

RED THREADS AND PROBLEM TREES

ICMP has been empowering and supporting associations of families of missing persons in the Western Balkans for over a decade, among other things encouraging associations of families to seek out strategic alliances with other civil society groups, especially young people.

With generous financial support from Switzerland, ICMP launched a series of activities in 2013 and 2014 designed to begin a dialogue on the legacy of the missing persons process in the region and the role of families in this process. These activities included **three innovative workshops** that explored ways of articulating, sharing and coming to terms with issues related to missing persons:

- A workshop with associations of families of missing persons and young people in Sarajevo, in September 2013;
- A workshop with associations of Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb families of missing persons on Mt. Kopaonik, Serbia, in November 2013;
- A workshop with associations of Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb families of missing persons in Pristina, in March 2014.

The workshops were organized with a view to strengthening the sustainability of the missing persons process, enhancing the effectiveness of family associations, and contributing to the legacy of the missing persons process. Some members of family associations had previously reacted with a certain amount of apprehension to the prospect of working with young people on this issue, whereas young people, though interested in dealing with the past, have sometimes been skeptical about working with older family members of missing persons. The broader purpose of the workshops was therefore to encourage enhanced cooperation between these two groups.

Objectives included:

- Helping to build empathy between young people and older family members through personal narratives;
- Helping participants to understand how the missing persons issue affects different generations in different ways;
- Encouraging older family members to identify positive forces, including young people, that can help take the missing persons process forward; and
- Fostering dialogue between young people and older family members on the legacy of the missing persons process and its impact, especially on second and third generation families of missing persons.

WORKSHOP WITH ASSOCIATIONS OF FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS AND YOUNG PEOPLE, SARAJEVO, SEPTEMBER 2013

The Red Thread

The workshop organizers presented the “Red Thread” – an exercise in story-telling that involved in this case exchange in small groups (four persons of mixed young people and older family members). Each participant received a piece of red thread and used it to describe his or her personal involvement with the missing persons issue.

Despite initial misgivings about the exercise, each participant began to work with the red thread as they thought through their story and delineated their narratives in their heads. Later, they recounted their stories to other members of the group. This was a leveling exercise, as each member of the group, regardless of age, was recognized as having been affected by the missing persons issue in some way. This exercise also helped to build empathy and solidarity among the members of the groups who were not only from different generations but from different ethnic groups, some Bosniak, some Serb, and some Croat.

There was minimal intervention from the facilitators during the exercise. However, when all the groups had finished, the workshop organizers invited them to reflect on the exercise and to share any insights that they had as a result. The consensus of comments clustered around the fact that the exercise had helped the members of the group to understand better how the missing persons issue actually affected all the group members in similar ways.

One young family member said she had surprised herself by how much she wanted to share her story: "Listening to my colleagues, it struck me how much of a shared experience we have had; we share a common loss. I had sympathy for them, I hope they had sympathy for me."

Another young family member commented that in the past they "were all in the trenches, but now they are all in the same house." She pointed out that there are "five seasons in the Balkans: spring, summer, autumn, winter, and death," adding that "the season of death is intergenerational."

One of the older family members noted that all the participants had very similar stories, adding that her red thread had just one knot that until now she hadn't been able to untie. She concluded by expressing the hope that she would be able to do so one day.

Another older family member said the exercise had taken her back into the past. The issue of missing persons is an intergenerational phenomenon. Her grandfather disappeared during World War Two, she explained, and she lost her husband and brother during the Yugoslav Wars. By connecting with others she hoped the issue would be resolved.

Another older family member said the problem was too great for a short thread. "We all tell the same stories, we cannot escape them," she said. "It made me think of what we will leave for the younger generation."

Written comments included:

- "[The exercise enabled me to] face myself and my personal story as well as the way society deals with this issue and the way in which other people deal with this issue";
- "It was a good exercise and helped me realize that no matter what generation was covered we are all affected by this issue";
- "It was a very good exercise which symbolically made me think of the process of dealing with the past. It was a very good introduction";
- "I heard new stories and learned about how people feel and that helped me to understand their problems better."

The Problem Tree

During this session of the workshop, the organizers divided the group into two: young people and older family members. The young people were tasked with the "Problem Tree" exercise – an analysis

of current missing persons issues, while older family members were tasked with “Force Field Analysis” – an analysis of positive and negative factors affecting the overall missing persons issue.

It was hoped that older family members would arrive at the conclusion that young people are a positive factor affecting the missing persons issue and should therefore be viewed as credible partners in the process. The young people were tasked with the Problem Tree exercise in order to see if the root causes, the core problems and their consequences chimed with the older family members’ view.

What was striking about both analyses was the fact that the young people and the older family members thought along similar lines in terms of the root causes of problems related to the missing persons issue and the negative factors that militate against resolving these problems.

The analyses sparked debate among workshop participants about the need for young people to become more involved. It also witnessed, among older family members, an element of fear that they might lose control of the issue. The young people expressed a degree of frustration at the fact that older family members would not open up and allow others to become truly involved in the issue. Several pointed out that despite their youth, they also had missing relatives and should have an equal say in how the missing persons issue is addressed.

The course leader explained to the participants the cyclical nature of the problem tree and how consequences of problems can become causes of new problems thereby perpetuating cycles of violence or the non-resolution of a given issue.

“Force-field Analysis”

Among other things, the older family members identified young people as a positive force – a desired outcome of the workshop. In terms of vision, older family members were clear in their view that all missing persons should be recovered and identified by 2020.

Workshop participants made the following comments about the analysis exercises:

- “The problem is old, the doubts are familiar to me but we cannot see the solution. Things are improving and becoming clearer through dialogue and through understanding. It seems we are kept in time and space status quo”;
- “I had an opportunity to learn what issues the families are facing and it was a good opportunity to exchange experience and opinions,” said one youth activist;
- “I heard young people and their experience,” said a senior family member;
- “This exercise helped me a lot since I had an opportunity to discuss this issue with my colleagues,” said another older family member;
- “[The problem tree exercise helps to show] the beginning, the middle and the end of the problem”;
- “It helped me, as I got some answers to certain questions, causes and consequences.”

The Legacy of Missing Persons

ICMP introduced “The Children of the Third Reich”: a case study in inter-generational challenges in dealing with the past. There was a short break after the film was screened and then participants

gave feedback.

“The Children of the Third Reich” looks at the first meeting of a group of Israeli and US children of Holocaust survivors, and a group of children of Nazi perpetrators. The Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On began working with children of Holocaust survivors in the 1970s and with children of Nazi perpetrators in the 1980s. The film, which covers a four-day meeting in Israel, explores the issues that the two groups had to deal with, issues that derived from the actions and experiences of their parents, and how their parents mediated the past to them.

The film portrays how the legacy of a painful past burdens not only the generation that experienced it at first hand, but how second and third generation families experience the past. It also gives thoughtful consideration to the role of victims and perpetrators and the long shadow that ancestors cast on the lives of subsequent generations. Ultimately, the film points to a reconciliation between the two groups and a shared understanding of a painful past.

Workshop participants commented:

- “It’s a perfect picture of us”;
- “It was an excellent example of dealing with the past and a good lesson”;
- “It was a really good example of dealing with the past; the process is long and this movie made me think about the psychological aspects of a second generation dealing with the past”;
- “The manner of interpretation of the issue pushes you to observe it from a different angle”;
- “It made me look at the missing persons issue from a different perspective, since it makes us face our issues”;
- One older family member commented that she “had been going wrong all these years” as she had tried to conceal the details of her painful past (the events surrounding the enforced disappearance of her husband) from her children so as not to burden them. The film made her reassess the wisdom of this since the children of the victims acknowledged being troubled by not knowing, which stemmed from a conspiracy of silence involving their forebears and their peers.

IWORKSHOP OF ASSOCIATIONS OF KOSOVO ALBANIAN AND KOSOVO SERB FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS, ON MT. KOPAONIK, SERBIA

The group agreed that its work on the missing persons issue is not only about advocacy but about reaching out to, and educating young people. The group expressed support for this new line of work. The challenge was how to reach out to young people in Serbia and Kosovo so that what happened in the past never happens again. Another important issue that the group agreed must be addressed is how to reach out to members of their own nationally-based associations of families of missing persons who had not been involved in the inter-ethnic work of the group and as a result were skeptical, if not opposed, to such cooperation. A proposal was presented to work with such association members in mono-ethnic forums at first, and later bring them into the group.

The group embraced different methods of storytelling, such as the “Red Thread” and the “Living Memorial”, as an important mechanism for dealing with the legacy of a painful past, and expressed a strong desire to continue this work in the future. This method of storytelling involves members of the group sharing their personal and family stories with one another during inter-group encounters.

The family stories represent the emotional and personal history of the participant as well as the collective history of the conflict. The hypothesis is that this model enables the development of emotional ties among members of the group and allows more complex representations of the self and others to emerge. Sequentially, this encourages participants to develop a feeling of mutual trust and respect for one another as well as enhanced mutual understanding.

WORKSHOP WITH ASSOCIATIONS OF KOSOVO ALBANIAN AND KOSOVO SERB FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS IN PRISTINA

Five members of the group voluntarily shared their narratives; three brought personal belongings of missing family members. The five group members were briefed prior to the Living Memorial session. They were told that they should limit their talk to ten minutes and that it shouldn't focus on the disappearance or death of their missing relatives but instead celebrate their lives and focus on how their family members would want to be remembered.

One spoke about her missing husband, using his wristwatch. She said her life with him had been good; they respected each other and had a beautiful son. Her husband was a hard worker, everybody liked him and he had a lot of friends. Her husband was missing until 2008, when his remains were identified by ICMP using DNA analysis.

Another spoke about her missing son, using a lighter, as her son was a smoker. He worked at the library in Pristina. She said that her family lived very well together and with their Albanian neighbors. Everybody liked her son – family, friends, neighbors – and she remembered him with great love. She said she would have liked to have grandchildren but her son had not had children.

Two others spoke about their missing husbands and how difficult it is to raise children without the head of the family, especially in the Balkans. They both commented on how widows in the region have a particularly difficult life and face many challenges.

The fifth spoke about her parents, who are missing, using handcrafts that her mother had made – embroidery and lace. Both of her parents had a very good relationship with their Albanian neighbors. She spoke about her father, who worked as a director of a secondary school. She said she could not understand why they simply disappeared, especially since they were on the best of terms with everybody.

The group was divided by ethnicity into working groups to discuss five things that other groups cannot understand about them. Initially, the two groups complained that they were accustomed to working in mixed groups and that the organizers were trying to generate a conflict that they did not want. ICMP explained the objective of the exercise.

The two groups worked for an hour and both came up with five things that other groups don't understand about them. The groups approached the organizers, requesting that they should present in brief their group work and facilitate the session strictly so as to avoid anything that would harm their cooperation. This was done, but with enough scope to discuss several key topics, especially revolving around the term "Kosovo and Metohija" and "Republic of Kosovo." The groups were unable to reach an understanding. Some participants stated that the term Kosovo and Metohija has been in use for 50 years and that Serb associations are registered with that name. Others asserted that the terms Kosovo and Metohija are political.

The majority of participants did not want to face issues that they believed would harm further cooperation. On the other hand a minority were in favor of discussing these difficult topics. They argued that only by putting all issues on the table and addressing them would the group as a whole become stronger. In the event, the majority view prevailed and it was accepted that difficult issues should not be discussed even though they might reappear and pose an obstacle to the group's cooperation in the future.

The organizers briefed the group on the nature of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, and then continued the session by dividing participants into three mixed groups to discuss their examples and to present to the other groups. Half the participants argued that prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination should be left alone and the group should focus on the issue of missing persons. The other half argued that the group could not fulfill its broader goals related to the missing persons issue without overcoming the challenges that prejudice and stereotypes pose. All participants however agreed "the workshop strengthened the group's ability to deal with conflict/s within the group."