

What Works in Youth Engagement in the Balkans

By Cathryn L. Thorup, Ph.D.
and Sheila Kinkade
Foreword by Erion Veliaj



International Youth Foundation®



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Balkan
Children & Youth
FOUNDATION

“Without commonly shared and widely entrenched moral values and obligations, neither the law, nor the democratic government, nor even the market economy will function properly.”¹

Vaclav Havel, *Former President, Czech Republic*

“To develop responsibility, young people need to have responsibility. To learn to care, they need to perform caring acts.”²

Thomas Lickona, *Developmental Psychologist and Professor of Education at the State University of New York*

“If you are not involved, then you are accepting things the way they are.”³

Kaizen participant, *Romania*

¹ Havel, Vaclav. “Politics, Morality, and Civility” in Eberly, Don E., (ed.) *The Essential Civil Society Reader*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., c2000, p. 401.

² Lickona, Thomas. *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*, New York: Bantam Books, c1991, p. 312.

³ Kaizen is the youth engagement program of Romania’s New Horizons Foundation.

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With little more than a cell phone, youth are able to mobilize hundreds of their peers to take action on a particular issue.

The rapid changes taking place around our world, including the spread of democracy, growth in civil society, advent of the Internet, and advances in communications technology are making it easier for young people to get involved in their communities. A growing number of today's youth activists find themselves less alone and more connected to the global stage. With little more than a cell phone, youth are able to mobilize hundreds of their peers to take action on a particular issue.

As a result of such changes, young people's sense of being, belonging, and civic attitudes have been renewed with unseen energy. Take, for example, the work of youth activists in Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe, who—right now—are tackling urgent social problems and corrupt elites. They inspire other citizens to believe that positive change—and a more promising future—is within their grasp.

Indeed, we live in a time of hope, of overcoming old attitudes and embracing new values. This publication is about hope and the opportunities that exist for young people to play an active role in contributing to the development of the Balkan region. Profiled here are 16 programs that are helping young people to develop the confidence, skills, and knowledge to serve as positive change makers and leaders in their societies. Here you will read about a youth-led organization in Croatia that engages young people throughout the region in volunteer activities, you will learn of a youth media program in Macedonia that equips young people with skills to communicate urgent social issues in their communities, and you will be introduced to the work of an organization in Bosnia-Herzegovina that is engaging rural youth in efforts to influence local policies.

While I believe firmly that a more positive future is possible in the Balkans, challenges abound. Ethnic tensions, corrupt leaders, outmoded educational systems, high unemployment, degrading health services, and pervasive criminal activity remain issues of grave concern. Yet, building on the words of the 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke, it remains true that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good, passionate, honest, young people to do nothing. We have no choice but to move forward in a positive direction. Youth have emerged as a potent force for positive social change in our region and that is encouraging news.

When I returned home to Albania two years ago, after many years of work and study overseas, I recall how disheartening it was to experience a sense of resignation among people—young and old alike. From them, I kept

hearing about how things will never change and how we are all doomed to live desperate lives. That is what sparked my interest in civic activism. I was motivated by the basic belief that this reality must, should, and will change. So we started MJAF T!, a campaign to combat civic apathy.

Translated from Albanian, MJAF T! means “enough!”—enough accepting the status quo, enough with poor quality education, enough with political corruption. Now, MJAF T! has turned into a powerful movement of mostly young people bringing about far-reaching changes in the economy, education, health, and the environment, while calling for greater transparency and accountability in business and government.

What I have come to recognize through this personal experience is how people can be mobilized to make a difference. Most often what they need is a vision to pursue and a valued role to play. Civic activism can be anything from a court case against corrupt officials to a public event that uses humor to deliver a powerful social message. Two years after MJAF T! was launched, we still wake up feeling like we have the most interesting jobs in town. Civic action is hard work, but it can also be fun.

I take true pride in the fact that the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF) places such a priority on supporting youth leadership and engagement in its work. Fifteen out of sixteen of the programs profiled here have received grant support from BCYF. Through promoting active youth engagement, we hope to foster a generation of youth who feel a vital part of their societies, as opposed to excluded from them. At the same time, we seek to influence public attitudes about what young people are capable of achieving.

To the youth who read this publication and seek to make a difference, count on us to be your ardent supporters, and to cheer you on as you tackle today’s many challenges. Count on us to continue actively supporting youth engagement, and mobilizing others to do so. In the months and years ahead, we hope to see many more youth, such as those described in these pages, assume leadership positions in government, business, and civil society. To young people throughout the Balkans I can only say, “What are you waiting for? Get up, get on, and get going!”

Erion Veliaj

Executive Director, MJAF T!

Board Member, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation

Two years after MJAF T! was launched, we still wake up feeling like we have the most interesting jobs in town. Civic action is hard work, but it can also be fun.

Today, the continuing fragility of many of the region's economies and political systems, lingering remnants of the stifling effects of communism on individual initiative, and intermittent outbreaks of conflict combine to produce persistent uncertainty among the region's youth about what the future holds for them.



A sobering array of challenges confront the 21 million children and youth growing up today in the Balkans. Many were personally affected by the violence and destruction that ushered in the new century; all must live with the consequences of the deep ethnic, religious, national, and cultural divides those events revealed and reinforced. Today, the continuing fragility of many of the region's economies and political systems, lingering remnants of the stifling effects of communism on individual initiative, and intermittent outbreaks of conflict⁴ combine to produce persistent uncertainty among the region's youth about what the future holds for them.

Introducing a dash of vibrant color into this otherwise stark picture are the tens of thousands of young people throughout the Balkans who are taking action to improve their communities and to open up new opportunities for themselves, their families, and their peers. This study examines the efforts of 16 local civil society organizations to support and empower these youth as agents of social change.⁵ Ranging from programs focused on life skills

⁴ In the aftermath of the death of three Albanian children in March 2004, violence broke out in Mitrovica, Kosovo. Clashes between ethnic Albanian and Serbs left dozens dead, hundreds injured, and thousands homeless. Numerous homes and churches were damaged or destroyed.

⁵ Three additional programs were visited as part of the research for this project (the Multidisciplinary Center for the Management of Child Mistreatment (MCMCM) in Albania; IPAK – mladost gradi budućnost in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and the Petnica Science Center in Serbia). Ultimately, we determined that these programs, while each strong in their own right, did not fit within the final parameters of this study. Where appropriate, we drew on the information gathered in these site visits in completing this publication.

development to service learning programs designed to get youth out into their neighborhoods and engaged in community development, these programs share a profound belief in the transformative power of the region's young people. Youth engagement is the common thread that links their work.

The programs profiled in this publication are located in 9 different countries and territories in the region: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. The analysis is based on site visits to 14 of these programs, personal interviews with their staff and program participants, extensive e-mail communications, and a lengthy written questionnaire completed by all 16 programs.⁶ The report also draws on the deliberations of the Working Group on Youth Engagement and Youth Leadership at the annual Balkan Youth Forum⁷ held in Trogir, Croatia in September 2004.

The Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF),⁸ a partner of the International Youth Foundation,⁹ played a key role in the development of this study, selecting these 16 programs as examples of promising practice in the region.¹⁰

All of the programs profiled—with the exception of Balkans YouthLink-Albania—receive funding from BCYF, in addition to numerous other donors, reflecting the emphasis that BCYF has placed on youth engagement in the Balkans since the foundation's inception.¹¹ According to the organization's Executive Director, Agon Demjaha, "BCYF has contributed to efforts to actively engage youth in their communities, while transforming societal attitudes about what young people are capable of achieving."¹²

Introducing a dash of vibrant color into this otherwise stark picture are the tens of thousands of young people throughout the Balkans who are taking action to improve their communities and to open up new opportunities for themselves, their families, and their peers.

⁶ Cathryn L. Thorup conducted the site visits in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Romania. Sheila Kinkade visited the youth engagement programs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. Both authors interviewed the head of Moldova's program. Sheila Kinkade developed the profile for Balkans YouthLink-Albania based on an interview with the Executive Director of that organization and a program questionnaire. For a detailed list of sources, see Appendix A.

⁷ This forum, sponsored by the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF), is an annual event that brings together youth-serving NGOs from throughout the Balkans to discuss a range of issues critical to youth development. For a summary of the Working Group discussion, see *Balkan Youth Forum 2004, "Building a Brighter Future Today," Conference Report*, Trogir, Croatia, September 6-12, 2004, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, c2004, p. 21.

⁸ Headquartered in Skopje, Macedonia, the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF) was established in 2000 to strengthen the youth development sector throughout the Balkans through a new model of regional cooperation; tri-sectoral partnering among government, business, and civil society; and, inter-cultural learning. For more information, see www.balkanyouth.org.

⁹ Established in 1990, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) is dedicated to supporting programs that improve the conditions and prospects for young people. For further information, see www.iyfnet.org.

¹⁰ The authors would like to express particular appreciation to Agon Demjaha, Executive Director of BCYF, Risto Karajkov, former Program Officer at BCYF, and Jean-Pierre Isbendjian, Director of Programmes at IYF, for their contributions to this study, and to the managers and staff of all of the local programs who so graciously provided us with in-depth information and analysis. A special thanks is extended to all of the youth engaged in these programs for sharing their insights, concerns, and dreams.

¹¹ BCYF supports the three programs profiled here from Kosovo through a two-year partnership arrangement with the Kosova Foundation for Open Society (KFOS). Within the partnership, KFOS acts as a leading partner for the Grantmaking activities, while BCYF acts as a leading partner for the Capacity Building ones. BCYF provides its portion of the funding (50%) to KFOS, which then selects the programs and – following ratification by BCYF – manages them accordingly.

¹² Demjaha, Agon. Letter from the Executive Director, Balkan Youth Update, No. 5, March 2005, p. 1.

Youth engagement is about “the involvement of young people in the decisions that affect their lives and the well-being of their communities.”¹³ This study is intended to provide a broad overview of multiple approaches to youth engagement in the Balkans, rather than an in-depth analysis of just a few such programs. Some of these 16 programs emphasize youth engagement in the political process, while others provide opportunities for young people to take part in community service or service learning activities. Among those focused more explicitly on civic action, some of these programs concentrate on voting or the promotion and protection of rights, while others work to help young people develop the values and civic competencies that are the underpinnings of democracy.



Many of the programs profiled here have evolved over time. A number began with a simple desire to bring youth in off the streets by offering them productive and enjoyable leisure activities. Over time, new offerings were added to the initial range of occupational and sports activities, and these programs began to provide language and computer classes and/or training in how to prepare a résumé. From there, some organizations started to offer their members information on local social issues and opportunities to “make

¹³ “Youth Participation: EQUIP3/Youth Trust Strategy,” draft strategy document, September 2004, p. 1.

a difference.” In other cases, youth themselves took the lead in proposing activities that would benefit the community. Still other programs examined here were launched from the very beginning with the express purpose of encouraging direct engagement in social action.

A number of the programs analyzed are focused on the longer-term and view themselves as contributing to incremental change over time. They concentrate on preparing youth for future participation through the development of the skills and attitudes critical to that involvement. Others are pressing for more immediate results, encouraging program participants to tackle major political and social reforms at the local and national levels today. According to Danilo Radulović, President of Montenegro’s Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET), “Participation is essential to building a democratic and civil society. Meaningful participation – being able to take part in and influence activities, processes and decisions – is not something young people should be rehearsing, but actually exercising. They do not have to wait for the future to arrive to contribute to society, but can do so today, and in so doing, change the future.”¹⁴

Both approaches produce significant results and both are changing the prospects for Balkan youth. All of these programs have a direct impact on youth and an indirect impact on the broader community, either through the participation of parents, teachers, and peers in these activities or in terms of improvements to the community through the projects undertaken. Given that youth 24 and under represent over one-third of the region’s population, youth engagement is critical in terms of the sheer numbers alone.

This study highlights different ways in which youth can be prepared and encouraged to play an active role in shaping the societies in which they live. The techniques vary—from theater, debate, service projects (like environmental clean-up days), television productions, and volunteer workcamps to ‘get out the vote’ campaigns—but the end result is similar. Youth engagement programs seek to provide youth with a legitimate role in the development of their communities, a stake in its success, the capacity to act, and a clear sense of shared responsibility for the results.

“Participation is essential to building a democratic and civil society. Meaningful participation – being able to take part in and influence activities, processes and decisions – is not something young people should be rehearsing, but actually exercising.”

¹⁴ AET program questionnaire.

It is not easy to engage youth in a region where there is a history of coerced volunteerism, where there is insufficient understanding of the NGO sector, and where respect is often gained by securing a paying job. According to Risto Karajkov, BCYF's former Program Officer, "In post-communist countries, there is a deficiency of volunteerism and a sense of apathy, exclusion, uselessness, and a lack of opportunities."¹⁵ This bleak description encapsulates the challenge faced by those who believe that youth have a critical role to play in addressing the immediate needs of their societies, shaping the future of the region, and enhancing their own personal development. "Balkan youth are urgently in need of opportunities to acquire the skills and knowledge to be effective in building strong economies and workable democracies, as well as to learn the values and principles of character that build stable societies."¹⁶

The legacy of communism is perhaps nowhere felt as deeply as in its impact on personal initiative, trust, and the development of civic and social responsibility. To a significant degree, governments and youth in the region hold each other in mutual disregard and many youth are unfamiliar with the role played by newly emergent civil society actors. "The experience of many former communist societies is that communism created many habits – excessive dependence upon the State, leading to an absence of entrepreneurial energy; an inability to compromise; and a disinclination to cooperate voluntarily in groups like companies or political parties – that have greatly slowed the consolidation of either democracy or the market economy."¹⁷

Youth have newfound freedom in the Balkans, but their economic opportunities remain circumscribed, and political instability and lingering nationalism raise the possibility of a return to political authoritarianism. For these reasons, many youth feel restless and choose to focus on ways to leave the region rather than on reasons to stay. For example, 80 percent of youth in Albania and 83 percent in Bosnia-Herzegovina are considering leaving their countries in search of better educational and job opportunities abroad.¹⁸

In this context, programs designed to foster youth engagement face considerable impediments. They must develop a tradition of authentic service in a region dominated by a history of forced service and a habit of reliance on the state. To be successful, they must first capture the attention of youth, offering them the opportunity to develop new skills and providing them with opportunities to contribute to their communities. In the process, program managers must face down skepticism, hopelessness, and some of the

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¹⁵ "Appropriation Recommendation for ADP-Zid," planning document, International Youth Foundation/Balkan Children and Youth Foundation. Risto Karajkov served as BCYF's Program Officer through February 2005.

¹⁶ "Balkan Regional Program for Youth Entrepreneurship and Engagement," Concept Paper from the International Youth Foundation to the USAID/Bureau for Europe & Eurasia, March 2005, p. 3.

¹⁷ Certan, Diane. "Service Learning as a Tool for Social Capital Development," conference paper presented at Romania's 1st National Conference on Social Capital and Service Learning, October 29-31, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁸ "Balkan Regional Program for Youth Entrepreneurship and Engagement," op. cit., p. 3.

less attractive aspects of the newfound focus on capitalism, such as rampant individualism and conspicuous consumption.



As is the case with youth everywhere, there are competing attractions. Although these vary a great deal depending upon local economic conditions and the economic constraints of the individuals in question, youth engagement programs must compete with a preoccupation with leisure activities on the part of those with the luxury to indulge such interests and the need to earn an income on the part of the majority of the youth in the region.

At the same time, as the analysis of these programs will highlight, many youth in the Balkans are ready for just such a challenge. Faced with too much time on their hands, a lack of productive leisure activities, and concern for the future, they are looking for ways in which to occupy their time while connecting with and making a contribution to their communities.

What is Youth Engagement?

Up until the last few years, most development practitioners used the term “youth participation” to refer to active involvement by young people in the world around them.¹⁹ Some, however, felt there was a degree of ambiguity associated with the term. It was sometimes used to refer to token (or at least very limited) participation by young people in activities and organizations over which they had little, if any, control. In this view, having a “youth voice” on an advisory board or allowing youth to take part in some of the activities of an organization would mean that the organization was fostering youth participation. Other analysts and practitioners were uncomfortable by the passivity the term seemed to portray. “Youth participation” did not seem to connote the leadership that youth could provide in driving change in their communities. In part as a response to these concerns, the term ‘youth engagement’ emerged as the state of art term, replacing or complementing the term “youth participation.”

Unfortunately, for those who were looking for greater clarity, the term “youth engagement” also suffers from a lack of precision and is used in a number of different ways by development practitioners around the world. At one end of the spectrum, it can simply mean the process of engaging youth in an activity. This definition focuses on youth as the recipients of services from programs offering them productive ways in which to occupy their time. These programs are “engaging” the time and attention of young people. The goal is primarily one of personal development. At the other end of the spectrum, youth engagement can refer to youth acting as agents of social change in their communities as they use their knowledge, skills, and organizing capacity to transform the world around them. The goal reaches beyond personal development to include tangible improvements to the community. In some cases, youth work within the system while in others they may adopt more adversarial tactics that include advocacy, mobilization and use of the media.

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¹⁹ In 1985, the UN General Assembly, for example, defined youth participation as including: economic participation; political participation (relating to decision making processes); social participation (relating to community involvement); and, cultural participation. The 16 programs profiled here concentrate their attention on the social and political dimensions of youth activism.

In between these two extremes, there are a host of programs that attempt to both build life skills and engage young people in community service and civic action.²⁰

For programs focused primarily or exclusively on personal development, youth engagement comes very close to what might be referred to as life skills development. A first category of such programs would provide skills designed to help youth to become gainfully employed. Youth might be invited to take part in activities at a youth center, for example, that would



help to increase their employability by building their self-esteem, computer literacy, entrepreneurial know-how, and/or English skills. A second category of programs might focus on building emotional literacy through psychosocial counseling activities, helping young people to learn to work through their problems. A third category might focus on helping youth to develop their leadership potential by strengthening life skills in areas such as critical thinking, conflict management, self-confidence, and communication. Some programs, of course, would combine elements of all three of the categories listed above. The overarching goal in any case would be to prepare youth to be productive members of their society. Local youth would be “engaged” in these capacity building activities rather than spending their time in unstructured and potentially unsafe activities on the streets.

For programs focused on more direct and more immediate social change, youth engagement would require an explicit focus on providing youth with the skills and the opportunities to participate in the life of their communities.²¹

²⁰ For an interesting analysis of the degrees of youth engagement, see the Continuum of Youth Engagement developed by LISTEN, Inc., “An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing, Occasional Papers Series on Youth Organizing, No. 1, Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, c2003, p. 10.

²¹ It should be noted that some analysts and practitioners also use the term “civic engagement” to refer to these community-oriented activities. Civic engagement is defined as, “Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. [It] can take many forms, from individual volunteerism, to organizational involvement, to electoral participation. It can include efforts to address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.” Kielsmeier, James C. (et. al.) *G2G: Growing to Greatness 2005*, the State of Service Learning Project, United States: National Youth Leadership Council, c2005, p. 116.

Again, there is diversity among these programs as well. Some would simply discuss social, economic, and political issues of relevance to the community, while others would go a step further by preparing youth for active involvement and providing opportunities for them to take self-directed action.²² This might include activities as simple as cleaning up a local park or collecting food for an orphanage, or more sophisticated community projects such as lobbying local officials to renovate a school, as was the case with the Association for Equality and Tolerance in Montenegro.

Much has been written about the importance of building “social capital”²³ in developing countries and in a sense all of these programs make a contribution in that direction. At the same time, if every program that in some way involves youth is considered “youth engagement” then the term begins to lose any real meaning. How would a life skills program differ from one designed to foster youth engagement?

For purposes of this study, youth engagement will be used to refer to programs that focus on preparing Balkan youth for active engagement with their communities at the local and/or national level. An explicit outward focus differentiates these programs from those oriented exclusively toward inward personal development. While youth engagement programs must certainly enhance personal development, that contribution alone is not enough. There must also be a strong emphasis on providing avenues for young people to contribute to the local community and/or to produce more systemic change at the national level. Those youth engagement programs described here exhibit two complementary goals: capacity building among Balkan youth and social transformation in the region.²⁴

Those youth engagement programs described here exhibit two complementary goals: capacity building among Balkan youth and social transformation in the region.

Youth Engagement through Civic Action, Community Service, and Service Learning

According to participants in the Balkan Youth Forum 2004, “Youth engagement [is] deemed critical in the region to promote young people’s roles as active citizens, to strengthen fragile democracies, and promote broad-based social transformation.”²⁵ These 16 programs help to prepare youth for a lifetime of active citizenship and social engagement. Youth engagement is also essential to a long-term process of democracy-building. It serves to restore

²² Taking action – playing a protagonistic role in their societies – can be an empowering experience for young people and helps to build their self-confidence.

²³ Social capital refers to “the processes between people which establish networks, norms, and social trust, and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” Kielsmeier, James C. (et. al.) *G2G: Growing to Greatness 2004*, the State of Service Learning Project, United States: National Youth Leadership Council, c2004, p. 92.

²⁴ While some analysts make a distinction between youth service and youth organizing, this study views both activities as integral components of youth engagement.

²⁵ Balkan Youth Update, No. 4, December 2004, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation and the International Youth Foundation, p. 4.

In the Balkans, as elsewhere in the world, the spread of democracy and the growth of civil society institutions is “fueling the rise of youth activism and organizing.”

faith in the political process among both young and old; provides youth with local alternatives and helps to stem ‘youth flight;’ assists in filling a critical vacuum in social services when governments are hard-pressed to respond; and contributes at the local and national level to more equitable and effective policies.

In the Balkans, as elsewhere in the world, the spread of democracy and the growth of civil society institutions is “fueling the rise of youth activism and organizing.”²⁶ Another factor contributing to the rise in civic and social engagement on the part of young people in the region is the revolution in information technology. This development is facilitating the flow of data across sectors and across regions; enhancing the exchange of ideas among youth of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions; and, making it easier for young people to organize and collaborate with one another.²⁷

As will be seen in this study, youth engagement takes many shapes and can be fostered in a variety of ways. One of the approaches used by a number of the programs profiled here is that of preparing youth to get involved in their community. Several of these 16 programs focus particular attention on familiarizing youth with key civic and social issues and providing them with the skills they need to become actively involved. Other programs go a step further and provide them with opportunities to put what they have learned into practice. Two such tools are community service and service learning.

Over the years, the term “service learning” has acquired an increasingly precise definition. In an effort to inject greater rigor into the concept and to differentiate it from the more *ad hoc* projects generally referred to as “community service,” many analysts and practitioners (particularly in the United States) began to apply the term solely to service programs that were school-based with a heavy pedagogical component.²⁸ Under this definition, the learning component of a young person’s involvement in a service activity was necessarily tied to the school curriculum.

Recently, however, some have argued for a broader definition of the term which would apply to both school-based and NGO-based service programs with a clearly defined learning component.²⁹ According to Silvia

²⁶ “Economic and Social Engagement of Young People in the Balkans: A Concept Paper from the International Youth Foundation in cooperation with the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation,” December 2004, p. 15.

²⁷ For example, MJAFIT!, an Albanian youth-led organization, has used cell phones quite effectively to organize mass citizen mobilizations.

²⁸ “Service-learning means a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience.” American Association for Higher Education (AAHE): Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines (adapted from the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993), cited by Campus Compact (www.campuscompact.org).

²⁹ The role of nongovernmental organizations in programs designed to foster youth engagement is evident in the following statement: “Community-based organizations often occupy positions in their communities that allow them a unique perspective and capacity for guiding youth in community exploration, critical reflection, and the pursuit of community/social change.” Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis in “An Empowering, Transformative Approach to Service,” in Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis (eds.), *Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change*, New York: Peter Lang, Inc., c1999, 2001, p. 91.

B. Golombek, Vice President for Programs at Youth Service America, “While service learning started in a school setting, there is a growing trend for community-based service learning. Service learning differs from traditional community service in that it starts with research and preparation (understanding homelessness, examining the demographics on homelessness, discussing the structural reasons for homelessness, etc.) then moves to planning and implementing a service project, and then it always involves evaluating (reflecting) during and after the project in terms of community impact and the impact on the volunteers themselves.”³⁰

In keeping with the activist definition of youth engagement outlined above, Jeff Claus and Curtis Ogden have suggested that there is a need “to move beyond conventional notions of service learning to a broader vision that focuses on just and sustainable community development achieved through reflection and democratic action.”³¹ In this context, they say, service learning is “an informed effort to develop skills fundamental to the democratic pursuit of social change.”³² Key to this process is the empowerment of youth and the development of the critical thinking skills needed to identify the root causes of social concerns rather than just the symptoms.³³

Not surprisingly, interest in service learning is growing rapidly in many developing countries.³⁴ Faced with daunting social problems and large numbers of unemployed and underemployed young people, governments and



³⁰ E-mail to Cathryn L. Thorup, March 23, 2005.

³¹ Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis in “Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change: An Introduction,” in Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis (eds.), *Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change*, New York: Peter Lang, Inc., c1999, 2001, p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³ “When service-learning is done effectively, a simple volunteer project can be a catalyst for change in a community.” YMCA *Civic Engagement Guide: Strategies and Tools for Increasing Civic Engagement*, National Council of Young Men’s Christian Associations of the United States of America, c2004, p. 4.

³⁴ As New Horizon’s (Romania) Program Director and Research Specialist points out, “Service learning gives [young people] the feeling that they have been part of something that will make a difference in the world and is focused on helping others in the community. Service learning develops concern, care for others, tolerance, respect, compassion, fairness and integrity. In this way community service learning has the potential to assist in reviving an apathetic citizenry. Service learning is seen as an effective and needed means for improving young people’s values and behavior and for empowering them to develop self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as to participate as valued contributors to their communities.” Certan, Diane. “Service Learning as a Tool for Social Capital Development,” *op. cit.*, p. 3.

nongovernmental organizations in many of these countries have developed mandatory national service programs³⁵ for youth and/or engaged youth in informal community service projects. As interest in youth engagement has grown, program managers in the Balkans and elsewhere have turned to community service and service learning as tools to foster connections between young people and their communities and to promote community development. Many, if not most, of these programs are offered through nongovernmental



organizations. Some of the programs could be considered service learning, while others would be more appropriately classified as community service. In differentiating between the two, James C. Kielsmeier, President and CEO of the U.S.-based National Youth Leadership Council, stresses that service learning includes the presence of an “intentional link between service and personal development outcomes related to social development and civic responsibility.”³⁶

For purposes of this study, a broad definition of service learning will be employed, encompassing both school-based and NGO-based service learning programs.³⁷ To qualify as service learning under this definition, the program must pursue structured learning objectives, whether that process takes place within a school setting or within the confines of local nongovernmental

³⁵ For a history of the evolution of national youth service and service learning, see Eberly, Donald, J. “National Youth Service as an Instrument of Peace and Reconciliation,” presented at the International Association for National Youth Service, 17th IAVE World Conference, Seoul, Korea, November 2002, p. 14.

³⁶ E-mail to Cathryn L. Thorup, March 23, 2005.

³⁷ The following definition would apply: “Service-learning: A philosophy, pedagogy, and model for community development that integrates community service with intentional academic or personal development goals to enhance cognitive and social development, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” Kielsmeier, James C. (et. al.) *G2G: Growing to Greatness 2004*, op. cit., p. 89.

organizations. This systematic learning component is what sets service learning apart from community service, regardless of its setting.³⁸

This broader definition ensures the relevance of the concept to settings such as the Balkans, where conditions in the school system may not lend themselves to the development of youth engagement programs or where out-of-school youth could derive substantial benefit from taking part in a rigorous program of community action. Despite the emphasis on education in the Balkans, there are significant numbers of out-of-school youth. In many parts of the region, an aging infrastructure, outdated textbooks, authoritarian teaching styles, and budgetary constraints contribute to the substantial numbers of young people who have either dropped out of school or who have graduated, but are unable to find employment. Estimated youth unemployment is 35 percent, which is 2.5 times higher than the rate for the European Union.³⁹ While the percentages vary from one country to another, the numbers of out-of-school youth are high throughout the region. (For additional information on the numbers of out-of-school youth in the Balkans, see Appendix C.)

The value of connecting youth to their communities can be seen in the description that Claus and Ogden provide of the impact of service learning:

“It can provide young people with an opportunity to learn about and address significant real world issues in responsible ways, and it can contribute to the development of an improved sense of community, both among the youth involved and within the communities served. Service experience, when set in a framework of substantive reflection, can also motivate and empower young people to think critically about their world and to act on it with a growing sense of purpose, agency, and optimism. In this way, service learning promises constructive youth development, as it contributes to a clearer sense of identity, self-worth, efficacy, and belonging, and it can motivate and prepare young people to work for valuable social change. In the process, it has the potential to serve as a strong antidote to the disconnectedness so often associated with adolescence in the postmodern world.”⁴⁰

A Propitious Setting: Unique Needs and Opportunities

Engaging youth in expanding their skills and addressing the needs of their communities is a valuable objective anywhere in the world, in both developed and developing countries. In the Balkans, it is a pursuit that is

In many parts of the region, an aging infrastructure, outdated textbooks, authoritarian teaching styles, and budgetary constraints contribute to the substantial numbers of young people who have either dropped out of school or who have graduated, but are unable to find employment.

³⁸ A structured learning approach to service learning, “begins with student-derived interests and perspectives; proceeds with dialogue, research, and critical thought; and leads to social action and ongoing reflection.” Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis in “An Empowering, Transformative Approach to Service,” op. cit., p. 73.

³⁹ “Balkan Regional Program for Youth Entrepreneurship and Engagement,” op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁰ Claus, Jeff and Ogden, Curtis in “*Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change: An Introduction*,” op. cit. p. 1.

essential to the well-being of the region. Simply put, youth are critical to local, national, and regional efforts to mitigate conflict, expand economic and social opportunities, and advance democratic reform. By the same token, youth engagement encourages young people to root themselves more firmly in the region and helps to attenuate youth flight. Youth engagement helps to make the home pastures greener and underscores the opportunities available to youth who have the skills and the drive to contribute.

Programs designed to foster youth engagement also develop skills and provide experience directly relevant to the job market.

As already mentioned, the region suffers from high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment,⁴¹ which in turn contributes to the large numbers of out-of-school youth. Programs designed to foster youth engagement also develop skills and provide experience directly relevant to the job market. For this reason, youth engagement programs are of particular value in the region and must take both in-school and out-of-school populations into account. Finally, youth engagement programs are particularly germane to the Balkans because these programs help to build a camaraderie that cuts across ethnic, religious, and national divides.

Contributing to Personal Development and Social Transformation

Engaging youth in the life of their communities can produce benefits in two distinct but related areas: personal development and social transformation. Some of the documented outcomes produced include: increased awareness of the needs of others; raised levels of personal and social responsibility; improvements in the way in which adults in the community view youth; expanded willingness on the part of young people to be actively engaged in their communities; creation of the rich and dense networks of cross-cutting connections with the broader community that help to build social capital; and, the development of bonds of trust and friendship among youth of different backgrounds.⁴² All of these elements will help to contribute to societal resilience in a region better known for fragility and fragmentation. In addition, programs such as these help demonstrate to youth that they are capable of having a meaningful impact on their communities, that change is possible, and that the region holds real opportunities for those willing to get involved.

⁴¹ For an analysis of youth employment in the Balkans, see Thorup, Cathryn L. *What Works in Youth Employment in the Balkans*, "What Works" Series, Baltimore, Maryland: International Youth Foundation, c2004, p. 75.

⁴² Eberly, Don. op. cit., pp. 10, 12. For data on the impact of volunteering among youth, see the results of the recently concluded 5-year study of the U.S.-based AmeriCorps program. "After their service ended, AmeriCorps members showed an increase in their 'level of engagement' and participation in community activities; the control group showed little or no change." Jayson, Sharon. "Building on Volunteerism: Young People Increasingly are Giving of Themselves," *USA Today*, December 9, 2004, p. 10D.

The programs examined here are dedicated to improving the lives of the young people with whom they work, helping them to develop new skills and opening new opportunities to them. Together, these 16 programs are also making important contributions to efforts to transform the region by harnessing the energy and talents of youth to address critical social problems locally and by utilizing networking and advocacy to effect policy change at the national and international levels.



Youth Engagement: Program Profiles

The following profiles provide an overview of the depth and range of programming in the area of youth engagement in the Balkans. Each program approaches the task differently, tailoring its work to the unique characteristics and needs of the local youth population.

Albania

Balkans YouthLink–Albania (BYL-A), Tirana

Imagine a highly diverse group of fifty high school students, sequestered for a ten-day, experiential exercise in which they immerse themselves in the nuances of governing a mythical country. Each day presents a new set of challenges and stretches participants to not only work together, but to address a series of moral and ethical dilemmas designed to bring into question the very foundation of their belief systems. By the time participants conclude the exercise, they will have acquired key leadership skills in areas such as effective communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution. They will have learned the importance of civic participation and how to lead positive change in their communities. Most importantly, they will have expanded their knowledge of democratic principles and what it means to exercise moral leadership in a complex, fast-changing world.

Since 2000, more than 150 talented youth from throughout the Balkan region have participated in this unique summer camp experience known as the Balkans YouthLink Leadership Institute (YLLI). As word has spread about the camp, its popularity has soared, with the Institute now able to accept only one in ten applicants. While developed to meet the needs of youth in the Balkans, young people from as far away as Ghana have expressed interest in participating in the program, which is managed exclusively by young people under the age of 26.

The Institute is a program of Balkans YouthLink–Albania (BYL-A), a youth-led NGO based in Tirana. First launched in 1999 in response to the Kosovo crisis, its founders were a group of university students from the region who were studying in the United States.⁴³ Together, they brainstormed ideas for how they might support their peers back home in efforts to secure a lasting peace in the region. Toward that end, BYL-A works to stimulate youth

Each day presents a new set of challenges and stretches participants to not only work together, but to address a series of moral and ethical dilemmas designed to bring into question the very foundation of their belief systems.

⁴³ Initially established in the U.S. as Balkans YouthLink, the organization's activities are now managed and carried out through Balkans YouthLink–Albania, a registered NGO in Albania. Balkans YouthLink remains a registered 501(c)3 organization in the U.S. and operates primarily as a fundraising entity. In addition to the Leadership Institute, Balkans YouthLink–Albania also operates MJAFIT!, a youth-led movement for social change in Albania that conducts civic engagement and awareness-raising campaigns. See: www.mjafit.org

activism and engagement, while promoting respect for human rights and democratic change.

Says Endri Fuga, BYL-A's Executive Director, "As our work has already shown, given appropriate training and ample opportunity, young leaders are powerful agents of change... By providing tomorrow's Balkan leaders with the skills they need to promote tolerance, democracy, and civic participation, we help make inroads to peace and stability in the region."⁴⁴

Building the Skills and Understanding of Young Leaders

For five consecutive summers, BYL-A has hosted the Leadership Institute, which works to equip high school students, ages 16 to 19, with the skills and attitudes to serve as leaders in their communities. To date, the Institute has focused its efforts on young people from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. In the Spring of 2005, the Leadership Institute launched a new version of the program adapted to meet the needs of college students, ages 19 to 24.

The YLLI model was designed by BYL-A's founders – and several university professors in the United States who served as advisors – to respond to youth leadership needs in the region in a creative and engaging way. More than a decade of ethnic tension and armed conflict had contributed to a decline in civic culture and fueled widespread apathy among the region's youth. In shaping the Institute's curriculum, its developers recognized that even the most talented and committed youth in the region would need help in overcoming the legacy of the past and deeply ingrained stereotypes and misperceptions. Says Fuga, "Youth in the Balkans need to shed a sense of inferiority as victims and to unite with other like-minded youth to overcome the great challenges that confront them."

Toward that end, the Institute immerses young people in a completely new environment where hidden biases and unproductive attitudes can be surfaced and new ways of thinking and viewing the world can emerge. Participants develop concrete leadership skills in areas such as active listening, critical thinking, public speaking, negotiation, and advocacy, while learning about the values of inclusiveness, respect for others, and consensus-building. As Fuga explains, the program creates "an environment that challenges young leaders to probe the very core of their knowledge, belief systems, and political formation, and educates them to be able to exercise moral leadership in democratic societies."

⁴⁴ Balkans YouthLink–Albania program questionnaire.

In shaping the Institute's curriculum, its developers recognized that even the most talented and committed youth in the region would need help in overcoming the legacy of the past and deeply ingrained stereotypes and misperceptions.

How It Works

To be truly effective and relevant to regional needs, the Institute strives for ethnic and geographic diversity among its participants. The program is advertised through NGO networks, schools, and media outlets throughout the region to attract a diverse pool of applicants. Application forms are made available on line at <http://www.mjft.org/ylli>. Following an initial screening process, a portion of the applicants proceeds to the next level: a personal interview. The intensive review process is designed to ensure that participants share a strong commitment to working across cultural and ethnic boundaries and that they possess solid English language skills. Using English as the language of instruction and dialogue at the Institute facilitates the delivery of content, while breaking down language barriers among participants.



A typical Institute “class” includes a total of fifty⁴⁵ participants. While the first two Institutes were held in Kosovo, in recent years the camp has taken place in Albania, since most young people in the region can travel there without a visa. When participants first arrive, those with similar backgrounds tend to stick together, Fuga explains, adding that built into the curriculum are a number of ice-breakers and warm-up exercises designed to break down barriers and encourage teamwork. He points out that by the end of the ten days, earlier divisions cease to exist.

The Institute achieves this collegial atmosphere among participants by engaging them as active citizens of a fictional country: Metavia. Translated from Italian, Metavia means the “middle way” and signifies the importance of identifying a middle ground among opposing viewpoints. After being briefed on the nature of their newly formed country (its demographics, languages spoken, political divisions, religious orientation, etc.) participants engage in a series of exercises divided into five modules: Public Debate, Elections and Government, Law in Action, Media, and Civic Activism.

Content is delivered through a combination of academic instruction and interactive workshops. Instructors include BYL-A staff, academics, journalists,

⁴⁵ In the early years of the program, the average camp size was smaller.

and prominent activists in the region. Throughout the ten-day program, the Institute's skilled facilitators inject a series of surprises into the proceedings that force participants to think creatively, analyze choices, make tough ethical decisions, and work together in teams.

During the Public Debate module, for example, participants spend two days developing their debating skills, including the ability to think critically and construct well thought out arguments. Past debates have focused on whether or not it is the duty of every citizen to participate in an election. The emphasis placed in the curriculum on developing one's debating skills is designed to encourage participants to think deeply about a given issue and consider opposing viewpoints.



During the Elections and Government module, students are divided into three political parties – Conservative, Liberal, and Anarchist. Members of each group are responsible for drafting their party's platform, especially with regard to controversial issues, such as abortion, the legalization of drugs, and the use of civil disobedience to achieve political and social objectives. Participants then advocate their party platforms through developing communication materials, creating campaigns, and holding public rallies. The module culminates with the holding of an election that includes a number of surprises. Through the process, young people learn about the causes and potential solutions to urgent social issues in their communities.

The Law in Action module centers around a mock trial, during which participants assume a variety of roles, including prosecutor, defense lawyer, judge, witness, and members of the jury. The exercise focuses on citizens' rights and the use of the rule of law in resolving disputes.

During the Media module, participants learn from experienced journalists how to research issues, conduct interviews, and draft articles. The module concludes with the production of a 16-page newspaper, the *Metavia Herald*, which summarizes the legislative battles, elections, and other events to have taken place over the course of the camp.

Finally, a module on Civic Activism engages participants in discussions about challenges in their communities and how they plan to use the skills they have gained to contribute to positive change upon their return home. Each receives training in how to plan and manage a project, raise funds, and mobilize volunteers. “We encourage them to start up things and tell them we’re there to help,” says Fuga.

Putting Knowledge into Practice

Upon completion of the Institute, participants are urged to put what they have learned into practice. Several months after the program ends, Institute staff follow up with graduates to see how they are doing and to offer advice. To date, approximately 70 percent of the Institute’s 150 graduates have gone on to start a debate club, mock trial tournament, or newspaper in their high schools.

In recent years, YLLI has received increasing recognition from both the donor community and political leaders. In 2002, the President of Albania addressed participants at the Institute’s closing ceremony, while the ambassadors of several European countries have openly praised the Institute’s approach. In recent years, YLLI has received support from various embassies in Albania and Kosovo, the Open Society Institute-Kosovo, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, Save the Children, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), among other donors.

While confident of YLLI’s approach, the program is not without its challenges, explains Fuga, underscoring the logistical hurdles involved in facilitating travel within the region, the ethnic tensions that persist, and the program’s limitations in terms of how many youth it can accommodate versus the number who seek to participate. Asked if he believes the model can be replicated in other countries and regions of the world, Fuga is hopeful, citing increased interest in the approach both regionally and internationally.

Through the process, young people learn about the causes and potential solutions to urgent social issues in their communities.

Albania

Young Artists of Stage Association (SHARS), Tirana

“If you light a passion for the theater, you can change the lives of youth... Even the most reckless kids,” says Gjergji Trola, Chairman of the Young Artists of Stage Association (SHARS). Launched in 2000, SHARS introduced street theater in Albania as a way to promote social engagement. Supported by the Open Society Foundation of Albania, UNICEF, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), and BCYF, SHARS uses street theater to connect with Albanian youth and raise their awareness about critical social issues. These include inter-ethnic peace, tolerance, drugs, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, land mines, and gender equality.



NGOs first appeared in Albania in the early 1990s, following the fall of the communist regime. Since that time, the number of NGOs focused on youth issues has expanded significantly. According to Trola, youth NGOs gained significant visibility during the civil unrest that occurred in 1997 and the Kosovo crisis in 1999. Supported in large measure by highly dedicated volunteers, these organizations were extremely effective in providing psychological counseling, offering recreational opportunities for youth, and working with local government to coordinate humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, many of these organizations lacked technical skills in the

areas of planning and management (particularly financial) and fundraising.⁴⁶ Capacity building needs among these youth NGOs remain significant today.

The SHARS program is run primarily by volunteers dedicated to building life skills among youth, including teamwork and effective communication. It also teaches youth about the critical issues confronting their communities, offering them the opportunity to address these issues in collaboration with their peers and the community at large. According to Trola, youth are the leaders of social transformation in Albania, always pushing to hasten the speed of change.⁴⁷

Using Theatre to Educate Audiences and Actors

SHARS staff consider street theater, also known as “Physical Theater,”⁴⁸ to be the most effective tool available to directly communicate critical social messages to Albanian youth. Using only visual communication, it is a type of theater to which the public can easily relate. Utilizing peer-to-peer learning, youth seek to convey social messages through their performances. The “actors” are primarily, though not exclusively, high school students, ages 14 to 18.⁴⁹ In Elbasan and Saranda, for example, homeless youth have taken part in the performances.⁵⁰ The program makes it possible for out-of-school youth to interact and build friendships with those who are attending school. In some cases, these relationships serve as an incentive for out-of-school youth to return to the classroom. One of the project participants, for example, decided to return to school in order to study acting.

SHARS staff—those based in Tirana and those who work in various branches of the organization in other parts of the country—work closely with the Ministry of Education and with public officials responsible for high schools and youth centers in Albania. Staff contact education authorities in each region to secure permission for the theater directors to work at schools in the area. The theme of the performance is discussed in advance with these local officials. Once authorization is received at the regional level, SHARS works with authorities in the high schools where the performances will take place. As part of its BCYF grant, SHARS has trained approximately 140 high school students in ten high schools in five towns and cities. Another 6,000 youth have attended the performances and learned about social issues of particular relevance to each venue.

SHARS staff consider street theater to be the most effective tool available to directly communicate critical social messages to Albanian youth.

⁴⁶ SHARS program questionnaire.

⁴⁷ E-mail from Gjergji Trola to the authors, February 1, 2005.

⁴⁸ “Physical theater” refers to acting that is expressed primarily through body movements.

⁴⁹ Although street theater can be performed anywhere, SHARS decided to concentrate on the school system in the belief that the required daily attendance would increase the likelihood of sustained participation in the program on the part of the students.

⁵⁰ Gjergji Trola points out that out-of-school youth operate on an equal footing with those who are students.

The Training

Over a period of three days, students are chosen to take part in the performance based on their prior theater experience; their talent, drive, and passion for the project; and, their willingness to work. Following their selection, the youth receive four days of training in street theater. The training has two objectives: to prepare the students to put on a performance and to lay the groundwork for future theater activities in the school. The first phase of the training focuses on a basic introduction to street theater and offers opportunities for staff to identify the most talented young actors. The second phase of the training consists of individual and group exercises that help students to develop their improvisational skills. All of the students attend the performance at the school and enjoy a special banquet prepared especially for this event.⁵¹

In 1998, SHARS worked in a very dangerous area of the country on a production entitled, "Don't Let Guns Kill Our Dreams." One of the students who attended the production turned in his gun as a result of witnessing the performance.

Topics, ranging from violence prevention to health awareness, are selected in close cooperation with youth, while also reflecting donor interest and differing priorities from one community to the next. Once the topic is selected, the young people try to link the issue to an actual event with which the audience may be familiar. Frequently these are issues on which they have opinions, but about which they may lack knowledge. They may be unfamiliar with the origins and/or magnitude of the problem or how to cope with it. In 1998, SHARS worked in a very dangerous area of the country on a production entitled, "Don't Let Guns Kill Our Dreams." One of the students who attended the production turned in his gun as a result of witnessing the performance. In 1999, SHARS collaborated with UNICEF to provide training to Kosovar refugees in Albania on how to identify land mines. While youth are the target audience, there is an expectation that the messages they absorb will be retransmitted to their family and friends after the show. In addition, approximately 20 to 25 percent of the audience at the performances is made up of parents and other adults.⁵²

Remaining Flexible and Adaptable

The simplicity of the model is an advantage. Pantomime⁵³ ("wordless, body-talk"⁵⁴) is something that youth can learn easily and performances can be prepared in a short period of time. In addition, the approach is highly versatile. The performance can easily be moved from the stage of a school to

⁵¹ In most cases, the performance takes place in the school. Some shows, however, have been performed at a local theater or on the stage of a youth center.

⁵² E-mail correspondence from Gjergji Trola to the authors, February 8, 2005.

⁵³ In pantomime, performers act "as if" other objects and actors are sharing the stage with them. These fictional entities do not actually exist, but the performers behave as if everyone can see them. Pantomime is a key component of "physical theater."

⁵⁴ SHARS program questionnaire.

the street. It is not dependent upon any specific type of space or geographic setting. Improvisation is the core element of street theater, making it possible for the performers to adapt to changing circumstances. Performed without words, the message of the production is easily accessible to all. For these reasons, this is an approach that is easily transferable from one country to another within the Balkans, from one ethnic group to another, from one nationality to another, and from one religious group to another. It is ideal, as well, for mixed audiences that cut across some or all of the social divides within the region.



One of the challenges SHARS staff face lies in adapting the program to different cultures and traditions in the country. The youth who take part come from different social backgrounds, making it difficult for some youth—particularly those from small towns in Albania—to publicly discuss topics such as sex education, HIV/AIDS, and prostitution. Teachers and SHARS trainers are often called on to address the concerns of the parents of some of the participants, particularly the young women, about program activities that typically take place after school. Once the program has been explained, however, parents are generally supportive.

Peer-to-peer learning is critical to the success of the project. According to staff, “Youth trust other youth and learn from them more easily.” In addition,

relationships among the trainers and the young actors are less vertical than the traditional power relationship between teacher and student. Trola emphasizes that the approach is particularly effective with troubled youth. “I don’t want the perfect kids... art is not mathematics, you need a rebel personality.”



SHARS staff also underscore the importance of the skills and dedication exhibited by the youth who participate. According to Trola, “As important as the training and years of experience that SHARS staff bring to this program is, this would never work without the talent and passion of the Albanian youth who participate.”

Participation in the program helps youth to become better informed about issues they confront on a daily basis and raises community awareness about these same issues. For some, it is the beginning of a longer-term social commitment. Ledio Topalli, a former program participant who currently works as a trainer for SHARS, says, “I wanted to realize my dream to be an actor... so initially the motivation was personal. Then I started to do volunteer work through this program and it changed me. First, I helped the Kosovar refugees. Now I feel I have an obligation to help others.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Group interview.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Democracy Center Nove Nade (“New Hopes”), Bihac

Founded in 1997, just two years after a bloody civil war ravaged much of what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Demokratski Centar Nove Nade (Democracy Center “New Hopes”) adopted the image of a turtle as its logo. Asked why this sluggish reptile was used to symbolize the Center’s activities, Program Manager Samir Halilović, explains that turtles, while slow, “live long and get to their destination.” The turtle symbol serves as a reminder that “the democracy-building process too is slow,” he says, and requires patience and perseverance.

Over the past seven years, the Center, located in the city of Bihac in northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina, has lived up to its logo, making steady, deliberate progress in educating the region’s young people about their role in building a viable democracy. Through its comprehensive approach—reaching out not only to young people but also to government officials and the public at large—the Center has steadfastly contributed to a new vision of what is possible in this formerly war-torn region.

By focusing its efforts on empowering youth to make a difference in their communities, the Center seeks to foster the development of a new generation of young, committed, forward-thinking community leaders. “Young people are the future of this region and if they are not raised and educated differently than their parents, history will repeat itself,” warns Almedina Grozdanić, the Center’s Project Coordinator. Grozdanić likens her work in promoting youth engagement to building a house—brick by brick. Every training session, workshop, voter drive, and outreach activity conducted by the Center influences young lives in subtle and sometimes profound ways. “No one should expect big results overnight,” says Grozdanić, “but eventually the house will be finished.”

“Young people are the future of this region and if they are not raised and educated differently than their parents, history will repeat itself.”

Overcoming the Legacy of the Past

For more than three years, from 1992 to 1995, Bihac was the scene of ongoing fighting between Bosnian Serbs, on one side, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Bosnian Croat forces on the other side—each seeking control of the area. “You couldn’t go anywhere,” recalls Grozdanić. “We didn’t have food or electricity much of the time.” Once a prominent industrial town, most of city’s factories and infrastructure were destroyed.

While there are visible signs that the city is slowly coming back to life, its rural surroundings remain isolated and economically depressed. Currently, nearly half of the region's 400,000 inhabitants are without jobs. Many are young people. With little to hope for, a significant percentage of youth are leaving in search of opportunity in larger cities or abroad.

Those that do stay have limited recreational or cultural opportunities. Youth NGOs are few and government resources scarce when it comes to addressing young people's needs. As a result, more and more youth have grown apathetic and are prone to alcohol and drug abuse, according to Grozdanić, citing the recent deaths of several local teenagers who used tainted drugs.



With very few youth-serving organizations active in the area, the Center strives to fill a void in services for young people, engaging youth themselves in efforts to meet their own needs. In recent years, participants have promoted concerts and art exhibitions, organized summer camps, and launched a reproductive health awareness initiative in schools. “We’re trying to educate young people to get more involved,” Grozdanić explains. “Most of them don’t know about the possibilities of a democratic society, how political parties work, about NGOs, and youth politics.”

Housed in the basement of the newly-constructed Krajina shopping complex, itself a symbol of revitalization in Bihać, the Center serves as a refuge and symbol of hope for local youth looking for meaningful ways to participate in their community. Its peach-colored walls are covered with posters advertising summer workcamps⁵⁶ and various youth-led campaigns. A reading room houses reports from international organizations and NGOs, along with “how to” manuals on volunteering, fundraising, and developing and managing an NGO.

⁵⁶ “A workcamp is a voluntary coming together of people to accomplish a task, usually involving construction or renovation.” “Quaker Workcamps International,” <http://qwi.quaker.org/>.

The space is being donated by the developer of the Krajina Center, who saw a television broadcast devoted to the Democracy Center's efforts to create a local community center for youth and donated the space as a gesture of support. "Business should help young people as much as they can," says Krajina Center Manager Rifat Tarić. "We're tired of old people in politics. We'd like to help young people assert themselves."

While this is the first contribution the Democracy Center has received from the business community, business leaders attend its events and are slowly coming to recognize the value of investing in young people's abilities as leaders with valuable energy and ideas. To date, the Center has relied principally on support from international organizations, including its founding donor, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Open Society Foundation, CARE, the International Rescue Committee, and BCYF, among others.

The Super Nova Project

A key initiative of the Center is the Super Nova Project, which targets young people living in isolated rural communities within a fifty-mile radius of Bihać. In developing a name for the project, Center staff again seized upon a symbol with profound meaning. "A super nova represents new life," says Halilović. "When one star explodes, millions of new stars are created. Our goal was to focus the country's attention on the needs of thousands of young people living in forgotten rural areas." Between 2001 and 2004, the Center has carried out three consecutive Super Nova projects.

During 2004, Super Nova 3 engaged nearly 500 rural youth, ages 15 to 24, in a range of activities, including:

- More than 25 educational workshops, seminars, and debates. Through such events, young people gained a greater understanding of their rights and their roles within a democracy, and developed skills such as fundraising, proposal writing, and project management.
- Ten roundtable discussions with public officials and business leaders on issues such as rural educational needs and employment challenges.
- Production of communications materials.
- Youth exchanges and networking with other NGOs in the region.
- Media outreach emphasizing the needs of rural youth.

"When one star explodes, millions of new stars are created. Our goal was to focus the country's attention on the needs of thousands of young people living in forgotten rural areas."

Among the recommendations put forth at the meeting were replacing current military service requirements with programs stressing civic engagement among youth, and the importance of integrating youth perspectives into public policy-making.

In one workshop entitled, “The Role of Youth in the Local Community,” 15 youth explored the needs of the region’s young people and the existing NGO environment. Participants were asked whether they were currently involved in a youth organization and their level of interest in local politics. Presentations focused on how young people can get more involved in community affairs – from voting to creating and serving on local youth councils.

In a subsequent roundtable discussion, youth met with NGO leaders, a representative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and reporters to discuss current deficits in rural education. Among the recommendations put forth at the meeting were replacing current military service requirements with programs stressing civic engagement among youth, and the importance of integrating youth perspectives into public policy-making.

One of the Center’s most visible campaigns under the Super Nova 3 project was an effort to reclaim the former Youth Culture House, which had been transformed into an arcade under the current government. Posters proclaiming “Vratite Nam Dom USAOJ-a” (“Give us back the Youth Culture House”) were put up in prominent places around the city, with youth volunteers succeeding in convincing over 5,300 local citizens to sign a petition that was submitted to local government officials. To mobilize public support, the Center developed a media outreach strategy to make sure the issue was covered in local broadcast and print outlets. While the Center has yet to win the battle for the Youth Culture House, the process of rallying youth and adults around a common vision has been worth the effort in itself, comments Halilović.

Engaging Youth as Part of the Program

The Center was founded on a philosophy of active youth participation. Young people are not only beneficiaries of programs, but are actively involved in identifying needs, proposing projects, and carrying them out. Young people participate in each of the organization’s formal structures, including its Assembly, Board of Directors, and Executive Team. Similarly, they implement the organization’s projects.

Twenty-one-year-old Haris Karabegović, for example, first became involved in the Center’s activities as a beneficiary in 1998. Now, he manages the Center’s reproductive health project with funding from the United Nations Population Fund. Among his responsibilities are individual youth counseling and the training of peer educators who offer reproductive health lessons

in secondary schools. While two years ago, it was hard to find volunteers to get involved in the program, now more young people are interested in participating, says Karabegović.

Building a Positive Enabling Environment: Networking and Advocacy

While the Center has steadfastly expanded its reach and the visibility of its efforts over time, several obstacles remain. Among these has been getting government officials, business leaders, and other key influencers to attend its regularly scheduled roundtable meetings and events. While occasionally events will attract senior officials such as the region's Minister of Agriculture, more often than not such invitations go unanswered or rejected. Another key challenge is deciding when it is best to work within the system and when more radical activity is warranted. In the case of the campaign to recover the Youth Culture House, mobilizing the public to take a stand was the most prudent course of action, says Halilović.



The Center has taken a number of steps to strengthen its position and to help to create an enabling environment conducive to youth development.

- From its beginnings, the Center has benefited from the support of major international funding agencies (e.g., OSCE, the Open Society Foundation). Having the support of such prominent institutions gave an early boost to its credibility, which it has continued to nurture by maintaining a successful

track record and developing positive relationships with diverse sectors of society. Similarly, its Board is made up of seven prominent, well-respected citizens.

- The Center serves as a resource for other youth NGOs throughout the region and is a member of regional and national NGO networks. It has a positive record of cooperation with regional and national Ministries and makes a point of engaging public sector leaders in special events and discussion forums.
- Through its research studies and public forums, the Center has increased awareness of the needs of rural youth and potential solutions (e.g., promoting greater government investment in small business development, particularly related to agriculture). In making the case to government for investing in rural youth, the Center is careful to advocate for win-win solutions, for example, improving services for rural youth to stem the growing tide of youth emigration. “If the government invested more resources in young people, we’d have more young people getting involved in public life and more young entrepreneurs contributing to local development,” says Halilović.



- In addition to offering its space to other local NGOs for press briefings, the Center carefully plans its media outreach so as to sensitize the local community to the needs of young people and the role of the region’s younger citizens in building a strong democracy.

In the fall of 2004, the Center was given one more reason to celebrate its efforts. In October of that year, the citizens of Bihać elected a 27-year-old Mayor, whose positions on many issues departed dramatically from those of the political party that had dominated local politics for close to a decade.

According to Center staff, the Mayor won the race, in large part, due to its “get out the vote” efforts among younger voters and increased awareness among the population at large of the political system and their role in building a healthy democracy.

Youth Profile: Šeherzada Omercehajić

Twenty-four-year-old Šeherzada Omercehajić first became involved in the Center’s activities in 1998. Šeherzada lives in the rural community of Otoka, which she describes as a small town with two buildings, four coffee shops, and 4,500 residents, most of whom are struggling to make a living through small-scale farming.

With encouragement and assistance from the Center’s office in Otoka, Šeherzada established an informal youth group, which meets regularly in the Center’s offices and has received training in areas such as volunteerism, fundraising, and project planning. Among the projects launched by the group have been a youth art exhibition, a neighborhood clean up, and an outdoor concert.

Such activities not only engage local youth, but also build community pride, explains Šeherzada. The popularity of the art exhibit in Otoka inspired participating youth to replicate the idea in Bihac. Following the exhibition, the artwork was auctioned. Selling their artwork had a lasting impact on members of the group, says Šeherzada. “Afterward, they realized they could do something.”

Šerhazada, who holds a college degree, is currently unemployed; yet her involvement in the Center’s activities is deeply satisfying. “[Through the Center] you gain experience that is very useful,” she says, and benefit “from knowing you’re doing something for yourself and your society.”



Bosnia-Herzegovina

Zemlja Dece, Tuzla

When asked if youth engagement has been an integral part of Zemlja Dece’s work since its founding in 1995, the staff responds “no.” Rather, the Center was created to meet the urgent needs of marginalized and displaced children in the city of Tuzla during the post-war period in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, a decade after it was created, Zemlja Dece has succeeded in nurturing the leadership potential of a growing number of area youth, while

creating an environment within the city in which young people's talents and contributions are recognized and valued.

While Zemlja Dece remains true to its original mission of “informing society about children's psychosocial problems and providing organized assistance to children in need,” its focus expanded, by necessity, to include the needs of teenagers. Its Teenage Telex Center offers psychosocial support to teenagers in the city “through organizing educational, counseling, sports, and cultural activities.”



According to Telex Center Coordinator Halida Hasanagić, the Center is working to promote the role of youth in the region, “by motivating young people to form youth groups, through supporting their initiatives, giving them trust, including them in decision making, and nurturing their self-respect.”

Zemlja Dece's efforts to promote youth engagement and leadership development evolved naturally from its core activities. Fostering the development of young leaders when many of the City's youth were struggling to survive would have been unrealistic, according to Center staff; yet through carefully nurturing young people's self-confidence and abilities, the Center now works to facilitate their active involvement in the community. Zemlja Dece's slow progression into an organization with a parallel focus on youth engagement is not uncommon, as can be seen in other examples included in this publication, such as the Cultural Center DamaD in Serbia.

Responding to the Needs of Young People in a Post-war Environment

In 1995, when Zemlja Dece was first established by the Swiss NGO Terre des Hommes – Lausanne, Tuzla was reeling from the aftershocks of the Bosnian war for independence. Most of the population was traumatized by the brutal and lengthy conflict. The city teemed with refugees; many families had lost relatives; the economy was in ruins; and educational, health, and social systems were nearly nonexistent. At the time, the Center’s goal was to address the urgent needs of the city’s growing population of street children – to get them off the street and provide them with constructive ways of spending their free time.

Gradually, as the post-war situation began to improve, the Center expanded its activities to meet a new set of challenges, including drug and alcohol abuse, organized prostitution, and pressures at home as youth struggled in their relations with parents facing harsh economic and social realities.

To help young people cope with such challenges, the Center expanded its youth programming and now offers a range of services and activities, including music, sports, computer literacy classes, journalism training, video production, health awareness education, and psychological counseling. The needs and aspirations of every young person who participates are evaluated upon entering the program, with those needs carefully factored into the Center’s program offerings and expansion plans. “All activities are based on the needs and demands of beneficiaries,” explains Mirsada Bajramović, Zemlja Dece’s Executive Director.

A Safe Place For Young People To Develop Their Potential

For youth growing up in Tuzla, a city of 165,000, the Telex Center is like a second home. Located in a two-story building on a quiet side street, the atmosphere at the Center is at times chaotic with band practice, dance classes, art workshops, and informal conversations often occurring simultaneously. Currently, the Center has approximately 2,900 registered members, ages 12 to 20, with an average of 70 youth participating in its programs each day.

With few places available in the city for youth to explore their interests and gather in groups, the Center satisfies an important need, enabling youth from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds to interact in a safe, nurturing atmosphere. At the Center, young people feel valued and are supported in pursuing their interests, whether learning how to play a new

With few places available in the city for youth to explore their interests and gather in groups, the Center satisfies an important need, enabling youth from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds to interact in a safe, nurturing atmosphere.

instrument or taking up a new sport. Through engaging in the Center's myriad activities, youth develop essential life skills such as self-confidence, creativity, time management, responsibility, and teamwork. Older youth mentor their younger peers, who in turn, look up to these youth as positive role models. In this atmosphere of trust and understanding, young people come to realize their individual gifts and potential contributions to their community. For some, the support and encouragement they receive at the Center is something they rarely experience at home.

“We recognize the potential of young people and encourage it. Many young people aren’t aware of having this energy and courage inside themselves.”

“We recognize the potential of young people and encourage it,” says Bajramović. “Many young people aren’t aware of having this energy and courage inside themselves.”

After developing valuable skills at the Center, young people often share what they have learned with the broader community, for example, through concerts and art exhibitions. Young participants also contribute to sustaining the Center's activities through the money they raise by selling their art and woodworking, through income from performances, and through magazines and videos they produce using the Center's resources.

Youth also play an active role in program implementation – choosing, creating, and evaluating activities, as well as making recommendations for the future. Similarly, members of the Center's informal Youth Council have an indirect influence on governance issues and decision making.

Building Community Awareness of Young People's Contributions

In an effort to increase public awareness of young people's talents and contributions, the Center launched the “Best Teenager” Awards in 2001. Through the awards, given out annually at a well-attended, highly-publicized event, the Center spotlights the achievements of local youth. In 2004, awards were given out to young people who exhibited exemplary characteristics in the following categories:

- Best student
- Most successful athlete
- Best humanitarian
- Most successful in art and culture
- Best teenager with special needs
- Best male teenager
- Best female teenager

Several months prior to the awards ceremony, a “call for nominations” is distributed to local NGOs, sports clubs, and secondary schools attended by more than 22,000 youth. A 28-person independent commission, comprised of youth, along with local leaders in the arts, education, sports, social, and political fields, reviews the nominations and makes final selections. Young people are also involved in promoting the contest through print publications, posters, and public outreach. Preparations leading up to the final event, as well as the event itself, are covered extensively in the media. The entire process of soliciting nominations and the final announcement of the awards has become a very positive force in the city. “It’s a real celebration, an opportunity for the whole city to celebrate its youth,” says Hasanagić.



Giving Back to the Community

In recent years, the Center has responded to young people’s desires to become more actively involved, both in its own work and in the greater community. “Only lately are kids motivated to play a part,” Bajramović explains, adding that the Center has worked to create an environment conducive to their active involvement. “The Center activates young people. It turns them on,” she says.

With many local Roma children lacking the basic skills they need to succeed in school, Center youth now provide volunteer mentoring to these children through a summer school program. Center staff are hopeful that the

“I’m so happy to be here. It’s the only place around that values what young people do.”

program, developed in partnership with Save the Children UK, will eventually be supported by the local government.

Another volunteer group has recently been formed among those teenagers recognized through the “Best Teenager” awards. The group meets regularly at the Center to plan community projects. To date, they have sponsored an art workshop for street children and organized a concert for youth bands that have yet to perform publicly. The group recently received a grant to assist members in developing their teamwork, communication, and proposal writing skills.

“I’m so happy to be here. It’s the only place around that values what young people do,” says 16-year-old Nela Jahić. In 2004, Nela was named “Best Teenage Girl of the Year” by the Center. Jahić recently volunteered her time to lead a special art class for Rroma children, in which she taught them how to create artwork using sand and paint.

Creating a Supportive Environment

In Zemlja Dece’s case, engaging youth in the wider community resulted from its success in creating a safe, supportive environment in which young people could pursue their interests, work in teams, and learn from one another. Through the experience and confidence gained in helping their peers at the Center, local youth developed a greater sense of connection to their own gifts, as well as to the larger community. To that extent, the Center’s small “campus” can be seen as a microcosm for the greater community. Within its walls, young people develop the self-esteem and leadership skills that a number of them are beginning to apply in the broader community.

Zemlja Dece’s staff underscore the importance of engaging young people early on as partners in designing and carrying out activities. Also important is the critical role that community recognition of young people’s achievements can play in generating a supportive environment where youth engagement efforts may grow. The Center’s “Best Teenager” awards program has fostered a positive image of young people throughout the city. One unexpected outcome of the awards has been a stronger relationship between Zemlja Dece and local government authorities who help sponsor the event.

Looking ahead, Center staff sees young people taking on even greater leadership roles in the community, with one of its alumni having been recently elected as the City’s youngest ever City Counselor.

Youth Profile: Muhamed Mešić

The war had just ended in Bosnia-Herzegovina when Muhamed Mešić first got involved in Zemlja Dece's activities. At the time, he was 11 and Zemlja Dece offered not only a safe place to "hang out" and make friends, but a recreational space where he could exercise his passion for soccer.

Over the years, Muhamed's involvement in the program grew, as did his sense of what was possible in his own life and within his community. "I realized from working with the loving people there that you can realize your dreams," he says, pointing to the nurturing environment created at the Center, in which young people and their ideas are valued and respected.

He also learned the value of friendship, teamwork, and building consensus, skills he put to work in co-founding the Youth of Tuzla, a youth association whose 100-plus members carry out a variety of community-service projects throughout the city. Zemlja Dece continues to support the group's efforts through providing office equipment and logistical assistance.

In 2001, at the age of 17, Muhamed received Zemlja Dece's "Best Teenager Award" in recognition of his academic and civic accomplishments. The real value of the awards is in motivating young people to reach for their best, he says, while showing society what youth are capable of achieving. The Center "is like a motivational machine," he says, helping young people to recognize how talented and important they are.

Now 20, Muhamed busily juggles his responsibilities as a law student and the City of Tuzla's youngest ever City Councilor. While he no longer participates in the Center's activities, he exercises the skills he gained there on a daily basis. "At the Center, I was shown that everyone can contribute, everyone has valuable ideas," he says. "I also learned that everyone should give a helping hand in the community."



Croatia

Volunteer's Centre Zagreb (VCZ), Zagreb

Established in 1998, the Volunteer's Centre Zagreb (VCZ) works to solve community problems and contribute to the development of Croatian citizens, while promoting a spirit of volunteerism. It does so by organizing voluntary summer workcamps within Croatia, and sending Croatian volunteers to workcamps abroad. While open to people of all ages, the vast majority of its volunteers are youth, ages 18 to 30. Over the past six years, VCZ has organized over 55 workcamps, accepted 800 international volunteers, and sent over 500 Croatian youth abroad. In addition to two-week summer workcamps, the Centre offers long-term volunteer opportunities ranging from six months to a year.



The origins of VCZ's approach date back to 1920, when, in the aftermath of World War I, volunteers from former enemy countries rebuilt a village in northeastern France. The experience proved that even within an environment with deeply embedded hostilities, international understanding is possible.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ South East European Youth Network (SEEYN) Handbook, Zagreb: Volunteers Centre Zagreb, c2004, p. 10.

Following World War II, a plethora of voluntary service organizations emerged to help reconstruct Europe, many of which are leaders in the international service movement today.

VCZ was created in response to growing apathy among Croatian youth, many of whom feel powerless to influence their environment.⁵⁸ “Pessimism and lack of interest in participation among Croatian youth is very high,” says Branka Cičak, age 24, a former VCZ volunteer staff member and current Board Member. Young people lack equal access to information on how to get active and “take your life in your own hands,” she adds.

VCZ focuses much of its effort on underdeveloped, rural regions in Croatia that were severely impacted during the Croatian war for independence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Such areas are ethnically mixed and continue to suffer from high rates of unemployment and a lack of social services. “Their inhabitants feel abandoned by the government and its economic development strategies,” explains Cičak. By carrying out volunteer projects in such communities, VCZ works to meet urgent needs, while setting a positive example for the community as a whole of what committed citizens are capable of achieving.

“Pessimism and lack of interest in participation among Croatian youth is very high.”

Service to the Community that is Both Educational and Fun

VCZ’s approach is based on the notion that while engaging in community service activities is serious work, it can also be fun. Young people attend the camps to contribute, to gain valuable experience, to make friends, and to enjoy an adventure. “The camps are an informal and indirect way of teaching young people how to get involved in the development of their local communities,” says Cičak. “They learn from people their own age how to deal with the issues they have, what could be changed, and how important it is to be active.”

Located in a former restaurant on a quiet side street in Zagreb, the Centre is run exclusively by volunteers, the majority of whom are under the age of 25. Its current volunteer staff of ten are responsible for promoting the program nationally and abroad, networking with other international volunteer organizations, reviewing applications, placing volunteers, budgeting, fundraising, and overall program management.

For Cičak and other volunteer staff, the hands-on experience they have gained through the Centre has proven invaluable. “You learn so many things,”

⁵⁸ VCZ Program Questionnaire response.

Through the camps, the youth volunteers develop key life skills, such as responsibility, decision-making, teamwork, and empathy for others.

she says, including presentation and language skills, record-keeping, and financial management. In addition, volunteers gain greater self-confidence and learn how to interact with diverse cultures. “When you compare what we’ve learned to our friends, they have no experience,” she adds.

The summer workcamps typically last for two weeks. Each camp group consists of 15 volunteers and two volunteer leaders, one from VCZ and one from the local community. Volunteers generally pay for their transportation to and from the site with food and lodging provided by the host community or organization. Recent volunteer activities have included producing theater for local communities, offering recreational and cultural opportunities to disadvantaged children, conducting archeological digs, and preserving the environment.

Through the camps, the youth volunteers develop key life skills, such as responsibility, decision making, teamwork, and empathy for others. It is as important to respond to community needs as it is to learn to work together within a diverse community. “Our mission is to promote intercultural learning, and to break down stereotypes and prejudices,” says Katarina Pinjusić, the Centre’s former Vice President. Local communities also benefit from interacting with youth from different countries and witnessing first-hand the volunteers in action.

For Croatian youth volunteering abroad, the experience opens a window to new viewpoints and ways of living, an especially important benefit given the dramatic changes most have experienced in recent years as their country has transitioned to a democracy and free market economy. “We all grew up in a communist society, where it wasn’t possible to study abroad,” explains Cičak, whose commitment to volunteering has grown ever since her first experience in Italy as a teenager. “After returning from a summer workcamp you realize you were isolated. People aren’t aware of what’s going on elsewhere.”

Focus on Leadership Training

Every workcamp leader undergoes a five-day Leadership Training Seminar (LTS) carried out by VCZ and its regional partners from the South East European Youth Network (SEEYN). The training focuses on the qualities of effective leadership, group dynamics, conflict resolution, building relationships within the local community, and overall management of the program. Emphasis is placed on equipping such leaders with the skills needed

to foster a democratic environment within the camps so that all volunteers may participate in decision making. According to the handbook given to all workcamp leaders, “Leaders are not the authorities, the big bosses, mammas, or the incarnations of wisdom. They are simply members of the group who are playing an important role in the existence, productivity, and creativity of the workcamp group.”⁵⁹

Through VCZ, more than 125 young people have been trained to serve as work camp leaders. Many of these youth go on to pursue opportunities in the NGO sector.



Toward Engaging Youth

VCZ credits much of its success to pursuing a model that offers both developmental benefits and enjoyment for participating youth. Also important is engaging members of the local community in carrying out work camp activities. The best way to motivate young people, emphasizes VCZ staff, is with the example set by their peers.

As impressive as operating a completely volunteer-driven organization may seem, it has its challenges. Among them is staff turnover. With most of VCZ’s volunteer staff attending college, they can be pressed for time and generally

⁵⁹ SEEYN Handbook, op. cit., p. 60.

move on after graduating to pursue paying jobs. While much of their learning is on-the-job, they do require training, which can be difficult to accommodate and coordinate.

The Centre has gained valuable experience in working with volunteers. “It’s important to select people who are extremely passionate about the work,” cautions Maja Janković, “...people who are self-starters.” Also important is creating some structure (e.g., approved methods of record keeping) and building in time for staff training. Taking advantage of training opportunities offered by other local NGOs can also be valuable. Perhaps most important is nurturing a positive atmosphere where people like to come and where they feel their voices are listened to and valued. For its volunteer staff, the Centre is like a second home and a place they enjoy “hanging out.”



Critical to VCZ’s success has been its partnerships with local and national NGOs, and those international service organizations with whom it works to facilitate volunteer opportunities nationally and abroad. These include SEEYN and Service Civil International (SCI). Such partnerships, and the networking that results, have helped generate much needed financial support for the program. Among VCZ’s past donors are the Croatian Government Office for NGOs, the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Danish Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, the European Commission, the European Youth Foundation, the Open Society Institute–Croatia, and BCYF.

Asked if the Centre can claim credit for generating a greater volunteer spirit in Croatia, Cičak and other staff offer mixed responses, saying that the type of young people drawn to volunteering tend to be more “altruistic types.” Still, the Centre provides a much-needed service for those seeking to exercise their altruism, while learning from others and their experience.

Youth Profile: Maja Janković

At the age of 18, Maja Janković traveled for two days by bus in the dead of winter from Zagreb to a remote wilderness area in Estonia. Having rarely traveled abroad, Maja had difficulty navigating the connections on her trip. When she finally arrived at her destination, “an eco-village,” Maja spent two weeks working hard – chopping wood, making fires, clearing away old branches, and forging new relationships with her camp mates, some of whom came from as far away as Japan and Korea.

“It definitely left me more open-minded toward new cultures,” says Maja, now 24, and a long-term coordinator at VCZ. For the past several years, Maja has volunteered up to six hours a day to help coordinate the Centre’s activities, while also completing her college degree.



Kosovo

INTEGRA NGO, Prishtina

INTEGRA NGO grew out of the community service work of a group of high school students in Prishtina, Kosovo. As part of their school activities, these students were engaged in cultural, educational, and humanitarian projects.⁶⁰ “We were active in student council and in our school generally and we wanted to continue our work as activists and continue to contribute to our peers,” says 20-year-old Kushtrim Koliqi, one of the organization’s three Program Coordinators. Though based in Prishtina, INTEGRA NGO focuses its work in 15 municipalities outside the city that are traditionally underserved by the development community.



INTEGRA NGO is dedicated to the promotion of youth rights and to projects that reflect the concerns of young people in Kosovo at both the local and national levels. Rather than focusing on a broad range of youth-related issues, program organizers chose to concentrate on three: reproductive health, culture, and accession to the European Union.⁶¹ Staffed by youth, ages 18

⁶⁰ “Since we graduated from high school, our desire to continue contributing to our society and our teens was never extinguished.” INTEGRA overview, p. 1.

⁶¹ The units operate independently, but are mutually supportive. “If one of us isn’t busy, we help the others,” said one program manager.

to 20, INTEGRA NGO was launched in 2003 and has received funding from donors such as UNICEF, Save the Children, the Soros Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Inter Church Peace Council (IKV), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Kosova AIDS Committee, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the Kosova Foundation for an Open Society (KFOS).

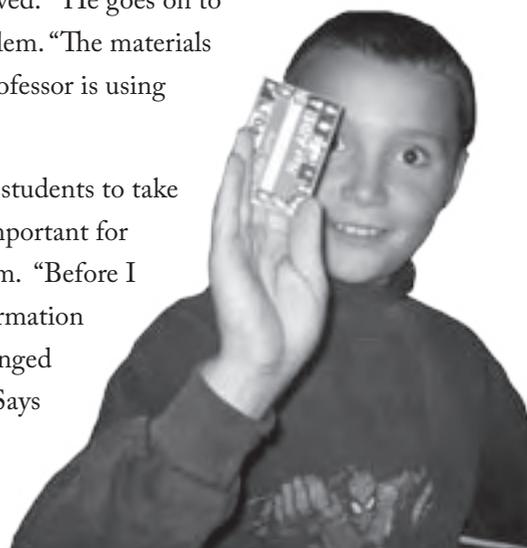
A Three-pronged Approach To Meeting Diverse Needs

INTEGRA NGO works with young people, ages 15 to 25, to ensure that the rights of youth are protected. The organization encourages program participants to play an active role in the decision making that affects their lives. In keeping with this philosophy, youth drive the organization's activities.⁶² These activities include awareness raising (including talks with influential leaders), training, and mobilization (street action). Program managers point out that by enabling youth to get involved in issues that affect them, they have made the program highly attractive to young people.

One problem that youth face in Kosovo is the lack of venues where they can come together. Very few options are available to young people outside the school system. "Youth here travel a lot, but when they return there is no opportunity for them to share information," says Koliqi. "There is no place for them to get together. I ask young people why they aren't active and they say it's because there are no organized activities."⁶³ Yet, says another program manager, Ilir Dauti, "Given a chance, youth will get involved." He goes on to say that access to up-to-date information is another problem. "The materials which are available are of poor quality. My economics professor is using books from 1988!"⁶⁴

The program provides an opportunity for high school students to take action in their communities. "I'm involved because it's important for youth to be informed," says one participant in the program. "Before I got involved with this program, I didn't have a lot of information myself. Once we began to learn about these issues, it changed our way of thinking. Now we are ready to help others." Says another, "Doing this work has changed me as a person, inside and outside of school. My classmates look at me differently now."

"Doing this work has changed me as a person, inside and outside of school. My classmates look at me differently now."



⁶² As evidence of the level of responsibility afforded to young activists in the program, INTEGRA NGO's program survey for this study was completed by a 17-year-old participant, Venera Mjekiqi.

⁶³ INTEGRA NGO program questionnaire.

⁶⁴ Staff would like to see a think tank created that could serve as a clearing house for the information and analysis that youth require.

One of INTEGRA NGO's areas of concentration is accession to the European Union (EU). "Everyone is talking about standards, but no one understands them," explains Koliqi. "We wanted to focus on something important... on structural change. Unemployment is a big problem here. We wanted to raise awareness about how the EU operates." With support from the Office of the Prime Minister, INTEGRA youth went to seven municipalities to talk about the EU and asked people to write their opinions about accession on a large billboard. "We then took the billboards and put them on display here in Kosovo," says Koliqi. "The Prime Minister came and signed it too. We ended up creating a dialogue between citizens and the government with this approach."

"We produced a TV show on multi-ethnic issues and a Rroma parent congratulated me for explaining things in a way he had been unable to do with his own son."

Another area of focus is culture, with participants producing a film on drugs, establishing theater clubs as an after school activity, and working on a national television show on social issues. Dauti says, "We produced a TV show on multiethnic issues and a Rroma parent congratulated me for explaining things in a way he had been unable to do with his own son." Called "Respect," the TV show is quite popular with Kosovo youth. Working on these issues satisfies a desire among INTEGRA NGO staff members to promote peace in the region. "I do not want to see any more problems here like in 1999. I want to live and let live," says one of the three program coordinators.

Organizers pay particular attention to the development of slogans and literature that are clear, accurate, and to the point. Peer-to-peer learning is viewed as the most effective means of communicating information and ideas. One project involved hanging an informational leaflet and a condom on the doors of apartments in Prishtina. The "Not For Sale" campaign was designed to raise awareness about human trafficking. Those involved in work on reproductive health held innovative "Make Love, Not AIDS"⁶⁵ campaigns in various municipalities. Lasting three days, the campaigns included informational brochures, peer-to-peer training, street action, and a movie night.

According to Dauti, "We approach things differently than others... we do it in a more attractive, friendly way. Our materials are easy to understand, simple, and straight forward." Pointing out the value of international exchange programs in skill-building, the staff says, "We use youth-friendly designs. Some of us were trained in Bulgaria on this. We use recycled paper and emphasize certain colors. From the Dutch, we learned how to do critical thinking and how to express our ideas in writing. We got to know about their work while attending a camp in France."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ In some cases, program participants secure the rights to use certain campaign slogans from youth activists in other parts of the world.

⁶⁶ Group interview with staff.

The program coordinator for the third issue area—HIV/AIDS and reproductive health—is 19-year-old Valon Ejupi, who says he was greatly influenced by the time he spent as an exchange student in the United States in Spokane, Washington. “In order to graduate, I had to complete 40 hours of community service. Now, I want to continue this practice by working on HIV/AIDS.” Another program coordinator echoes this, saying, “I spent a year in the United States in Kansas and I saw a different way of life. You are involved in school or after school activities from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. We need to reform the educational system here... not just the professors, but the students too.”



Addressing Political and Financial Obstacles

One of the challenges the program has faced is difficulty in working with political leaders in the community. Youth are ready to contribute to policy development, but find limited space within which to operate. Established political forces control access to decision making and it is difficult for young people to break into that arena. INTEGRA NGO emphasizes the importance of the youth vote. As one of the program coordinators points out, “60 percent of the population is under 25, but many of them do not vote. They say it’s because they do not belong to a political party or because one vote doesn’t really make a difference. We give them examples of situations in which one vote has changed history. We organize activities that encourage them to vote. It doesn’t matter who they vote for, just that they vote.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Attitudes vary from one area to another and program managers go to great lengths to consult with their stakeholders and adjust their approaches accordingly. “We don’t do the same condom show in every community.”

The coordinators of the project express their frustration at the lack of financial support from the government, particularly the Ministry of Youth. “We receive moral support, but not financial,” says Koliqi. “Government money goes primarily to support youth who are affiliated with political parties.” The lack of support at the local and national levels is also reflected in the fact that there is no national youth policy. At the same time, program organizers emphasize the importance of maintaining their political independence. “We try to work with those in the government who are viewed as independent. We don’t want to be identified as being part of one particular party.”

The program coordinators for each of the three units are enrolled in the university and work for the organization on a part-time basis.⁶⁸ It is primarily a volunteer-run operation although each of the department heads receives a small honorarium. One who is enrolled in business management wonders how long he can sustain that arrangement. Pointing to a problem that many in the civil society sector in the Balkans face, he says, “I enjoy doing this work, but you have to be able to support your family.” Program managers retain their connections to the high schools to ensure that there are new leaders ready to take over from them and continue to run the organization.⁶⁹

Consultation and Evaluation

Staff point out that one of the lessons they have learned is the importance of tailoring the program to reflect the specific circumstances of different municipalities. Attitudes vary from one area to another and program managers go to great lengths to consult with their stakeholders and adjust their approaches accordingly. “We don’t do the same condom show in every community,” says Ejupi. INTEGRA NGO holds focus group discussions with high school students to find out what they want. When they visit another municipality they meet with local NGOs first and ask for their advice. Program coordinators also engage in inter-generational consultation, conducting brainstorming sessions with young community activists, who are invited to bring their parents. Staff also discuss the program with experts in different fields, such as specialists in theater production.

Program organizers make use of pre- and post-surveys in designing their programs and measuring impact. Impact is also tracked through focus group discussions. “We sometimes do surveys after a project,” explains one coordinator. “We get feedback from people. They see what we’re doing and call us. We go out to the municipalities where we work and we find that

⁶⁸ The program coordinators try to integrate their work and their careers. One says he is studying theater and incorporates what he learns into the activities of the organization (and vice versa).

⁶⁹ Program organizers work closely with student body councils, for example.

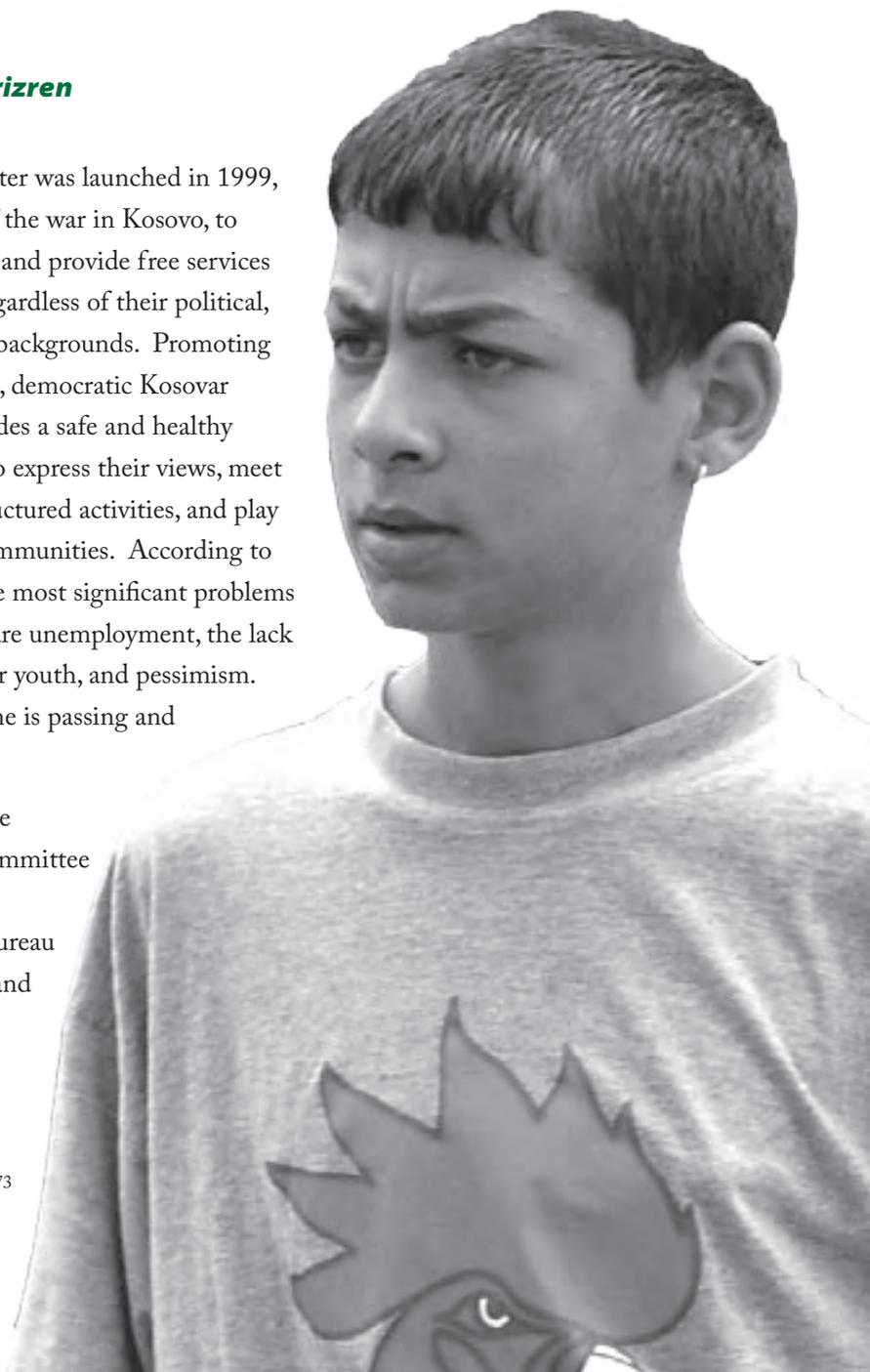
people are still using the HIV/AIDS booklets⁷⁰ that we gave them one and a half years earlier. It's encouraging that when we return to places we have been, we find that youth are still carrying on the work.”

Kosovo

IRC Youth Center, Prizren

The IRC Youth Center was launched in 1999, in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, to promote voluntary work and provide free services to children and youth regardless of their political, ethnic, race, or religious backgrounds. Promoting the creation of a tolerant, democratic Kosovar society, the Center provides a safe and healthy environment for youth to express their views, meet for structured and unstructured activities, and play an active role in their communities. According to program participants, the most significant problems facing youth in Kosovo are unemployment, the lack of organized activities for youth, and pessimism. “There is a sense that time is passing and you’re not living.”⁷¹

Initially funded by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration (PRM), the Center now has more than 6,000 members,⁷² ages 14 to 25, from a variety of ethnic groups.⁷³ The staff point out that the Center is in fact one of the only multiethnic youth organizations



⁷⁰ These small (1 ½ x 2 inch / 3.5 x 5 cm) brightly-colored booklets of photos, cartoons and prose are designed to appeal to youth.

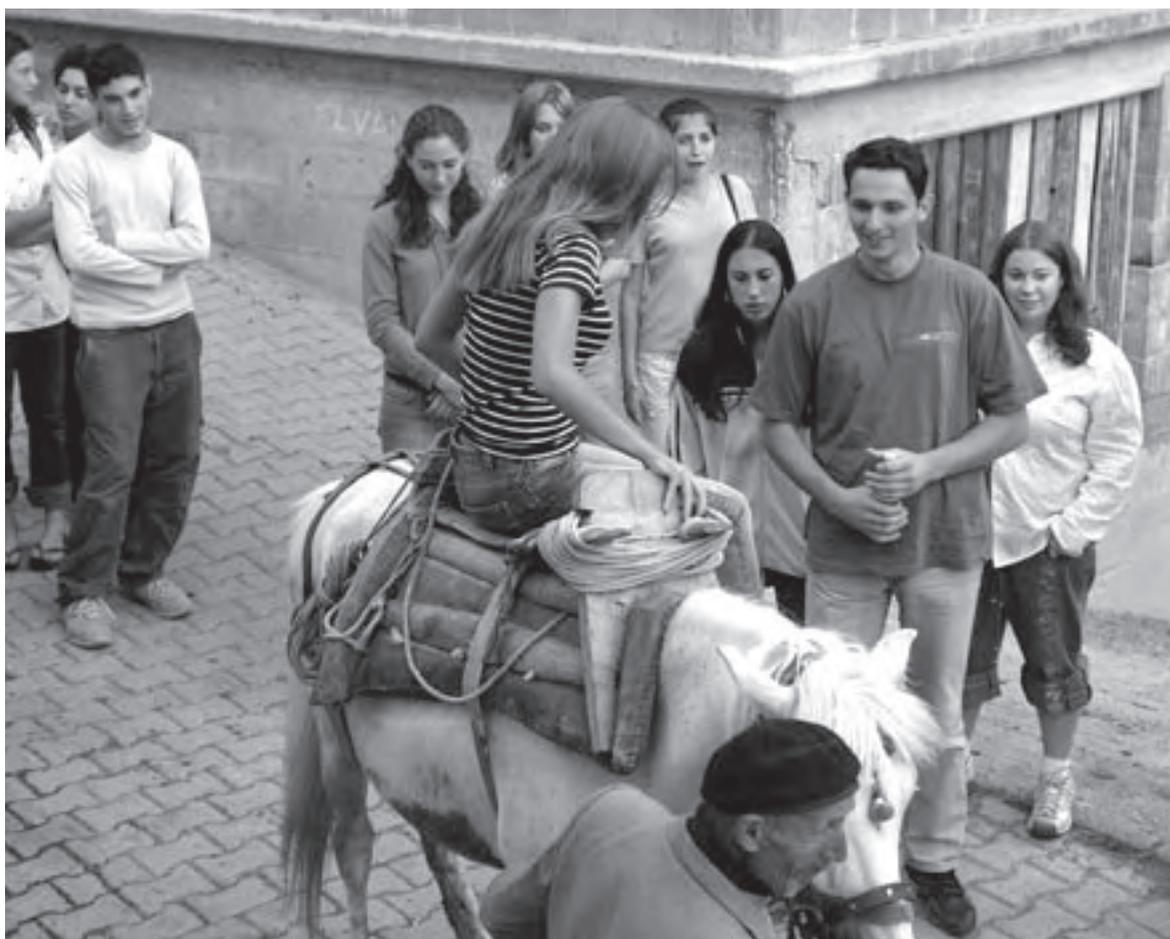
⁷¹ Besim Mydyti, group interview with program participants.

⁷² In addition, the Center provides outreach services to an additional 1,000 children and youth.

⁷³ The group who took part in the interview conducted for this study included Turkish, Albanian and Bosnian youth.

in the region, serving the needs of Albanians, Bosnians, Gorans, Rroma, Serbs, and Turkish. The goal is to build the capacities of youth in both rural and urban areas and to increase youth engagement through structured, non-formal educational activities with local youth groups. Open 12 hours a day, the Center provides youth with opportunities to occupy leadership roles in their communities today.

Staff point to a range of challenges faced by youth in Prizren and the surrounding region of approximately half a million inhabitants. The educational system is antiquated, youth unemployment is high, the standard of living is low, freedom of movement is restricted, and the government has not prioritized the needs of children and youth. Many Kosovar youth live in rural areas and lack access to some of the same advantages of urban youth in terms of formal and informal education, youth events, and activities.⁷⁴ The Center aims to help integrate rural children and youth⁷⁵ into Kosovar society, to build tolerance within that society, expand youth participation in democratic processes in the country, and foster the process of European integration.



⁷⁴ The Youth Center also collects and distributes second-hand clothes and footwear for impoverished families in remote rural areas.

⁷⁵ In response to this need, the Center is leading a year-long vocational training program in five municipalities for out-of-school youth of different backgrounds.

The Youth Center in Prizren has established 14 satellite youth centers in rural areas of Kosovo offering free programs in computers, languages, art, debate, health promotion, and sports. The centers are intended to offer a safe and secure environment for youth to read, relax, learn, and work together,⁷⁶ with training sessions emphasizing human rights, tolerance, and democracy for all. Debates and seminars are held on a variety of social issues, such as youth employment, drugs, access for the disabled, and prostitution. Recreational activities foster both physical and emotional development, as well as vocational skills. Social events include cultural programs, musical performances, and discussions. In the lead-up to the elections in late 2004, the Center encouraged youth to vote. Overall, the program has worked with more than 20,000 youth in a variety of structured and unstructured activities.

Teaching Young People About Their Role in a Democracy

Designed to increase youth engagement and leadership, the Youth Center has established an informal board of young participants in the program to provide advice on program design and implementation and to carry out monitoring and evaluation activities. With only three paid staff, 90 percent of the Center's work is led by volunteers. According to program staff, the youth who participate in the Center's program take their responsibilities very seriously. They are committed to making a difference and are gaining the experience they need to move into leadership roles in Kosovo. "Before coming to the Center, I didn't know what democracy was about," says Krenar Basha, a participant in the program.⁷⁷

One key element of the IRC Youth Center's program is its multiethnic dimension. Youth become very accustomed to interacting in mixed groupings which has a positive effect on attitudes around diversity and peaceful coexistence. Based on interviews and evaluations, program staff say that youth involved in the program are more optimistic about the future than they were prior to coming to the Center. The Center provides some youth with a reason to stay in Kosovo rather than leaving to study or work abroad. Says Besim Mydyti, "Now we are teaching others. If everyone leaves, that would be a problem. It's better for us to stay here."⁷⁸ Others say they have to leave, at least for a while. Says Basha, "The books we're using in school were published in 1967. I need to study elsewhere, but I will come back."⁷⁹

The centers are intended to offer a safe and secure environment for youth to read, relax, learn, and work together, with training sessions emphasizing human rights, tolerance, and democracy for all.

⁷⁶ "IRC Youth Center," tri-fold brochure.

⁷⁷ Group interview with program participants.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Krenar Basha, op. cit.

Building Partnerships with the Public Sector

The Center's Executive Director, Bari Zenelaj, stresses the need to develop institutional support from the local and central governments in Kosovo to ensure the sustainability of programs such as this. Although the Center works with government entities (such as the Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Non-Resident Affairs) where possible,⁸⁰ project staff point out that there has been a general unwillingness of the government to support youth initiatives or to protect youth. Zenelaj explains that, "In a country where 64 percent of the population is under 30... the total budget that the local government in Prizren has allocated to the youth sector this year is 20,000 euro... it is totally irresponsible. Government institutions are neglecting children and youth issues."⁸¹



The impact of local politics on the Center's ability to serve youth is also evident in the decision by local government officials to evict the Youth Center from the building where it provided free services to 250 to 400 youth on a daily basis. When the Center refused to align itself with the main political party in the area—fearing that to do so would compromise the Center's reputation for neutrality—local officials insisted the Center begin paying rent for the first time.⁸² The rates were well beyond the financial capacity of the Center. As a result, in March 2003 staff of the Center had to move into a one room office entirely inadequate to their needs. Notwithstanding this prior lack of support from local officials, the Center has benefited from strong community support. In addition, the Center is now working to expand the involvement of the Municipal Directorate of Youth and other local institutions, as well as other youth organizations.

⁸⁰ For example, the Center is the implementing partner for several programs of the Ministry of Youth (i.e.: the awareness campaign against illicit small arms and light weapons, community policing, etc.).

⁸¹ E-mail communications from Bari Zenelaj to the authors, February 8 and February 9, 2005.

⁸² E-mail communication from Bari Zenelaj to the authors, February 11, 2005.

Empowering Youth to be Agents of Social Change

From the perspective of Center staff, youth engagement is about removing youth from the streets and engaging them in structured activities. The topics discussed at the Center help to foster greater awareness about conditions in Kosovo. The program's emphasis on the importance of volunteer work leads many to give back to their community. The youth take part in environmental projects in the community, peer counseling, and charitable work (distributing clothing and food to those in need). Program participants, for example, traveled to a Serbian village in order to refurbish the cultural center. They also raised funds to improve a local school.

The Center also contributes to youth engagement by providing youth with the opportunity to assume leadership roles in program activities. Zenelaj emphasizes the importance of making youth responsible for program implementation. Erkan Vardari reinforces this point, saying, "We tell them to organize whatever they want. If it is healthy, we'll support it. We ask them to write up their request so that they gain experience."⁸³

According to staff, the most important task they face is to motivate youth. Says Zenelaj, "We worked for several months with one very troubled youth who had been in jail. He is now one of our most active members. We showed him a different reality." Krenar Basha, the 22-year-old former program participant who now works as the Center's computer specialist⁸⁴ says,

"Immediately after the war in Kosovo, there were no opportunities for young people. I went to the Center to see if I could help and if the Center could help me. I found a warm welcome and received training in graphic design. I also learned planning and management skills because it's not enough to learn computers; you have to know what to do with that knowledge once you have it. Now I have my own graphic design workshop. I also continue to volunteer at the Center. I felt like the Center was there for me and now I should be there for others. I don't want to talk about what the Center has done for me, I want to talk about what I can do for the Center. Just like John F. Kennedy. We need that opportunity to give back."

"I felt like the Center was there for me and now I should be there for others."

⁸³ Erkan Vardari, Program Manager, group interview with staff.

⁸⁴ One of the advocacy pieces he has produced is an eye-catching flyer entitled, "Kosovo is Our Home."

Kosovo

NGO Future, Gračanica

Launched in 2001, NGO Future responds to the needs of Kosovo's minority Serbian population. Funded by organizations such as the Kosova Foundation for an Open Society (KFOS), the Kosovar Civil Society Foundation, the Center for Democracy Foundation, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sport, NGO Future places particular emphasis on promoting democratic participation, strengthening civil society, and building regional cooperation. Programs focus on human rights, reconciliation, returnees, community development, environmental protection, and culture. The organization's approach is based on human resource development, as well as organizational strengthening, public/private partnerships, and legal and regulatory reform.

A New Generation of Leaders

In this way, youth discover the value of participating in the local political process in order to advance the rights of ethnic communities in Kosovo.

Youth are the focus of NGO Future's program entitled "New Leaders for a New Age." According to the organization's Executive Director, Nenad Rikalo, the project is designed to build the capacity of thirty young civil society leaders from the Kosovo Serb minority community and to help them move into public life. Launched in June 2004, the project seeks to mainstream these youth within Kosovo Albanian and minority civil society organizations and activities.⁸⁵ Through this program, Kosovo Serbian youth (ages 20 to 35)⁸⁶ are learning to articulate the needs of their community and to hold their political representatives accountable to the concerns of their community. In this way, youth discover the value of participating in the local political process in order to advance the rights of ethnic communities in Kosovo.

"New Leaders for a New Age" is designed to foster societal integration in Kosovo. According to Rikalo, "Multi-ethnicity is not working now in Kosovo. People do not believe in it. The situation is constantly changing. In March 2004, for example, our plans for this program had to be suspended due to another outbreak of violence.⁸⁷ Some Serbs have left the country." Part of the problem now, according to program managers, is the dearth of Serb political leaders.⁸⁸ A new Serbian political leadership is needed. "In five years, we have

⁸⁵ Program questionnaire.

⁸⁶ NGO Future board member Dragan Petrović comments that due to the economic situation many youth are still living with their families at age 30 in Kosovo. "Thirty is the age at which many are starting their own lives."

⁸⁷ Clashes in March 2004 between ethnic Serbs and Albanians in Mitrovica and other parts of Kosovo produced numerous deaths and injuries, as well as substantial property destruction.

⁸⁸ Another option that was considered by those who formed NGO Future was to create a political party. "It wasn't realistic. We already have five Serbian political parties. We would have been the sixth or seventh and we would have divided the community further." Group interview, Nenad Rikalo.

had four or five leaders. It's not enough," explains Rikalo, adding, "And we don't just need political leaders, we need NGO and business leaders as well."⁸⁹

NGO Future's approach to youth development emphasizes capacity building for young leaders. The goal is to enhance the ability of young Kosovo Serbs to evaluate and address policy options in the context of Kosovo's political realities. Youth from ten different communities receive training in democratic practice, including the role of opposition parties and the transfer



of power following an election. Specifically, youth take part in training in voter education, public relations, advocacy, management, organizational and institutional development, and leadership. The approach also includes a training of trainers component. Particular emphasis is placed on the development of public relations specialists. The idea behind this strategy is that public relations is a good entry point for these young leaders into Serbian political parties. According to Rikalo, "These parties have no PR specialists. We will prepare these youth and they will be well-positioned to move up quickly within the party structures. In addition, they will always be in the public eye."

⁸⁹ Group interview, Nenad Rikalo.

Moving Beyond Ethnic Divides

Program managers point out that as of today youth do not see a bright future in Kosovo.⁹⁰ They face high levels of unemployment, poor education, and low mobility. These problems are especially acute within minority populations. Many live in rural areas with even less access to opportunities in education, culture, and sports than their urban counterparts. Ethnic tensions further exacerbate these problems. “We are living separate lives here,” says Rikalo. “The only people who collaborate across ethnic lines are those who work in international organizations, business people, and criminals. That’s about it. There are many myths and misperceptions that divide the communities. We have to find common interests and values.”⁹¹

“The establishment of contacts and cooperation among civil society actors is a prerequisite for the integration of minority communities into Kosovo society.”

NGO Future’s youth program is designed to make young leaders more aware of the political role they can play, emphasizing representation and participation in the political process as a way to protect community rights. In the short-term, program managers would like to see the youth who take part in the program playing lead roles in government, business, and civil society. In the long-term, they hope the Serb community will be looked at differently than it is today; that there will be better relations among all ethnicities and new possibilities. According to Rikalo, “The establishment of contacts and cooperation among civil society actors is a prerequisite for the integration of minority communities into Kosovo society.”⁹² The benefits of the program, however, will not be limited to the Serb community within Kosovo. “These young people will be thinking and acting democratically.”⁹³

⁹⁰ “Albanian youth can circulate more easily within Kosovo than Serbian ones (who are primarily confined to the various Serbian enclaves). Consequently, most of the Serbs in Kosovo are looking for an exit. We have to try to provide options that would make it possible for them to stay.” Agon Demjaha, September 18, 2004.

⁹¹ Group interview, Nenad Rikalo. Rikalo goes on to say, “We feel under siege. Previously, we lived in Prishtina. We had access to things. We had hope for the future. At 14, I had goals. Now at 30, I have no goals. Now we must live in Gracanica. This is not home. Home is Prishtina.”

⁹² Program questionnaire, Nenad Rikalo.

⁹³ Group interview, Nenad Rikalo.

Macedonia

Aureola, Struga

Aureola is located in the southwestern Macedonian town of Struga. Long popular with tourists, Struga has been the site of considerable ethnic strife in recent years. Today 65,000 residents of different ethnicities (e.g., Albanians, Macedonians, Turks, and Egyptians, among others) share this scenic spot on the shores of Lake Ohrid. Funded by organizations such as CARE International, Catholic Relief Services, the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ), Oxfam, Star Network, BCYF, and Kvinna Till Kvinna, Aureola was established in 1999 to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees from the crisis in Kosovo. Subsequently, the organization began to focus on gender, with a special emphasis on the empowerment of women



and youth.⁹⁴ With a staff of 9 and over 30 volunteers, Aureola concentrates particular attention on activities designed to foster interethnic cooperation among high school youth (ages 14 to 18) who work as teams on common socio-economic problems.

Aureola's approach to youth engagement is grounded in the belief that many of the social problems that individuals face later in life are rooted in

⁹⁴ Aureola's work includes advocacy, capacity-building, counseling, education, and networking in support of women's rights and gender equality. The organization provides courses designed to help women become financially self-sufficient such as computer skills, sewing, and language courses. One-on-one and hot line counseling is provided to women and young girls who have been subjected to acts of violence and the organization works to raise consciousness at the local level on domestic violence, women's rights, and political participation through both the electronic and print media. Aureola also offers lectures on topics such as human rights, domestic violence, health, and human trafficking.

adolescence and can best be addressed at an early age. Launched in late 2002, the goals of Aureola's youth program are to: improve interethnic relations and communication among youth; train youth in the areas of journalism and research; build partnerships with government bodies on issues related to youth; and improve communication in the schools. The organization also seeks to expand collaboration and raise public awareness on the psychological, social, and economic challenges faced by local youth.



Using Television as a Medium to Analyze and Communicate Social Issues

Inspired by a program in Albania, Aureola has created multiethnic teams of youth trained in the basics of conducting television surveys and interviews, as well as television production. Program participants have produced a series of documentaries that present youth opinions on a variety of social issues. These documentaries are presented on local television and taped copies are distributed to the schools. The shows reach an audience of approximately 1,500 youth, as well as the community at large. Community exposure to these issues is critical given that adults in the area tend to be oblivious to some of the problems that youth face. According to program participants, “Adults

don't pay attention to these problems. They do not see everything that we do. They do not think like us. The adults think things are the same as when they were young."⁹⁵

Aureola works on social issues at the local level with teenagers, parents, and schools.⁹⁶ To ensure that they attracted a broad cross-section of youth, Aureola staff announced the program in Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish on television and radio and in leaflets. Youth had to be enrolled in high school in order to compete for a place in the program and the selection panel was composed of journalists. Some of the youth chosen to take part in the program received training as announcers, while others developed skills as reporters and camera operators. Both groups worked on preparing the first television show, which analyzed the school system in terms of teacher/student interaction, reforms in the education process, and infrastructure needs.⁹⁷ Subsequent shows addressed local issues of interest to youth such as drugs,⁹⁸ preventing HIV/AIDS, recreational opportunities for youth, youth migration due to unemployment, education and employment challenges facing persons with disabilities, and multiethnic relations in Struga.

“Adults don’t pay attention to these problems. They do not see everything that we do. They do not think like us. The adults think things are the same as when they were young.”

Youth Play a Pivotal Role

According to program staff, it is critical for youth to have a space where they can develop their skills and talents.⁹⁹ Aureola provides youth with the opportunity to explore social issues of importance to them and their community and, most importantly, to take steps to address those issues. Says one staff member: “We believe that students must face problems directly. They learn that they can tackle these problems themselves.”¹⁰⁰ One of the youth involved in the project points out that programs like this demonstrate that, “Youth aren’t just sitting there drinking coffee. We’re doing something. We want to help other youth do more.” Another participant said, “These are the first shows about young people. We learn about other cultures and we develop better presentation and research skills.”

Aureola’s approach places youth in a pivotal role in the design, implementation, and management of the program. According to program managers, “Aureola staff is just there to support and encourage youth in the achievement of their goals.” As one of the participants stated, “We have

⁹⁵ Group interview with program participants.

⁹⁶ Program staff also emphasize the importance of working in partnership with other NGOs and with local authorities.

⁹⁷ Staff recognize the value of audience feedback and have made changes in the programming in response to those comments (i.e.: shorter interviews, suggested topics, etc.).

⁹⁸ The show chronicled the life of an 18-year-old drug user and had quite an impact in a community that was in denial about drug use among its youth.

⁹⁹ According to one program participant, “This program has had a real impact on me. You see how far you can reach. I am more confident.”

¹⁰⁰ Group interview with program staff.

“We hope to produce young talented journalists who will present issues of concern to them in an independent and fearless manner. Further, we hope they will take the next step and take action on these issues.”

done it by ourselves.”¹⁰¹ Aureola provides the training and encourages close cooperation among team members. “We hope to produce young talented journalists who will present issues of concern to them in an independent and fearless manner,” explains an Aureola staff member. “Further, we hope they will take the next step and take action on these issues.”¹⁰² As a direct consequence of one of the programs aired, a local primary school was retrofitted to allow access by students with disabilities. In another case, following a broadcast about the crumbling infrastructure of a very old school that was still in use, a new school was constructed.

The program places youth into direct contact with a variety of points of view. Aureola staff believe that youth learn more by analyzing and reporting on these issues themselves than they would if someone were lecturing to them about those same issues, saying, “We are helping youth to think deeper and harder about their problems.” They note that none of their project participants were involved in a spate of ethnically motivated hostilities in the local schools in 2004.

Bridging Ethnic Divides

Aureola hopes to foster better relations among different ethnic groups in the larger community by improving communication among youth across ethnic lines. According to staff, “The participants have established friendships¹⁰³ irrespective of their nationalities and they have started to take a deeper look at the issues youth confront.”¹⁰⁴ Program staff report encouraging responses from both parents and peers to the work undertaken by the program participants. Shows are taped and used in schools to spark debate on key social issues. Community response to the efforts of these youth to raise the visibility of critical social issues has been positive.

According to staff, the program makes it clear that it is possible for youth to tackle problems that previously seemed insurmountable. In addition, according to Ruhije Sula, President of Aureola, “The program is modeling positive behavior by demonstrating how youth of different ethnicities can work together. We know very little about other cultures. There is a lack of respect. We are pushing the new generation to change this situation... to continue to work on these problems and to respect and get to know other cultures.” As one participant stated, “I’ve started to think differently about other people since taking part in this project. Before, I didn’t do anything... I didn’t care. Now I feel differently.”

¹⁰¹ Group interview with program participants.

¹⁰² Aureola program questionnaire.

¹⁰³ “The program gives us the opportunity to interact with other ethnicities. We are like brothers and sisters on this project.” Group interview with program participants.

¹⁰⁴ Aureola program questionnaire.

Macedonia

Youth Educational Forum (YEF), Skopje

The headquarters of the Association of Citizens Youth Educational Forum (YEF)¹⁰⁵ provides a vibrant and cozy space for the young leaders of the organization and their even younger members to meet, learn, and strategize together. Founded by former debaters, YEF provides an opportunity for young professionals to continue giving back to their community by sharing what they have learned with the next generation of community activists.

YEF offers students, their teachers, and parents, opportunities to engage in public debates on issues of concern to them and to the broader community. Designed to complement the Macedonian educational system with educational, creative, and policy-oriented activities for youth, YEF's goal is to advance the establishment of an open and democratic society in Macedonia through youth engagement. Through civic and human rights



education and the development of public speaking skills, participants develop the ability to influence policy discussions. Program activities include debates, quiz competitions, workshops and training sessions, mock trials, visits to other institutions, and publication of a newsletter.

¹⁰⁵ The program was established in June 1999 under the name “Debaters.”

First launched as a youth program of the Open Society Institute in Macedonia in 1999, YEF has been funded by a variety of other donors including Pax Christi, CARE International, UNICEF, the Council of Europe, the American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (ABA/CEELI), the American Embassy, and BCYF. Headquartered in Skopje, YEF works with youth, ages 14 to 26, in eight cities throughout the country.¹⁰⁶ Approximately 25 volunteer teachers and trainers work with the organization's 600 members¹⁰⁷ from high schools and 50 members from universities.¹⁰⁸ National and local governments have funded some events, as has the business community. Approximately 1,000 high school and 70 university students from diverse ethnic, geographic, and economic backgrounds participate in YEF activities annually.

“Macedonian youth must learn how to uncover information for themselves. In the process, they learn that there are many truths.”

YEF's program is designed to address some of the principal challenges facing Macedonian youth. The first of these is the rigidity of the school system, where curriculum changes have been minimal despite the transition toward a more democratic society. Civic education is still lacking. Second, the government pays insufficient attention to the status of youth in the country. It is difficult, if not impossible, for young people to secure part-time or full-time jobs. As a result, they lack access to legitimate sources of income. Third, the uncertain political and economic climate of this divided, transitional society makes it very difficult for youth to do any long-term planning regarding their studies or employment. Finally, drug use, HIV/AIDS, and criminality continue to increase among the young.¹⁰⁹ All of these factors contribute to a lack of motivation on the part of youth to get involved in their communities.

Helping Young People Find Their Voices

According to program staff, Macedonian youth receive insufficient attention from their parents and society at large. YEF works to fill the gap, helping youth to develop their leadership and public speaking skills and their ability to play an active role in addressing Macedonia's social problems. Since 2001, YEF has offered two programs: Street Law and Debate.¹¹⁰ YEF's Street Law program is designed to teach non-lawyers about the law, the legal system, citizen rights and responsibilities, and the basic principles and values underlying Macedonia's constitutional democracy.¹¹¹ Participants take part in

¹⁰⁶ These include Veles, Prilep, Tetovo, Struga, Krusevo, Radovish and Makedonski Brod.

¹⁰⁷ YEF members take part in a broader array of organizational activities than do other program participants. They also take part in YEF's Annual General Assembly. All program participants have the opportunity to become members.

¹⁰⁸ Initially, YEF focused on its high school program. Today, increasing attention is being paid to complementing activities at the high school level with intensified work at the university level.

¹⁰⁹ YEF Youth Program Application Form for BCYF, p. 15.

¹¹⁰ The debate program was originally founded by OSI in 1994. Street Law was first offered in 1998. YEF began to jointly manage both programs in 2001. Both of these programs were adapted from programs developed outside the region.

mock trials and gain practical knowledge about the law in programs based on real-world examples of interest to youth. YEF's Street Law Coordinator, Neda Korunovska, says, "Macedonian youth must learn how to uncover information for themselves. In the process, they learn that there are many truths." Staff make sure that opportunities are provided for interaction with the community and for positive adult/youth learning experiences. Such interaction helps program participants bridge the gap between a theoretical understanding of their rights and their application in the real world.



YEF's debate program provides young people the opportunity to argue the pros and cons of critical social questions. It fosters teamwork, critical thinking, and tolerance toward alternative opinions. Participants learn to develop their own ideas on issues based on hard data, rather than prejudice and ignorance of the facts. Program managers say there is a need for this sort of public debate in Macedonia. Says YEF President Marjan Zabračanec, "Previously, youth did not have a chance to speak. Through the program, youth begin to believe that they are 'old enough' to discuss these issues. They even start to see themselves as intellectual leaders on certain issues. They feel they are responsible for

¹¹¹ YEF description, internal document, p. 2.

something. They feel empowered to speak out... confident and strong." In short, they learn how to fight for their rights.

Program managers make a concerted effort to focus their attention on youth of all temperaments and abilities, not just "natural" leaders. Says one, "Debate depends on teamwork. We try to get the shy participants involved, too. They learn to value their ability to do research, for example. One young man had a speech impediment when he started the program, but it has since disappeared. Another told us that she is no longer afraid to go to the Principal's office."¹¹² Through the program, participants develop self-confidence and become noticeably more outgoing.¹¹³

One participant describes the program saying, "The debate teachers were young and impressive. We would spend two hours each weekend looking for information and evidence for the debates. The team would debate women's rights, education, violence, drug policy, and child labor. Sometimes we would choose the topics. About 20 or 30 students take part in my school." Another adds, "It's not just about talking. We have learned to form opinions. We learn to look at issues from more than one point of view—both the positive and the negative dimensions." Eighteen-year-old Maja Stojanovska says, "It's the first time we have had a program like this in Macedonia. Youth are interested in it because of the topics. We had no place to express our opinions before. This is a place where we can do it. People are taking us more seriously now."¹¹⁴

In addition, some program participants take part at the international level in debate competitions. Program managers explain that at the international



¹¹² Group discussion with program managers.

¹¹³ YEF program questionnaire.

¹¹⁴ Group interview with YEF program participants.

tournaments, youth have the opportunity to see different systems, how things work elsewhere, learn new methods, and develop new contacts. “We want them to see the situation more objectively. In Turkmenistan, debate is prohibited. In Uzbekistan, the topics selected must be pre-approved by the government. When you travel abroad, it reinforces your commitment to your own country.”¹¹⁵ A well-regarded international competitor, YEF will be hosting the 2005 world championship debate tournament.¹¹⁶

Promoting Respect for Differences

The YEF program is also focused on building tolerance, and managers pay particular attention to bridging ethnic divides. The youth who take part in the debates are from many different ethnic backgrounds. “We have to work together in debate and it brings us closer. We get to know each other’s traditions and religion. We’ve become friends,”¹¹⁷ explains one participant. Bojan Maričik, YEF Secretary, says, “There is a lack of dialogue at every level. We need to build respect for different opinions.” A 16-year-old debater says, “One of the purposes of debate is to teach you how to make compromises.” Another program participant comments, “Now I listen better. My father and I are both more tolerant of each other’s opinions.”

YEF promotes the use of interactive teaching methods and the development of critical thinking. The approach is based on the belief that honing a young person’s ability to debate key social issues enables that person to see those issues from a variety of perspectives and fosters tolerance. One of the program’s managers notes: “If they become leaders, they will respect the views of others. They learn to find positive aspects of both sides of an issue.”¹¹⁸ With a goal of raising awareness of the rights and responsibilities of youth as citizens of Macedonia, the program emphasizes concepts such as justice, rule of law, tolerance, freedom of thought and freedom of speech, conflict resolution, teamwork, and basic democratic principles. Program participants play an active role in evaluating the program and in making suggestions for refinement.

YEF is a youth-led organization. Program managers are themselves products of the program and are all ex-debaters.¹¹⁹ They are all currently enrolled in the university and work at YEF in their free time. Says one, “I feel motivated by taking part in this program... seeing these young people who want to do something, helping to build their skills. It keeps me enthusiastic.”

“If they become leaders, they will respect the views of others. They learn to find positive aspects of both sides of an issue.”

¹¹⁵ Group discussion with YEF program managers. YEF staff show the youth with whom they work that the world is not perfect outside of Macedonia.

¹¹⁶ YEF’s debate team recently placed fifth in an international competition involving 42 countries.

¹¹⁷ Group interview with YEF debaters. Participants indicate as well that their parents are supportive of this aspect of the program.

¹¹⁸ Group interview with program managers.

¹¹⁹ YEF staff must have been debaters for at least a year in school. They then work as assistant trainers for a year under the supervision of more experienced trainers at YEF.

Although initially launched as a non-formal education program where students would gain knowledge and skills they would not otherwise acquire during their regular classes, the debate and street law programs are now being incorporated into the formal school curriculum in some high schools. The Ministry of Education allows YEF to offer its programs in high schools all over the country and to use school infrastructure in carrying out its activities. In addition, 18 schools in 10 different towns offer the program as an elective. In some of these cases, students can earn credits for taking the program and the schools cover the program costs.

Developing Skills for Active Engagement

“We are not interested in just raising issues, we want to change things.”

YEF contributes to youth engagement in several ways: helping youth develop the skills necessary to play an active role in their community, building awareness around key public policy issues (e.g., drugs, prostitution), offering opportunities for youth to take action on some of these issues, fostering self-expression, and initiating public debate. As one program manager put it, “We are not interested in just raising issues, we want to change things.” Debates are not only held within the schools. One public debate took place in the main plaza in Skopje in front of 3,000 people. Sometimes the debates take place in Macedonian, sometimes in Albanian, and sometimes in English. The audience accepts this and it helps to build bridges across ethnic lines.

In addition to the debate skills they develop, program participants are encouraged to develop project proposals and to become actively involved in educational, environmental, and health issues. YEF helps to connect their participants with other NGOs for collaborative action. “We are not just focused on debate tournaments. We are open to taking part in community events and working with NGOs.”¹²⁰ YEF also networks with other local, regional, and international NGOs such as the International Debate Education Association (IDEA), The Anticorruption Network in South East Europe, and the South East European Youth Leadership Institute (SEELYI), and the Agency for Sports and Youth—to build support for the creation of a national youth policy. Within these networks, YEF is best known for its work in the areas of education, protection of students’ rights, and peace-building.

Through their participation in YEF programs, participants develop leadership and management skills that they can apply to the job market, such as public speaking, critical thinking, teamwork, research skills, and tolerance. One of the participants in the debate program said, “I am more informed. I have bet-

¹²⁰ Some YEF participants work with other organizations. One local NGO asked YEF to recommend youth who could run a public debate on sex education, for example. Group discussion with YEF program managers.

ter presentation skills and can communicate more easily.” Another commented that she has learned new research skills. One of the program managers pointed out, “Debaters learn creative advocacy. It helps them to market themselves better. I learned how to present myself. Given unemployment levels, this is an important skill.”¹²¹ YEF staff report that many of its members become spokespersons for political parties and public institutions.



Program managers see their work contributing to the strength of the student movement in Macedonia which in turn can play a significant role in educational reform. There is a conscious effort to connect activists at the high school level with those in the university. One program coordinator says, “I see we are making a difference. A lot needs to be changed in our society. This allows us to be actively engaged in issues that interest us. It helps us with our own personal development and expands our experience with social activism. Now we are dealing with issues of corruption in higher education. What will happen when youth who have developed new ways of thinking in high school enter our very traditional universities? It may be too late for us to have a good higher education, but not for others. It would be easier to leave the country, but it is not the right thing to do. We feel responsible for the future.”¹²²

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Moldova

Child Rights Information Center (CRIC), Chişinău

Unlike many youth-serving programs in the Balkans that evolved over time to incorporate a focus on youth engagement, the Child Rights Information Center (CRIC) in Moldova was established with the explicit goal of strengthening children’s and young people’s participation in society. CRIC upholds participation as a fundamental right of every child and young person and works to strengthen the ability of the nation’s youth to meet their own urgent needs.

“We empower them [young people] by developing their knowledge and skills, by educating them about children’s rights, and enabling them to work in partnership with adults.”

CRIC views young people—not as beneficiaries of its programs—but as active participants and partners. “We support and encourage initiatives coming from youth, not for youth,” emphasizes CRIC Programs Coordinator Viorica Cretu, a lawyer who became a child rights advocate upon seeing how little was being done to protect children from mistreatment and abuse. “We trust them [young people], empower them, and provide them with the possibility to implement their ideas. We empower them by developing their knowledge and skills, by educating them about children’s rights, and enabling them to work in partnership with adults.”

According to Cretu, CRIC’s work to increase youth engagement came at a time when young people were eager to create associative structures and develop strategies for solving their own problems at the local level, through advocacy efforts and community mobilization. At least part of its success can be attributed to the enthusiasm that existed among young people themselves for initiating positive change.

With roughly half of the nation’s population living in poverty, Moldova is an extremely difficult place in which to grow up. For more than a decade, the country has struggled in its transition to a market economy and is now the poorest nation in Europe. Average income, estimated to be between US\$30–40 per month, is less than half of what is considered adequate to live on.¹²³

Poor economic conditions have severely affected the nation’s children and youth, with most child development indicators having declined in recent years. Young people lack access to basic health services, education, and recreational opportunities and are frequently denied their basic rights. With many adults leaving the country in search of employment opportunities elsewhere, an increasing number of children lack proper care, are mistreated, or abandoned. About 13,000 Moldovan children currently live in orphanages or boarding

¹²³ Viorica Cretu, CRIC program questionnaire.

schools, with the nation gaining an increasingly negative reputation as a hub of trafficking in human beings.¹²⁴

It was against this backdrop that CRIC was established in 1998. Its mission is to promote the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Moldova and to facilitate young people's rights to participation and freedom of expression. Among its activities, CRIC disseminates information on children's rights, promotes active youth participation, works in partnership with young people to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, and undertakes initiatives to combat child trafficking.



CRIC programs stress learning by doing. Says Cretu, “One cannot learn about democracy from books, democracy must be experienced.” Toward that end, CRIC supports youth initiatives that help young people develop the knowledge and skills necessary for effective participation in the decision making and policy-making processes.

Efforts to actively engage youth must be complemented by efforts to educate the public and key stakeholders (e.g., parents, school administrators, government officials, business leaders) about the critical role of young people in society. By developing partnerships with schools and local and national government bodies (e.g., the Ministry of Education and the Youth and

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Sports Department of Moldova), CRIC cultivates much needed support for its efforts to create a more child- and youth-friendly society. CRIC likewise collaborates with international NGOs and is a member of several national and international NGO networks working in the area of children's rights.

Focus on Children and Youth Participation

While CRIC promotes youth engagement and leadership development in all of its activities, its children and youth participation program encompasses the following three projects.

■ Youth Councils

In 1999, CRIC launched its first youth participation projects – developing a Children's Parliament at the national level and supporting the establishment of Local Children and Youth Council's (LCYCs) in different parts of the country. Over the course of four years, the Children's Parliament engaged over 450 young people, ages 10 to 16, in substantive discussions on national youth issues and policies. In 2003, for example,



Parliament members issued a declaration on the mistreatment of children that was distributed widely to the media and child protection organizations. While the program raised public awareness of the role of young people in society, it was eventually phased out by CRIC in favor of concentrating on the development of effective models of local youth participation, capable of reaching greater numbers of young people.

In 2003, CRIC benefited when the national government adopted a National Youth Policy calling for the establishment of Youth Councils in every major community in the country. As an active partner in these efforts, CRIC helped create more than 200 LCYCs. The Youth Councils, comprised of young people, ages 10 to 18, who are elected by their peers, offer their recommendations to local governments on a range of children and youth issues, including educational needs and priorities and the promotion of children's rights. While acknowledging that the Councils have had varying degrees of impact on policymaking, Cretu emphasizes that CRIC's principle goal is to empower children and youth to be active in their society. Through the Councils, young people learn to identify issues, articulate their needs, and assert themselves. If they are successful in positively impacting policies, all the better. In 2004, the LCYCs created a National Network in order to have a greater impact at the national level.

Through Youth Act!, young people, particularly those living in rural communities, receive the training and support they need to launch volunteer projects.

■ Youth Act!

In 2002, CRIC launched the Youth Act! project, a component of the Democracy Education Exchange Program (DEEP) run by a consortium of NGOs in the United States working in the field of civic education. Inspired by the Youth Act! program of Street Law, a U.S.-based NGO, the project supports children and youth participation at the local level.

Through Youth Act!, young people, particularly those living in rural communities, receive the training and support they need to launch volunteer projects. During the course of the program, participants study local issues, interview experts, develop detailed action plans, and mobilize members of the community in support of their efforts. In 2004, roughly 300 students in 20 communities took part in the program, with young people from Ukraine and Belarus also participating.

Among the projects they pursued were the expansion of a school library in the village of Carabetovca, the repair of a central roadway in the village of Caracui, the planting of new trees in the deforested village of Chirca,

Like many youth-serving NGOs, CRIC faces the challenge of working within an environment in which young people's problems are not considered a priority and in which adult authority figures are often not prepared to accept the views and recommendations of youth.

and a campaign by young people in Geamăna to inform local residents of the health dangers posed by a nearby landfill. Said Tamara Cobăleanu, a participant in the landfill awareness-raising project, “I have learned to identify problems, to negotiate with my colleagues and with other students and even with adults. Now I am not afraid to say that there is a problem and we all should get involved in order to solve it.”¹²⁵

In 2003 and 2004, Youth Act! was funded by UNICEF Moldova, the World Bank, the U.S. Government, and Rädä Barnen/Swedish Save the Children. Partners in the project include the Ministry of Education, the Department of Youth and Sports, the Association European Youth Exchange Moldova, BCYF, and the Independent Society for Education and Human Rights.

■ **Small Grants Program**

For five years, CRIC has offered support to local youth initiatives through its Small Grants Program. In 2004, more than 100 project proposals were received and 37 supported with US\$18,150. Since the program was launched, more than 2,430 young people have received financial, technical, and logistical support in carrying out their projects, which have ranged from launching youth-led media projects to providing young people with information on their rights, health issues, and human trafficking and its consequences.

Prioritizing Youth

Like many youth-serving NGOs, CRIC faces the challenge of working within an environment in which young people's problems are not considered a priority and in which adult authority figures are often not prepared to accept the views and recommendations of youth. For this reason, CRIC places emphasis—not only on supporting the role of young people in society—but building awareness among parents, school administrators, public officials, and others as to the vital roles young people are capable of playing.

As testimony to its success in promoting active youth engagement and mobilizing public will in support of its efforts, CRIC has been asked to share its experiences and methodology with NGOs in other countries, including Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Romania.

¹²⁵ YouthAct! *15 Stories of Success*, Child Rights Information Center, c. 2003.

Montenegro

Association for Democratic Prosperity-Zid (ADP-Zid), Podgorica

The Association for Democratic Prosperity-Zid (ADP-Zid) promotes and strengthens the ability of individuals and NGOs to participate in the transition process in Montenegro. With an emphasis on strengthening democracy-building efforts and community development, ADP-Zid was founded in 1996 and began its operations with the publication of a student magazine.

The overall aim of ADP-Zid's youth engagement program is to increase the employability and mobility¹²⁶ of Montenegrin youth through alternative education and active involvement in NGO work on a volunteer basis. The organization estimates that there are approximately 350 direct beneficiaries of this



program and more than 1,000 indirect beneficiaries among Montenegrin youth. The organization also supports the work of youth NGOs in Montenegro by expanding their skills in integrating and managing youth volunteers. ADP-Zid concentrates its work on youth, ages 18 to 28. There are no restrictions regarding ethnicity or country of origin (although most beneficiaries are from Montenegro). Special emphasis is given to reaching youth in the northern areas of the country where opportunities are more scarce. ADP-Zid helps to place some of the young volunteers it has trained with other Montenegrin youth organizations.

¹²⁶ Mobility in this context is a reference to the ability of youth to travel freely within the country and abroad (without administrative or financial obstacles) and for them to work in cities other than their home town.

Run by four full-time staff, two part-time staff, and five volunteers, the organization operates in a challenging political environment. According to Program Manager Slobodan Zivković, the still undefined political relationship between Montenegro and Serbia and the boycott of the national parliament by opposition parties complicates an already difficult situation.¹²⁷ Zivković points out that Montenegro suffers from a large export deficit, high rates of unemployment¹²⁸ and poverty, a sluggish reform process, and corruption.

In addition, as Vojislav Jovanović points out, there is still relatively little understanding on the part of government officials about the societal contributions of NGOs. The role of volunteerism and the opportunities it provides is equally misunderstood. “If you want to do a community project, you can do it on your own. You don’t have to ask the Ministry for money. You can mobilize your neighbor.”¹²⁹ ADP-Zid provides youth with education on both volunteer work and on the role of civil society. One indirect result of ADP-Zid’s efforts is increased public awareness about volunteering.

The lack of support for ADP-Zid’s work on the part of the local government in its hometown of Podgorica has been disappointing. “Unfortunately, youth issues are not a high priority for our government and, as a result, support for youth programs by the local government is modest to non-existent,” according to Zivković. Fortunately, relations are good with other municipal governments in towns such as Kolasin, Cetinje, and Ulcinj. ADP-Zid has worked with these municipalities on community development, including organizing international workcamps in those cities. Along with other local organizations, ADP-Zid is working with the national government on the

development of a youth policy that will foster and support Montenegrin youth programs. Zivković points out that relations with the public sector seem to be improving, as collaboration between NGOs and local and national government has grown over the last four years.

In addition to its work with government, ADP-Zid works in partnership with a



¹²⁷ ADP-Zid program questionnaire.

¹²⁸ Although official statistics show an unemployment rate in Montenegro of 20%, “...unemployment and under-employment rates are substantially higher,” according to Project Coordinator, Vojislav Jovanović.

¹²⁹ Group interview with program managers.

number of local NGOs, particularly those that are active in the Montenegrin Youth Network. The organization also participates in networks at the regional level (such as the South East European Youth Network), and at the international level (with organizations such as the International Cultural Youth Exchange, Service Civil International, MOVIT na Mladina, and Youth Action for Peace). ADP-Zid encourages the NGOs with which it works to expand the opportunities they make available to youth.

An Antidote for Apathy

AD P-Zid's youth engagement program is designed to combat the passivity of Montenegrin youth and to spark their interest in community development.¹³⁰ As Zivković explains, "One of the challenges in Montenegro is that of motivating youth to take part in activities."¹³¹ Participants in the program are quick to point out their frustration with the lack of recreational, cultural, and employment opportunities in the area. Says one, "It's hard to live here. There's no work and no money. Youth here spend their time in coffee shops... two or three hours a day. They are not interested in looking at other options. Lots talk about leaving, but they don't have the opportunity to do so."¹³² Jovanović agrees, "There is no sense of collective responsibility. Everyone is happy just drinking coffee."¹³³

ADP-Zid is addressing this situation by encouraging youth to be active, to take responsibility, to get involved, and to learn how to make a contribution. "We help to build their self-confidence and provide them with an opportunity to see something different, to learn by doing, and to realize their ideas," says Jovanović. "The main message is that they should stay here in Montenegro and do something useful. If there is no job, they should do volunteer work. When you get involved in this way, you understand that you are a part of something larger." The program also allows youth to develop skills that they can apply to future paid employment.

Program staff consider non-formal education and volunteer exchanges to be particularly efficient tools for fostering youth participation and youth leadership in the region. Many youth lack experience with volunteer work. According to one of the program participants interviewed, "If you don't get paid, young people are not interested." This type of attitude may be understandable where youth need to earn money to survive. For others it may demonstrate a lack of understanding or a lack of respect for volunteer work.

"It's hard to live here. There's no work and no money. Youth here spend their time in coffee shops... two or three hours a day. They are not interested in looking at other options. Lots talk about leaving, but they don't have the opportunity to do so."

¹³⁰ Program staff attribute this lack of interest to a variety of factors including the lack of structured opportunities for youth engagement in their communities.

¹³¹ Program questionnaire.

¹³² Group interview with program participants.

¹³³ Vojislav Jovanović, group interview with staff.

As a result of this program and others, volunteerism is becoming more common in Montenegro and there is growing interest on the part of local residents to take part in community activities.

It is important to remember as well that during the Communist era, family members of these youth were forced to “volunteer” their time to the State and may, as a result, harbor lingering feelings of resentment.

In addition to general training about the role of the NGO sector and the value of volunteer work, program participants learn practical skills on how to write a project proposal or how to prepare a résumé. Depending on the interests of the individual, information is provided on issues such as democracy, human rights, education, and community development. “We talk about what they would like to change here and how that might be accomplished,” says Jovanović. “We help them to get involved in international programs, to change certain things in the community, and to get jobs.”¹³⁴ The program’s English instructor, Ana Radulović, says that the youth first arrive at ADP-Zid saying they are just there to listen or because a friend is there. “Within two months they are doing something. I can see a real change.”¹³⁵

Promoting a Spirit of Volunteerism

ADP-Zid’s approach is based on short- and long-term volunteer exchanges, non-formal education, the encouragement of volunteerism, and small grants. The goal is to train new youth leaders and to increase youth engagement in community work. Programming is also designed to raise youth employability, helping young people to become more competitive in the labor market through the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and experience. Youth—both project coordinators and volunteers—are actively engaged in providing input (through questionnaires and interviews) into the design and implementation of new ADP-Zid programming. They also take part in program evaluation.

Program managers report that participants become more self-confident and interested in taking part in community development through their participation in the program. Some join ADP-Zid activities, or those of other organizations, while others develop new ideas and projects independently. As a result of this program and others, volunteerism is becoming more common in Montenegro and there is growing interest on the part of local residents to take part in community activities. Participants encourage their peers to get involved and a growing number of young people have requested information about ADP-Zid.

While initially, the program focused on providing youth with short-term international volunteer opportunities, over time, long-term exchanges were

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Group interview.

developed through programs such as the European Voluntary Service. As part of these short- and long-term exchanges, ADP-Zid sends Montenegrin youth overseas to take part in international workcamps and hosts young volunteers from overseas who come to take part in similar workcamps in Montenegro. Learning by doing is key to the training the youth receive in the international workcamps. One program participant says, “At the workcamps, we do community projects. I’ve worked with children in an orphanage, helped to build an outdoor market, and cleaned up a beach.”

In response to the needs of the youth with which ADP-Zid works, non-formal education programs have been developed in areas such as computers, language training, and volunteer management. In addition to the creation of a database of volunteers, research and public awareness campaigns have been carried out to foster volunteerism in Montenegro. Youth who have participated in ADP-Zid’s programs and others are invited to take part in these activities.

ADP-Zid makes youth aware of the options available to them, helps them to develop the skills necessary to play a role in decision making, and motivates them to take responsibility for becoming actively engaged in the decisions that are important to them. Says Radulović, “It’s in my nature to do volunteer work. I had the will to do it. The organization has showed me how to do it. There are lots like me who want to be involved in community life.”



Montenegro

Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET), Podgorica

The Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET) focuses on helping young Montenegrins take the lead in building civil society in their country. With a strong emphasis on human rights, AET works to promote democracy, equality and tolerance in Montenegro. Launched in 2001, AET is dedicated to increasing youth participation in decision making at the local level, engaging youth in their communities, and fostering adoption of a national youth policy.¹³⁶

“Young people in Montenegro are not socially integrated... We help to make [them] aware that they are part of the community.”

According to AET staff, Montenegrin youth have experienced profound political upheavals, economic collapse, and ethnic conflict. Ongoing crises in the region have intensified the challenges that young people typically face as they begin to define their personal and social identities. The shifting political landscape in Serbia and Montenegro, combined with widespread poverty, have fueled uncertainties among youth about the future. “This results in a limited skill set, a lack of confidence, a lack of leadership and mentoring, increased drug and alcohol abuse, and results ultimately in a passive, unproductive, and unhappy citizenry. Young people in Montenegro are not socially integrated,”¹³⁷ reports Danilo Radulović, AET’s President. “We help to make young people aware that they are part of the community.”¹³⁸

The “Youth for Youth” Project

“Youth for Youth” is AET’s response to what staff perceived as a lack of vision and motivation on the part of Montenegrin youth.¹³⁹ Designed to foster youth engagement in their communities, the program works with local Youth Councils to provide youth with a structured environment in which young people can develop their interests and gain recognition for their accomplishments both inside and outside of school. The program encourages youth, ages 11 to 18, to take on leadership roles and provides them with the skills to do so through workshops, discussions, study tours, and peer education.¹⁴⁰ Participation in the project also prepares youth for future employment. “We want to engage youth in decision making at all

¹³⁶ In addition to BCYF, AET has received funding from Catholic Relief Services, UNICEF, the Government of Montenegro and private companies. The organization employs one full-time and two part-time staff members, and includes 16 activists and 96 volunteers. In addition to the youth themselves, parents, teachers, peers and other community members have taken part in AET activities.

¹³⁷ Danilo Radulovic, program questionnaire.

¹³⁸ Group interview with staff.

¹³⁹ Staff point to a lack of job opportunities, increased drug and alcohol use, a lack of exposure to foreign cultures, political instability, and a lack of cultural opportunities as contributing factors.

¹⁴⁰ Former Youth Council activists tend to stay involved in the program. Some of these youth mentor the younger and newer members.

levels,” says Andjelija Kovacević, Coordinator. “We didn’t have an organized student movement in our day. If you give enough support to 17- and 18-year-olds, imagine what they will be doing at 30.”¹⁴¹

Six Youth Councils¹⁴² from five different towns in Montenegro have worked with NGOs and the business community as part of the project. In addition, the Youth Councils operate in close cooperation with local government. According to program staff, the Youth Councils have overcome initial resistance, gained the respect and support of school and municipal authorities, and made a noticeable improvement in the lives of youth in the schools and in the community.¹⁴³ The school provides an on site coordinator and an office. AET has also established partnerships with local businesses. These companies provide equipment and advertising and send representatives to the school to talk with the students. AET plans to invite other professionals from the media and information technology industry.



The youth focus on local problems and determine which projects they will tackle. In Podgorica, the Youth Council from the Economics High School ran a highly successful campaign to force the government to build a new

¹⁴¹ Group interview with staff.

¹⁴² AET created the majority of the Youth Councils in partnership with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in 2002. All students are eligible. Based on their level of interest in social engagement, members are selected by school administrators and older Youth Council members. AET is looking for funds in order to reach 17 additional cities in Montenegro.

¹⁴³ AET program questionnaire.

school. Built in the 1920s and used for many years as a stable, the school's infrastructure had become completely inadequate. The Youth Council took the initiative and organized plays, exhibits, and a soccer tournament to raise money for a new school. They created dramatic posters¹⁴⁴ highlighting conditions at the school and sent postcards to the homes of local residents. A petition was circulated which generated 5,000 signatures in two days. A photo of a child carrying a door at the school was auctioned off. The students went on strike for a week to raise awareness within the community and the government about conditions in the school. Representatives of the national government and foreign governments visited the school. AET staff indicate that the response from school management and the local community was quite positive. Teachers supported the effort as well. Ultimately, the government put the project for the new school on their list of priorities.



In Plav, students waged a campaign to build an outdoor space with a table and benches where they could socialize between classes. The school and the community supported them, they found their own donors, and with the help of AET the project was completed. The work of the Youth Councils extends out into the communities as well. In Herceg Novi, the local Youth Council ran a campaign against serving alcohol to juveniles in cafés. The Youth Councils also participate in city-wide efforts such as the reconstruction of the main street in Berane, Montenegro. One program participant comments, “I was very passive.

¹⁴⁴ The walls of the AET's offices are decorated with these posters and other reminders of the battles in which the youth have engaged.

I was afraid to say anything. After two or three months with the program, I made friends. We did our first campaign on street traffic, the second year we worked on the environment, and we did debates on television.”¹⁴⁵

Empowering Youth to Assume Their Place in Society

AET’s program fills a critical gap for youth in Montenegro. “There are not many after school activities. The Youth Council provides opportunities for socializing, doing projects, and gaining new experiences.”¹⁴⁶ One participant indicates that in his school they had 20 applicants for the Youth Council in 2003 and 50 applicants in 2004. “With the Youth Council, students have a place to go. People recognize them; it makes them feel special,” Kovacević explains. In addition, AET is working to help youth establish a network of Youth Councils in 2004 with a newsletter and joint projects.¹⁴⁷

AET staff believe that youth have a critical role to play in their society, helping the country to move beyond its communist legacy and transcend the problems associated with this period of transition.¹⁴⁸ AET provides youth with experience in democratic practice, teaching them the way in which an NGO functions by including them in AET projects as volunteers. Projects are presented and voted upon by the youth.

The process enables youth to express their concerns regarding local problems and to exercise their creativity in developing solutions. “The driving idea was that if young people were empowered to confront the risks in their lives they could and would make healthy choices for themselves.”¹⁴⁹

Promoting Human Rights

AET’s approach appeals to youth interested in the promotion of human rights and emphasizes the roles of culture, peace, learning, and education in creating conditions favorable to nurturing respect for those rights. Seeking to address the absence of institutions within which youth can participate, AET works with local youth councils to help strengthen their level of cooperation with local government. In this way, AET hopes to raise the level of youth engagement in community initiatives. AET staff emphasize the creative potential of youth, encourage teamwork and communication, offer technical and financial assistance so that that youth can pursue issues of interest to them, provide mentoring, and offer peace-building activities and seminars on human

“With the Youth Council, students have a place to go. People recognize them; it makes them feel special.”

¹⁴⁵ Group interview with program participants.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ In addition to their work on the Youth Councils, AET program participants volunteer with other NGOs and take part in a variety of community projects.

¹⁴⁸ Program questionnaire.

¹⁴⁹ BCYF Project Application Form for AET.

“We knew nothing when we were in school. We are giving youth the information they need to take action. With a little support, these students can really make a difference.”

rights. Training courses are provided on subjects such as journalism, computer literacy, project proposal writing, and teamwork.

AET has run numerous public awareness campaigns on human rights. With support from the Government of Montenegro, AET members prepared a document they called a “Student Passport,” which contains information on a diverse set of issues critical to youth including human rights, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, how to apply for a driver’s license, legal rights, the role of the police and the army, corruption, travel abroad, and how to be active in an NGO. “We knew nothing when we were in school. We are giving youth the information they need to take action,” says Kovacević. Andjelka Janjusević, AET’s Assistant, adds, “With a little support, these students can really make a difference.”

Gaining Key Life Skills Through Active Youth Participation

Staff introduce changes in the program based on the input they receive from youth. “Our approach is to help young people to express their ideas and opinions freely,” says Danilo Radulović. “We are listening to their needs and giving them an opportunity and a place to show what they want.”¹⁵⁰ Youth are involved in all phases of the program from design to evaluation, are encouraged to speak up, and play an active role in decision making. Says one participant, “We made a list of the top ten problems in the school and the community to help us decide which projects to take on.”¹⁵¹ Adds another, “We have had lots of problems with the sanctions and the bombings... industry has been affected. The best approach is to organize small groups to make things better.”

The program provides youth with information they would not otherwise have access to and builds their verbal skills and self-esteem.¹⁵² Through their participation in the project, young people develop critical life skills such as listening, tolerance toward diversity, conflict management, critical thinking, and teamwork. Initially curious or even suspicious about the program, parents became very supportive.¹⁵³ “They were free to meet with us and talk,” says Kovacević. Some parents have provided financial assistance, while others have helped in carrying out some of the campaigns.¹⁵⁴ “The best compliment we received was from one father who said that he could not recognize his own son after a year,” Radulović relates. “A once very shy boy who frequently skipped classes, he had become the leader of his Youth Council and started working on projects until late in the evening. Three years later he continues to play this role and feels more optimistic about his own future.”

¹⁵⁰ AET program questionnaire.

¹⁵¹ Group interview with program participants.

¹⁵² “I’ve been able to develop new abilities. Everyone has their responsibility...their job. I feel useful to the school and to the community.” Group interview with program participants.

¹⁵³ AET staff point out that they devoted considerable time to explaining the program to the parents.

¹⁵⁴ In Nikšić, Montenegro the director of the school and the majority of teachers worked in cleaning up the school garden as part of the Youth Council’s ecological campaign.

Youth learn a variety of skills in the AET program. According to Radulović, “I have always told the students that improvisation is the master of success. In one school, the students decided to put on a play with two parts. On the day of the performance, one of the two actors did not show up. The other young man took the stage and played both parts. The students loved it.”

A Long-Term Focus

As is the case with some of the other programs profiled, AET provides participants with an opportunity to continue working with AET upon graduation. Some work as volunteers and others as program coordinators. “We are looking at the long-term, helping them become part of the NGO sector,” Janjusević explains. One of the youth involved in AET’s program says, “I want to continue to do this kind of work. I want to change people’s way of thinking.” One of the benefits of the program is the opportunity it provides youth to work with one another regardless of their economic, ethnic, or political situation. “I like convincing people to work together on problems,” relates one participant. Once a year, all of the Youth Councils hold a summit to exchange ideas and lessons learned.

The staff at AET are well aware of the impact of their work. Says Janjusević, “When I was in school, there was a horrible situation in this country. We didn’t have anyone to listen to us. We’re trying to give these young people someone who will listen to them. I feel like I am making a difference here at AET. It’s a long-term project... twenty years.”



Romania

New Horizons Foundation, Lupeni

Romania's Jiu Valley is home to the New Horizons Foundation. The World Bank has designated this extremely poor coal-mining region as a "severely disadvantaged area." More than half the area's 200,000 residents are unemployed. Despite this stark backdrop, visitors to the New Horizons Foundation step into a world of color, energy, and extraordinary commitment. There is standing room only as project beneficiaries, volunteers, and staff vie for the floor in order to share their experiences with "Kaizen," the unique youth development model pioneered by New Horizons. Blending adventure education, character development and service learning,¹⁵⁵ "Kaizen" (Japanese for "continuous improvement") combines fun, learning, and service to improve self and society in a program that fosters personal development and community engagement on the part of the region's youth.

The combination of poverty and corruption has had a particularly insidious impact on Romanian youth.

Established in 1999 by adventure education and service learning advocates Dana and Brandi Bates, the New Horizons Foundation first became known for its award-winning Viata Program.¹⁵⁶ Despite the success of this adventure education camp benefiting 550 Jiu Valley youth each summer, the founders of New Horizons came to believe that the region also needed a more intensive, year-round program in order to more fully respond to the needs of local youth and the community at large.¹⁵⁷ In 2001, the New Horizons Foundation launched the Kaizen program in response to this need.

Fighting Civic Apathy and Corruption through Service Learning

Most post-communist societies struggle with civic apathy, corruption, low social capital, and distrust.¹⁵⁸ The problem is particularly acute in Romania where the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989) is widely credited with the systematic erosion of interpersonal trust and cooperation. "In a World Values survey publicized on the BBC, Romania voted itself the unhappiest country in the entire world (and all Romanians consider the Jiu Valley the most unhappy place in Romania),"¹⁵⁹ explains New Horizons

¹⁵⁵ Service learning pioneer, James C. Kielsmeier (President and CEO of the U.S.-based National Youth Leadership Council) serves on the international advisory board of New Horizons.

¹⁵⁶ In 2002, the Viata Program was recognized as one of the top Romanian youth activity programs when it won a second place at the Gala Civil Society Awards. The award is given by the Romanian Academic Society in recognition of excellence in the field of social activism.

¹⁵⁷ The Viata program was designed to foster civic values and ecological responsibility on the part of the participants. To date, it has benefited 2500 young people, 20% of whom come from the state-run orphanages. New Horizons program managers observe youth in the Viata program and identify those whom they believe have the ability to take part in Kaizen.

¹⁵⁸ Anthropologist and Romania specialist Dr. David Kideckel believes that civic apathy is greater in Lupeni—where New Horizons is headquartered—than anywhere else in Romania. Program questionnaire.

¹⁵⁹ Dana Bates, program questionnaire. This study of more than 65 countries was published in the *New Scientist* magazine and was reported by the BBC on October 10, 2003 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/africa/3157570.stm>).

Co-founder and Executive Director Dana Bates. The combination of poverty and corruption has had a particularly insidious impact on Romanian youth. A recent survey indicates that 50 percent of young people believe that the way to achieve success is through stealing. Another 30 percent indicate success can best be achieved through connections, 11 percent through luck, and only 9 percent believe that hard work and qualities such as integrity are important to success.¹⁶⁰ Although numerous NGOs work with Romanian youth, few are concentrating on strengthening Romania's civic culture through youth. Fewer still provide youth with the opportunity to engage in community service.

New Horizons staff believe that the history of the region is such that democratic values and skills must be largely created from scratch. "It's not a simple question of improving things, reversing a decline, or mending things here and there," says Bates. "A new start is needed in these countries and youth hold the key. The art of association is key to building democracy and needs to be nurtured through strategic grassroots interventions. Youth play a critical role because they are not hardened to the 'inevitability' of corruption and apathy."¹⁶¹



According to Bates, "Kaizen helps to solve the upstream issues in post-communist cultures of moral corruption and the subsequent inability to work together for the common good."¹⁶² Kaizen youth reject use of the common phrase "asta este," which means "that's the way things are; nothing can be done." Club members see themselves as agents of change rather than as victims of circumstance.

The Kaizen model consists of community development clubs that meet twice a week and carry out service learning projects about every two months. Each meeting includes three components: 1) a fun team building game; 2) a narrative reading and discussion; and 3) a training (in conflict resolution,

¹⁶⁰ This data was reported by the Romania Survey Institute in 2004. Program questionnaire.

¹⁶¹ New Horizons program questionnaire. Statements attributed to "Bates" refer to Dana Bates throughout the document. The Kaizen clubs directly address the issue of youth apathy and have found that it is when they actually get involved in a project that youth first take an active interest in their community.

¹⁶² New Horizons program questionnaire. "There are lots of good-willed people here. We want to give public expression to that in a place where predatory behavior is celebrated." Group discussion.

computers, etc.) or project planning session (to develop the community service project). Kaizen facilitators¹⁶³ lead discussions about community problems and needs and participants analyze local systems and structures to identify the root causes of these problems and to design possible solutions. Demonstrating a strong commitment to social action, club members frequently gather for additional brainstorming and research sessions in addition to their regularly scheduled club meetings.

Kaizen's strategy is to create and sustain a volunteer and community service mentality where none exists by engaging youth in local service projects.¹⁶⁴ A micro-culture is created that nurtures social capital development. Through their participation, young people develop the critical skills and values that will prepare them for active citizenship. The idea is to "increase the quality of social participation through an experiential 'learning by doing' methodology."¹⁶⁵ Kaizen is a social incubator "for the skills, attitudes, and (inter)personal values necessary for living cooperatively and productively in a modern democratic society."¹⁶⁶ The program, based on a process of continuous engagement, repeatedly engages young people in community action, intentionally creating a lifelong habit of service.



The New Horizons Foundation's diverse array of partners and donors includes the Ford Foundation (through Innovations in Civic Participation); West Virginia University; the Kaufmann Foundation for Youth Entrepreneurship; U.S.-based churches; Cluj, Timișoara, and Petroșani Universities; the Romanian Ministry of Education; the National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption; the Romanian Orthodox Church; Rotary International, the Peace Corps; and BCYF. The Foundation has also received

¹⁶³ Kaizen refers to its leaders/trainers as facilitators. They help to ensure that members internalize positive values, have fun, and implement community service projects.

¹⁶⁴ As founder Dana Bates points out, "One of the challenges for service learning projects in developed areas is to identify meaningful service projects with visible impact. This is definitely not a problem in Romania." New Horizons program questionnaire.

¹⁶⁵ New Horizons, program questionnaire.

¹⁶⁶ New Horizons Foundation. "BCYF Visit, Lupeni, September 22, 2004," p. 9.

support from local and national businesses. The Kaizen clubs are 90 percent self-sustaining through the assistance of local businesses, which provide support for specific projects (rather than to the club itself). The club's track record is provided to prospective donors and helps to generate this support.¹⁶⁷

New Horizons is also part of an 18-month USAID faith-based grant intended to promote service learning in the public school system through the Romanian Orthodox Church. International Orthodox Christian Charities are also collaborating on this project.

Already an approved extracurricular program in the Lupeni public schools, Kaizen managers plan to establish similar programs across the country in 2005, effectively launching a nationwide service learning movement in Romania.¹⁶⁸

The Kaizen Approach to Social Capital Development

Kaizen clubs utilize youth voluntary service as a strategy to develop the positive values needed for sustainable development. The program is designed to mobilize youth and to help them to become actively engaged in the life of their community. The model is based on service learning and focuses on the “three E’s:” equity, environment, and economic productivity. As stated on its website, the primary mission of New Horizons “is the development of social capital¹⁶⁹—the moral competencies that build trust and make sustainable development possible. Social capital development is the upstream issue in Romania. Until this is solved, the downstream issues of poverty, child abandonment, environmental degradation, and corruption will continue... we are facilitating a shift in perception away from a win-lose way of thinking, towards a win-win cooperative ethic...”¹⁷⁰

Particular emphasis is placed by New Horizons on battling local corruption (moral and financial) through democratic theory and practice. According to Bates, “We are hoping to develop service learning into a global tool for fighting corruption at the grassroots level.”¹⁷¹ While many definitions of corruption focus on the abuse of power by public officials, Bates emphasizes

“Social capital development is the upstream issue in Romania. Until this is solved, the downstream issues of poverty, child abandonment, environmental degradation, and corruption will continue...”

¹⁶⁷ NGOs tend to be viewed with suspicion in Romania as some are used for illicit purposes. For this reason, New Horizons strives for 100% transparency in its operations.

¹⁶⁸ New Horizons pairs its service delivery work with a strong research and policy component. In this context, New Horizons organized Romania's 1st National Conference on Social Capital and Service Learning in October 2004. The conference was linked to the organization's policy strategy to ensure that Romania's Youth National Action Plan includes youth voluntary service (and service learning).

¹⁶⁹ Social capital development (see footnote 17) has drawn considerable academic interest in recent years. Community service and service learning are ways to build a society's social capital by offering participants a way to contribute to the greater good of their community. “All our societies need more social capital...and in my view the single most promising area of initiative is youth service.” Robert Putnam as quoted in the New Horizons Foundation call for papers for the 1st National Conference on Social Capital and Service Learning (2000 Ford Foundation Worldwide Workshop on Youth Involvement).

¹⁷⁰ www.new-horizons.ro

¹⁷¹ E-mail to the authors, March 5, 2005.

“We are better off spiritually, morally, and socially when we are giving to others. Kaizen is the support system to make this possible.”

the need to address corruption in the private sphere as well as the public one, and to tackle it from an early age.¹⁷²

Kaizen youth become familiar with key elements of democracy (such as participation, mutual accountability, and peaceful change) through their work on a variety of high impact community service projects. It is an upstream approach that works to address the root causes of citizen apathy. The theoretical underpinnings of the approach are rooted in the social capital movement¹⁷³ (emphasizing social responsibility reinforced through positive social interaction) and in the capabilities approach (emphasizing personal development and individual rights).¹⁷⁴ Kaizen works to blend individual rights with social responsibility. According to Bates, “Civil society is ultimately based on the *desire* and *ability* (skills) of individuals to self-organize to solve collective action problems. Kaizen is engineered to develop both. We want to motivate the unmotivated and associate the non-associated in the region.”¹⁷⁵ The benefits are far-reaching, says Bates, adding, “We are better off spiritually, morally, and socially when we are giving to others. Kaizen is the support system to make this possible.”¹⁷⁶

The Kaizen model of experiential education is intentionally simple and emphasizes flexibility. There is no single key to the program. Success in a Kaizen club depends upon adapting the model to the needs and interests of the young members.¹⁷⁷ A comprehensive training manual tied into New Horizon’s website¹⁷⁸ is being developed to facilitate scaling up the model for use throughout Romania, but trainers recognize the importance of “being open to and cultivating a participatory process.”¹⁷⁹ Kaizen staff are viewed as facilitators of the program and receive much of their training by working in the Viata summer program. They, in effect, “grow with the youth.”¹⁸⁰

Youth are given great responsibility in the Kaizen program, with members of the clubs playing a central role in running it. The Kaizen model provides a basic framework and training modules that guide and encourage

¹⁷² Bates cites the World Bank in emphasizing the centrality of the fight against corruption to the work of Kaizen in Romania. “The Bank has identified corruption as the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development. It undermines development by distorting the rule of law and weakening the institutional foundation on which economic growth depends.” The Bank considers strengthening civil society participation as one of the five keys to fighting corruption. <http://www.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt/index.cfm>.

¹⁷³ This approach was pioneered by theorists like Robert Putnam (*Making Democracy Work*, 1993) and Francis Fukuyama. The latter has publicly endorsed the work of New Horizons in a letter of recommendation (see: http://www.new-horizons.ro/about_us/recomendations.asp).

¹⁷⁴ This approach was developed by Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen.

¹⁷⁵ New Horizons program questionnaire.

¹⁷⁶ Dana Bates, group discussion.

¹⁷⁷ According to Bates, “It is important to have a critical mass of excited, committed youth in a group.”

¹⁷⁸ This state of the art website (www.new-horizons.ro) includes searchable databases to assist in running the Kaizen model, space in which to share lessons learned, a Kaizen forum (blog), training materials, and “success stories.” A similar website has been created in Romanian (www.noi-orizonturi.ro). Regional coordinators have been selected to facilitate the expansion program.

¹⁷⁹ New Horizons program questionnaire. It is worth noting that educators in Romanian schools tend to be more authoritarian in their approach, so the Kaizen approach represents a significant break with tradition.

¹⁸⁰ New Horizons program questionnaire. Kaizen has eight full-time staff and four full-time volunteers.

the members toward community service, but the youth are responsible for everything from brainstorming projects to implementation and the evaluation of impact. Kaizen youth are responsible for planning the budget and mobilizing local resources to support the projects.¹⁸¹ They democratically select the projects on which they will work, tackling progressively more challenging tasks. Youth are encouraged to work with the community in their project development and not to assume that they have the perfect solution.

To guide the identification of projects, New Horizons has developed a service project checklist (see Appendix B). This set of criteria helps to promote partnering with other organizations, community awareness, structural change, and skills development. By taking these criteria into account, youth are more likely to identify meaningful projects with significant, tangible impact. Kaizen also teaches the joy of community service and the checklist helps to ensure that the tasks incorporate an element of fun.



The New Horizons program helps youth to develop the vision necessary to identify problems, formulate strategies to address those problems, and acquire the skills needed to implement their plan. Kaizen youth learn how to mobilize local resources as they take steps to identify and approach potential partners in government, business, and the NGO sector. They also develop critical life skills in areas such as conflict resolution, critical thinking, and teamwork. The program benefits the entire community by “improving the physical and environmental design of the community, helping the community to address local

¹⁸¹ Originally, New Horizons would give each club a budget and US \$50 a month, but now the club members handle these responsibilities themselves.

issues and take advantage of local economic opportunities, and providing powerful examples in youth of citizen responsibility.”¹⁸² Kaizen youth are an inspiration to others in the community, raising confidence levels about the future.

Today there are eight fully functioning Kaizen clubs in Lupeni (four launched recently with funding from BCYF), and plans are in place to develop 32 additional clubs by mid-2006.¹⁸³ Each club carries out six service projects a year and each of those projects affects a minimum of 50 individuals. Expanding the program through the creation of additional clubs is made easier by the simplicity of the model, the ease of transmitting the curriculum and lessons learned through the website, and the relatively low cost of the program. Apart from some start-up costs (in terms of space and computers), the clubs are almost entirely self-running and self-funding.

Engaging Youth in Service Learning

The Kaizen program targets youth, ages 12 to 18. It is an extracurricular activity which combines physical, social, and vocational elements¹⁸⁴ to provide participants with the knowledge, skills, and drive they need to create change and become leaders in their community. “Using community service projects as an educational tool, youth set goals for improving their community, learn important vocational skills, develop civic competencies, and work closely with the main actors in government, media, and business to benefit



¹⁸² BCYF Appropriation Recommendation for New Horizons, 2003.

¹⁸³ As part of its national expansion strategy, New Horizons is actively engaged in discussions with the Ministry of Education, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Youth National Authority.

¹⁸⁴ Kaizen emphasizes healthy lifestyles (including outdoor recreation), trust and teamwork, and the development of marketable skills.

the community.”¹⁸⁵ In the process, youth model a different type of civic behavior and demonstrate the power of citizen activism to the community at large. By empowering youth with the skills they need to improve their own communities, program participants are able to develop their social and civic competencies alongside their vocational competencies.¹⁸⁶ Kaizen members are encouraged to “continually use critical reasoning in rethinking how things are done in their community and in their daily actions and thoughts.”¹⁸⁷

Kaizen clubs were initially age segregated, but it was discovered that the 12-year-olds lacked the skills necessary to succeed in the community service projects. Now youth of all ages work together and learn from each other. Says one older participant, “It’s not difficult working with 12-year-olds.” Says another, “Sometimes they have better ideas than we do. We learn how to work with people of all ages.”¹⁸⁸

The economic level and ethnicity of participants is varied. Most participants, however, are quite poor and about half come from difficult home environments. Program organizers believe there is a threshold of viability. If 90 percent of the participants have serious problems, it would be difficult to make the club work. If 30 percent have problems, the others can provide them with the support they need. Given New Horizon’s interest in fostering social inclusion, some clubs will be designed to ensure diversity. While social capital theory emphasizes the importance of “bridging” societal divides, Bates takes the concept one step further to promote “bonding for bridging.” The emphasis is on creating “in-group” loyalty (bonding) based on “out-group” service and inclusion (bridging). Program managers work to ensure that the participants do not become too insular even though they have a strong sense of identity.

Due to a lack of infrastructure, local schools operate in two shifts (morning and evening). As a result, some Kaizen clubs meet before school and others meet after classes have ended for the day. About half of the clubs meet on school premises, while others meet off campus at New Horizon’s facilities. As the program expands, it is expected that most of the new clubs will meet on school property. One school has already devoted one room exclusively to Kaizen activities and members have been able to customize it by painting logos and positive messages on the walls. The school has even provided free internet access to the members.

While New Horizons staff would like to include out-of-school youth in the program alongside students (and at times have two or three out-of-school youth taking part in club activities), parents and teachers are generally reluctant

By empowering youth with the skills they need to improve their own communities, program participants are able to develop their social and civic competencies alongside their vocational competencies.

¹⁸⁵ BCYF Appropriation Recommendation for New Horizons, 2003.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ New Horizons Foundation. “BCYF Visit, Lupeni, September 22, 2004,” p. 9.

¹⁸⁸ Group meeting with program participants.

All Kaizen clubs ask their members to sign a covenant wherein they promise to abide by certain values... Among other things, they commit to respect others, to accept responsibility, to be honest, and to participate actively in positive change.

to accept this type of diversity within the club. Currently, New Horizons is developing plans for Kaizen lines of clubs that specifically target Rroma youth, out-of-school youth, and institutionalized youth respectively.

In addition to the work that the Kaizen teams carry out in their community, club meetings also provide an opportunity for members to support one another in addressing personal challenges. When the members heard that one of the young women in the group was distraught because she was being forced by her parents to drop out of school and go overseas to work (either to Spain to pick vegetables or to Hungary to work on a pig farm), they came up with several alternatives and encouraged her to make her wishes known to her parents. The young woman's parents relented and she was able to find a job locally, stay in school and continue taking part in her Kaizen club.¹⁸⁹

Kaizen members commit to achieving specific short- and long-term goals in three broad areas: Physical Fitness/Health; Vocational/Intellectual Skills; and Social/Moral/Civic Values. All Kaizen clubs ask their members to sign a covenant wherein they promise to abide by certain values. The covenant is a living document that groups can revise over time as they see fit. They sign the agreement in a solemn ceremony and the document is laminated and placed on the wall. Among other things, they commit to respect others, to accept responsibility, to be honest, and to participate actively in positive change. The idea behind the covenant is to jumpstart the internalization of positive social values.¹⁹⁰

Kaizen club members were initially mocked by some in their community for even attempting to address local problems. In an early clean-up project, for example, some community members (including adults) pelted the youth with trash as they worked. Despite this effort to demonstrate the futility of their work, Kaizen members persevered and completed the project. In another case, possibly inspired by the work of their peers, non-affiliated youth in one neighborhood where Kaizen meetings take place have begun to spontaneously organize neighborhood clean-ups. Kaizen members report that their friends want to join Kaizen and there have been numerous requests for the formation of Kaizen clubs in local schools. Says one club member, "I called a friend to tell her about this program. I told her that she would learn many things. There are games, stories, and you can help people. You will be taken seriously."

Parents have been equally supportive and New Horizons has responded by creating a club for parents of Kaizen members. Fifty parents attended a Kaizen parent's day event in 2003 and seventy people participated in a grandparent's ball that Kaizen youth sponsored. Parents use the club meetings

¹⁸⁹ E-mail to the authors, February 28, 2005.

¹⁹⁰ At the same time, members are encouraged to think about how these values support their work as a team. New Horizons staff stress their desire to ensure that the covenant is not imposed, but democratically embraced by the group.

as an opportunity to encourage their children to work hard in school. Kaizen leaders reinforce this message. The club also provides parents with an all too rare opportunity to interact with one another and discuss community issues. Prior to 1990, such activity would have been illegal. Today, parents become aware of community problems through the Kaizen clubs and can use their influence to open doors. Parents are encouraged to provide feedback to New Horizons on the changes they notice in their children as a result of their participation in the program. Some parents have volunteered their time to help with the club.

One key element of the Kaizen program—and a critical component of service learning approaches such as this—is that time is set aside for reflection upon completion of a service project. Groups go about this differently, with some using journals and others holding group discussions. Frequently, groups will discuss how best to inform the public about issues related to a project, with some clubs staging debates or producing newsletters. Evaluation of the way in which the project was implemented is a key element in the learning process and is generally conducted as a participatory evaluation involving both Kaizen participants and, often, project beneficiaries.



Making a Difference in the Community

Innovation and creativity are hallmarks of the work of these young people. Passenger service on the train from Lupeni to Petroșani was in danger of being discontinued due to cost overruns. The reason for declining revenue was that passengers typically bribed the conductors rather than paying full fare for a ticket. At the same time, the theater in Petroșani was about to go under due to a lack of revenue. To publicize both problems, Kaizen club members decided to take the train once a month to Petroșani in order to go to the theater and to insist on paying full fare for their tickets.

The Kaizen model offers youth graduated challenges. Keeping the challenge at an appropriately high level helps to ensure continued learning and sustained interest on the part of the members. Projects increase in complexity in terms of impact, scope, and depth. From simple clean-up projects, information campaigns, or the collection of goods for orphanages, youth take on successively more demanding projects. A project to convince local officials to install speed-bumps is an example of a more complex project requiring advocacy and sustained interaction with government officials.¹⁹¹ The construction of an outhouse in a local park required numerous meetings and approvals from forestry officials. The Kaizen youth who participated were



¹⁹¹ A USAID study on civic education underscores the importance of such interaction, stating, "... civic education had the greatest impact on participants when programs brought individuals directly into contact with local authorities or engaged in local problem-solving activities." "Approaches to Civic Education: Lessons Learned," Office of Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Agency for International Development, June 2002, p. 24.

able to cover the costs of the project by securing in-kind donations for supplies and labor from the local community. In Uricani, Romania, the Kaizen club has raised donations to cover the costs for the renovation of the local theater/cultural hall. It will be used to screen movies with strong social messages such as “Pay it Forward.”

A recent Kaizen project is breaking new ground in the educational system. Over time, program participants learn that accountability and feedback are critical to the success of their work in the club. Youth in one club are now



applying these same principles to their school and have designed an evaluation form rating teachers’ performance that students will complete and give to their teachers. The directors of the school have given the green light to this very upstream and potentially controversial endeavor. Questions address issues such as, “Do you see your teacher as a role model?” Bates says, “This project goes to the heart of the matter of underdevelopment: corruption—which is the abuse of power through the absence of accountability.”¹⁹²

In March 2005, Kaizen club members in Lupeni organized a “Say No to Bribes” campaign, staging an event that featured a talk by a visiting theology student and an original theater production. Approximately 300 community members from Lupeni and Uricani attended the event, including the Mayor of Uricani and members of the Mayor’s Council, parents, teachers, and non-Kaizen youth. A Kaizen club drama team wrote and staged the play, and additional presentations are scheduled in collaboration with other Kaizen clubs.

Approximately 30 percent of Kaizen activities involve this sort of cross-club cooperation. In 2004, for example, three clubs combined forces on a clean-up project involving 1,000 beneficiaries. All of the schools in the community

¹⁹² E-mail to the authors, February 28, 2005.

competed to see which school could be most improved by a single afternoon of collective effort.

Sometimes these different projects can be mutually reinforcing. In one ecology project, local residents who had previously received food and other goods and services from Kaizen youth spontaneously joined them in the clean-up effort. As one program participant said, “They knew our way of thinking and this was their way of saying thank you.”

Measuring Impact

New Horizons places considerable emphasis on the need to track impact. New Kaizen members complete pre- and post-questionnaires designed to help measure social capital development,¹⁹³ which is seen as the core of the program. “Most development approaches have focused on the areas of financial capital and technical assistance. Yet the need for social capital development, especially in post-communist societies, is equally important. Indeed the proper usage of technical and financial assistance is largely determined by the prior presence of social capital—the ethical norms of honesty and reciprocity.”¹⁹⁴

There is particular emphasis on the development of interpersonal trust and cooperation. Among other measures, scores comparing levels of trust, tolerance/openness to cooperation, and empowerment are tabulated. Data released in November 2004, indicated a 36 percent increase in the level of trust Kaizen youth feel in others after a year of involvement in the program.¹⁹⁵ Focus group activities, interviews, and the collection of anecdotal evidence are also part of New Horizon’s data gathering processes. The organization has recently begun tracking the grades of Kaizen members to see what impact their participation might have on their scores.¹⁹⁶ In addition, New Horizons is beginning to measure the impact of their vocational training (in areas such as civics, technology, life skills, etc.) using McREL¹⁹⁷ benchmarks.

New Horizons emphasizes the need to fight corruption in Romania and trainers draw a clear connection between corruption and cheating in school. Significant attention is placed on the need to build trust and honesty. In another indicator of impact, teachers have reported to staff at New Horizons that they never have to worry about Kaizen youth cheating on tests. It just does not happen. Teachers also report that these students participate more

¹⁹³ Gabi Bădescu, a leading social capital scholar in South Eastern Europe and New Horizons board member, supervises the application of work in the area of social capital development to the New Horizons program.

¹⁹⁴ Certan, Diana. “Service Learning as a Tool for Social Capital Development,” *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁵ EN-TablesGraphs for Preliminary Results for Kaizen Program, e-mail to the authors, December 1, 2004.

¹⁹⁶ Teachers were initially concerned that participation in this extracurricular activity might take time away from their school work. Initial results indicate a neutral or positive impact on grades.

¹⁹⁷ Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning is a U.S.-based NGO dedicated to providing educators around the world with high quality school improvement products and services. As part of its works, McREL has developed content standards for K-12 curriculums. For additional information, see www.mcrel.org.

There is particular emphasis on the development of interpersonal trust and cooperation. Among other measures, scores comparing levels of trust, tolerance/openness to cooperation, and empowerment are tabulated.

actively in class since becoming involved in the program and that retention rates have improved.¹⁹⁸

Finally, the successful completion of these projects is another indicator of the skills these youth have acquired in the individual, social and vocational arenas. Says one participant, “I don’t know what others would think, but I know what I think. Kaizen has changed me from the inside. I felt useless before. I feel happy now.”

Developing Entrepreneurial and Advocacy Skills

Job training is practically non-existent in the Jiu Valley, but Kaizen teaches entrepreneurial skills such as teamwork and problem solving. Kaizen youth learn computer skills, typing, project management, fundraising, and English. Through their involvement in multiple networks within the community,



program participants come into direct contact with potential employers in the public and private spheres. New Horizons will be concentrating more attention on entrepreneurial training in the coming months and is currently working to introduce new training materials into the Kaizen program.

¹⁹⁸ New Horizon’s Project Application Form for BCYF, pp. 12, 17.

As is the case with several other programs profiled here, New Horizons employs some of its program graduates as Kaizen leaders and others as trainers in the summer adventure program, Viata. At the same time, a number of Kaizen members gain additional work experience by volunteering for the organization. In addition, New Horizons has helped some program graduates secure employment with local businesses, such as a local call center. These businesses report being pleased with the work of these young people. New Horizons is working on establishing a contractual relationship with these businesses, guaranteeing them a work force with a specific set of core competencies and a defined value base.



Kaizen encourages program participants to take on the types of advocacy projects where youth can learn how to work with officials at the local, regional, or national levels and teaches them how to locate financing for their projects from within the community. “Contributing to the development of local policy is an empowering experience,” says Bates.¹⁹⁹ New Horizons is developing an advocacy guide for Romanian youth which can be used by both the Kaizen clubs and the general public. The publication will provide guidance on how youth can become involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

Public education is another key aspect of the New Horizons program. Youth are encouraged to play a significant role in educating the public about critical issues facing their community.²⁰⁰ One participant comments, “The

¹⁹⁹ Program questionnaire.

²⁰⁰ New Horizons staff are very conscious of the connection between their programs and the general development process in Romania. Staff make a concerted effort to be knowledgeable about the latest thinking in the development arena. The organization’s emphasis on public education, for example, is linked to the work of Amartya Sen on the role of public education, discourse, and debate in the process of development.

water is polluted. The air is polluted. Sometimes students have to pay to get their grades. People are not getting involved. They don't care about cleaning the town. We have the courage to do what others won't."²⁰¹ When asked whether youth can make a difference in their community, another participant responds by saying, "I think we have already started."²⁰²

Romania

Youth Association for Education, Leadership, Information and Ecology (AtelieR), Braşov

The rooms of AtelieR's Braşov Youth Center are overflowing with projects demonstrating the creativity, exuberance, and skill of the youth who take part in the Center's programs. With courses and clubs on topics as diverse as paleontology, icon painting, music, journalism, astronomy, entrepreneurship, and debate, the Center is a second home for many local youth. Established in 2000, AtelieR complements the formal education programs in Braşov, Romania and the surrounding area. Providing instruction on information technology, civic education, and career counseling, AtelieR works to develop the leadership abilities and sense of social responsibility among its participants. AtelieR created the Braşov Youth Center in 2002, as a space within which local children and youth could develop their academic, social, and artistic skills in a relaxed and fun atmosphere.²⁰³ To date, more than 31,400 youth have taken part in such activities at the Center.

The Center welcomes children and youth, ages 7 to 25. Participants include both in school and out-of-school youth,²⁰⁴ employed and unemployed youth, and disadvantaged youth. AtelieR has received funding from a number of sources including the National Romanian Youth Authority,²⁰⁵ the European Youth Foundation, Braşov County's Office of Education, BCYF, and the YOUTH program of the European Commission (EC). Recognizing the value of this alternative approach to educating youth, the Romanian Ministry

AtelieR works to develop the leadership abilities and sense of social responsibility among its participants.

²⁰¹ Group discussion with program participants.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ The Brasov Youth Center was supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sport from April 2002 until February 2004. During that time, 21,437 youth participated in the Center's programs. From February 2004 to the present, the program has been supported by BCYF and the Romanian National Youth Authority. During this time, approximately 10,000 young people have taken part in activities at the Youth Center.

²⁰⁴ Approximately 10 percent of those who come to the Center are out-of-school youth. The majority of these young people come to the Center in order to take part in the Internet Club. While there, they often hear about other center activities in which they are interested in participating. One such example is AtelieR's Multiethnic Festival.

²⁰⁵ The Romanian Youth Authority was previously known as the Romanian Ministry of Youth and Sports and as the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research and Youth. In the near future, AtelieR will increase its collaboration with authorities at the local level.

of Youth and Sports awarded AtelieR a prize as the Best Youth Center in Romania in 2002.²⁰⁶

Braşov is situated in Romania's most important tourist region and is home to 17.4 percent of Romanian youth.²⁰⁷ Despite the city's relative prosperity, youth unemployment is a significant challenge, political participation by young people is low, and the future of the economy is still uncertain. The largest ethnic groups in the region are Romanian, Hungarian, German, and Rroma, and the Center works to build understanding of these different cultures and respect for national minorities. All of the activities are designed to raise the level of participation of young people in local community life. Trainers at the Center emphasize the importance of civic participation, responsibility, citizenship, and volunteer work. "Young people are actively involved in the Center's programming at all levels," says Simina Crăciun, Project Manager.²⁰⁸ It is a model they encourage other organizations to adopt.



Designed and developed by young people for young people,²⁰⁹ the Braşov Youth Center seeks to contribute to the community through its emphasis on social responsibility, leadership skills, entrepreneurship, teamwork, and

²⁰⁶ Based on similar institutions in other countries, the Romanian government created six youth centers in Romania. The only one to thrive was the Braşov Youth Center. As a result, the Braşov Youth Center is being used as a model for the redesign of other Romanian youth centers. E-mail to the authors from Simina Crăciun, Program Manager, February 28, 2005.

²⁰⁷ Youth constituted 24.2 percent of the population in 2000. Program questionnaire.

²⁰⁸ Atelier program questionnaire.

²⁰⁹ As is the case with many youth organizations in the region, AtelieR distinguishes between "members" and "volunteers." Members include many of the youth who founded the organization and who—though unpaid—have a permanent relationship with the organization. They are routinely involved in AtelieR's activities. The volunteers are youth who are occasionally involved in program activities. They are unpaid and help to implement certain activities such as information campaigns, translation of materials, and graphic design.

tolerance. Committed to a belief in the value of non-formal education, the Center seeks to complement what youth learn from their families and in school, offering seminars on topics in the arts and sciences, discussions on the history of ethnic groups, sports events, training in traditional crafts, guitar lessons, and cultural offerings. The Center also provides special training for youth interested in launching a business. There is a Multiethnic Club focused on intercultural learning and a Youth NGOs Club that promotes active citizenship, democratic values, civic education, volunteering, and community involvement. “Youth are always ready to learn something new,” says Crăciun.²¹⁰

Emphasizing Personal Freedom and Purpose

With an emphasis on interactive learning, the Center utilizes peer education and learning by playing techniques. AtelierR staff, who emphasize personal freedom, have created a space where the environment is non-judgmental, participation is voluntary, and young people come to the Center knowing that they will not be tested. As one staff member points out, “You’re not in school here. It’s not your family. We’re not parents or teachers.” Program participants appreciate the approach. “This is completely different from school,” says one. “We are not in some classroom. We can express ourselves and be more open. Nobody tells you when to come or go. It’s very free.”²¹¹ The relaxed atmosphere does not mean an absence of any guidelines, however. Many courses have rigorous schedules and participants are expected to be on time and to respect each other’s opinions.

Although the Center’s services are delivered within a structured environment, planning is flexible and youth are encouraged to follow their own interests and to work at their own speed. According to Dorian Lungu, AtelierR’s President, “We show them alternatives and get them thinking. We ask open-ended questions. It is very different from the teaching environment they experience in school.” The Center focuses on equipping youth with practical knowledge. Says Cătălina Tănase, Youth Officer at the Center, “School is too formal, too theoretical. Young people need to know how to live on their own. They need more practical skills. Their parents all expect them to go on to the university, but they are not all well-suited for that.”²¹²

The approach is incrementalist. According to Lungu, “You can’t change everything over night. It’s about changing small things. We show them alternatives and help to prevent them from dropping out of school.” Tănase

“This is completely different from school. We are not in some classroom. We can express ourselves and be more open. Nobody tells you when to come or go. It’s very free.”

²¹⁰ Atelier program questionnaire.

²¹¹ Group interview with program participants.

²¹² Group interview with AtelierR staff.

The youth who come to the Center are of different ages and come from different schools and ethnic backgrounds. At the Center, they develop social skills and learn to collaborate in joint activities.

echoes this, saying, “We are trying to prevent unemployment in advance.” Youth are encouraged to take on volunteer work and in some cases this has led to paid employment. AtelieR participants work on projects such as collecting clothes for an orphanage, working at a home for the elderly, and helping out at a shelter for unwed mothers.

AtelieR stresses the importance of teamwork and tolerance. The youth who come to the Center are of different ages and come from different schools and ethnic backgrounds. At the Center, they develop social skills and learn to collaborate in joint activities. Once skeptical about the value and purpose of a youth center, parents have become supporters and attend Open Days at the Center. Teachers are pleased to find that their students are using the Center’s library, the Youth Information Center, and access to the internet to complete their homework and reports. Participants in the program bring their friends and peers to take part in Center activities.

A Safe Space in which to Grow and Reach Out

The Braşov Youth Center provides young people with a safe space within which to experiment and try out new ideas. “We encourage creativity,” says Tănase. “Many have skills they are not using. We open new doors for them... for their personal and professional lives.” At the same time, “We try to keep them grounded,” emphasizes Lungu. “We push them to be realistic, while still encouraging them. We show them that there is more to life than just hanging out.” In addition, through their experiences with AtelieR, a new generation in Braşov is developing an understanding of the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their country. Community members also can see how an NGO like AtelieR can help prepare skilled, trained individuals.

While youth were initially reticent to take part in Center activities, they have become strong advocates as they have grown more involved. “The Youth Center is like a home,” says one participant. “I do not have a good relationship with my family. I have found that warmth and kindness here. Now I feel like I can face things.”²¹³ Youth at the Center say that they feel better able to express themselves, are more tolerant of others, and feel more optimistic as a result of their participation in Center activities.

While primarily focused on life skills development, AtelieR contributes to youth engagement in a variety of ways, including: a weekly seminar on

²¹³ Group interview with program participants.

active citizenship, opportunities and encouragement for youth to get involved in community efforts, and discussions on values. “Youth make new friends here,” says Tănase. “They have also created new NGOs and affinity groups here. These include an ecological organization, graffiti and skateboard clubs, and dance. It gives them a sense of responsibility to have an association. It also may help them to find a job later. We help them to establish themselves legally.” One group formed an NGO called Optim which focuses on doing volunteer work in the community. Another group decided to run an informational campaign regarding the general election and the right to vote. Two of the youth wrote a guidebook featuring teenagers touring Braşov and came to know their community better as a result.



Center staff lead by example, working to help youth realize their potential to make a difference. According to staff, some of the youth were initially reluctant to do manual labor. When they started to see the managers cleaning up the Center’s grounds, they were inspired to help. They planted trees and picked up garbage. Says Lungu, “We help them to feel a sense of social responsibility. They don’t litter now.” “Every Saturday,” says Tănase, “we meet with local teenagers. We might have a discussion on community problems

or how young people can get involved in local politics. Or we might discuss contraception or do some career counseling.”



AtelieR emphasizes the importance of making the Center a place where young people want to come and spend time. Experienced staff members utilize a variety of techniques to attract youth and emphasize the need to respect the value of young people’s free time. “There are lots of other temptations and options out there,” explains Lungu, “so we provide free access to the internet to get youth in the door. Right next door to the computers, however, we might be offering a seminar on journalism or a meeting of the debate club.” Topics such as inter-generational conflict, the war in Iraq, and issues related to their schools are addressed. “If the youth come once, they are likely to return,” says Program Manager Simina Crăciun. “It’s all about offering opportunities... to be here instead of on the street.”

Serbia

Cultural Center DamaD, Novi Pazar

For young people to develop as active citizens and leaders within a democracy they need to feel safe, they need to be able to get along with those of differing viewpoints, and they need to understand their basic rights and those of others. These are the core principles driving the Cultural Center DamaD's recent efforts to promote the active engagement of young people growing up in Novi Pazar, a city of 98,000 in southern Serbia.

Democracy and culture are intimately linked, according to Center staff. Making democracy work within an extremely multicultural environment requires that people communicate effectively and strive to understand one another, says Center Coordinator Zibija Dh- Šarenkapić.

Šarenkapić describes Novi Pazar and the surrounding Sandzak region as a “crisis spot of low intensity,” given its multiethnic population and close proximity to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Contributing to current tensions within the region are rising nationalism and conflicts between the Islamic and Christian communities.

The Cultural Center DamaD was established in 1992 at the time of the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia by a group of intellectuals seeking to combat increasing nationalism, interethnic separation, and intolerance in the region. Its mission remains to strengthen civil society, to contribute to the region's overall development, and to promote social and cultural values that stress inclusiveness.

Addressing Youth Needs at a Time of Increasing Political Polarization

Young people growing up in Novi Pazar and the surrounding region face a host of challenges, including unemployment, poverty, lack of leisure opportunities, gender discrimination, and a frequently hostile environment resulting from multiethnic and political tensions. A major problem is lack of space for young people to pursue their interests, says Šarenkapić, giving young people little to do in their free time. As a result, “talents are wasted in this city,” she adds.

For young people to develop as active citizens and leaders within a democracy they need to feel safe, they need to be able to get along with those of differing viewpoints, and they need to understand their basic rights and those of others.

An added problem is the manipulation of youth by local politicians, explains Šarenkapić. Political parties are constantly trying to recruit youth, creating an environment where clashes between parties often erupt in schools. Within such a heated environment, it is imperative that young people learn to understand and communicate with those with opposing views.

To help meet their needs, the Center offers developmentally age-appropriate programs to children and adolescents, ages 7 to 19. Such programs focus on computer literacy, English language instruction, non-violent communication, child rights education, and creativity and self-expression. At the heart of its work is creating a safe place where young people of diverse backgrounds can interact and learn from one another. Through its TeenNet Center, youth participate in programs aimed at increasing their role in the broader community through its various youth-led performances, sports competitions, and arts exhibitions. Together, these events strengthen community ties and create opportunities for people to gather and appreciate young people's contributions.

The Center enjoys a diversified funding base with past support coming from the Fund for an Open Society, the European Union, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO), USAID, UNICEF, Freedom House, the British Embassy in Belgrade, the King Baudouin Foundation, CARE, BCYF, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, among others.

A Holistic Approach to Meeting Young People's Needs

The Center offers a range of activities which collectively reinforce young people's self-confidence, self-expression, and teamwork skills. As of the close of 2004, the Center was benefiting approximately 1,360 young people in Novi Pazar and the surrounding region, with many more adults and children benefiting indirectly through the impact the program is having in schools and through their attendance at performances and exhibitions.

Every young person taking part in the Center's activities is required to attend workshops in nonviolent ways of communication. "We believe that education for nonviolent communication is essential for the development of youth," says Šarenkapić. "It's the only way to overcome national and political divisions among youth."

Nonviolence workshops begin with helping young people develop active listening skills. Participants are asked to consider how they feel when they

"We believe that education for nonviolent communication is essential for the development of youth. It's the only way to overcome national and political divisions among youth."

are heard, and conversely how they feel when they are not listened to. By participating in various exercises and sharing their personal experiences, young people learn to express themselves with confidence, saying what they feel instead of what others expect.



The theme of nonviolent communication is also stressed in drama workshops, through which participants are given an opportunity to understand one another's points of view and experiences. The plays engage 14- to 16-year-olds, who determine the theme they want to explore and delegate responsibilities (script-writing, acting, scenery construction) among themselves under the supervision of the workshop instructor. In the absence of school drama programs, the plays enable local youth to express themselves and share important messages with participants' parents and friends during performances. One recent play explored an actual incident in the school in which a conflict arose between a poor student and a wealthy student. The play explored different means of addressing the conflict, with emphasis placed on a solution in which both parties talked through their differences and the root causes of their negative feelings toward one another.

The Center's Education for Democracy Program teaches children about their rights as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Participants learn to recognize when their rights are being violated and when they are being discriminated against. During one exercise, participants pretend they have been stranded on a deserted island. As citizens of a new land, they must adopt new rights governing how people must treat one another.

Involving Youth in the Community

In the summer of 2004, the Center initiated a new program designed to engage young people in addressing an urgent challenge in their community: a lack of cultural opportunities and places for youth to come together in their free time. Through the Youth Summer of Culture Program, a core group of 25 young people met regularly to plan and implement a series of cultural events in the city. Over the course of the summer, the group organized movie screenings, exhibits, and international nights. Among the group's cultural offerings were showings of Spiderman II, Garfield, and the Fellowship of the Ring, along with an exhibition of photos of Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa and a night of Cuban-African music.



Participants not only planned events, but were also responsible for obtaining sponsorships from local businesses. “We explained to local

businesses what we were going to do and they took out their wallets,” said Enis Šemović, a member of the group. In exchange for donations, the logos of participating businesses were included on t-shirts and related advertising for events. One restaurant even agreed to let the group hold events on its premises ever Tuesday night. Participating youth were able to hone their presentation skills through media interviews on local TV and radio stations. As it turned out, not only youth, but also adults became interested in the group’s cultural offerings. Within a short period of time, the Tuesday night events, attended by 50 to 70 people, were well-known throughout the city and helped position local youth as positive change-makers in the community.

Building a Foundation for Youth Engagement: Step by Step

Center staff recognize that their efforts to engage young people in the community would not have been possible without laying the initial groundwork. “Our short-term goal is still to create a safe place for youth and provide them with basic knowledge,” says Šarenkapić, while “our long-term aim is to promote their role as young leaders.”

Šarenkapić admits that it can be difficult to attract youth to programs that are labeled “democracy-building.” “Education for democracy is not an attractive topic for youth. They don’t know what it is and the local community doesn’t recognize how it can benefit,” she says. For that reason, the Center emphasizes practical skill building, such as computer literacy and English language instruction, in its outreach. Once young people get acquainted with its activities, it becomes easier to do more.

As for the Center’s new youth volunteer focus, Šarenkapić is extremely pleased with what the “Summer of Culture” group was able to accomplish in a relatively short period of time. Whereas in the past, young people were more accustomed to receiving, “this was the first time they were responsible for something,” she explains, adding, “Now people are asking, what’s next?”

“Our short-term goal is still to create a safe place for youth and provide them with basic knowledge, while our long-term aim is to promote their role as young leaders.”

Lessons Learned

As different as these 16 programs are from one another, they share a common focus and frame of reference. This section explores some of the key lessons learned by these programs with broader applicability both within the region and beyond. Some of these learnings relate to program design, while others have to do with program implementation, evaluation, and impact.

Combining Life Skill Development with Social Action

All of these programs operate somewhere along a spectrum that ranges from a heavy concentration on the development of life skills to extensive opportunities for social action. Over time, many of the programs have expanded their offerings to include community service; others did so from the outset.²¹⁴ Providing youth with the opportunity to put their new skills into practice builds their confidence and reinforces what they have learned. It allows them to see first-hand that they can make a difference in their community and it teaches them that they have a responsibility to do so.

For example, in Albania, the YouthLink Leadership Institute helps build young people's skills in public speaking, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Afterward, participants are encouraged to apply what they have learned by developing activist projects in their communities and mobilizing others to get involved. In Serbia, the Cultural Center DamaD first focused on developing young people's life skills in areas such as communication, cooperation, and creativity. Older participants were then encouraged to develop their own community project, the first of which focused on enhancing cultural opportunities for youth.

Creating a Fun Learning Environment

Programs designed to foster social and civic activism must battle a number of countervailing forces that can produce disengagement and/or underengagement on the part of Balkan youth: apathy, resistance to volunteerism, lack of information or misconceptions about the NGO sector; the absence of family or community support for such work; and, competing claims on youth's time (such as school and leisure activities). For these reasons, it is particularly important to design programs that will be attractive to youth.

²¹⁴ Timing is important. CRIC, for example, emerged when youth were eager to respond.

Participants are encouraged to apply what they have learned by developing activist projects in their communities and mobilizing others to get involved.



More so than is the case with those who run youth employment programs, for example, youth engagement program managers place particular emphasis on the importance of making the experience fun. Dana Bates of New Horizons (Romania) refers to this as “giving youth what they need in the way that they want.” The staff at Zemlja Dece (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and at AtelieR (Romania) point out that they try to present their programs in a youthful, fun way. Similarly, the Volunteer’s Centre Zagreb (VCZ, Croatia) works to combine fun with a nurturing, positive atmosphere. A participant in the New Horizons program says, “We would not like it if they took everything too seriously. After all, we’re still kids.”²¹⁵

Participants in Kosovo’s IRC Youth Center reinforce this point. Besim Mydyti says, “I came to the Center and used the Internet. I was surprised it was free. I liked the atmosphere and the fact that smoking and drinking was prohibited.”²¹⁶ The staff was friendly. I didn’t know who was running the place... everyone was equal. I was warmly accepted. I came early and left late and increased my knowledge of computers.” Another participant says, “I came to the Center because it was close and it was cool.”²¹⁷ The Youth Center provides participants with an attractive alternative to life on the streets. “My friends are still in the bar every night until midnight,” says Krenar Basha “but

²¹⁵ Group interview with program participants.

²¹⁶ One issue with which programs struggle is whether or not to allow youth to smoke. Some programs, like AtelieR, permit smoking outside in order to create an environment in which youth are comfortable. Others, such as New Horizons and the IRC Youth Center, prohibit smoking by either staff or youth at any gathering.

²¹⁷ Fatmir Rexhaj, IRC Youth Center, group interview with program participants.

I finish at the Youth Center at 10 p.m. or at 1 a.m. and I go home.” Hamit Konga says, “This is one place that we can come and meet our peers and discuss issues. It is not just for structured activities.”²¹⁸

Many of the organizations profiled first attract youth to their programs by offering them fun activities and practical skills. As participants grow more comfortable with the program, they are introduced to activities in the areas of civic participation and social activism. Says Dana Bates of New Horizons, “We concentrate on fun for the first 5 to 8 months, then the switch happens and we begin to work on social projects.” The situation at the Cultural Center DamaD (Serbia) is similar. As Zibija Dh- Šarenkapić points out, young people come to the Center initially to develop skills in English and computers. Over time, they become involved in activities linked to civic participation. At AtelieR, youth who first come to the center to use the computers find themselves drawn into a broader array of programs offered “right next door.”



²¹⁸ Erkan Vardari, Program Manager, at the IRC Youth Center gives the following advice to those who want to work with youth. “Don’t wear a badge. No loudspeakers. Be on the same level with the youth. Don’t flaunt your position of authority. Everyone needs to respect the rules (including the managers). Make friends and show them that you are open to their ideas.”

Non-Formal Education as a Way to Develop New Skills

Programs such as the Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET, Montenegro) and the Youth Educational Forum (YEF, Macedonia) were designed to help compensate for the failures of the region's rigid educational system. Interactive teaching methods are not the norm within most schools in the region. Youth respond extremely positively to the opportunity in these programs to engage in an active dialogue with those delivering course and/or training materials. In addition, a number of the programs highlight the importance of peer-to-peer learning and some, like New Horizons, pair older youth with younger ones. The development of critical thinking skills is also emphasized over the rote memorization of material that characterizes the education offered in the schools.

In addition, most—if not all—of these programs endeavor to provide youth with critical information about study, volunteer, and job opportunities of interest and about key developments in their communities and their country. Staff at AtelierR point out that one of the pressing issues facing young people is a lack of information about what is going on around them. At the same time, in some cases youth are already exceptionally well-informed about developments in the region. This is particularly evident in groups like INTEGRA NGO (Kosovo), YEF, and AET where youth themselves are running the programs.

All of these programs help to provide the participants with hope for a better future and skills to improve their lives and those of others in their community today. Their level of trust in others has increased by virtue of their group interaction. According to program managers, one young participant was suicidal at the time he became involved with their organization. Today, he is articulate, positive, and full of energy.

Creating Social Incubators

In the same way that some programs that promote economic growth develop business incubators, those that seek to foster citizen engagement can create social incubators. Programs like Zemlja Dece (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and New Horizons provide a safe, nurturing environment in which youth engagement can grow and flourish. Similarly, AtelierR and the IRC Youth Center help to develop life skills designed to prepare youth for active participation in their communities.

In the same way that some programs that promote economic growth develop business incubators, those that seek to foster citizen engagement can create social incubators.

Listening to Youth/Trusting Youth

One point reiterated by numerous program participants throughout the Balkans is the desire to be listened to by adults. “It’s hard to convince a 30- or 40-year-old to do something. They don’t respect your ideas... they think you are too young.”²¹⁹ At New Horizons a participant says, “We are told that we cannot do this and that... that we’re too young. No one takes us seriously.” At Zemlja Dece a teenage girl says, “This is the only place that values what young people do.”

Creating an environment in which youth feel comfortable in taking the initiative is particularly important for programs designed to foster youth engagement.

In order to make their program interesting and appealing to youth, staff at AET offer young people a key role in design, implementation, and evaluation. Danilo Radulović, President of AET, says, “Listen to youth and change the program accordingly. Once youth know and feel that there are people who care about their engagement, they are able to give far better results.”

Creating an environment in which youth feel comfortable in taking the initiative is particularly important for programs designed to foster youth engagement.²²⁰ “The key is to lead kids forward, but to let them come up with ideas, too,” says Dana Bates of New Horizons. Viorica Cretu, Programs Coordinator at the Child Rights Information Center (CRIC, Moldova) makes a similar point saying that CRIC encourages initiatives coming from youth rather than initiatives designed for youth. “It’s about trusting youth... empowering youth,” she says. Aureola (Macedonia) staff also emphasize the need to provide youth with a space within which they can express themselves. One program participant there said, “I came to take part in the program to make new friends, have new experiences, and work on certain social problems.”

Trusting youth and respecting their opinions are critical to program success. “It’s important not to have a preconceived notion about what youth think... sometimes you are surprised by how much they ‘get’ it,” says staff at the Association for Democratic Prosperity (ADP-Zid, Montenegro). Dana Bates reinforces this point, saying, “Don’t underestimate the kids. Young people, if given the proper structure, can amaze you.”

Recognizing Youth

“There is no chance to prove ourselves. I’m writing poems and painting, but nobody knows about it. There is no one to show.”²²¹ This comment by a young Montenegrin woman reflects the importance of

²¹⁹ Program participant, group interview at AET.

²²⁰ In addition to the significance of demonstrating trust in youth, it is vital to help youth to trust in themselves. One young leader in Nepal expressed this concern saying, “The greatest challenge for me was to overcome the sense of being too young to make the right decision.” Swastika Shrestha, Coordinator of Chiranjeevi, see Kinkade, Sheila. *Youth in Action: Profiles of Youth Leading Change Around the World*, Vol. 1, November 2003, Baltimore, Maryland: International Youth Foundation, p. 5.

²²¹ Group interview with program participants, ADP-Zid.

recognizing the talents and contributions of youth. ADP-Zid managers make sure to express their appreciation for the contributions that youth make to the organization and comment that community recognition is also important. Zibija Dh- Šarenkapić at the Cultural Center DamaD makes a similar point saying that it is important to involve youth in identifying activities and carrying out projects and to be sure to offer praise and encouragement to young people for their contributions.



Appropriate Level of Challenge

At New Horizons, staff make an effort to ensure that youth experience an appropriate level of challenge. The goal is to design activities that are neither too far out ahead of their abilities nor too far behind. This requires repeated monitoring of Kaizen members to ensure that the complexity of the social projects in which they are involved grows along with their abilities.

Giving Youth Responsibility

Providing youth with the skills and the opportunities to play lead roles in the work of any organization dedicated to youth development is important. In the case of youth engagement programs, it may be critical. Youth engagement is by definition a proactive behavior. Helping youth to realize that they can tackle problems by themselves is crucial to the development of the confidence they need to do so. Aureola and New Horizons both encourage their participants to take initiative and to take responsibility for projects from start to finish. Zemlja Dece engages youth as partners in project design. AET considers that the best approach to youth engagement is to give youth authority, to listen to them and to let them know that there is someone who cares about them.



Trusting in the ability of youth extends beyond the parameters of these projects. Gjergji Trola of SHARS (Albania) believes that youth can play a lead role in reforms and democratic changes in Albania. The emphasis in most of the programs analyzed here is on the transformative role of youth today, not in the future.

In some cases, like ADP-Zid, youth provide critical input into program design and implementation. In other cases like YEF, AET, and INTEGRA

NGO, youth are actually running the organizations. Similarly, the Volunteers Center Zagreb is volunteer-run by youth under the age of 25. In all of these cases, program managers are themselves practicing youth engagement by working to empower other young people to take social action, to participate in the civic life of their communities, and/or to become better informed about the critical issues in their societies.

In this sense these organizations offer dual tracks for youth leadership and youth engagement: young program managers are challenging the status quo in their societies through their work to prepare other young people to do the same. In addition, in some cases—as with INTEGRA NGO’s work on accession to the EU—these programs tackle tasks that go well beyond preparing others for civic and social action to directly lobby for policy change.

Learning by Doing

Part of the strategy for fostering youth engagement on the part of these 16 programs is to show youth a different reality. According to Bari Zenelaj of the IRC Youth Center in Kosovo, “Words are not enough. They need to attend a training session or a youth exchange where they can see other options. It is a combination of theory and hands-on experience.” This is also the case with BYL-A’s YouthLink Leadership Institute in Albania which engages young leaders in a highly experiential summer camp program through which they learn about democratic principles while governing a fictional country. CRIC’s work in Moldova is also organized around learning by doing. In Romania, New Horizons helps youth to develop their skills in training sessions and then encourages them to put this knowledge into practice by raising their own funds for their projects and directly negotiating with business leaders and government officials in pursuit of their objectives.

Building Skills for the Workplace

In addition to instilling civic values and building civic competency, the type of service learning opportunities that most of these programs provide gives young people some of the skills they will need in the work place. For some, volunteer work is an activity that will keep them productively occupied, learning and building skills while they look for full-time employment. For others, this on-the-job training will lead them to careers in the nongovernmental sector.

“Words are not enough. They need to attend a training session or a youth exchange where they can see other options. It is a combination of theory and hands-on experience.”

In the same way that more comprehensive youth employment programs provide those who have completed training with internship opportunities and job placement options, some of the more comprehensive youth engagement programs look for ways to provide youth with opportunities to first participate in the program (receive training, etc.), to then volunteer and/or work in the organization, and finally to find long-term employment options within the NGO sector. Several programs—ADP-Zid, New Horizons, YEF, and VCZ—make it a point to offer volunteer or paid employment to program participants and program graduates.



Casting a Wide Net: Challenging All Youth to Participate

Viorica Cretu of the Child Rights Information Center warns against the tendency to focus attention only on youth with proven leadership qualities. Cretu believes that more emphasis needs to be placed on attracting young people who are minorities, who are poor, who do not do well in school, who are shy, or who may feel left out. AET, YEF, and SHARS also make it a point to draw out the talents of all young people. The challenge of youth engagement programs is to nurture the abilities of young leaders, while ensuring

that a broader cross-section of youth develops the skills and attitudes necessary to exercise their responsibilities for citizen participation and social action.

Serving Both In-School and Out-of-School Youth

A number of the programs profiled here are delivered as extracurricular activities offered on school premises. This leaves out a substantial number of Balkan youth who have dropped out of school or who have graduated and are unable to find employment. For this reason, programs such as SHARS and Zemlja Dece make it a point to involve out-of-school youth in their activities. Similarly, New Horizons is in the process of developing specially targeted programs for youth who are not in school.

Another issue associated with providing youth with access to youth engagement programs is related to the location of these programs. Staff at AtelieR point out that most youth centers tend to be located in urban areas, which limits the access of rural youth. This is one of the reasons, for example, that INTEGRA NGO concentrates its activities outside of Prizren, Kosovo. Other programs, such as the IRC Youth Center, New Horizons and ADP-Zid, also make a concerted effort to reach a broader youth population.

Building a Positive Enabling Environment

Efforts to provide youth with the skills and opportunities they need for civic and social engagement are bolstered by a positive enabling environment. “Before youth can be active social change agents, there must be an enabling environment conducive to youth social engagement: an environment where youth are viewed as protagonists not antagonists, where youth culture is respected, and where youth can assert their voices on issues of most concern to them. Youth are not just potential beneficiaries... but full-fledged stakeholders and development actors in the coordinated response to problems in their communities.”²²²

By working with parents, teachers, and the community at large, NGOs such as those profiled here can help to foster an enabling environment supportive of youth engagement. Program managers who help prepare young people to work in their communities, must at the same time take steps to pave the way for the community to open a space for such engagement and recognize its value.²²³ Too often, adults in society view young people as problems to be

“Before youth can be active social change agents, there must be an enabling environment conducive to youth social engagement: an environment where youth are viewed as protagonists not antagonists, where youth culture is respected, and where youth can assert their voices on issues of most concern to them.”

²²² “A Concept Paper by the International Youth Foundation on a Global Initiative ‘Young People at the Forefront of Social Change’,” Baltimore, Maryland: International Youth Foundation, 2004, p. 2.

²²³ In much the same way, several programs (like ADP-Zid) prepare youth to work in the NGO sector, while at the same time encouraging NGOs to open their doors to youth.

An added benefit of involving parents in these programs is that it allows them to see the results of youth engagement for themselves.

solved, rather than as assets to the community. To reverse this trend, efforts must be made to educate policy makers, business leaders, parents, educators, and civil society representatives about the critical role of young people as leaders and vital contributors to social change.

Most of the programs analyzed here, for example, have made a special effort to involve the parents of the youth involved.²²⁴ AET staff point out that it is important to take the time to explain the program to parents and to seek their support. According to a number of those interviewed, many parents are unaware of the types of issues confronting young people in the Balkans today. In addition, they are skeptical about volunteer work given their own experiences with forced “volunteer” work under communism and are frequently uninformed about the role of the nongovernmental sector. Reaching out to parents is particularly important where parents are uncomfortable with their children (particularly young girls) taking part in after school activities. INTEGRA NGO takes this approach a step further by working to bridge the generational divide by including parents in some of their strategy sessions.

An added benefit of involving parents in these programs is that it allows them to see the results of youth engagement for themselves. Program participants can share with their parents what they are learning about the value and role of civil society. They can discuss with their parents some of the social issues they confront—like drugs, HIV/AIDS, and trafficking. Armed with a greater understanding of the issues, parents can reinforce what their children are learning in these programs rather than undermining their progress by conveying messages of hopelessness or resignation. By the same token, when empowered to contribute, young people in the Balkans are often more optimistic and more open to new ideas than the generation that preceded them. Serving as sources of innovation and inspiration in their societies, these youth can play a vital role as social catalysts, leading positive change in their communities.

For these same reasons, it is important for youth engagement programs to reach out to the broader community. Given time and perseverance, these programs can hope to influence the views and behavior of a broader array of local citizens regarding their community. Examples of efforts to broaden the impact of their work include: SHARS’s theater productions, YEF’s public debates, anti-corruption rallies at New Horizons, Aureola’s television broadcasts, AET’s campaign for a new school, INTEGRA NGO’s billboard project about EU accession, and Zemjla Dece’s “Best Teenager Awards.” All of these advocacy activities help to advance the specific objectives of

²²⁴ This would include: SHARS, Aureola, YEF, CRIC, AET, New Horizons and Atelier among others.

these programs, while at the same time, strengthening the general base of community support for social action. Broadening the circle of engagement emphasizes the power and the responsibility each citizen has to address pressing social issues.

Bridging Societal Divides through Teamwork

Ethnic divisions and generational differences are two of the societal divides that many of these programs seek to mitigate. Youth engagement programs are well-positioned to bring youth from different backgrounds together to work as teams on a common cause. Working to build tolerance across ethnic groups is of particular importance in some areas of the region. For this reason, special attention is paid to bringing youth from different ethnic groups together in several of the programs based in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia.

Similarly, programs such as CRIC emphasize adult/youth partnerships. Such interaction can take place in the context of training and mentoring relationships. Adults and youth can also work together in pursuit of common



social objectives, as was the case with a road improvement project in Moldova championed by youth from CRIC. As described above, programs like INTEGRA NGO, SHARS, the Cultural Centre DamaD, and New Horizons make a concerted effort to include parents in their work in activities ranging from strategy sessions to attending theater performances.

Raising Visibility/Building Credibility

The Cultural Center DamaD emphasizes the importance of building a strong public image. Program managers say that the positive image they enjoy within the community is important in generating public support for its activities within an environment that can be distrustful of NGOs. The Democracy Center Nove Nade (Bosnia-Herzegovina) reiterates this point, emphasizing the need for youth engagement programs to build their credibility within the community. Related to this is the Center’s emphasis on engaging youth in advocacy and media outreach.



A similar point is made by CRIC’s Viorica Cretu, who points to the value of engaging young people in media outreach. “Young people can be articulate spokespeople for their own needs and priorities. Supporting the journalistic initiatives of children and youth (e.g., newsletters, radio, and TV programs) helps build their skills, self-confidence, and ability to influence wider audiences.” Similarly, Aureola’s program provides youth with the skills and

opportunities they need to produce television shows addressing critical social issues and to disseminate this information and analysis to the public.

Exploring Opportunities to Engage at All Levels: Local, National, and International

Youth engagement programs can engage in service activities, civic action, advocacy, and networking at a variety of levels: local, national, and international. Some of these programs began at the local level and expanded their range of activity over time. One program, CRIC, initiated a youth parliament at the national level, before discovering that they could have greater impact and reach a larger number of young people when implementing such activities locally. ADP-Zid participants take part in international exchanges through their involvement in workcamps, while YEF youth participate in international debate competitions.

Participation in youth engagement programs provides young people with the opportunity to see the value of the civil society sector from the inside.

Strengthening the NGO Sector

Involvement in these programs has provided many Balkan youth with their first exposure to the nongovernmental sector. Many are uninformed or misinformed about the role of NGOs and uncertain about the contributions these organizations make at the local, national and international levels. Participation in youth engagement programs provides young people with the opportunity to see the value of the civil society sector from the inside. They learn about NGOs (several programs make this part of their training), see its impact first-hand, and experience a work environment which is qualitatively different from that of business and government. A number of the youth interviewed commented positively about the quality of the relationships and the general atmosphere within these NGOs.

In addition, programs such as ADP-Zid make a concerted effort to ensure that their program contributes to the development of positive new attitudes about volunteerism. In Romania, volunteer work has a negative connotation among many, particularly older, Romanians. According to Cătălina Tănase at AtelieR, “Some youth heard about forced volunteer work under Nicolae Ceausescu. Now they have a different perspective having experienced it first-hand.” YEF staff point out that there is a positive multiplier effect in operation when some of the youth who are active in their program also become involved in other NGOs and other community activities.

Inter-Sectoral Partnering

Most of the programs profiled here make a concerted effort to partner with government, business, and other civil society organizations. Depending on the specific area of focus, youth engagement programs can be especially well-suited for inter-sectoral partnering. Community service activities that involve clearly defined contributions to the public good, such as environmental clean-up days or activities designed to provide services to disadvantaged social sectors, are particularly attractive to business and government. When youth tackle potentially more controversial topics such as corruption or political and social reform, they may find it easier to partner with like-minded civil society organizations. Over time, youth may find broader support for more challenging types of advocacy projects once a foundation of trust has been established through collaboration on less contentious endeavors.

Notwithstanding a lot of rhetoric about support for youth centers and national youth policies, repeated complaints were voiced by those interviewed for this study that in many cases local and national officials are simply unresponsive to youth.

The Democracy Center Nove Nade, AET, and New Horizons are three of the programs that have made a concerted effort to work with the business community and have found enthusiastic partners for their work.

Government has been more of a challenge. Notwithstanding a lot of rhetoric about support for youth centers and national youth policies, repeated complaints were voiced by those interviewed for this study that in many cases local and national officials are simply unresponsive to youth. The situation varies a great deal from country to country, but in cases such as Romania, Kosovo, and Serbia, government (particularly local government) has constituted more of an obstacle than a support. In some instances, public officials feel competitive with local NGOs, worrying that they will attract resources that would otherwise have come to the government. In other cases, according to the Cultural Center DamaD, the issue is the manipulation of youth as political parties try to recruit young people to their ranks.

In one country in the region, youth point to the close links between the government and criminal elements and say they need to keep their distance from the public sector in order avoid compromising their reputation. Unfortunately, widespread allegations of corruption in government in a number of countries in the region have led many Balkan youth to be cynical about political participation. In one case, program organizers wanted to carry out a solidarity event to express support for the United States in connection with the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. They spoke with someone in the government about their plans and were told it was a great idea for which they would receive financial support. That support was not forthcoming and

at the last minute, their idea was appropriated by a youth group attached to a political party. That group received the funding and staged the event. “Now we don’t provide advance information to the government about what we are planning,” said one of the program managers involved.



Working with authorities in Romania can be problematic even at the level of school officials. According to Dana Bates, “You have to be very careful where you invest your energies. You must do careful research as to which schools have the interest and the capabilities to cooperate with the best interests of the youth in mind.”

Despite these hardships, some programs, such as Zemlja Dece, report that their relationship with government is improving. Many of those interviewed said they would like to see a stronger partnership with government if circumstances permitted.

Finally, there is a significant level of networking and partnering among the civil society organizations that are dedicated to youth engagement in the Balkans and internationally. AET-Zid and YEF are good examples of organizations that are making good use of such networks. The very nature of the work—social activism—lends itself to this sort of interaction even

more than other types of youth development work. One area yet to be fully explored is that of partnering with the faith-based community. New Horizons has begun to work with local churches and believes that such collaboration is highly promising given the community development focus of Eastern Orthodox religion.

Context Matters

Program managers must determine which life skills are most valuable to youth in a particular locale and opportunities for social action should be selected based on their relevance and interest to a particular area. INTEGRA NGO carries out community-based consultations with local NGOs prior to



developing programs in areas outside Prishtina. ADP-Zid had to work around the conservatism of parents in northern Montenegro who were unwilling to allow their daughters to take part in activities that included sleeping away from home.

At the same time, all of the program managers interviewed felt that the work they were doing could be adapted to the circumstances of other countries in the region given their existing similarities.

Scaling Up

Youth engagement programs lend themselves well to efforts to “go to scale.” In those cases where the programs are delivered in the schools, there is a ready-made infrastructure that facilitates adoption of the program at the regional or national level. This process, of course, can be facilitated or obstructed by the relevant public authorities. To the extent that local school officials and local and/or national elected officials support the work of civil society organizations such as these, such efforts are more likely to be successful. Finally, as program managers at SHARS and New Horizons point out, scaling up in their cases is facilitated by the simplicity of the model itself. New Horizons is quite explicitly designing its program to make it as easy as possible to replicate.

Key Elements of a Comprehensive Program

Based on the above, it is possible to identify certain factors conducive to the development of a comprehensive youth engagement program. This is not to imply that every program necessarily needs to incorporate all of these criteria and there is clearly enormous diversity among the 16 programs profiled in this study. For that very reason, not all of these elements would necessarily be appropriate to every circumstance and local context must play a key role in decisions about program design and implementation. With that caveat, a holistic approach to youth engagement would include many of the following characteristics:

- Youth-driven—tailor the project to the specific interests of local youth
- Needs-based—a project in civic participation may be more appropriate in one context than another
- Offers a safe, neutral atmosphere where youth from diverse backgrounds can engage in joint activities and develop greater understanding of one another²²⁵
- Engages parents, peers, teachers and others in the community at large, thereby building understanding of youth as leaders of social change
- Develops critical life skills,²²⁶ including work skills appropriate to the realization of community projects
- Arms participants with up-to-date-information about developments in their communities and about issues of critical importance to youth such as drugs and HIV/AIDS

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²²⁵ In certain cases, youth may need psychosocial support prior to or at the same time as engaging in community service. *Zemlja Dece* offers this support, for example. In Albania, the Multidisciplinary Center for the Management of Child Mistreatment (MCMCM) is another excellent example of a program that provides comprehensive psychosocial counseling.

²²⁶ These might include skills such as project and time management, public speaking, critical thinking, decision making, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, tolerance, teamwork, and conflict management.

Developing comprehensive approaches to youth engagement in the Balkans that build critical life skills, provide opportunities for service, create local and regional networks, and foster advocacy efforts by youth in support of civic and social action.

- Provides practical instruction in areas such as language and/or computer skills, as well as internet access
- Provides opportunities for civic advocacy and service projects in the community
- Provides youth with the opportunity to take part in the selection and design of community projects, includes discussion and research as part of the design and implementation process, and incorporates a reflection period
- Offers graduated levels of challenge—the complexity of the service projects should keep pace with the development of new skills on the part of program participants
- Builds connections among youth across ethnic, religious, national, and economic divides
- Provides opportunities for youth to take the lead
- Combines learning and social action with fun activities designed to attract and retain program participants
- Builds the skills and confidence youth need to take responsibility for project selection, fundraising, advocacy, implementation, and evaluation of impact
- Fosters capacity-sharing through networks of like-minded NGOs
- Pursues partnerships with business, government, and civil society actors
- Works with public officials to create an enabling environment supportive of active participation by youth in their communities, including the approval of national youth policies and support for youth centers
- Provides both volunteer and paid opportunities for employment
- Raises the visibility of youth in the community and recognizes their contributions
- Builds social capital

Incorporation of as many of the above listed elements as is appropriate to the local context and available resources will help to ensure the development of comprehensive approaches to youth engagement in the Balkans that build critical life skills, provide opportunities for service, create local and regional networks, and foster advocacy efforts by youth in support of civic and social action.

Where Next?

The future viability of the Balkans will depend to a large extent on the success of efforts to fully engage Balkan youth as politically active, economically empowered, and socially committed citizens. In turn, the ability to improve prospects for young people in the Balkans will depend largely upon the results obtained by programs designed to: bridge the region's social divides; provide economic opportunities for youth; and, equip youth with the skills, confidence, and sense of responsibility they need to be informed and engaged citizens. It is on this latter point that this study has concentrated.

Each of these 16 programs is designed to help prepare youth—immediately or in the near future—for lifelong engagement on critical civic and social issues.²²⁷ Throughout the Balkans, youth are learning *how* to participate in their society *by* participating in their society. As one program manager points out, while they may not win on the first round (and in fact may not “win” at all), young people discover that by expressing their views they have contributed to public discourse and have modeled the type of citizen participation they would like to see as the norm.²²⁸

Through the work of these 16 organizations and others like them, Balkan youth are becoming more knowledgeable about how to successfully address social needs in their community and how to participate in the political process.



²²⁷ Numerous studies have shown that individuals who become actively engaged in their communities at a young age are more likely to remain engaged as adults than those who do not. According to a study by Independent Sector and Youth Service America, “Adults who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to volunteer as those who did not volunteer when they were young.” Toppe, Christopher and Golombek, Silvia (et.al.), *Engaging Youth in Lifelong Service: Findings and Recommendations for Encouraging a Tradition of Voluntary Action Among America's Youth*, Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector and Youth Service America, c2002, p. 5.

²²⁸ According to Viorica Cretu of CRIC, “The process is very important, not just the product. They can be successful even if they don't get results. They are no longer afraid of authority figures, for example.”

They are developing effective leadership and organizational skills, as well as the civic, social and ethical values appropriate to democratic participation. The result is the construction of networks of politically active, socially engaged, and well-informed youth with the drive and skills to contribute to their communities.

Under the mantra of “No wasted talent,” those who run and operate these programs have dedicated themselves to providing youth with viable alternatives to simply “hanging out” in local bars and cafés or on the streets. Transcending hopelessness, resignation, and apathy, many of the youth who take part in these programs develop a deep-seated passion for social action and civic participation. In this way, these 16 organizations are helping to build social capital throughout the region.

A number of steps can be taken to reinforce and advance these efforts:

1) Partnering with Government

With few exceptions, governments in the region are not providing sufficient support - financial or political - to the work of these organizations and others like them. In the best of cases, government support (at the local or national level) tends to be restricted to verbal expressions of encouragement. In other cases, such as Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia, the governments may actually be working—intentionally or not—at cross-purposes with these organizations.

Future advances in the area of social entrepreneurship among Balkan youth will depend in part on the success of efforts to broaden the understanding of public sector officials regarding the positive contributions to be made by civil society in general and by youth in particular. Unless governments in the region learn to view youth as net contributors to their communities, they will not invest in youth to the extent necessary.²²⁹ In addition, many young people in the Balkans are searching for opportunities to address the developmental needs of their communities through participation in the decision making and policy-making processes that affect their lives. Governments in the region can make a positive contribution to youth engagement by encouraging and supporting such participation, providing space for active involvement, and incorporating youth perspectives into their work.

The responsibility for improving the relationship between government and these civil society organizations is not one-sided. Just as government needs

Future advances in the area of social entrepreneurship among Balkan youth will depend in part on the success of efforts to broaden the understanding of public sector officials regarding the positive contributions to be made by civil society in general and by youth in particular.

²²⁹ Ironically, one way to demonstrate youth’s capacity to contribute is precisely through support to programs such as these. “You have to earn the right to be heard, and youth will be better heard, their concerns addressed, if they are perceived to be positive contributors to their communities. In this way they will be viewed as a resource rather than as a problem.” Dana Bates, New Horizons program questionnaire.

to pursue opportunities to strengthen its support for programs such as these, so too does the nongovernmental sector need to redouble its efforts to find good partners within the public sector. Many of the leaders of the organizations interviewed for this study feel the potential for increased government support is significant and remain positively disposed to increasing their partnerships with local and national officials.

2) Reaching Out to an Untapped Resource: Business

Business is a natural partner to civil society in the area of youth development. As businesses come under increasing pressure—both internal and external—to pay attention to the “triple bottom line,”²³⁰ they will look for opportunities to demonstrate that they are good corporate citizens. A concern for corporate social responsibility will lead forward-thinking leaders in the private sector to explore the opportunity to invest in youth. Nongovernmental organizations in the Balkans should take advantage of this opening to do what they can to build relationships with business. These partnerships need not be limited to (or even necessarily include) financial support. Technical support—providing training in areas such as financial management or marketing and communications—can be a first step to a longer-term relationship and joint action.²³¹

3) Turning NGOs into Viable Employers

“In Romania it is very difficult to earn a living by working in an NGO. Most youth see NGOs as something to do in the present and a hobby for the future,” says Cătălina Tănase.²³² Much of the work of these 16 organizations is performed by volunteers. Without negating the enormous value of volunteerism, it is also important that these organizations convert some of their volunteer positions (and/or months of work based on small honorariums) into paid positions. In the absence of such action, the degree of professional maturity these organizations can reach may be compromised.²³³ Without such a shift, the work that many perform as actors within these NGOs will necessarily remain ancillary to the paid employment they will be forced to seek out elsewhere. Such a situation is likely to contribute to high staff turnover.

A concern for corporate social responsibility will lead forward-thinking leaders in the private sector to explore the opportunity to invest in youth.

²³⁰ An exclusive focus on financial performance has been replaced by a concern to demonstrate positive outcomes with regards to three bottom lines: financial, social, and environmental.

²³¹ For more on the opportunities for inter-sectoral partnerships among government, business and civil society actors, see: Reese, William S., Thorup, Cathryn L., and Gerson, Timothy K, *What Works in Public/Private Partnering: Alliances for Youth Development*, What Works in Youth Development Series, # 5, Baltimore, Maryland: International Youth Foundation, c2002, pp. 62.

²³² Cătălina Tănase, group discussion, AtelieR.

²³³ A related challenge for NGOs is that of providing high quality services in the absence of long-term financial support. As ADP-Zid's program manager, Slobodan Zivkovic, points out, “Long-term planning is critical to the achievement of lasting results and uncertainty about a program's financial stability makes this more difficult.”

NGOs operating in the arena of youth development will be strengthened by overarching actions taken to bolster the role of civil society in the Balkans.

In this context, even highly committed individuals will be able to work for these NGOs only for as long as it fits their schedules and they can make sufficient money to support themselves and their families elsewhere. “After you learn, it’s important to give something back. You cannot, however, make a living in the youth sector,” say AtelierR’s Dorian Lungu. In addition to serving as President of AtelierR, Lungu attends school and runs his own business developing web portals and software.

Clearly, NGOs operating in the arena of youth development will be strengthened by overarching actions taken to bolster the role of civil society in the Balkans. Similarly, the economic viability of nongovernmental actors will depend upon the success of efforts aimed at bolstering economies in the region.

4) Promoting Regional Capacity-Sharing

Staff at the Youth Educational Forum (YEF) underscore the region’s shared values, problems, and opportunities.²³⁴ Such similarities create a fertile ground for collaboration. Facilitating the sharing of expertise and lessons learned across the broad array of youth engagement programs in the region would increase cost efficiencies, build cross-border collaboration, and increase impact. Measures to promote regional capacity-sharing might include staff and volunteer exchanges, joint projects, and regional workshops similar to the BCYF Annual Youth Forum. Such workshops could promote capacity building in specific areas, networking, and the sharing of lessons learned.

5) Engaging Both In-School and Out-of-School Youth

Schools are well-positioned to host extracurricular programs designed to build life skills and provide students with the opportunity to take part in community service. As noted above, they also offer a ready-made infrastructure for “scaling-up.” At the same time, the percentage of out-of-school youth in the Balkans is high. For this reason, the promotion of youth engagement will require creating and/or expanding programs specifically targeted at the large numbers of out-of-school youth who are searching for constructive ways in which to use their time. Programs—like SHARS in Albania—that bring in-school and out-of-school youth together for joint activities can benefit from the peer-to-peer learning that results.²³⁵

²³⁴ YEF program questionnaire.

²³⁵ Other programs involving out-of-school youth include the IRC Youth Center, NGO Future, Aureola, ADP-Zid, and Atelier.

6) Raising the Visibility of Youth-led Social Change

The transformation of public attitudes about the capabilities of youth is central to efforts to create an enabling environment conducive to youth engagement. NGOs, like those profiled here, and the media both have critical roles to play in raising the visibility of youth and in nurturing and expanding public support for youth-led efforts. VCZ and Zemlja Dece each place considerable emphasis on the creation of an environment in which youth are valued and recognized for their contributions. VCZ helps to shift public perceptions about young people by actively engaging community members in the service projects carried out by its young participants. The youth who volunteer in VCZ's workcamps serve as role models for the broader community. Organizations like INTEGRA NGO work to ensure that parents recognize the contributions of youth. For its part, Zemlja Dece strives to make sure that young people are respected and honored through its "Best Teenager Awards."

In those cases where youth-led media projects have taken hold, they too have played an important part in educating the public about the roles and accomplishments of youth. As the examples from Zemlja Dece and the Democracy Centre Nove Nade demonstrate, the media has a vital role to play in "spreading the word" about young people's contributions.

7) Building Social Capital by Expanding the Opportunities for Youth Engagement through Civic Action, Community Service and Service Learning

Youth engagement is an extremely powerful, cross-cutting youth development tool. As the richness of the programs profiled here so clearly demonstrates, there are many ways for youth to engage with the broader community. From traditional service projects such as environmental clean-ups to get-out-the-vote campaigns, these programs offer a myriad of opportunities for young people to contribute to their society. In addition to direct service projects, youth can use public debates, advocacy and public campaigns, street theater, and television shows to connect with their community, surface key social issues, and advance a dialogue.

Adding a service component to programs designed to equip youth with the knowledge and skills they need to become active citizens, allows program managers to move their programs to the next level and provides youth with the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice. In addition to

Youth-led media projects have played an important part in educating the public about the roles and accomplishments of youth.

providing on site workshops and learning opportunities, youth centers can and should encourage and facilitate community service and service learning opportunities.

Another option for programs such as these is to engage in advocacy work at the national level, encouraging governments to include “voluntary service” as part of their extant or planned national youth policies. New Horizons is pursuing just such a strategy in relation to Romania’s Youth National Action Plan. Says Dana Bates, “If included and implemented, these policy measures can provide the mechanism for a robust youth service movement.”²³⁶

8) Toward Greater Rigor in Program Design, Implementation and Evaluation

Despite enormous diversity among the 16 programs profiled here, there is an emerging trend toward greater rigor in design, implementation and evaluation. Donors can foster greater precision by encouraging programs to clearly define their goals (both in terms of personal development and social impact), develop structured learning objectives, and incorporate key elements such as youth involvement in the selection and design of service activities, research, and reflection.

By its very nature, youth engagement brings young people together for a common social purpose.

Another area for program development relates to gender. Do young women and young men face different opportunities and challenges when they get engaged in community action? Do they have different priorities or interests? Do they make different types of contributions?²³⁷ By paying attention to this issue, program managers can maximize the value of the opportunities they offer.

Finally, greater use of pre- and post-evaluations and other monitoring and evaluation measures will provide much needed data on the impact of these programs and point to ways in which to improve project design. What constitutes “successful” youth engagement? Program managers should take steps to develop indicators that will make it possible to track and measure program impact both in terms of personal development and community development.

9) Creating a New Generation of Bridging Agents

By its very nature, youth engagement brings young people together for a common social purpose. Encouraging networking among youth from across the region reinforces their role as bridging agents across ethnic,

²³⁶ New Horizons program questionnaire.

²³⁷ “Youth Participation: EQUIP3/Youth Trust Strategy,” draft strategy document, September 2004, p. 3.

religious and national divides. According to Bojan Maricik of the Youth Educational Forum in Macedonia, “No one should underestimate the capacity of young creative people. They can raise important issues, bridging prejudice and intolerant actions and stimulating permanent communication among young people in the region. Through this communication, youth from the region will realize that they are the same... clever young people with the same problems and needs.”²³⁸

The Role of Donors in Fostering Youth Engagement

Donors have a critical role to play in advancing the points raised above. A key task is to help government, business, and civil society organizations learn to appreciate the value of inter-sectoral partnering and learn how to make it work—helping government, for example, to see that it is not in competition with NGOs. In this context, donors might consider providing training to all three sectors on the benefits of inter-sectoral partnering and how to bridge some of the cultural and operational differences among government, business, and civil society actors. Particularly useful would be sessions on how NGOs should approach business and sessions for business on corporate social responsibility.

At the same time, donors should encourage government and business to invest in youth by partnering with organizations such as those profiled here. Donors can help to foster an enabling environment conducive to youth engagement by encouraging the development of national youth policies and promoting corporate social responsibility. By the same token, civil society organizations should be encouraged to build their connections with other critical sectors of society. Finally, donors can support capacity-sharing across the region, helping organizations pool their technical know-how.

By fostering collaboration across government, business, and civil society at the local, national, and international levels, donors will also be contributing to efforts to bridge the region’s divides. In turn, this type of networking will help to create and strengthen the dense social networks that fragmented societies such as these so desperately need.

For its part, the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation will be devoting considerable attention to efforts to foster youth engagement in the region. Recently, BCYF adopted four new programmatic objectives that will guide its work over the next four years and which focus on strengthening the economic

“No one should underestimate the capacity of young creative people. They can raise important issues, bridging prejudice and intolerant actions and stimulating permanent communication among young people in the region.”

²³⁸ YEF program questionnaire.

“Through actively engaging youth in developing their communities, we seek to foster improved social conditions in the region overall.”

and social engagement of young people in the region. In keeping with this new framework, BCYF will concentrate on programs that “enhance youth employability, stimulate youth business entrepreneurship, support youth social entrepreneurship, and promote youth volunteerism.”²³⁹ BCYF will place particular attention on efforts to engage young people, ages 12 to 29, in civic participation, activism, service learning, social entrepreneurship, and youth mobilization.”²⁴⁰ A special effort will be made to encourage collaboration among young social entrepreneurs in the region across ethnic, religious and national divides.

Balkan youth represent a powerful force for change.²⁴¹ By supporting young people in programs such as those profiled here, BCYF intends to “...plant seeds of civic-mindedness that will bear fruit for generations to come... Through actively engaging youth in developing their communities, we seek to foster improved social conditions in the region overall. Studies have found that when youth are able to identify social issues, mobilize others to participate in social action, take the lead in moving forward an action agenda, and engage in building alliances, they have an opportunity to impact social systems significantly over the long-term.”²⁴²

According to BCYF’s Executive Director, Agon Demjaha, “Our goal is to nurture a generation of young people in the Balkans who feel a vital part of their societies, who are empowered to actively contribute, and who are hopeful for their futures and that of their communities and nations.”²⁴³ As 20-year-old Muhamed Mešić, the city of Tuzla’s youngest-ever City Councilor, points out, “The Balkan region has some of the most engaged and passionate young people in the world. The only way to make a huge fire is to light a lot of sparks.”²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Demjaha, Agon. “Letter from the Executive Director,” op. cit., p. 1.

²⁴⁰ Balkan Youth Update, No. 5, op. cit., p. 2. BCYF will accomplish this in two ways: by promoting youth social entrepreneurship through a program that will provide young people, ages 16-29, with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and resources they need to strengthen their civic engagement and leadership capabilities, activism, and social entrepreneurship; and, by strengthening the network of NGOs working to engage young people, ages 12 to 24, in civic participation, service learning, activism, social entrepreneurship, and youth mobilization. The first of these two challenges will be met through the establishment of Youth Leadership Institutes linked to IYF’s YouthActionNet program. For more on this program, a part of “Make a Connection,” a global initiative of IYF and the Nokia Corporation to inspire and promote youth leadership and social entrepreneurs worldwide, see www.youthactionnet.org.

²⁴¹ “Economic and Social Engagement of Young People in the Balkans,” op. cit., p. 4.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 3.

²⁴³ Demjaha, Agon. “Letter from the Executive Director,” op. cit.

²⁴⁴ “Economic and Social Engagement of Young People in the Balkans,” op. cit., p. 3.

Program Site Visits and Interviews²⁴⁵

Albania

Young Artists of Stage Association (SHARS), Tirana

Group interview with Gjergji Trola (Chairman), Ada Galanxhi (Secretary), and two current program trainers and former program participants (Ledio Topalli and Lorenc Kaja, ages 24). September 15, 2004.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Democracy Center Nove Nade, Bihać

Individual interview with Almedina Grozdanić (Project Coordinator).
Group interview with Samir Halilović (Program Manager), Zoran Arsović (Financial Officer), Ida Karapetrić (Volunteer Coordinator), Haris Karabegović (Reproductive Health Project Coordinator), Sead Beširević (participant) and Šeherzada Omercehajić (participant). September 13, 2004.

Zemlja Dece, Tuzla

Group interview with Mirsada Bajramović (Executive Director), Halida Hasanagić (Coordinator of Telex Centre), and Edin Hodžić (Youth Worker).
Individual interview with Nela Jahić (participant). September 15, 2004.

Croatia

Volunteers Centre Zagreb (VCZ), Zagreb

Group interview with Katazina Pinjušić (former Vice President), Branka Cičak (Board member), and Maja Janković (volunteer staff member). September 13, 2004.

Kosovo

INTEGRA NGO, Prishtina

Group interview with Kushtrim Koliqi (Program Coordinator), Valon Ejupi (Program Coordinator), Ilir Dauti (Program Coordinator), and Ermal Emini (Office Administrator). Group interview with three program participants, ages 17-20, including Venera Mjekiqi, Zana Dauti and Besart Sllamniker. September 19, 2004.

²⁴⁵ In most cases, separate interviews were conducted with program staff and program beneficiaries. Usually, both groups were present during each of the interviews.

IRC Youth Center, Prizren

Group interview with Bari Zenelaj (Executive Director) and Erkan Vardari (Program Manager). Group interview with four program participants, ages 21-23 (Krenar Basha, Besim Mydyti, Hamit Konga and Fatmir Rexhaj). September 18, 2004.

NGO Future, Gračanica

Group interview with Nenad Rikalo (Executive Director), Dragan Petrović (Board member), and Ivana Jovanović (Technical Support). September 18, 2004.

Macedonia

Aureola, Struga

Group interview with Ruhije Sula (President), Nurije Zhaku (Vice President), Leonora Zhuta (Secretary), Melihate Mislimi (Coordinator/Accounting). Group interview with six program participants, ages 17-19. September 14, 2004.

Youth Educational Forum (YEF), Skopje

Group interview with Marjan Zabrcanec (President), Ilija Zupanoski (Debate Coordinator), Vesna Ivanoska (Creative Teaching and Learning Project), Bojan Maricik (Secretary), Neda Korunovska (Street Law Coordinator), and Olivera Simovska (Coordinator, Tetovo). Group interview with four program participants, ages 16-18. September 13, 2004.

Montenegro

Association for Democratic Prosperity—Zid (ADP-Zid), Podgorica

Group interview with Aleksandra Zeković (Program Coordinator, Volunteer Center) and Vojislav Jovanović (Project Coordinator). Group interview with two program participants, ages 20 and 24, and Ana Radulović (English instructor and volunteer). September 16, 2004.²⁴⁶

Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET), Podgorica

Group interview with Danilo Radulović (President), Andjelija Kovacević (Coordinator), and Andjelka Janjusević (Assistant). Group interview with three program participants, ages 16-18. September 17, 2004.

²⁴⁶ There was also an informal discussion with ADP-Zid's program manager, Slobodan Zivkovic. The program manager also completed the program questionnaire.

Romania

New Horizons Foundation, Lupeni

Individual and group interviews with Dana Bates and Brandi Bates (Co-founders/Directors), Diana Certan (Program Director and Research Specialist), Ancuta Predan (Kaizen Coordinator), Monica Vieru (Project Coordinator). Group interview with fourteen program participants, ages 16-28. September 22, 2004.

Youth Association for Education, Leadership, Information and Ecology (AtelieR), Braşov

Individual and group interviews with Dorian Lungu, (President), Simina Craciun (Program Manager), Cătălina Tănase (Youth Officer), and Aurel Morar (Youth Officer). Group interview with five program participants, ages 17-18. September 21, 2004.

Serbia

Cultural Center DamaD, Novi Pazar

Group interview with Zibija Dh-Šarenkapić (President), Mirjana Hubanić (computer course instructor), Seida Hadžić (theatre workshop instructor), Ajsela Skrijelj (creative workshops instructor), and four program participants, Edis Bulić, Enis Šemović, Esmin Bilalović, and Nermin Fakić. September 17, 2004.

Program Questionnaires

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- **Young Artists of Stage Association (SHARS), Tirana**

Bosnia-Herzegovina

- **Democracy Center Nove Nade, Bihać**
- **Zemlja Dece, Tuzla**

Croatia

- **Volunteers Centre Zagreb (VCZ), Zagreb**

Kosovo

- **INTEGRA NGO, Prishtina**
- **IRC Youth Center, Prizren**
- **NGO Future, Gračanica**

Macedonia

- **Aureola, Struga**
- **Youth Educational Forum (YEF), Skopje**

Moldova

- **Child Rights Information Center (CRIC), Chişinău**

Montenegro

- **Association for Democratic Prosperity—ZID (ADP-Zid), Podgorica**
- **Association for Equality and Tolerance (AET), Podgorica**

Romania

- **New Horizons Foundation, Lupeni**
- **Youth Association for Education, Leadership, Information and Ecology (AtelieR), Braşov**

Serbia

- **Cultural Center DamaD, Novi Pazar**

Additional Interviews

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- Agon Demjaha, Executive Director, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, various interviews between September 14-20, 2004.
- Endri Fuga, Executive Director, Balkans YouthLink-Albania, phone interview March 30, 2005.
- Risto Karajkov, Program Officer, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, various interviews between September 13- 23, 2004.
- Muhamed Mešić (former participant, Zemlja Dece), April 21, 2005.
- Ashok Regmi, Manager, YouthActionNet, various interviews between September 6-14.
- Ditika Shehi, Executive Director, Multidisciplinary Center for the Management of Child Maltreatment (MCMCM), Tirana, Albania, September 15, 2004. Interview included program participants and a teacher.
- Rafit Tarić, Manager, Krajina Center, Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina, September 11, 2004.
- Sihana Xhaferi, Program Coordinator, Kosova Foundation for Open Society (KFOS), September 18, 2004.

Documents

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Kaizen Service Project Checklist

Does the project fully utilize media involvement and or other forms of Public Education?

Does the project develop/incorporate “bridging” Social Capital element?

- i.e. can the project be done in partnership with another organization or group, especially marginalized?

Does it push deeper into community awareness and understanding?

- Incorporates “upstream”, causal issues.
- Facilitates active reflection.

Does the project advance academic skills, especially as it relates to vocational development?

- Is it the appropriate level of challenge? Not too easy, not too hard?

Does the project incorporate fun?

Is the project “Strategic” for advancement of service learning in Romania?

- i.e. need for policy component, so a leader facilitates a project of this nature.
- High visibility and high impact especially in the beginning.

Project transparently meets real community needs (i.e. is not partisan to an insider interest).

- It improves the quality of life (by promoting a good, or removing a bad/danger) for the persons served. Alleviates suffering?
- How will community interpret project? Is it self-serving?
- Helps develop a sense of caring for others, especially neglected others or those that are unlike oneself?

Does the project have full consensus of the Kaizen group?

Does the project have measurable outcomes?

(Advanced) Does the project incorporate policy change or implementation?

Out-of-School Youth in the Balkans²⁴⁷

Numbers of Secondary²⁴⁸ School-Age Youth²⁴⁹ Not In School, 2001

Region/Country	Total Secondary-Age Out-of-School Youth	% of Total School-Age Population
World	274 422 000	36.49
Central and Eastern Europe	5 541 000	12.64
Albania	107 000	22.10
Bosnia-Herzegovina	No Data	No Data
Bulgaria	42 000	5.71
Croatia	53 000	11.64
Kosovo	No Data	No Data
Macedonia	42 000	16.09
Moldova	158 000	27.62
Romania	424 000	15.82
Serbia and Montenegro ²⁵⁰	519 000	40.54

Source: Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005 (Table 8, p. 310)

http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/c774ba723a22887dfe3cb77022362baatable8_secondary.pdf

²⁴⁷ Table prepared by Jacob Korenblum, Research Assistant, EQUIP3 / Youth Trust, Education Development Center.

²⁴⁸ Refers to lower and upper secondary education.

²⁴⁹ Age ranges vary by country; typically secondary-level students are 13-18 years old.

²⁵⁰ Data is from 2000.

International Youth Foundation

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