

From Visibility of Non-governmental Organisations towards the Visibility of Peace Work

Tamara Šmidling

“You know the trouble with activists? They assume that having the vision and speaking out for nonviolent social change is the same as having the technique and skill to”.

“On the other side of the coin”, I responded, “having the technique and skill does not necessarily provide the vision”.

From the book Preparing for Peace, John Paul Lederach

A kind of an introduction

I have been trying to complete this text for a while now, to put it within a framework I would be content with and that would reflect both my many years of experience in the field of peacebuilding and some of my basic intellectual preoccupations with this type of activity. Several things/terms make this work significantly more difficult because it feels that each of them in particular deserves to be addressed in a separate text – peacebuilding, civil society, non-governmental organisations, as well as the visibility of peacework and its effectiveness. It is not in the least incidental that I keep spinning within this very vicious cycle of *these* notions, because for some time now I have felt fairly discontented with their scope and contents I/we read into them, their basic (predominant) concepts and the ways in which they describe and conceive ‘themselves’. And the root of this discontent lies in my intense feeling, but also finds itself based in my continual communications with some very diverse people

and a constant ‘scanning’ of media production in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and more broadly, in the region of the former SFRY), that peacework, in the minds of the people and the public in general, is in 99% of the cases closely linked to ‘NGO activities’ or (in an only seemingly more acceptable variant) activities of the so called ‘civil society’. At this point I find it easy to imagine the justified objections of the kind of ‘Well, what seems to be the problem there?’ or ‘It is logical for it to be like that considering that no one else wants to deal with some ‘hot’ issues!’.

And that’s exactly the point where the greatest challenge for myself as a peace activist lies, a member of a NGO and the writer of this text (in that exact order) – how to think out and criticise such a condition without becoming a part of the story in which non-governmental organisations, as the most exposed and most promoted part of the ‘civil society’ are always an easy and convenient target for ‘attacks’ from all sides and all ideological positions (from national-chauvinists to anarchists and back, through the entire social scope) and how to preserve oneself from the lethal smugness and belief that there is no room for criticism and that it is **heresy** to criticise the modes of work and approaches of non-governmental organisations whose activists often perceive themselves as a sort of ‘cultured heroes/heroines’ who bring light where the darkness had reigned before them.

My choice in such a situation is criticism (I have a feeling that it is criticism that we largely lack), and also the sort of criticism that doesn’t come from the positions of ‘theory’, but instead gains its momentum through everyday, immediate experience of *practices* of peacework and work in a non-governmental organisation. It is important for me to emphasise that I consider my own work and the work of the organisation I am in to be a part of this story, and by no means a morally superior exception.

The situation in which increasingly bureaucratised¹ NGOs remain and survive in the public as carriers of peace processes and at the same time not being very keen on dealing with self-reflection and an open social dialogue with

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1 In this text, I use bureaucratised NGOs to describe the situation in which a large number of organisations find themselves, organisations with administrative work abounding, writing reports and project proposals, corresponding with ministries in charge, banks and other institutions, the work that take up a large portion of capacities and potential.

‘the rest of the world’ doesn’t seem to be promising in terms of peacebuilding in our region; not even to mention the painful lack of *vision* or at least their conspicuous *invisibility*. Unless phrases such as ‘democratisation, NATO-isation and Europeanisation (i.e. EU accession)’ are counted as a vision. I will attempt to explicate the three basic theses in this text:

- The necessity of peacework as a basic priority of our societies (or the need to be treated as such);
- The lethality of understanding that NGOs are exclusive carriers of these processes (or the erroneous belief that with the imagined cessation of the work of NGOs the peacebuilding will stop too);
- The need for new paradigms of peacework that will make the work itself *visible*, i.e. its results, instead of its most exposed/most powerful agents and the phraselike ‘newspeech’ and a multitude of ‘efficient models’.

‘What do you do? Peacebuilding, pardon my French...’

‘I see peacebuilding as a broad range of social activities that create and empower vertical and horizontal social connections, further meeting people’s needs, create space for constructive, nonviolent conflict transformation and influence increasing the sensibility of social institutions for social justice and generally influences the creation of a culture of peace and dialogue. Peacebuilding is a lasting process of reshaping social relations that enable a different use and more just distribution of power at the levels of individuals, institutions, communities and the entire society and culture.’

Marina Škrabalo

One of the greatest (or at least the more specific) challenges I have encountered during my peacework is to explain to various people what it is that I really do. The challenge lurked in all sorts of places – from numerous border crossings in our much divided region and communications with customs officers, the police and other ‘uniforms’, to chatting to my own curious parents and family who were never ever satisfied by various theoreticians’ definitions, no matter how ‘clever’ and precise they were. I have wholeheartedly tried to explain (especially to people close to me) that peacebuilding, for me, doesn’t mean working in a

NGO, but rather living in a way that entails constantly finding some small, everyday strategies for criticising the existing knowledge, rebellion, subversion of certain relations of power, non-consent to certain matrices (even if they were promoted by wise people).

What seemed to be more interesting than my attempts to explain what I do were their very different and often mutually quite opposing views on peace work such as: a) something 'beautiful and good', but that, really, come on, no one who can do anything concrete in his/her life ever does;² b) something that is a part of the package along with 'transition, democratisation, Europeanisation and NATO-isation', and is therefore, mind you, necessary, whatever it really is; c) something they think they have no clue about, but there are those who are in the know about it ('Those NGO people') and do it (the meaner among them would call it 'whistling in the dark') for some quite handsome money unattainable by average citizens (increasingly often called by numerous economic experts, in a very patronising manner, 'transition losers').

And however I try to keep the focus on peace work during such conversations, and not on non-governmental organisations, the conversation would very often move in exactly that direction, which I saw as a clear message that peace work (as well as some notions such as – activism, civil/citizens' society etc) is 'doomed' to be perceived through the role and contribution of NGO and largely viewed through their very poor image. I also found it to be a very strong and intense incentive for me to re-examine yet another matrix, the one I partly belong to myself, which is the matrix of acting through a peace (but still also a non-governmental) organisation.

Instead of dealing with 'lack of information, ignorance, lack of sensibilisation' of my collocutors and instead of lamenting over the 'low level of political (and general) culture of our citizens', I will rather critically view the clumsiness or downright

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2 I have to emphasise that I have encountered this perception mostly among people from Serbia whose notion of the wars lead in the region of the former Yugoslavia is still fairly vague and inevitably marked by constant balancing between the 'state of denial' and 'state of justification'. Non-existence of broader awareness of the horrendous consequences of the wars and thousands of victims, of devastated cities and villages, lives destroyed, has as a consequence the non-existence of awareness of and the need for existence of something that is called peacebuilding. 'Aren't we living in peace?' is one of the most frequent questions, the answer to which is usually not even expected.

nonsensicalness of the explanations and (self)reflection that peaceworkers are ready to give and share with the society they live and work in and communicate with daily, as well as the enclosure of public space (shaped by the neo-liberal logic of ‘time is money’) they have at their disposal for such explanations. Reaching out for highbrow language of ‘non-governmental organisation, civil sector, project management, grassroots and middle level peacebuilding’ to explain a relatively simple thing that the answer to the question of ‘why are we in peacebuilding and in what ways?’ does very little for recognising, accepting and higher visibility and recognizance of this type of work without which I sincerely believe there can be no real progress of our society and that should be understood as priority of all priorities.

In order to achieve this broad acceptance of peacework, we need to think and conceptualise the answers to several questions: What it is that we wish to achieve? In what ways do we wish to achieve it? And lastly, but not least importantly, why do we want to do it? However banal these may seem, I think it won’t hurt to remind of these questions, to demand other’s answers to them and to offer the world one’s own answers and thoughts.

The existing discourse of peacebuilding is saturated by the answers of the sort – ‘We wish to fight against discrimination on ethnic, religious, racial, sex bases through organising education and public campaigns, because these are the types of discrimination that affect a large number of people and make our society non-democratic, fairly violent etc.’ In such ‘typical’ answers, reflection on the following subject is somehow lost – what is this overall society that we *really* want?, what do we mean by peace values?³, how ready we are to talk to those who think differently?, in what ways and how do we think of the language we use?, how ready we are to share our failures, shortcomings and things we overlooked with others?, what is our very personal motivation to work on peacebuilding? (if we abstract the famous ‘philanthropy and caring for others’ – where are we in all that?)

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- 3 How aware are we that the same words can have completely different meanings – for example, ‘solidarity’ and ‘social justice’ can entail completely different notions to different social groups with diametrically opposing concrete manifestations? How prepared are we to move forward from the statement that ‘we share the same values’ that hardly holds water, and instead try to comb through our own value premises?

I think one of the possible pathways for recognising and attaining a broad horizontal and vertical social support for peacebuilding is exactly to make these, often covert, aspects of peacebuilding, visible and open for discussion, the aspects that are usually pushed to the side because we don't consider them to be attractive enough for our presentations to donors or the media, or we experience them as irrelevant in the context of continual attempts to provide grants for our work, or we believe that the 'dirty laundry' comprised of our failures, mistakes, dilemmas and fears should not be displayed, because we would thus expose our weaknesses.

In my opinion, promoting the idea of necessity of peacebuilding means to be in a dialogue with the world surrounding us, to be able to explain what, how and for what reason, to continually reflect on the basic concepts of one's own approach and to be ready for a change 'within oneself', to at least the same extent to which one expects to see a change 'around oneself'.

NGO – honours or horrors?

'Civil society is not a magical concept that means the same in every time, context or society; it is not a magical panacea, it needs to be put into a context.'

Paul Stubbs

In its narrow sense that usually includes non-governmental organisations and 'other forms of association and connection of citizens', has increasingly been a subject of critical examinations by theoreticians working in the region of the former Yugoslavia in the past years.⁴ Even though the birth and development of civil society in our regions is mostly linked to the period of the beginning of the wars, the late 1990s are signified by a period of a complete boom of civil society (particularly so in Bosnia and Herzegovina)⁵, we would be well advised

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- 4 I particularly point out the works by Paul Stubbs and Vlasta Jalušić that I found to be very inspiring and refreshing.
- 5 A good and concise overview of terms and problems linked to civil society engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding is made in the article by Marina Fischer, with the title of «Civil Society in Conflict Transformation – Ambivalence, Potentials and Challenges», in: *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, www.berghof-handbook.net

to remind ourselves of the fact that in the so called socialist period in the regions of SFRY there also existed various, more or less developed forms of civil associations, initiatives and activities. It seems important to accept the concept that the civil societies in these regions are not, after all, models imported from 'the West' at the time when the bloodthirsty wars began, because this opens a perspective for a broader and much more contextualised viewing of the very notion of 'civil society' in which the manager-structured non-governmental organisations are not necessarily predominant (as is the case today).

I see the basic problem with the premise in which NGO and NGO-ised concept of civil society are treated as 'paramount to social change' in the problem-ridden trend that, in parallel to the above mentioned 'equalisation' of peacework with activities of (peace) non-governmental organisations, also unfolds the (also undesired) transposing and 'weaving into' the very weft of peacework of some problematic principles on which NGOs act. In other words, I find it difficult to believe in effective 'value oriented peace work' based on principles of a society of solidarity, social justice and equality, that would be conducted by competitive market oriented, highly hierarchised and professionalized NGOs.

Thus, probably even without a clear awareness and intention for it, peacework has to a certain extent become a field of competition; a field in which culture of dialogue and exchange of approaches has not been established; a culture of giving and accepting feedback; a field of whose reaches and results it is difficult to speak of due to the habit of not documenting anything from peace practice but save for the reports to donors; a field in which information is not exchanged and in which insufficient attention is paid to strategic, long-term approach and building solid associations with other, current or potential, agents of peace processes.

It is fair and necessary to pay the deserved recognition to NGOs for their enormous efforts and significant achieved results in certain fields,⁶ as well as

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6 I find it particularly important to mention organisations that work in the field of dealing with the past and human rights protection.

to acknowledge and value in acceptable ways the great energy and endeavour that hundreds of activists have for years invested in peacebuilding work. It is equally, I would say, important to critically view the practices so far and to break the unwritten rule according to which the most concrete criticism of the work of NGOs never come from the so called ‘insiders’, people active in the NGOs, because it is considered to be disloyal and non-collegial, if not even condescension to impassioned ‘enemies of justice and freedom’.

Taking into consideration the current non-enviable positions in which large numbers of organisations currently find themselves in, which entail complete financial dependence on international funds, narrow possibilities of conceiving adequate activities without the influence of ‘external’ factors, non-existence of adequate legal regulation defining the legal status of these organisations, the increasing professionalisation and bureaucratisation of the employed followed by the lack of ‘activist zeal’, it is not difficult to conclude that the perspective for their further work and existence is fairly bleak. Still, this shouldn’t lead to the conclusion that it necessarily indicates a bleak perspective for peacebuilding.

We can act in more ways than one against such inevitability, of which I will name but a few:

- empowering and encouraging activism and activists instead of exclusive production and training of managers and coordinators;
- empowering public dialogue with the basic motivation of promoting an inclusive principle in peace work, instead of exclusivity of any organisation/association;
- search for visions instead of constant building of skills and techniques.

And finally – visibility (or what seems to be the problem?)

It is expected and customary that, when speaking of the visibility of peace work, in most of the cases we speak of quality and quantity related approaches of peace work in the media, or more broadly, in public spaces (ranging from streets, squares, parks to, unfortunately scarce, public discussions, theoretical and activist reflections and discussions). To put it in a very simplified manner, either things that are present in the media (particularly on television, as, for

a vast majority of people, undisputed arbiter separating the ‘important’ from ‘unimportant’, ‘necessary’ from ‘unnecessary’) or what happens in the streets we walk everyday – is what is called visible. Our perception, i.e. degree of visibility of these events, will depend on the entire series of factors – the number of people who gathered, our previous knowledge and interest in the problem the attention is being drawn to, our political orientation, degree of empathy and sympathy for carriers of action, our environment’s and other people’s reaction to one and the same event, and so forth...

A good part of my motivation for writing this text is in the need to try to expand this understanding of visibility with some other aspects, i.e. to try to view it from some other angles as well.

Visibility in the media, i.e. in a broader public space, can be seen as a type of *presence* of peace work in the public sphere, i.e. as a way of *attaining greater visibility* and influence. This would mean that a constant and well thought out presence of peace initiatives in the media is a good way of contributing to creating public opinion with the goal of increased acceptance and acknowledging the values and the need for peace work, but also that the *real results and impact* of peace activities (and thereby their *total visibility*) will also depend on many other factors that will be considered in the paragraphs that follow.

The most visible peace work will certainly be work that gets the most results, that is the most effective and that, through its approach and choice methods, contributes the most to working on identified problems that can be and are very diverse, for example: establishing a dialogue between various social groups, conflict transformation, restorative and transitional justice, environmental protection, human rights, dealing with the past, economic and political progress, education, research, trauma healing are but a few of these. If what we do meets its purpose, reaches the selected social spheres and has a concrete effect in the society one acts in, we can say that it is realistic to assume that such peace work will be visible and recognisable. The problem, as expected, arises when we try to define the criteria on which we can claim that the goals are achieved, and that our peace work is appropriate and effective, which is a question that often arose at both ‘activist’ and theoretical levels,

but one that still remains with no satisfactory and all encompassing answers. It is difficult to measure, in terms of both quantity and quality, the effect of peace work as a whole, and even more difficult to measure the effects of specific activities and initiatives. The situation is, at the same time, not made easier by rigid frameworks imposed by donors, accepted at face value by local agents, the frameworks demanding the achieved results to be expressed in mathematically precise indicators, which is not realistic, to say the least, bearing in mind the very nature of peacebuilding as a very long-term process oriented activity.

Is there a possibility of viewing peace work and its success or lack thereof a bit more broadly, as a whole composed of many different activities, initiatives, ideas, burnouts, that we (our organisation, group, movement, collective) contribute to in an important, specific, but not exclusive, the only right one and self-contained way? Would we be prepared to, for instance, instead of trying to count the participants of our programmes for war veterans who continue to be in peacebuilding and turning these numbers into some usable parameters (preferably in percents), reach out for an attempt to see how many veterans (at some kind of a global level of our region), and in which way, appear in the role of agents of peacebuilding and how that is looked upon by the society, what kind of echoes these attempts encounter, what we can learn from these collective experiences? If in 2001 there were zero peace initiatives that involved war veterans, whereas nowadays there are six or seven of them in different parts of the region, we can conclude that some things change for the better, that they become more effective and thus also more visible. If we, on the other hand, stop at this conclusion alone and continue to look for 'our part and our percentage' in it, with no wish to make a critical overview of this process and have a dialogue with other agents of the same process, then we hit a dead end, I'm afraid, and we patter in the dark, lost in our erroneous belief that a mere increase in the number of veteran peace initiatives also means improved quality of action.

For this reason, it would be most useful to make a coordinated and continuous effort directed towards establishing a set of criteria of effectiveness of peace work, that would be discussed in public and observed through a prism of specific social contexts.

If, therefore, we observe the category of visibility in the sense of efficiency and adjustment of peacework to a concrete situation, and at the same time we have some well defined criteria of success of this same work, it would not be possible for good peacework to be invisible at the same time. Still, it would not mean that we too, we the carriers of peace processes, will become more visible and have more of an influence on creating public opinion.

This other aspect is worth empowering through additional activities, but only after we have become assured that we did our best in the following fields:⁷

- coordination and sharing information between peace workers;
- building a local, national and regional (global) peace community;
- leaving the narrow strips of cooperation with the likeminded ones and those who share 'our' values;
- articulating goals and changes we advocate;
- dialogue with governing structures including those 'against' us.

Only after, or parallel to, the afore mentioned activities, contents could be added to the greater presence in the media that not even the best conceived and most sensitive media approaches could provide for our peacework in and of themselves.

I end this text by remembering a fairly widespread question/dilemma that I have heard many times from many peace activists: 'How can we make this work visible, when peace activities almost never make the *news*?'⁸ It seems important to me that, before we (lightly) accept the logic that 'whatever is not in the media never happened to begin with', we should try to work seriously on the quality and roundedness of our approaches to peacework. Only when we become sure that we have done everything to make our activities conceived in a way that meets the needs of the social context to the greatest extent possible and that they largely correspond with other past and current activities collected in the field; that the value basis of our work is clear and real (instead of merely

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7 According to quotes by Tamara Mihalić, in the concept of her yet unpublished work.

8 Meaning they are not shocking, scandalous, sensational enough, or, to put it more mildly, are not 'TV-genic' and dynamic enough.

declarational) and that we are prepared to have a dialogue about it; that we have thought well about the language we use – only then can we be assured that our work will make the *news*. And the news, as is well known, spread through all channels possible, of which printed and electronic media are but one, even though possibly the most influential and the loudest, but certainly not the only possible channel. By saying this, I don't mean to advocate non-cooperation with the media or to relativise the significance of media presence of peacework. What I wish to support with this thesis is non-conforming with the set rules that turn agents of peacework into activist *celebrities* and an attempt to create a different type of media presentation that would be placed outside the highbrow discourse of the so called 'elite of the third sector' and a discourse supporting the advertising philosophy in the field of peacework.