

*2000 - Enhancing the EU's Response to Violent Conflict: Moving Beyond Reaction to Preventive Action*

**CHALLENGES FOR NGOS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF WAR TORN COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**  
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*"The key to peace lies in working at all levels of society."*

In conflict prevention and crisis management there is a certain divergence between theory – the views stated in reports and papers – and practice in the field. While lessons have certainly been learned from the EU's experience to date, the processes must continue to be monitored to avoid repeating past mistakes, particularly those of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

**Bringing in civil society**

It appears to be taken for granted that reconciliation exercises in the post-conflict period are essential to prevent the recurrence of conflicts in the aftermath of war. While this has certainly been the case in numerous countries and regions of Central America and Africa, it is not yet recognised in BiH where the focus has essentially been on physical and economic reconstruction.

The role of civil society in BiH has been largely neglected. Five years and 5 billion euros later, none of the initiatives introduced by the international community appear to be self-sustaining.

Few if any could withstand an international community withdrawal from Bosnia. The Dayton Agreement has legitimated the existence in BiH of three separate state entities, each with its own economic system, police, armed forces and set of institutions. The key to reconstruction and stability is reconciliation, but this has not occurred in BiH: the conflicting parties have simply been separated. No culture of peace has been built. For this, civil society is key. Yet there appears to be no clear strategy to involve civil society. This means bringing in not only EU-based NGOs but also local members of civil society. They should be made to feel part of an international community.

The key to peace lies in working at all levels of society: with local and national authorities, trade unions, schools, different societal groups and so forth to create linkages and a spirit of co-operation. If this does not happen, peace will not be achieved and what is left is merely an economic view of stability. Opening Central and Eastern European markets to the EU is important, but local capacities must be strengthened to enable them to produce an original, authentic model of the economy and society built on their own identity, culture and history. There is a tendency to expect major changes to occur simply by moving into a region with funding and ideas. This leads to disappointment when all is not resolved in five years. Peace is a lengthy process and 'quick fixes' will not bring about long-term stability.

**EU leadership**

There appears also to be a sense of competition in the Balkans between the EU and the United States, and between the EU Member States themselves. Positive co-operation is essential, but the EU should not always act in reference to US actions. It should take the lead in the reconstruction of the Balkans and become a strong and independent player in the international arena. There is a better approach to work in Kosovo because lessons have been learned, because enormous economic and financial means are being made available and because over 500 NGOs are active there.