Local Activism for Local Peacebuilding
What is Local Peacebuilding?

This year’s Project on Peacebuilding (POP) was motivated by one central question: what does peacebuilding look like when it is driven by grassroots local activism, rather than top-down or international institutions?

Peacebuilding is often understood as work driven and led by government or international organisations, but local activists and local communities are the main stakeholders in this delicate peace that is trying to be built. In order to explore this theme, the group engaged in discussions, workshops, and activism with a variety or local organisations and groups.

This report is a collection of reflections by participants in the 2015 Project on Peacebuilding organised by Most Mira, in partnership with Humanity in Action.

Most Mira conducts art projects with children in the Prijedor area. Founded in 2005, Most Mira means “Bridge of Peace” in Bosnian. Most Mira works with children of diverse backgrounds towards a common goal, such as hosting youth festivals, putting on school theater performances, or building a community center.

Humanity in Action is an international nonprofit organization headquartered in New York City with offices in Germany, The Netherlands, France, Denmark, Poland, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The organization’s aim is to educate students and young professionals about human rights issues of global concern.

Learn more on our website: www.mostmiraproject.org or our project blog: http://hiapeacebuilding.wordpress.com. This project was funded by National Endowment for Democracy.
What is this thing called peacebuilding?

Last Sunday we gathered in Kevljani for our third annual joint program between Most Mira & Humanity in Action. Our team is well drilled but every year life springs a few surprises on us. One participant just got a job and therefore had to cancel his attendance. Another one had a minor surgery, but was still resolved to come even if for one day only. Next year she wants to run a workshop.

Even though we run a formal program every year, we do it in a very friendly atmosphere that builds long-lasting bonds between our participants and our partner organisations. It has been no exception this year. The work is very rewarding, but the weather has been extremely hot (over 40 C) with the region suffering from the worst bout of drought in living memory. Kevljani has felt more like the tropics than north-western Bosnia—that was until this afternoon when a hailstorm broke out and lashed the parched land.

Last night we came back home after a long, hard, and sweaty day of sharing some inspiring but rather heavy stories. Flies were swarming all over the house. Sticky sweat glued our clothes to our bodies. Stefan had a short shower. Yasmine was next, and just when she was getting ready to rinse soap the water pump drawing water from the water well decided to stop. Yasmine stayed calm and she graciously washed herself with a bottle of water. And this is what peacebuilding is all about. It is about sharing stories, space, food, drink, humanity—creating empathy. It is about passion, sweating in extreme heat, swatting flies, helping your colleagues wash when with a water hose, washing your laundry by hand, and cooking food for your colleagues. It is about Samed, Kasim, Nedim and Mirnes coming to your aid with noble intentions even if they have no plumbing skills to resolve our well problem. It is about them caring about our presence in their community.

It's about your neighbour being prepared to share his water with you when your water well is dangerously close to becoming dry. It is looking after each other when they feel tired because of sleep deprivation. It is about waiting for Smajo and his son in law, Zoran, coming to repair the water pump and Smajo recognising you from 5 years earlier because of your community work with young people. So it is about memories too. Sometimes painful ones, but often about positive ones too. This is how peacebuilding aids democracy building. It is not about comfortable hotel rooms, marble bathrooms, or restaurant meals. It is about the messy, un-planned, and sometimes trying work of building and rebuilding human relationships.

By Kemal Pervanic
Founder of Most Mira
Art & Activism

On Wednesday, Laila led our group in a creative workshop on the role of art and artists in activism. We also visited a building that was destroyed in the war but in which Most Mira hopes to build a future youth centre. Laila inspired us to write about the conflict, memorials we had seen, and the potential for a different future. Below are a few of our first drafts of poems from the workshop.

**Reflecting on Ado’s house, Kevlijani, 22/07/15**
At first a field was here
village children herded cows
one of them had built a house
and ten years later
other children tore it down.

Today Ado comes to find his house is full of birds
instead of bricks he sees blackberries as walls
he smells the scent of grass and lavender
he thinks of graffiti on his garage wall.

Tomorrow he’ll see the sun
shining through his open roof
graffiti on the walls
will be signposts
to a better future.
By Kemal, Stephan, Selma

Before the house was surrounded by trees,
Now the trees live in the house,
Going forward they will live in harmony.
By Asger, Caterina, Tara.

This was the site where pillars were shatters
Where walls and windows were destroyed and a family slept in the past

This is the site
Where some one’s bedroom has no roof
Where grass levels the floor
And birds sleep in their nest

This is the site
Where murals come to life
Where windows display a peaceful life.
By Tara, Nick, Maja
The memorial
Remember victims through art,
Didn’t you get that memo?
Victims remember through art.
By Asger

The memorial
First there was peace. It was full of trees, birds, and sounds carried around by wind.

Then people came with their guns, and the guns destroyed peace. The sound of peace was replaced by the sound of other people running away.

Then there was peace again. State sponsored peace, and new people came with an image of a new community to remember not peace but war.
By Kemal

The memorial
Bound by distance, carved in stone,
Hope was non existent
Folly of their makers was
Ideology of sorts
By Stefan

The memorial
The names of people lost
Sit etched in stone creating
A physical space
But this space is really reflecting
The gaping hole left in their community.
By Nick

The memorial
Memorials are much more about the future than the history of the past. They trigger different emotions depending on the audience of the memorial, come trigger.
Every year on the 20th of July a collective funeral is held near Prijedor for the burial of victims whose remains were identified in the last year. Most of these victims were found in mass graves and identified by the International Commission on Missing Persons. The ceremony was led by imams from the region, with speeches by local civic leaders. One speaker declared in front of a crowd of more than 400 people that all would forgive if the perpetrators acknowledged what they did. She suggested that the community needed to focus on finding evidence of genocide and proving it happened here in Prijedor as they did in Srebrenica.

The participants of POP observed the collective funeral for the first time. The importance of collectively mourning the victims was clear and the significance of recognizing their memory. The collective funeral was an opportunity for the families and community to articulate publicly a common narrative of the atrocities in the region and construct a collective memory of the family members they lost. The difficulty with finding a common collective narrative is that some believe it is unacceptable to unite the narrative and have both Serbs and Bosniaks asking for the same acknowledgement. The politics of identity are complicated by the question of who has legitimacy to articulate and define the common narratives depending on their personal context.

Later today, we also began our discussion on peacebuilding, especially in the local context. In general, the focus was on moving on from violence and conflict. Tara defined peacebuilding as "building relationships between people who think they have nothing in common." Yasmine suggested it is "breaking down the difference between us and them and strengthening relationships so as to move toward a common goal."

Another important element, Goran emphasized is "cutting the cycle of social conflict- especially in Bosnia." This must be done on two tracks: challenging the narrative and engaging new people in the civic space. Laila explained that it is crucial to "stop the myths being handed down the generations." Some of the activists in Prijedor are trying to ensure that the public know that alternative narratives exist. This can both challenge the dominant narrative but it doesn't force people to accept it as their own. They have the opportunity to choose for themselves. Selma concluded that the best way to challenge these myths is "dealing with the past in an honest way."

By Nick Micinski
The best preparation for my short visit to Kevljani during the Most-Mira camp, was to watch Kemal’s documentary film “Pretty village” (David Evans, Kemal Parvenic, 2014). When I arrived in this small village located southeast of Prijedor and just next to Omarska, I recognized the landscape and the house that appear in the film. There, they are most of the time covered in snow; or maybe that is how they remained impressed in my memory after the film, as metaphorically frozen in the negative remembrances of the past— the sufferance experienced at Omarska, the loved ones who never came back, the betrayal of neighbors and friends.

So it was a nice contrast, when I arrived last Monday, to see the same house and landscape shining in the heat of mid July and full of young people who want to be part of a better future. By which I don’t mean, of course, that the solution is to look only at the future, and stop remembering the past. Kemal’s film gives quite the opposite message, that the struggle for the right remembrance can save people from becoming prey of the past.

In the documentary, Kemal, who survived the Omarska camp, gives voice to his and other survivors’ memories in an effort to understand and to share their past. One of the most emotional scenes is when he goes to meet one of his former professors who participated in his interrogation at Omarska. They had recognized each other there, the professor had been a role model for Kemal, but had not recoiled from his new role of interrogator and therefore accomplice of the crimes that followed in the camp. When Kemal meets him twenty years afterwards, the professor appears thorn between shame and self-justification, “I was just a small clerk.” Kemal then told us that the professor had died recently, so there had been no time for further encounters, but through the film he had been able to initiate a dialogue about the past with the professor’s son.

And, like the film, this is what the initiatives of Most Mira are also about: initiating a dialogue about the past, sharing what happened back in 1992, and fighting against the denial that prevails in the Prijedor municipality: against its false memorials.

By Caterina Bonora
Empowering victims of sexual and gender based violence as an integral part of local peacebuilding

The violent war taking place in the 90s brought a lot of distress to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and subsequent societal post-conflict reconstruction. During that time, many cases of sexual and gender based violence occurred in different parts of the country. This had a serious impact on individuals and communities. The trauma affected victim’s physical and mental health and deeply impaired their capacities to establish relationship with others, which has undermined the overall development of local communities. Tackling issues related sexual and gender based violence in post-conflict settings is a challenging process since there is no one sector that is able to address the core of the problem on its own.

The global response to the sexual and gender based violence has advanced in the past decades. The UN agencies have recognized the importance of the issue in Declaration on the Elimination of violence against women, adopted in 1994. This led to the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, endorsed by 122 countries in September 2013. Most recently, the UN General Assembly approved a new resolution to commemorate 19 June as the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict.

The Statute of Rome protects against crimes of a sexual nature, and since the International Criminal Court’s landmark decision on the Foca Case during the war in Bosnia, rape became recognized as a crime against humanity.

Sexual and gender based violence is very difficult to prove in the courts because it is necessary to demonstrate coercion. The exact number of victims of sexual violence and rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still unknown, but UN estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000. Many believe that this lack of a systematic approach towards addressing victims' needs reflects the government's inability to fully tackle and deal with war crimes.

The situation of victims of sexual violence, and stresses the importance of establishing a truthful account of war crimes committed against women, regardless of their religion or ethnicity, and recognizing obstacles faced by victims, so that they could find ways to remove them in the near future.

Last month, for the very first time in the modern legal history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Court of BiH in charge of dealing with war crimes, ruled on material compensation for victims of sexual violence and rape that occurred during the brutal Bosnian conflict. Members of the Army of Republika Srpska, Bosiljko, and Ostoja Markovic were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for rape and were bound to pay up a financial compensation of 26,500 marks to their victims. A few days later, the Court sentenced Slavko Savic, another member of the Army of Republika Srpska, to eight years in prison for the rape of women in Vogosca in 1993. The ruling also included duty to pay up 30,000 BAM in compensatory damages to the victim. These rulings were deemed as game-changing by many legal professionals, as they adjudicated compensation to the victim of sexual violence in the context of criminal proceedings, which was overlooked in the previous trials. The idea of compensation was derived from the notion of correcting past injustice through the transferal of material resources to the victims.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I believe that other factors should also be considered: a nation-wide culture shift in attitudes towards women in general, which will be accompanied with economic support and legal reform, establishing solidarity and trust among different communities of sexual and gender based victims, so that it is not divided along ethnic lines and past divisions helping women to gain full access to understanding of their rights and protection mechanisms, through local contact points inclusion of different perspectives in creating victim based historical account of the past violence against women, which would be aimed at their empowering and active participation in other peacebuilding initiatives.

By Selma Hasić
Art has been a way of expressing one's creativity since the dawn of humans. Artists always had a special place in society as the people who materialize emotions for themselves or their societies. But how do we perceive art these days? We are living in a time of widespread use of social media and rapid technological advancement that have made more diverse forms of art available to a larger spectrum of “consumers.” Art has begun to take its place as yet another product in a neo-liberal market—sometimes even losing their true artistic value and becoming a norm or a status symbol.

Almost inevitably, art has become a political tool in the form of propaganda. The problem in BiH is that this propaganda is used in a culture of denial by mainstream media to rewrite our local history. I believe that it is necessary to rehumanize art. Experimental, alternative, and free-thinking art should be prioritized in our communities, especially here in Bosnia. This free-thinking art should be created and distributed to the public, thus countering the propaganda by being an alternative to the mainstream narrative of denial. In this way, we can use free-thinking art to express ourselves and our past: art becomes a tool for egalitarian activism and peacebuilding.

I had a great experience of working with other young people and activists from various countries on in the POP workshops that supported these kind of ideas. We lived, worked, and learned for five days, being brought together by our common viewpoints and we bonded through our passion for activism. If you think you got to like someone, wait until you part. I also got a chance to write this short poem about the memorials in one of the workshops, and it's dear to me because it will always recall me of those days.

By Stefen Gvozden
Monuments and Memorialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina

On Day 2 of the Project on Peacebuilding, our group participated in a workshop led by Elma from Humanity in Action on monuments and memorialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Elma commenced the workshop by asking us to brainstorm the connotations of monuments and memorials. To take a few, we used the words “lessons”, “history”, “remembrance”, “reflecting”, “provocation”, “guilt”, and “inspiration” to describe our initial thoughts on monuments. In some respect, monuments exhibit a connection between the past, present, and future, as they are physical objects that are present in our surroundings for long periods of time.

We discussed the significance of the location of monuments, for who and when monuments are built, the purposes that monuments serve, the physical characteristics of monuments (such as symbolism, size, structure, and the type of material used), and who funded the building of these monuments. This was very interesting. Although I had previously visited monuments and memorials in my life, prior to the workshop I did not think about memorials in such a systematic way. Memorials function as a tool for family members to remember, survivors to testify, politicians to gain votes, and perpetrators to rewrite history. They are profoundly political.

After the workshop finished, we visited several monuments in the village of Kevljani and Omarska. Kemal, our brilliant host shared his knowledge and expertise with us on the facts, culture, heritage that are embedded in these monuments.

Here, we discussed the role that memorials have in assisting survivors of the Bosnian War in overcoming their grief and how they may help these people come to the realization of their loss of a loved one. This memorial came into existence because Korazac citizens did not want to forget but to remember the tragedy of so many lives lost in the conflict in Bosnia. It also sits in the center of Kozarac, a majority Muslim village that was destroyed in May 1992. Since the war, many refugees have returned to Kozarac, making it one of the largest majority Muslim villages in the Prijedor region. Memorials like the one in Kozarac are rare in the region because it commemorates Muslim victims in a predominantly Serb area. The Serb political leadership in the region do not want to look back at the tragedies of the past but this memorial forces any passerby to remember.

By Yasmine EL-Tourgman
Looking backward and forward

With a history like Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is no wonder that the past plays such a big role in the countries mindset. In order to understand the present and influence the future it is important to look to the past. This was a big part of Project on Peacebuilding over the last week. One of the most powerful experiences where the past became very clear in the present was the collective funeral that we went to in Prijedor. Here the community got together to bury the bodies of Muslims killed during the war that had been discovered over the last year. It was a very emotional experience to see a community mourn together. It is a clear reminder that the wounds of the past are still hurting and are not based on the memories of the people. Their memories are physically present in the remains still being found from victims of the war. A little less than 1000 people have still not been found in the Prijedor area and in order for families to get closure it is vital that the search continues.

As emotional as it was to be present at the collective funeral, I was truly inspired to meet the many activist that work around Prijedor and Banja Luka. Collectively coming together around issues such as memory politics, social inequality, LGBT rights, and feminism, the activists look to the future, trying to move on from the past. By fighting for a more equal and just society, where people are not discriminated because of race or sexuality, they are trying to make a brighter future for themselves and Bosnia. They did not always agree on how to do this, but they had the same goal. And for a country that has been looking backwards in the past two decades, seeing the energy and determination in these activists was the highlight for me during this week.

And this makes me hopeful for the future of Bosnia.

By Asger Pedersen
Building friendships and building peace

On Day 4, Nick ran a thought provoking and passionate workshop on community organizing and development. We discussed the nitty gritty of influencing people – be it your allies or strong opponents. We agreed that building relationships with people is imperative to influence change and create wider activist networks. We practiced one-to-one’s with each other. Jvanna and I plunged right into it and had an intense ten minutes of sharing and exploring our upbringings, our goals, and our passions. From our love of lipstick to our contrasting family life, we were both sure of one thing – no matter who you are or where you are, there is always common ground to be found with another person. One-to-one’s as a community organizing strategy are there to find that common ground and build a relationship on it.

Sometimes activism can get depressing – the perceived failures of our work consume us. Celebrating our successes gets neglected. We get tired. We burn out. Perhaps we even absorb our movement’s failures as personal ones. But even with the toils and troubles of campaigning, we’re never really alone. There are a bunch of us out there, next door and over the Atlantic. That’s where the beauty of this year’s Project on Peacebuilding lies – in the relationships we’ve built together, as activists from all over the world – Bosnia, London, New York, and Copenhagen. Although this was an intensive week in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people, we grew together. We bonded over our shared visions, shared emotional experiences like attending the collective funeral, our shared hatred for flies, and love-hate relationship with the singing chickens. We bonded over our new love for Bosnian food – in particular ajvar – and our common values, and interest in peacebuilding in Bosnia. We got to know each other through our chats, doing the washing up, sharing hairdryers in the morning, writing poetry together, sharing stories from school while stargazing, and during the rush to get in the minibus and off to our next workshop. These mini “one-to-one’s” that we had with each other connected us – from unfamiliar people to friends.

Arriving in Kevljani, I was tired, nervous, and excited for the week ahead. A week later, I’m still excited. I’m excited by all the stories, thoughts, emotions, friendships, and hope that this Project on Peacebuilding has sparked. I’m overwhelmed and inspired. Kevljani is a beautiful place.

By Tara O'Reilly
Art & Activism

Using poetry to work with the group at POP2015 gave us the space to really consider what the events of the war meant to us on a more personal level—so that we can carry the stories forward and use them in our awareness-raising and peacebuilding work. The poems the groups created both individually and as a group were really thoughtful and concise, great lyrical pieces we can use to share our experiences. Condensing all the stories and images is always a challenge, and whilst writing you can find yourself writing as much for an audience as yourself. This poem 'Julys near Omarska' reflects on the days I spent with the POP2015 group, how we all worked together to learn about the past in fairly sweltering conditions, whilst finding the signs of hope and building on our own resilience.

By Laila Sumpton
Trustee of Most Mira
Sleep was hard to find for two hundred men locked in a room at the steel mine—only space to crouch and lean till bodies thinned, faces dwindled.

In our July, over 20 years on, a few miles from that mine and the tracks that had towed the village apart it was hotter than any July before and sleep was hard to find.

Our well ran dry, sheets dank, and flies swarmed in heavy nights riddled with rooster caws and wartime tales that we had woken, that should not sleep—should walk pages and paths spiralling out of here.

We had flown in from various towns found ourselves at a forgotten stop on the most deadly Bosnian road where cars swerve and flowers frame dry ditches. We left all our shoes at the door to contemplate their trails and shelter bugs, as we moved onto the same carpet that we would unravel together.

We were waking up the stories people pass—whilst hay is turned, cats creep up on meat, and the village rebuilds each year, it’s families returning to repaint doors, teach children how to tractor lawns, learn their accent back, wander their new old streets.

We paused and circled graves, then the steel, marble, cement roll call banners with a scattering of wreaths, stone address cards with only struck out names re-etched and welded into a roller-deck of loss.

We look for traces, of what there was before turned over leaves, found jokes under forgotten bricks, laughter where washing was hung—rebuilt it all in our various tongues to fly and carry home.

By Laila Sumpton
Trustee of Most Mira