

Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need: Community Healing and Engagement in Times of Disaster

Experiences from the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-1995

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1. How can we respond to disaster with dignity and act in accordance with the lived experience of others?

Disintegration war of former Yugoslavia (1991-1995), had its recognizable stages before, during and after the war. Each of these stages offers a multitude of possibilities for intervention, help, and change.

WAR – conflict based disaster, total destruction of others, catastrophe – WAR					
↑ Spiral of conflict ↑	15	Humans reduced to war instincts, full dehumanization	Help coming from the third side is coming to a standstill	1.	↓
	14	Darkness of humanity, assassination on reason	Warrior groups separation	2.	→ Reconciliation →
	13	Humans transform to warriors, full armament	Withdrawal of soldiers and weapons to military barracks	3.	
	12	Mutual attacks, killings, full enmity is deepening	Organizing of societies for peace and democratization	4.	
	11	First attacks, attacks cause revenge	Prisoners of war exchange	5.	
	10.	Fanatics, endangerment, threat	Reparation of mutual systems: roads, water supply, rivers...	6.	
	9.	Fear predominates – fear is mystery of war	Road opening: train, air transport, open market	7.	
	8.	Accusations, repulsing, diabolization	Silent to more open contacts and communication	8.	
	7.	Strong identification with own national or religious group or excommunication of traitors	Peace initiatives from outside and from inner groups	9.	
	6.	Division in interest groups, mobilization in the groups	Vocational healing of humans, physicians, teachers, social and religious workers	10.	
	5.	Breaking of interaction and communication	Cultural and religious initiatives, trends in music, life, various groups...	11.	
	4.	Negative tensions prevail – open conflicts outbursts	Fear and tensions reduction	12.	
	3.	Focus transits from problems to humans	Mutual discovering of suffering and revival of compassion	13.	
	2.	Positive tensions are growing and helping to solve conflicts	Mutual discovering of human face by enemy	14.	
	↑ 1.	Complex social situation – unsolved conflicts accumulate	Normalization of life	15.	
PEACE – normal life – conflicts are being resolved and integrated in life – PEACE					

After Tito's death in 1980, former Yugoslavia started to slowly collapse, many problems pushed under the carpet were accumulating, and an explosion of disintegration awaited. Many people, like me, were moved by the situation responsibly and wanted to do all that was possible to solve the problems in a nonviolent way. USA CIA prophesied a terrible war, and they were not the only ones. We knew that this prediction was based on the very concrete facts. Therefore, the peace ideas of the world peace movement – which, during communism looked as subversive – found fruitful soil in the entire Yugoslavia. There was an explosion of freedom: freedom of speech, free media, freedom of faith and belief, free art, pluralism of ideas and ideologies. This peace movement was massive and idealistic, and very unrealistic. I personally was sure that we would solve all our problems without war and violence. I was also convinced that the processes of democratization will absorb all the existing conflicts and solve them through arrangements. Therefore, the highest goal of that peace movement was education for democracy and organization of parties expressing the needs and will of the people.

But the most problematic group, made up of mostly Yugoslavian Army officers, policemen, politicians, prevailing Serbs, advocated for ideas of Big Serbia, and only saw an advantage to solve the conflicts by acting violently because they controlled the weapons of the former Yugoslavia. Slobodan Milosevic headed this group. They started the war in 1991. During 1992, I traveled through Europe visiting some peace movement centers and also some politicians, while pleading their engagement to stop our war. I was sure if there was a strong engagement from politicians and peacemakers from the USA and EU and repercussions for violent groups (if they started a wave of violence, they would be punished), there was a real possibility to escape the war.

First conclusion: The war in the former Yugoslavia could be avoided if the international community felt responsibility for its world. It was necessary to support peace groups, reduce tensions, keep communication, to create consequences for the groups inclined to violence, to understand the needs of the various groups, to help all the groups to find the advantage in peaceful and nonviolent solutions, and avoid the opposite.

- a) How can health services be delivered — even to the most vulnerable — in ways that promote the dignity of both service users and service providers?

In the middle of the war warriors can't understand the independence of humanitarian workers; they have to be prepared and organized to provide assistance. They may be better prepared through understanding their situation, trust building, acceptance, help and promise. If it is not possible to organize it precisely, it is better not to go and look for a direct delivery making corridors, from air. Imprudent actions are very risky and endanger people's lives.

- b) How can individuals and communities sustain a vision of and practice of peace and resilience in the midst of crisis and disaster?

The Serbian relationship with Kosovo before the war in the Balkans, during the war on Kosovo in the nineties and the situation of some tribes I faced in Nigeria in 2010 are alarming and symptomatic. One Serbian policeman in 1998 gave me a picturesque description: *With your human rights, peace ideas, and democracy we lose our territories. War is the only solution for us.* In the state Plateau in Nigeria, the Christians described their situation in the same way: *This was our country from times immemorial. We received the other tribes because we were generous, but now they have become the majority and in a democracy they take control over our country.* In such situations it is essential to open new perspectives to people, new development for all, new frameworks, like uniting Europe for Kosovo or modern Nigeria for Plateau. People must have hope with very realistic expectations and their hope must not be betrayed.

We have to have a deeper insight in the experiences of the disappointed and suffering, in order to recognize the situation they are experiencing and find out what the condition of their spirit is.

c) How can lessons learned and best practice be shared?

The next chart is based on the experiences from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and it points at different stages people are experiencing in the situation of disaster. Each stage is specific and it demands a special method of acting. The first condition is to fully understand the state of the spirit of degraded persons by being able to address the pain they experience, and to speak and act in a way that heals the wounds and opens a new perspective – giving hope.



2. New technologies and community engagement

Mobile phones and Internet have impacted human relationships and lives in general. Communication is the main power tool, not only for warriors, but also for peacemakers, humanitarians, and a great tool for awakening solidarity, compassion, and help. In the wars in the Balkans, small radio stations were a powerful tool to for spreading information and engaging help to people.

a) How are communities finding new forms of expression?

In the state of disaster, the natural reactions of people are solidarity and mobilization. The community comes together around reliable institutions and persons with moral gravity. Community based systems like schools, health institutions, universities, religious organizations, media, and humanitarian organizations become more important than politicians. Readiness to help, to encourage people, to reduce fear, to build unity is strong. People who act in that direction enjoy trust. People declared to be plunderer, thieves, or traitors become extremely at risk. Such mechanisms of decisiveness, black-white thinking is very present in the language of the community.

b) How can technology give voice to communities, fostering engagement and resilience in daily life and in response to disaster?

Technology is a medium and it must function: mobile phones, internet, media, traffic, medicine. If communication mediums function well, they foster all mechanisms of social life.

c) How are technologies built-in or developed organically to benefit poor communities in a long-term, sustainable way?

Education which is provided for independent use of technology guarantees a sustainable development.

3. Community participation and governance: who's listening to whom?

Governance is listening and serving the community.

- a) How are communities voicing their needs and how are governments and funders listening and responding to what communities are saying, or not?

To recognize the people's **needs** is the highest ability of human vocation. If governments employees, religious organizations, health systems, humanitarian organizations, teachers and social workers, are not able to recognize the needs of the people and to serve to these needs, they are not up to their mission. The needs are to be discovered through communication, mutual life and understanding, and an ability to understand symptoms.

- b) What is the proper balance between community participation and government in fostering resilience?

Governmental acting must not stop community participation; on the contrary it should only foster and coordinate it. Good government attains skillful leaders and organizers, which are further integrated in to the social system by community initiatives.

- c) How can the space between communities and their governments be reduced?

By educating leaders, communicating and developing a fair social system, and guaranteeing an equal right for everyone.