies. The solution is seen in the amount of funding made available, but the problem is how you spend the money, what is the long term impact of your action, in the moment you are working in the aftermath of a conflict whose causes are deeply rooted in local cultures and social systems, rather than poverty and underdevelopment. What sense does it make to give solely economic answers to non-economic problems?

All sorts of mistakes have been made by the International community, in the years of Balkans war. The story of this decade should be studied by political scientist as a handbook of wrong practices, but there must well be a moment when we finally learn the lesson: the Stability Pact is an opportunity we should not waste.