



# Pro-Future Project

## Interethnic Education through Dialogue

*implemented by*



## FOCUS GROUPS STUDY REPORT

*Researched and written by  
Ljuljjeta Goranci – Brkić and Nebojša Šavija – Valha*

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## Introduction

In the framework of the project Interethnic Education through Dialogue which is implemented by Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo, 10 workshops have been organized in 10 high schools for 10 students plus 1 teacher from each school. The topic dealt within the workshops was interethnic dialogue and its use in improving interethnic relations in B&H. The workshops were facilitated by NDC Sarajevo trainers. The workshops were organized during April-May 2016 in following communities: Nevesinje; Mostar; Prozor – Rama; Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje; Goražde, Sokolac, Kladanj, Srebrenica, Bratunac, Vlasenica.

From each group 2 students and 1 teacher were chosen to participate at Youth Camp organized by CRS in PRO-Future project framework. After the workshops and the camp, follow-up activity in the form of a small scale focus group study have been organized for each school and it have been conducted by NDC staff. The activity took place as follows:

1. Nevesinje; 10.10.2016, participated by 10 students and 2 teachers
2. Mostar; 11.10.16, participated by 5 students and 1 teacher
3. Prozor – Rama; 12.10.2016, participated by 8 students and 1 teacher
4. Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje; 13.10.2016, participated by 9 students and 1 teacher
5. Goražde, 17.10.2016, participated by 10 students and 1 teacher
6. Sokolac, 18.10.2016, participated by 7 students and 1 teacher
7. Kladanj, 20.10.2016, participated by 12 students and 1 teacher
8. Srebrenica, 24.10.2016, participated by 9 students and 1 teacher
9. Bratunac, 25.10.2016, participated by 11 students and 1 teacher
10. Vlasenica, 25.10.2016, participated by 3 students and 1 teacher

The students are coming from all grades.

All discussions except one (Mostar)<sup>1</sup> have been audio recorded.<sup>2</sup> Additionally the notes were taken for all discussions.

Both media have been used and combined during the data analysis, without transcriptions of the discussions. We prepared and use a semi-structured guide for conducting focus groups. The guide has been constructed around two main questions relating 1) workshops and camp effects and impact, and 2) perception of the overall situation for youth in the local communities. The first question was a part of evaluation process of the activity and the second one provide us with idea how achievements of educational process are contextually appropriate. The control questions related participants perception of the recent municipal elections, alternative elections in Mostar, and protests of high school students in Jajce against ethnically motivated division of their school. These questions bare high political potential and the answers should have offered a set of practical thoughts and opinions to estimate “truth-value” of the statements given in the first round of questions, or whether they consciously or unconsciously adjusted to what we as focus group facilitators want or do not want to hear.

The main method in processing data was comparative qualitative analysis of discourse having in mind heterogeneity of the sample in terms of ethnicity and type of the community (multiethnic and monoethnic). Additionally, a special attention was given to the statement of those participating at the camp who make approximately 10% of all the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to technical problem!

<sup>2</sup> Total recorded time: 5 hours and 37 minutes.

## Findings

### *Workshops and Camp*

#### The Workshops



All the participants expressed satisfaction with a workshop. They found it as being useful for increasing knowledge on and opening (or awareness raise) to the others (both in terms of interpersonal and interethnic relations<sup>3</sup>), improving communicational – dialogue skills and exchange of experience and ideas for practical work in the community. As result, in multiethnic schools it empowered pre-existing relations; in mono-ethnic schools it gave raise to understanding a necessity to

communicate with the others for peaceful coexistence.

It is common opinion that such training should be continued, preferably by mixing the students from different schools, since many of participants think that only through permanent contact and mutual learning the situation relating interethnic communication could be improved.

In accordance to this, it is interesting to note that many students had an initial problem remembering the particular workshop we were concerned with,<sup>4</sup> because in a meantime they participated in many similar non-formal training. A key for faster recognition was distinction between dialogue and debate which was introduced in every workshop as a crucial communicational point in dealing with interethnic issues in a non-violent way. It indicates that trainers have been quite successful in delivering the key message to participants. However, this “memory gap” also indicates necessity of follow-up activities to sustain gains achieved on training, particularly for those implemented in such timely restraining range.

Discussing the workshop methodology, the participants expressed high level of satisfaction with group work and an opportunity to speak openly about all issues.

Another important remark was given by a teacher who expressed his discomfort with a task to choose participants for the workshop primarily according to equal ethnic quotas rather than quality.

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<sup>3</sup> Dependently whether it is a case of monoethnic or multiethnic community.

<sup>4</sup> Since the focus group took place 5-6 months after the workshop!

## The Camp

Regarding the camp all the participants expressed extremely high satisfaction with the camp and what they gained there in terms of knowledge, skills, opening toward the others and different, new ideas, but also in terms of friendship across ethnic and regional difference. There are statements like: “Something best that I have ever experienced”; “Phenomenal experience”; “I was completely changed there!”



Particularly positive effect on participants had an experience of interethnic encounter or a personal opportunity to meet and get acquainted with people of different ethnicity/religion. For some, this was first ever meeting with persons of different ethnicity/religion which was marked as highly positive experience; one student told that he was completely surprised with what he saw and thought before it is impossible: a Bosniak and Serb from Srebrenica sitting together, talk to each other, socializing [*druže se*] and have a fun together.

However, it is not only a short-time psychological effect of the interethnic and inter-regional encounter that was appreciated, but also skills and experience which can be (and to certain extent they have already been) reproduced by participants both in term of reducing/changing prejudices and stereotypes within their own environments and in developing and using a network of young people for a regional cooperation. Participants mentioned a number of initiatives for some activities between the schools; the other talked how they have already try to work with their friends on their prejudices with few or without success, which, however, did not discourage them.

With regards of the methodology participants are highly satisfied both with the training process and with trainers. Also they very appreciated visits to Kravice, Mostar, to the religious objects as well as public speaking, live libraries and theatre show “Hajmo na fuka.”

As a main problem participants pointed out a tight schedule with a lack of free time, which can be used for socializing and hence developing more deeper and emotional ties among participants.

Considering a difference between those who attended the camp and those who were only at the workshop in their school, we noticed that the first are more ready to speak out, sharing experience and even to initiate some local and regional activities. It is also interesting that we notice no signs of jealousy against those who were at the camp.

## Context



As it was said in the methodological introduction, this set of questions aimed to check whether the knowledge and skill shared during formal educational part are contextually relevant. The discussion was led from more general picture to the one of the interethnic relations.

Except Mostar all other communities are small towns rather isolated in terms of main communicational infrastructure (main roads)<sup>5</sup> and economical, social and cultural benefits connected to

them. Hence, it was almost intuitively understandable that economical, social and cultural situations have been estimated as very bad. What remained from the social and cultural institutions is closely connected with local political power and usually is not available for the citizens. In most cases the social and cultural life has been consumed through an abundance of cafés each community has or through disco bars with predominant folk music. However, it is not only a lack or usurped infrastructure a cause for such a situation: the youth is also very passive; thus, even if some event is organized (theatre show, exhibition etc), there are few young people in the audience. Few of them tried or have been trying to improve the situation through some civic and cultural actions, but it is going slowly followed with many obstacles.

Having such social and cultural condition on mind, combined with bad economical perspective and corrupted politics, young people do not see any perspective for their life, and literary all of them want to leave the Country.<sup>6</sup>

With regards to interethnic relations it is very interesting that participants from all multiethnic communities (except Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje) told us that interethnic relations are basically fair, and particularly among their generation (born after the war). They do not have a problem of being and socializing together. Asked to explain this opinion, we were told that time distance from the war, but also common sense, mutual meetings, socialization, being together in the schools, but also many joint activities (seminars, training, etc) organized by external organizations contributed to such situation. And they notice a trend of further improvement of interethnic relations in the last 3-5 years. However, they are not naïve in this regard, there are also lot of problems in terms of interethnic relations, but, according to their opinion they are created by older generations<sup>7</sup> (parents particularly), politicians and media. They also mentioned groups of young hooligans which create some problems, but they pointed out that it is a politics that use their (psychological) capacities for violence arming them with chauvinistic rhetoric to maintain the tensions which enables politicians to keep the power.

<sup>5</sup> Although Kladanj, Vlasenica and Sokolac to certain degree are located along main routes, it does not change their perception (both internal and external) as being isolated communities.

<sup>6</sup> Although few of them told that they want to come back once they get old and provide themselves with means for descent life.

<sup>7</sup> One participant said: “The elders are poisoning youth!”

In the case of monoethnic communities, the participant has no strong opinion on interethnic relations. However, they are very keen to meet the others, regardless or despite their parents' mostly negative opinion related to the interethnic interaction.

The case of Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje is a bit of special case. It functions literary as the divided community with a topographic line dividing Croats and Bosniaks. Unlike other multiethnic communities, there is



barely any contact between Bosniaks and Croats. If there are, they are strictly formal or personal. The latter are actually not perceived well by majority, so those individual interethnic contacts that exist are largely low profiled, strictly private or even kept secret. The school reproduces such system and some Croatian students were even penalized by school administration when have been seen socializing with the Bosniaks in the school yard.<sup>8</sup> We were told that the some Bosniak students tried to develop formal communication with Croat students (with whom they privately hang around), however they show no interest in such activity, providing no other reason except “it is stupid to do that!” Yet we were also told that both Croatian and Bosniak students have no problem getting together and to have fun once they are taken out of the community, so basically a wish to be together exists among this generation.

It is important to notice that we had an opportunity to discuss only with Bosniak students, so the potential for their biased view can not be neglected, particularly since they all the time operate with the terms “them” nominating Croat students and “us” referring to themselves.

It is also worth mention that in an informal talk to the person who lives and works in Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje, but who came there recently from Mostar, we found out that such condition might not be only product of the war, but that it is something that goes far more in the past. She does not know what it is, but since she moved there she got a lot of impressions and inputs towards that conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

At the end, with regards to overall and particular contextual condition we can conclude that the actions organized in the framework of the project are to a great extent tuned with the needs. However, continuation of the work is necessary to maintain achieved results and to further improve situation where needed.

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<sup>8</sup> The school in the community function as “two schools under one roof”, with two completely ethnically separate administrative units using the same building.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately the format of this study does not allow us to follow this and any other contextual opinion, but we find out worth to notice such opinions for potential deeper research/action.

## ***Control Questions***

The answers we got on control questions highly corroborate attitudes and opinions discussed during the first part of the focus groups.

Regarding the elections – although only few of them with a right to vote – all students express very strong opinions against “regular” practice of political establishment of “buying” the votes, “rigging” the elections, promising one, delivering the other, etc. They recognize that politicians consciously keep people in survival mode, to be able to push their agendas which improve only their own lives, while all the other suffers. They recognize that encouraging ethnic antagonism is used for keeping political power, not for improving life of their “own” people. On the other side there is no culture and system of protests among people in B&H to stand against such situation.

Most of the participants see no possibility of change of such situation which is highly in line with their wish to leave the country. In this regard necessity and urgency for further work in these and other communities becomes even strongly emphasized.

In this regard examples of “Jajce case”, the protests of the students against ethnic division of the school and Mostar alternative elections, are good example of a possible ways of resistance toward status quo.

The protests in Jajce were highly praised by all the participants – which again indicate that what they experienced and learned through the workshop and the camp has positive impact to their attitudinal change<sup>10</sup> in terms of interethnic relations.

On the other side the alternative elections in Mostar were perceived more disparately: some see it as an attempt to draw attention to a bad situation, the other do not see the point – because the political establishment benefit from current status, while some think that such action must be more serious. However, such range of opinion should not be considered negative; quite contrary, it indicates that during the workshop and the camp, the participants did not only internalized knowledge and skill at the level of ideology, but they got skills to think through that knowledge and openly share their thoughts. In this respect it is important note that the participants spoke freely expressing their opinions regardless the fact that their teachers were present during focus groups.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding this report we are firstly giving two important methodological notes. 1) It is has been extremely difficult to develop even a small-scale qualitative focus group study for basically two one-off events,<sup>11</sup> which could be even barely evaluated in themselves, except for some trends in developments of outcomes 2) Another issue is that we did not have any qualitative baseline to compare our data with. To respond the challenges we were forced to focus equally or even more on contextual level then on the achievements of the very events, because it was a mechanism – if not the only one in the scope us such study – to provide us with “check and balances” for getting what we suggest are plausible data and findings.

On the very content of the workshop and the camp we could suggest that they both fulfill their intentions – transferring targeted knowledge and skills, opening new perspectives on the ethnic/religious others with decreasing and/or changing “nature” of prejudices and stereotypes, contribute to development of critical thinking on historical and political narratives. It could be also suggested that they increased level of both “bonding and bridging

<sup>10</sup> Behavioral too: at least at the level of the performative – speech act in public!

<sup>11</sup> Although they were framed by a wider Pro-Future project, which was not in the range of this study.

social capital”, in terms of initiating intra-and-interethnic networks with capacity to develop and implement social/political actions.

Furthermore, we suggest that these achievements have a significant potential for social change, but this potential should be systematically recharged, refined and maintained to be actualized through social/political actions in mid- and long-term.

This opinion was permanently an issue during the discussions. In their own words, participants ask for continuing follow-up support<sup>12</sup> in their actions, particularly at regional level,<sup>13</sup> where they see the networking and socializing across ethnic/regional boundaries as tools for decreasing stereotypes and prejudices and involving more young people in the process. Also they ask support in “educating” their parents and schools in these issues, because they have been recognized as the main obstructers of normalizing interethnic relation.

Another important – if not the most important – finding of the study is that “saturation with data”<sup>14</sup> was basically reached during the first focus group. It has been astonishing to us to see that discourse patterns, attitudes and opinions repeats in every school regardless of heterogeneity of the sample (ethnic/religious and regional differences).

This finding bring us to an important conclusion that, besides a fact that they past the same processes, the level of their agreement in all the topics far exceeds what they learned together, and indicates, we dare to suggest, existence of a new generational paradigm, a new intra-generational discourse in opposition to the paradigm and the discourse of the pre-and-war generations. For methodological reasons, it is true that this study even with researchers’ boldness barley can indicate such a hypothesis,<sup>15</sup> let alone dis-proves it by any means. However, if such hypothesis appears plausible, after some deep and fundamental research, it could have significant impact on overall approach to peacebuilding in B&H, as well on development of civil society and alternative politics.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, one participant criticized donors’ policies not to support follow-up but only main events, after which young people very easily lose interest and all positive achievements disappear.

<sup>13</sup> Be those camps, training, workshops, sport games, cultural events, student exchange, etc.

<sup>14</sup> In a qualitative research it is a point where a researcher does not get any new data from the field by which s/he might increase knowledge and/or understanding of the phenomenon more deeply.

<sup>15</sup> Not to be rejected as farfetched!