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The Participation Forum*

January 23, 1997

Topic: Bosnia: When Customers Tell Us What We Don't Want to Hear

The twentieth session of the Participation Forum builds upon some themes of past forums: participation where there is no time, what participation means in crises and disasters, and what happens when you listen harder. Presenters Mike Mahdesian of the Humanitarian Response Bureau and Jerry Hyman, formerly of the Europe New Independent States (ENI) Bureau and now with the Democracy Center in the Global Bureau, recounted just one small part of the story of USAID assistance in Bosnia. The focus was not on U.S. Bosnia policy, but, rather, on the ways USAID has found to identify and support local priorities, even when this means revising firmly held beliefs and opinions and rethinking programs. The discussion offered practical advice on listening—even when we don't like what we hear. Barbara Turner, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the ENI Bureau, framed the issues for the session.—Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development

Listening More Than Just Once

Barbara Turner

In my own work in the last few years, in Russia and the newly independent states (NIS), I learned that when there is no government to work with, USAID personnel are forced from day one to talk to a wide array of people. I don't mean to be suggesting that we don't have to work with the government. But we in USAID have a tendency to spend the limited hours that we have in the minister's office. We never seem to get out beyond official-dom. That's an interesting opportunity, because unfortunately, more and more of our assistance programs in the future are going to be aimed at situations of disruption and transition.

In Bosnia, by starting out essentially without a government, we were forced to work with other groups. Hopefully, we'll now try to institutionalize the process of bringing some of those groups in touch with their own government—easier said than done, but something we have to have as an

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or Internet as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development. The Office of Health and Nutrition's Environmental Health Project (EHP) arranges logistics, maintains the mailing list, and prepares the Forum summaries.

objective. While it is not up to us to run the country, it is critical to try to get the government and nongovernmental groups talking to each other.

It's not good enough to listen once. To listen more than once may mean setting up a participation process so that participation will continue in some form. In Bosnia, some things we found out just six or eight months ago are probably already changing, not always for the better, in terms of what people want to do.

Turning Assumptions on Their Heads

Mike Mahdesian

One of the key things that I got out of my experience in Bosnia over the last three years was how important it is to listen to as many people as possible, because, quite often, U.S. policy imperatives or assumptions will clash with the reality on the ground.

U.S. policy in Bosnia started off supporting the Federation and then the Dayton accords. From my point of view at the Bureau of Humanitarian Response, U.S. policy also supported repatriation, the right of return; freedom of movement; a unified Bosnia; building Bosnian institutions; and, finally, jump-starting the economy so that a sense of normalcy could be brought back to the people of Bosnia. We wanted Bosnians to feel that peace is more important and valuable to their lives than military gains.

We found, though, when we listened to what was going on in Bosnia, that timing for the USAID programs sometimes is not in sync with U.S. policy imperatives and assumption. Bosnia was a case where many assumptions were turned on their heads.

Knowing When To Pull Back

My first experiences in Bosnia were in early 1994 when it was possible to believe in a separate peace within Sarajevo. My colleague Rick Barton went out to Sarajevo about a month or two after I had arrived to assess the situation. While he was there Gorazde was attacked by the Bosnian Serbs, and, within Sarajevo itself, there was increased sniper firing. In a meeting there with Barbara, myself, and Brian Atwood, Rick was describing the ping-pong sound of sniper bullets, which were hitting no more than a couple of hundred feet away. And at that point, Brian Atwood looked at Rick and said, "Rick, I don't think this environment is ripe for a transition at the moment." We wisely shelved the idea of a separate peace in Sarajevo.

Experimenting with Small Projects

In 1994, one of the great achievements of U.S. policy was creating a Federation between Muslims and Croats in Bosnia. Even though it existed more on paper than in reality, it changed the dynamics on the ground. We tried to see how we could support federal institutions and reconciliation in communities that were divided between Muslims and Bosnian Croats.

A multidisciplinary USAID team went out to Bosnia to look at various options. A big, thick study was written, and then we started to implement some of its proposals. We started experimenting with what we called "venture capital," about a million dollars' worth of small projects to test out the theory that the time was ripe for reconciliation between the Croats and Muslims within the Federation.

We created four criteria for green-lighting small projects. One was building Federation institutions; the second was multi-ethnic participation; the third was joint projects that would build physical bridges

between communities, such as infrastructure projects; and the fourth was implementing projects in a way that builds on the democratic process. If we got two out of the four, we would green-light a project.

Some 30 projects were begun in various parts of the Federation. As things began to change during the summer of 1995—for example, the resurgence of Croatia and further gains made by the Federation army within Bosnia itself—suddenly the willingness of some of the participants in these reconciliation programs began to taper off drastically. In particular, the Bosnian Croatians pulled back because they began to think that they would one day be part of a greater Croatia, and they suddenly became very wary of doing anything with the Federation.

Of the 30 or so projects, only six or seven were actually coming to fruition. Some of those were stopped at the last minute, not by the local people who participated in the design of the projects, but by central political authorities in Mostar or Sarajevo. Understanding that was very important for the future design of some of our projects.

The Gersonys' Iterative, In-Depth Listening

Before the Dayton negotiations started, Brian Atwood sent out two specialists, Bob and Cindy Gersony, to assess the feasibility of some quick-impact-type projects to help parts of a society recover immediately after a conflict. Brian wanted to explore how USAID could jump-start the economy in a post-Dayton environment in such a way that would further repatriation and normalcy inside of Bosnia.

Bob and Cindy Gersony spent three months going up and down Bosnia, talking to 400 or so people from all walks of life—government officials, intellectual elites, as well as people on the street.

In Washington the idea of using conditionality in our foreign assistance in the post-Dayton environment was being pushed. That is, U.S. foreign assistance would be a carrot or a stick, depending on how the localities behaved regarding cross-ethnic return, freedom of movement, and so on. I was supportive of using our assistance to achieve these purposes, but once I read the Gersony report and matched it with the reports we were getting back from our Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) projects, I learned that our assistance was not having an impact on the behavior of local officials. All politics in Bosnia were *not* local; all politics in Bosnia were central; and these were being controlled by the various entity capitals in Mostar, Sarajevo, and later in Celji.

We were thinking of supporting NGOs in projects with a reconciliation component. In other words, NGOs would have to go to the local communities and tell them that if they got involved in some reconciliation-type activities, they might get some assistance. That situation would be tantamount to NGOs' trying to conduct diplomacy when diplomacy really needed to be conducted by officials in the U.S. State Department. This was one of many reasons that we began to turn against using conditionality on a local level.

We began to realize as well that the time might not be ripe for making reconciliation the total focus of our program. Perhaps we should further other U.S. government aims, such as repatriation. What was realistic and possible at the time was repatriation in majority ethnic areas, not in minority return areas.

When questioned by the Gersonys, people first would say, “Oh, we miss our Croat or Muslim neighbors, and we think fondly of them.” But when the assessors asked more in-depth questions, they heard people express resentment, if not outright hatred, for their neighbors for doing whatever it was that they had done. In fact, they did not want to live next door to their old neighbors at this time. They weren't ready for that. The passions were still much too raw. Again, that tracked with what we were getting back from some of the OTI experimental projects.

A More Realistic Approach

We began to craft a quick-impact program that would further repatriation, but do it in a way that was realistic.

We wanted a program that would build some physical space, and hopefully that would bring people home and have a chain reaction. We attempted to use local contractors to repair housing that was too damaged for a self-help type program. It would help jump-start the economy, and bring people who were staying in other people's residences in towns and cities back to the villages where they came from. That in turn would free up other space.

One of the six successful things that OTI projects had done was a shelter-repair project around the Kruševac area. The houses were built so well there that even attempts to burn them from the inside with phosphorus bombs did not succeed in destroying the structure. Homes were repaired—both Bosnian and Croat homes—and the people came back. But that was in the no-man's-land area, and it was in the interest of both sides that these people return. In other areas, it would probably backfire to try to push minority returns.

We tried to figure out the best way to repair these houses quickly because we had only a small window between the time the snows thawed in March and the time the snows came back in October. We had to be ready to go by mid-spring.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees had been pursuing a self-help program in which materials would be provided on the assumption that Bosnians are skilled and able to repair their own shelters. When the Gersonys asked people if they intended to rebuild or repair their own houses, everyone said, “Sure, that's what we plan to do.” But if they were asked if they actually were going to wield a hammer and start repairing the roof, they said, “Oh, no. We'll just hire a local contractor. We'll oversee it and supervise it, but we'll hire a local contractor.” In other words, the self-help project was just not going to happen. Another assumption was that the best people to do housing were large contractors, and NGOs weren't staffed up to deal with large contractors. But in Bosnia, again, this assumption was turned on its head. The NGOs *had* staffed up. They had people that could build housing and small infrastructure. They knew some of the contractors; they knew the process of weeding out the good ones from the bad. We began to use the NGO model. It became the quickest approach. We completed over 2,500 shelters in the time that we said we would.

The Benefits of Listening

If we had not listened to the people on the ground, if our assessors had not kept asking questions to get beyond superficial answers, if our reporting had not been honest—even from people who ended up having their programs pulled out from under them, I think we would have made many mistakes and probably wasted a lot of money.

Diane La Voy: For the purposes of our discussion in a few minutes, let me pull out from your account two concrete methodologies for understanding people's views in a war-torn society. One is the “venture capital” idea: to offer to support people to do something they've identified—and to see what happens. The other is the iterative, in-depth interviewing approach used by the Gersonys.

Intellectual and Emotional Learning

Jerry Hyman

Bosnia is a place of dashed hopes, fairly large stakes, and assumptions overturned. A lot of things that we learned through participation—that OTI learned through the small projects and the Gersony trip

and that we in ENI learned—were not new. It's that we learned them more in depth than before. We learned emotionally rather than just intellectually.

Four Realities

After the elections in September 1996, with the help of OTI, Susan Kazinski and I—Susan is with the USAID mission in Sarajevo—went around to three or four cities and tried to figure out what the elections foretold about the future of Bosnia and how our program could be responsive to the realities on the ground.

Four realities struck us at the end of that trip. All of them were things that we knew intellectually but not emotionally.

The first was that the election and the war leading up to it were about the shape of the state itself. In this respect Bosnia was unlike most other countries that USAID works in. Usually people contest who will control resources in a state whose borders are established and agreed upon. In Bosnia, the issue at stake was the nature and shape of the state itself, not merely who was going to control the political or economic resources of a “Bosnian state.” The question was whether there would be a Bosnian state at all, and, if so, who would live in it and with what rights.

The Dayton accords provided the rationale for two very opposite views of what the future of Bosnia would be like. The Croat and Serb view was that, although there would be a Bosnian state, it would be a state of very limited powers. And the Croats and the Serbs would make sure that those powers remained extraordinarily limited. The real power would reside in the lower-level entities, one of which was controlled by the Serbs and the other was a loose federation of Croats and Bosniacs. That's the level at which people's lives would be lived, at least politically and economically.

The view of the Bosniacs, on the other hand, was that the overarching state, not the two entities, was of prime importance. For them, Bosnia was a reality, although, to be sure, it consisted of two parts.

The point of the Dayton accords was to reconstruct a multi-ethnic, pluralistic Bosnia, but all three communities came to the same piece of paper with radically different visions of what that paper would hold for them in the future. Each party could find language in the accords for its own interpretation.

The second reality was that fear—not hope, not commitment, not passion—drove the September elections. One question we asked people was why the opposition did so poorly in these elections. Why had they done so much worse than expected? We were told that the same people who were there in 1990 had just been reelected—the same people who brought them the war were back in power. When asked how that had happened if it did not represent the will of the electorate, people responded that it was fear: the prisoner's dilemma. People in one community were unwilling to vote for the opposition party because they were afraid that people in the other community would vote for their nationalist party, rather than for their opposition. If one community split its votes and if the others kept all votes together, their nationalist parties would win. The community that cast some votes for the opposition would be divided for the next four years and would be on the outs, while the other communities would be unified. That was the rationale in each one of the three communities: the Serbs, the Croats, and certainly the Bosniacs. Each community voted its fears in response to what it thought the other community was going to do rather than what it thought was best for itself.

The third reality was the economic depression and its effect on people's visions of what they thought they could achieve politically and economically. They had an exaggerated notion of the value of their resources, especially their industrial resources, and each of the communities thought the others were trying to grab those resources away from them. The political life of Bosnia was dominated by the

efforts of the three communities to create conditions in which they could keep those resources for themselves.

The fourth reality was the variation within subregions, or localities. We found out that there needed to be more latitude for local variations within the parameters of a general strategy than we had expected. There were differences within Republika Srpska and within each part of the Federation. We needed micro-strategies to respond to these variations.

Policy Impact of the Four Realities

The result of our trip was that after we'd listened to people, a number of our initial assumptions were turned on their heads. We assumed that we would be doing a lot of government institution-building after the elections. But the basic underlying political support for those institutions was not as strong as we presumed it would be. We concluded that this was not the right time to be emphasizing the institutions that were defined in Dayton and that were to be actualized by the elections. Rather, we needed to pay more attention to breaking the terror that people felt, breaking the fear, the isolation, and the control that the various central political authorities had over information. We needed to give people a stake in Bosnia itself by breaking down the isolation that had created so many misperceptions. So strengthening media became the number one priority in our strategy.

The second priority was to strengthen political parties as a vehicle for the expression of differing opinions. We wanted to make it possible for people to vote their hopes instead of their fears, and to have a more pluralistic political environment.

The third priority was civil society and the fourth was governance.

These priorities were actually a temporal sequence: what to do first and what second. After we had listened to people from all three groups expressing their hopes and fears, the sequence that we had assumed we would be pursuing after the elections needed to be turned on its head.

Discussion Session

The Need for Political-Psychological Analysis

Joe Montville: I direct the Preventive Diplomacy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). We have a big program in the former Yugoslavia focusing on religious communities, mid-level clergy, and religious lay people from all the faith traditions in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia. We've been trying to help weave together the strands of civil society based on the commitment of these people to pluralism.

The more I hear about real-world experience on the ground, the more convinced I am of the necessity of integrated strategies that not only improve the cognitive learning that's served by independent broadcasting and media, but also pay attention to affective learning. What needs to be integrated into the grand strategies of USAID, State, and the World Bank is the capacity to tolerate softer interventions that have to do with affect—the burdens of history, the wounds, the lack of recognition.

The Serbs have a terrible problem with no one really recognizing their sense of loss over the centuries. And the Bosniac senior clergy on the Muslim side are resistant to an invitation from friendly third parties to all sit down around the table on an equal footing. The situation requires a profound political-psychological as well as developmental analysis. There needs to be a strategy where each activity reinforces the other. And this strategy must be developed, executed, and monitored in a participatory manner—with USAID and with the World Bank and other donors and NGOs.

Barbara Turner: Those of us that have worked in Bosnia would tend to agree with you. But making that idea operational is a lot easier said than done. At present our democracy efforts in USAID are

under some criticism that we don't measure them enough. The nice thing about shifting to the housing project was that we could say, "X number of houses by Y date will cost Z dollars." It's very hard to quantify the reduction of fear. Such "touchy-feely" stuff is hard to sell to international donors. It also requires some staff on the ground to see that big mistakes aren't made. It is harder to mess up the construction of a house. But USAID and the State Department have a lot fewer people on the ground than we did in the past.

Rick Barton: Attitudes and behaviors are not particularly difficult to measure. Look at the dramatic changes in our society in the last 50 years and the huge impact of mass marketing on what we've decided we need on a daily basis to be a full-blooded American. Many methodologies that have been used by successful organizations to change our society might be used to get to the people of countries like Bosnia.

We should look for models that reach directly to people, not necessarily those that are institutional. As we used to say, if you have a kid with a problem, you can send him to summer camp or you can send him to a psychologist. USAID probably has to spend more time at the summer camps for the next couple of years, doing things—climbing the trees, dropping into the lakes—and seeing if that moves us ahead.

Diane La Voy: There is a natural overlap between thinking about what our strategy or policy should be and what instruments for participation can be used, including the "touchy-feely" stuff of listening to people to find out what is driving them. No matter what your strategy is—even if it's building houses—you need to know how to listen to people.

Matching the Pace and Scale of 'Reconciliation' to Reality

Landrum Bolling: I'm involved with Mercy Corps and Scottish European Aid in the project that Joe spoke of. I've been caught up, as an NGO official, with the efforts of a lot of well-meaning religious groups who have come to Bosnia over and over again during the last year. The people in the former Yugoslavia have become sort of weary with the delegations coming from fine academic and religious groups, trying to help.

I spent two days last April with a delegation of religious leaders from the United States who wanted me to take them around and introduce them to various local religious leaders, whom I had come to know quite well. And the spokesman usually started out by saying, "This is my sixteenth trip to Eastern Europe. I'm here on a mission of reconciliation, and I want to help you to achieve reconciliation." At the end of almost every meeting, I would walk away saying, "Oh, my gosh, these guys are not getting it!" There is a time and a place for all things, and the time had not come for "reconciliation."

The trips made to assess in-depth the attitudes on the ground provided a reality check. The heart of this reality was that reconciliation comes about very slowly, but we mustn't give up on it.

When I heard Gersony's briefing, I called my home office back in Portland, Oregon, and said, "Look, I haven't even unpacked my bags. I might as well go home," and they said, "Oh, no. If USAID has given up hope in reconciliation, we haven't. We've got a little bit of money. Stay there and try to do something." So I've been there for a year trying to do something.

What we decided to do was to start some workshops. We didn't call them "conflict resolution" or "conflict management." We called them workshops in "problem-solving." We started with our own staff. We had about 80 employees in the Tuzla area, mostly engineers and technicians who had been making housing and water supply repairs. The day of the first workshop fell on a nice Saturday when people wanted the day off to tend their gardens. I never had a more reluctant group of students sitting before me when the workshop was opened.

But, fortunately, we'd done enough listening on the ground and enough research about what their problems were. We came in with some scenarios of games to play as a part of the learning process to

get them engaged. At the end of the day, they said, “When can we do another one?” and we've been doing others since then.

Now, this is an effort to promote civil society among people we have some natural contact with. We're not trying to reconcile Croats and Muslims, but on our staff there, we've got Croats, we've got Serbs, we've got Muslims all working together harmoniously, doing a job.

Jerry Hyman: It's hard to have to say to yourself, “Well, maybe some of the things we thought are wrong because our programs were premised on one set of assumptions, and maybe now they should be premised on another.” Bosnia was particularly difficult because the issues challenged some fundamental beliefs of Americans. We believe that people should be treated as individuals and that we should have a pluralistic society. As an American, I was very reluctant to give up the idea that there could be a reunified Bosnia. To see the spirit of unity destroyed, not only in Sarajevo but all over Yugoslavia, was difficult, not merely because of our bureaucratic interests, but because of who we are and what we stand for.

Mike Mahdesian: It's important that we be ready for openings on reconciliation and other goals that the United States wants to pursue in Bosnia. There's a danger of not listening and of being too cynical and saying that reconciliation will never happen in Bosnia.

Barbara Turner: We have not given up on reconciliation in Bosnia. We are just taking different routes to it. One of the routes is the physical infrastructure route. For example, in building an integrated railroad system, you get railroad guys to begin to talk together, not about politics, but about the size of track. This kind of communication gets us a little bit closer to reconciliation.

Howard Sumka: I'd like to put a word in for how difficult it was to make physical improvements in Bosnia. ENI Bureau was designing a Municipal Infrastructure Program at about the same time that the Emergency Shelter Program, which Mike Mahdesian talked about, was being put together.

After a constructive and animated dialogue with various interested parties, the ENI Bureau concluded that, as important as it was for us to support the Federation, there were one or two things that really had to happen early on. One was to give people the sense that the war was over and good things were going to come with the peace. And some of those good things were having a house to live in, which was where the Emergency Shelter Project came in; having water and electricity; having a road that would allow people to get home during the worst weather; and so on.

Working with NGOs, civilian affairs representatives, and municipal governments, where they were functioning, we identified priority projects within the constraints that we were working with. We have a U.S. contractor that manages the operation but works with local construction firms.

We started the process with reconciliation and ethnic collaboration objectives but quickly realized that nothing would ever get built if we didn't move in a more directed way. Getting things going laid the basis for reconciliation activities. To build democracy people had to have a sense that their communities were once again going to be intact, that they were going to have a place to live and were going to be able to resume their normal lives.

The Reconstruction Finance Facility, which finances small business, has a similar objective: get the economy going again, provide opportunities for people to work—and that would be the basis for putting the society together. However, there is a chance that reconciliation will never come to the degree that we would have liked when we looked at the situation a year and a half ago.

We have looked for legitimate authority at the closest level to the people to identify projects and oversee implementation. That has meant working with municipal governments, identifying community groups, and getting demobilized soldiers working on small reconstruction projects. When we have had the opportunity, we've gone as close as we can to the people—who are the beneficiaries of these projects.

Listening Broadly and Repeatedly through In-Depth Interviewing

Bobby Herman: Listening is very difficult in war-torn, mobilized and highly politicized societies. How do you make sure that you are meeting with a representative cross-section? And how do you establish mechanisms for ongoing listening after you've done your initial assessments?

Mike Mahdesian: In the case of the Gersonys, I don't know how scientific their sample was, but it was voluminous. As I said, they talked to over 400 people. I don't think they got a balanced cross-section necessarily, but I think they talked to enough people to get a sense of public opinion.

Bob would never take a straight-up answer if he felt something was being held back. He would spend a couple hours with people and keep probing in a very friendly way. He doesn't try to put people on the spot, nor does he have a list of questions that he ticks off one after the other. The first thing he tries to do is create a sense of confidence and trust. Sometimes he would spend several days. He'd come back to a conversation, and find a way to dislodge what might be lying below the surface. I don't know if you can bottle that method.

Diane La Voy: Bob Gersony is an individual with considerable ability at pulling off, alone or as a two-person team, something that we usually associate with a very rigorous methodology—rapid or participatory rapid appraisal. Among the people who've written in a very straightforward manner about this type of appraisal is James Beebe, who used to be in the South Africa mission. (His article and the summary of a July 1995 workshop on rapid participatory appraisal, in which he was a presenter, are available from PPC.) He states that a rapid appraisal is by definition an intense and iterative process, as opposed to a survey. Questions are not decided upon ahead of time, so one of the sources of bias is immediately removed. The appraisal is usually conducted by a team, and team members work to keep each other honest. They ensure that the professional biases that one person brings are neutralized by a rigorous process of discussing each point among themselves after an interview. That is nearly what we have in the “Gersony method.” Of course, with that kind of appraisal, the sample is not statistically valid, but rapid appraisal does offer a scientifically valid method of overcoming many of the pitfalls that are associated with surveying of any sort.

Sher Plunkett: Rapid appraisal is an exploratory method. It's useful for making quick decisions and a lot better than having no information or than simply applying a priori a cultural model. But it is the sort of thing that needs to be kept in place and done again and again until a foundation of knowledge is built up. Also, information from a rapid appraisal can be used to formulate a survey to formally test a hypothesis. So the main thing is not to rely on a one-shot effort but to follow up.

Barbara Turner: I do think we've been following up. We got folks out to do some in-depth interviews and meetings on people's views on the upcoming municipal elections. Debriefs on those were more informative to me about a whole lot of other things beyond how they were going to vote.

Charles Santangelo: Jerry, did you use the USIA polls to guide your efforts, and did you do your own polling?

Jerry Hyman: It was the USIA polls, which were excellent, that had led us to believe that the “nationalist” parties would do less well than they did and that the opposition parties would do better than they did. It was precisely the USIA polls that led us to ask people what had happened—why had the opposition done so poorly.

Paul Randolph: OTI learned that subregions across Bosnia had their own unique characteristics. It was not possible to design a sweeping program that would cover the entire country. As 1995 wound down and 1996 began, we began to establish regional USAID offices staffed with U.S. personal service contractors and local hired staff. That gave us feedback on a regular basis and allowed the USAID mission staff from Sarajevo to get out into the field easily.

So that's an ongoing way that we want to keep our finger on the pulse of individuals in the various regions across the country and report back so that programs can be modified if necessary.

Experiences in Other Countries

Eric Chetwynd: In Poland, I was recently helping a mission design a local government program. I had the opportunity to meet with a local mayor and ask him how he was doing with participation. He said, "Participation is very difficult. First of all, the city council doesn't know how to do it, and they feel that once they're elected, that's the end of their discourse with their constituents." Obviously, there's room for a special kind of consciousness-raising for elected politicians on how to carry the participation process beyond the election. The mayor also said that it was difficult to get the citizens interested in participating. As much as he wanted to engage them in dialogue, they didn't have the interest.

John Sheidler: I'm with Future Past, Inc., and this experience in Bosnia reminds me of some of our organization's experience in Ukraine. Listening to the customers, working with them, and trying to achieve what is possible, as opposed to what has been set out as the final policy objective, does feed back into the reformulation of policy.

Communications from the E-mail Bag

Dangers Inherent in a Policy Focus on NGOs

David Fishman (Georgetown University): “In some countries, like Bosnia, the consequences of war or totalitarian atomization or primitive levels of economic development or literacy rates may limit alternatives to working with the existing Government or building civil society from scratch at the grass roots. In other countries, however, a wealth of intermediate institutions, such as courts, parliaments, trade unions, research institutes, and the like, may be an important part of the developmental environment and must not be overlooked.

“Some of these institutions may be formally participatory in only a limited sense—e.g., courts, whose responsibility is to uphold the law regardless of the political will of the Government, or for that matter of NGOs that may be criticizing it. More often these institutions are partially or fully participatory—whether elected parliaments or organized trade unions—and potentially a much more powerfully organized expression of the popular will than externally funded NGOs. While their political perspectives may or may not be in tune with any given U.S. policy reform agenda, in the long run their flourishing is fundamentally supportive of broader U.S. policy goals of free and open societies. At the same time, if American assistance policy either ignores the potential of these intermediate institutions or, by overemphasizing the relationship with the executive branch, excludes them from consideration, it runs a substantial risk of doing serious damage to U.S. long-term policy goals and interests.”

Continuing the Dialogue

Robert Herman: “I was hoping there would have been a little more discussion of the challenges and different techniques/methodologies required to do an appraisal in strife-torn, highly politicized environments where community (read ethnic) leaders do not necessarily speak for their “constituents.” I was certainly pleased to learn more about Bob and Cindy Gersony's work. However, I think it would be helpful to offer more systematic/generalizable insights about listening to and eliciting information from a reasonably representative cross-section (no, it doesn't have to be a scientific random sample) in war-ravaged and political and socially divided societies.

“I thought your observation about watching what people do to get a sense of their priorities is generally sound, although there is the potential danger of erroneously inferring attitudes from behavior.

“Lastly, Barbara Turner's point about iterative listening needs to be fleshed out further with respect to creating some mechanisms or processes to ensure ongoing monitoring of stakeholder views, particularly in volatile environments like Bosnia. It was not clear to me what steps were taken to ensure incorporation of stakeholders' views after the initial assessment and, perhaps, design phase.”