

PC-AAA 760

*war-torn societies project in*

# Guatemala



**WSP**



**PSIS**

## The WSP Dissemination Phase

This publication is one component of a wider exercise of not only evaluating the first four years of the War-torn Societies Project, but also of sharing this evaluation and the lessons learned during the project with a wide variety of interested audiences. The lessons have been compiled into a set of core reports that analyse the WSP experience in the four countries in which it was piloted, document WSP's operational experience at field and headquarters levels, and draw conclusions on the project overall.

*The War-torn Societies Project: the first four years*

(an overview of the WSP experience and lessons learned)

*WSP in Eritrea* (an account of the project in Eritrea)

*WSP in Guatemala* (an account of the project in Guatemala)

*WSP in Mozambique* (an account of the project in Mozambique)

*WSP in Somalia*

(an account of the ongoing project in Northeast Somalia)

*WSP in practice* (an account of WSP's operational experience)

In addition to the reports, three companion volumes are being published in collaboration with WSP successor bodies and/or regional publishers in the countries in which WSP has completed its pilot work.

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*Del conflicto al dialogo: el WSP en Guatemala* (Spanish)

published in association with FLACSO

(Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales Sede Guatemala)

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# Abbreviations

CCU	Central Coordination Unit of WSP
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PAR	Participatory action-research
PSIS	Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies
SAG	Special Advisory Group to WSP
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WSP	War-torn Societies Project

# The War-torn Societies Project

## How WSP began

The War-torn Societies Project (WSP), a collaborative project of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS) of the Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies was launched in June 1994. Its first aim was to help clarify policy options in societies that are emerging from major social and political conflict.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, there had been a dramatic rise in the number of instances of profound internal strife in countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Invariably these had momentous implications for the structures of societies in these countries and posed major challenges for those providing immediate relief and aiding longer-term rehabilitation, be it social, economic or political. UNRISD, the United Nations research institute devoted to social development, saw a responsibility to explore what and how social science could contribute to post-conflict rebuilding. In 1993, therefore, UNRISD convened a preliminary workshop devoted to that question.

Within UNRISD itself, interest in the issue had grown out of a number of earlier projects on political violence and on ethnic conflict, and more directly from projects on the return of refugees and on Cambodia. On the PSIS side, work on these questions had included formulating a new strategy for Swiss humanitarian aid and assessing UNDP work in conflict and disaster situations. The experience of these agencies, and of others involved in the delivery of aid, was discussed at a brainstorming seminar held in Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1994 that brought together, for the first time in such a form, representatives from war-torn societies and some of the major actors in international assistance. At Cartigny, these shared interests in post-conflict rebuilding laid the foundation for a concrete plan of joint action that would link research and policy. The War-torn Societies Project was born.

The essential premise of WSP was that post-conflict rehabilitation typically involves a whole range of actors – internal and external – but that it is often hampered by these actors' lack of understanding of how some of the basic issues and priorities involved in rehabilitation interact. This lack of understanding was seen to be compounded by insufficient exchange of information on the various actors' policy agendas and last but not least by the limitations and inflexibility of some of the external actors' own terms of reference.

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With these initial assessments of some of the hurdles in view WSP undertook to initiate, in selected war-torn societies action-research projects that would facilitate jointly sponsored research activities into priority areas for social and economic reconstruction, and to promote policy dialogue and synchronisation among the main actors involved. Research and policy action were seen as potentially interrelated in several ways: research would help identify priorities for policy involvement and adjustment while also mapping out what programmes various actors were already engaged in, actors in turn might not only respond to research findings, but call for new areas of enquiry, collectively steering research into new or more directions. In the process, it was expected that there would be value in promoting and facilitating dialogue about research priorities and findings, as well as about their respective policy agendas, among different actors: government agencies and other national actors, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The WSP approach was laid down in a Project Document accepted as a basis for action at the 1994 Cartigny seminar. The document outlined a number of crucial steps that were to be followed and elements that were to be included in each

country project. In terms of organizational structure and staffing, this involved choosing a national Country Project Coordinator/Director necessarily a consensus figure who would have overall responsibility for the project and for liaising with key government and external actors: forming a Project Group comprising representatives of the main internal and external actors involved in post-conflict rebuilding, that would assume collective ownership of the project, recruiting a Research Coordinator and other core researchers, and providing for administrative support staff and logistic support.

*The first task for the core research team was to prepare a Country Note, a substantive paper discussing the key social, economic and political conditions and requirements of the country in the post-conflict situation*

Operationally, the first task for the core research team was to prepare a Country Note: a substantive paper discussing the key social, economic and political conditions and requirements of the country in the post-conflict situation, paying due attention to how various issues were connected. The Country Note was to be prepared on the basis of both existing data and research and broad consultation with main internal and external actors. It would serve as a basis for discussion in the Project Group and for selecting usually not more than five key themes or Entry Points for research that could highlight policy issues in which different actors would be engaged.

For each of these themes a Working Group was then to be constituted made up of representatives of the different actors with a particular interest or involvement in the policy area concerned. Members of these Working Groups would interact with the relevant researcher(s), and by implication with each other on the question of

which issues would be given priority and how, and would generally give direction to the research and feedback on the basis of its preliminary findings. In the conduct of the research activities and in Working Group deliberations, a special effort was to be made to ensure a meaningful 'policy mix' as well as 'actor mix'. WSP projects were expected to last approximately eighteen months, a period considered both necessary and sufficient to initiate a process that might eventually become self-sustaining. Throughout the life of the projects, a Central Coordination Unit (CCU) in Geneva would closely monitor the research activities, provide backstopping where necessary and arrange for logistical support.

Based on this general framework, WSP was launched in Eritrea in June 1995, in Mozambique in July 1995, in Guatemala in August 1996 and in Somalia – after a prolonged preparatory period – in January 1997. The Eritrean project ended with a final workshop in December 1996. Its life was officially extended until May 1997 to allow for the preparation of a successor arrangement, and then again to the end of October that year when WSP Eritrea was officially closed. In June 1997 it was decided to extend the project in Mozambique to the end of that year to allow for more effective dissemination of the research findings and further consideration of possible successor arrangements. Subsequently the transition phase was extended to the end of April 1998 at which time WSP Mozambique was closed. The Guatemala project had its final workshop in March 1998 and was formally brought to a close the following month. As WSP itself approached its intended closing phase in December 1998, plans were in place to extend the Somali project to additional locations, including Somaliland, and thus to extend its life beyond the close of the wider pilot project.

## **What's new in the WSP approach**

There are various possible ways of looking at the WSP experience and judging where it fits into the research/policy nexus. It can be considered according to its potential as a venue for policy dialogue. It can be defined by its capacity to generate policy-relevant research data, or can be judged by its comparative advantages as a tool for identifying and solving problems. Each of these approaches will highlight a particular aspect of what in most WSP countries was a complex set of processes and interactions, involving researchers, policy-makers and other interested parties.

Each of these approaches – by implication, also adds to our general thinking on the possible links between research and policy. Such links occur in many forms in different contexts though quite often they have been obscured by a lack of adequate feedback mechanisms. It is common, for example to say that sound policy preparation requires reliable research back-up (and feedback), although the understanding of what the exact connection is and how it can be assured is constantly being redefined. WSP has come to represent one significant effort towards understanding the research/policy connection, specifically in contexts where post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation are on the agenda.

One interesting way of looking at the WSP experience – at least in part – and of understanding its rationale and objectives is to consider it in the context of the development of participatory approaches towards problem-oriented and problem-solving social research. Some of WSP's roots in fact can be traced back to innovative forms of participatory action research (PAR) that became quite prominent in the late 1960s and 1970s. At that time they were developed particularly for application in micro-contexts such as small rural communities (Stiefel/Wolfe, 1994). Anthropologists and other researchers would associate themselves with, say, small groups of peasant farmers and, in extensive discussion and dialogue with them, would try to identify the needs and aspirations of local communities and help them think through how members of the community could themselves contribute to achieving these. Understanding and raising awareness of the key problems social groups were facing, including alternative ways of overcoming them, were key concepts guiding this new approach.

On the research side, the problem-orientation and participatory dimensions of this new approach stood in stark contrast to 'classical' anthropological research in which researchers would make painstaking efforts to observe and accurately record social interactions within the community they studied, while basically trying to stay outside those processes themselves. On the policy side, the basic assumption of this new participatory approach was that it might allow for sounder ways of identifying needs and problem-solving options than would be provided by solutions and programmes devised elsewhere and simply handed down to passive recipients.

Both the problem-orientation and the participatory dimensions demanded entirely new and different roles and skills on the part of the researcher. Observation and analysis were by no means to be superseded but would have a more preparatory and supportive role, and beyond that the researcher would also act as a facilitator, providing a venue (at least symbolically) and guiding the interaction and collective thinking among participants in the project.

Instead of striving for scientific objectivity (which at roughly the same time came under heavy fire as ultimately unattainable anyway) researchers were expected to be able to develop a basic sense of empathy and identification with the local community's self-examination and search for ways of improving their condition. This new role posed its own professional requirements and codes of conduct, which in due course would become the subject of a good deal of discussion and elaboration.

PAR was first developed in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and other so-called Third World regions, in the wake of liberation theology and as a supplement to conventional research methods. It soon gained a place in the repertoire of social science research strategies and methodologies, although the somewhat exaggerated expectations that initially accompanied it were in due course moderated to more realistic proportions. Elements of PAR can since then be recognised in various kinds of problem-solving strategies.

WSP methodology was directly derived from some of the basic ideas and experiences of PAR largely through the initiative of the WSP Director, who had been a prime mover in the use of PAR in UNRISD, in particular as Director of UNRISD's Popular Participation Programme. From these early experiences, in particular the stress on the common recognition of issues and policy priorities, on dialogue to better appreciate different actors' perspectives and on the empowerment of local actors to participate in decisions affecting their future, came the general direction of the methodology to be used in the project.

What makes WSP methodology different and unique, however, is that it represents a quantum leap from a research methodology designed to be implemented at the micro level to implementation at the macro level, addressing broad national issues and involving a variety of actors, internal and external, who play key roles at the macro level.

In WSP the participants are representatives of major agencies rather than a community of peasant farmers. The facilitators are a WSP Country Project Coordinator/Director with a research team rather than an individual researcher and while PAR researchers were generally (though not necessarily) outsiders WSP researchers are invariably insiders widely recognized as interested parties in the process.

There is a further difference. Micro-level PAR not only addressed itself to the local level, but also sought to empower local participants like small farmers in their dealings with powerful agents such as landlords or the state. In confrontational situations its own role was thus essentially conflictual. In contrast WSP methodology, in its efforts to create bridges for dialogue and communication, is basically consensual.

The underlying assumptions of WSP methodology are that, particularly in post-conflict situations, there is an acute need for broad-based dialogue and communication, for sound information and the sharing of it on the requirements and priorities for reconstruction.

Post-conflict situations are potentially characterized by a lack of clarity, confusion and/or overlap as to which actors – government branches, private organizations, international agencies – are doing what and what policy responses they are developing to immediate and long-term needs. Also there is usually little open space if any for regular communication among key actors in the field. WSP's premise therefore is that mapping key issues and key policy initiatives through jointly initiated research, and using the results as a basis for dialogue towards an improved understanding of different policy approaches and possible coordination, may help fill important gaps.

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Does it? The answers to that can only be given with confidence when the various WSP pilot projects have all been completed and more fully analysed. Nonetheless, a few striking experiences already stand out.

In the first two countries where WSP projects were launched – Eritrea and Mozambique – the dynamics of the projects worked out quite differently, as might have been expected in different contexts. In both countries, however, participants reflecting on their involvement in WSP Working Groups singled out the element of dialogue as having been of most significance in helping them better understand different actors, positions and policies. Representatives of NGOs or multilateral agencies, for example, reported that it was through WSP that they had come to better appreciate the rationale of government policies, while participants from government or political organizations observed that WSP had provided a much needed venue for sharing some of their policy thinking with other actors engaged in reconstruction efforts. Beyond this, almost all quarters said that involvement in WSP had been a shared learning experience, and in a number of instances had helped to indicate attainable solutions to common issues.

A similar appreciation emerges from the WSP experience in Guatemala and Somalia – where the project created a much needed democratic forum for all actors

– particularly local and national actors – to meet and search together for a better understanding of common challenges of post-war rebuilding, and to search for new solutions.

*The particular context in which WSP-type action-research is undertaken is of crucial importance in determining both the needs and the possible scope for its engagement.*

In terms of providing a venue for creative dialogue and generating a sense of common orientation from the initial country experiences it appears that WSP may indeed have succeeded in transposing some basic elements of PAR from the micro to the macro context.

But if this seems to hold significant promise for national and international engagement in reconstruction efforts, there are limits to the WSP model of participatory problem-oriented research. Again, the particular context in which WSP-type action-research is undertaken is of crucial importance in determining both the needs and the possible scope for its engagement.

In this connection it will be useful to recall one basic assumption underlying the WSP concept: that PAR at the macro level will be especially relevant in those post-conflict situations where it is unclear which actors are pursuing what policy objectives and where there is a clear need to arrive at broader consensus. In many post-conflict situations, the government wants to retain overall command of the policy process and is determined to keep the initiative in setting out strategies for national reconstruction. In such situations, it is likely that participatory policy research that seems to go beyond dialogue would be seen to infringe on this Dialogue as such may still be seen as useful and even of potential service to the

government in office, but the government will be more likely to ensure that policy dialogue it did not initiate itself does not encroach on the (re-)setting of national policy priorities

In fact there is potential ambivalence in government responses to the WSP approach. WSP's role in facilitating dialogue between different actors (among whom there are possibly some former rivals) is likely to be seen as valuable, and it is not unlikely that governments might seek to make use of the venue WSP offers as an additional forum to get their messages across. At the same time, though, there is likely to be concern that the policy dialogue that ensues might follow an entirely autonomous course and engender new policy. Though the concerns are delicate and may not always be explicit they are genuine and need to be recognised by all parties. In principle, though, WSP's particular approach to action-research can potentially make a strategic contribution to rethinking key issues in post-conflict reconstruction, in tandem with and in support of government efforts in parallel directions

## Assessing the WSP experience

From its inception, WSP attracted wide international interest. Donor agencies in particular showed a keen interest in its potential, and gave it their initial support. Many different actors asked what lessons WSP might produce and speculated on what difference it might make in a number of contexts. There were at times high expectations of WSP's possible role. Donor representatives and other observers, for example, were from the outset interested to learn whether the project has impact, though without specifying what this might mean. If a true assessment of the role, potential and impact of the WSP is to be made, it is important first to ask what expectations are reasonable

The aims of WSP itself bear repeating

*WSP is a pilot project that aims to make a contribution towards post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building through an innovative approach and methodology that brings relevant internal and external actors together around a number of key policy themes of common interest*

WSP thus aims to achieve better insights into basic problem areas, to promote improved coordination of rehabilitation and development efforts, and to de-politicize divisive issues, thus indirectly contributing to reconciliation

These objectives evolved in the course of the project, with key focuses changing subtly from one phase to the next. From the beginning WSP pursued multiple objectives that were not always clearly defined. Priorities changed or progressed as the project moved through different stages. Thus, at the 1994 Cartigny seminar WSP was conceived essentially as a response to the frustration of the international community over its all too apparent failures, and the ultimate objective was to assist the international community to perform better. Initially, WSP projects in the pilot countries were seen primarily as a tool to reach that objective

Once WSP country projects had been initiated in the selected countries, however, assistance to rebuilding processes in these countries naturally enough became an overriding objective. The change in orientation this signified was profound but perhaps not immediately visible, as external actors kept an active interest in WSP, though now to better understand how their own programmes would relate to national policies.

As stock is taken of WSP's efforts to improve insights into basic problem areas and promote relevant dialogue among a larger field of actors, there is also an enhanced interest in trying to ascertain to what extent some of the lessons learned may be generalized to other post-conflict situations, and possibly to international development assistance more broadly.

At the point at which WSP's 'impact' is assessed, a number of other factors need to be taken into consideration. For example, WSP's contributions to post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation are more likely to be indirect than direct in nature. Accordingly, the 'impact' of WSP is more likely to refer to how well it succeeded in creating a means of facilitation, in contributing to improved communication and understanding, possibly in helping create a new view of or changed climate for policy dialogue (likely to need longer to assess) and not necessarily to any concrete shifts in policy. Again, actors might well adjust their policy agendas in the light of deliberations in a WSP context, but it has not been an objective of WSP as such to steer or influence policy in any particular direction. In principle the 'impact' of WSP should thus not be judged by whether or not it has done this.

It is also important to remember that WSP is essentially a pilot project, experimenting with a previously untried approach to policy-oriented PAR. This has two important implications: the first is that the first phase of WSP is in many ways a means of testing the WSP 'package', the instrument or methodology itself, the second is that WSP 1994-1998 is a first try-out in a variety of different post-conflict situations.

Questions may still be unanswered, therefore, on how ready the methodology is for application elsewhere, or whether it should first be further adjusted. By implication, any assessment should also take into account whether what is being measured is the potential of a project approach that is to be further developed, or a methodology that can now be fully assessed in terms of its performance.

It is perhaps even more important to remember that during the pilot phase, WSP projects have been operating under conditions that may not necessarily be present in the future. In particular, the close monitoring and logistic support from the CCU in Geneva, and the high level of support from donors, may not be available beyond the pilot phase.

When drawing lessons from the experience so far and assessing its relevance and validity for application elsewhere, therefore, we also have to consider how the

blueprint for WSP projects is likely to fare without these forms of support. Is it conceivable that a WSP 'package' could be composed in a form that could be employed relatively easily without much external assistance?

The first stage in the assessment of all four WSP country projects was to develop a set of tentative guidelines and questions. This was used not as an exhaustive check-list but as an indicative framework in which the assessment might be used to draw lessons, particularly since, from the beginning, WSP had been seen not as a static product but as an interaction between research and policy deliberation, and between different sets of actors.

As the 'lessons learned' focus is central to the whole exercise, it is useful to spell out more explicitly what is meant by 'lessons' and to ask 'lessons for whom and from what?'

Clearly, in the case of a project like WSP, which operates at different levels, insights and lessons drawn from the activities differ from one actor to another. Lessons are likely to be relevant to different bodies at different times and for different reasons. At least three different levels can be distinguished in the context of WSP, all with their own distinctive value but also significantly related.

Firstly, lessons learned in the context of the empirical research conducted in one of the WSP country projects, or through the confrontation of policy assumptions with substantive research results from the field, lie at the core of what WSP is about. In other words, fresh research evidence may prove to be relevant to key policy actors. The lessons concerned do not necessarily represent scientific discoveries or breakthroughs (that was not why the research was undertaken to begin with), but interesting findings of wider relevance should not be *a priori* excluded.

The key point is that research evidence about actual conditions may represent an important additional resource for policy actors (whether or not this was strictly called for by the actors concerned), and therefore can represent relevant 'lessons learned' at that particular level. But to offer the same 'lessons' at other, for example international levels and thus presume their wider validity might not serve much purpose, and could even be counter-productive if these lessons had been long recognised in other contexts or were to be found in more general theoretical literature. It is obviously important, therefore, to keep in mind the likely relevance of lessons to particular levels of actors.

Secondly, lessons learned in the conduct of organizing and monitoring WSP projects – largely relating to methodological matters rather than to substantive findings – concern a different but equally crucial resource to operational actors. This is particularly true of the experience and insights gained in the process of setting up successive WSP projects in different country contexts and from keeping track of subsequent actions and initiatives. Lessons learned here might include those arising from both successes and failures and might arise in response to unanticipated turns in the course of WSP projects. In either case the lessons learned are largely a function of learning by doing or 'self-teaching'.

Lessons of this kind thus concern the adequacy of WSP as an 'instrument' that is being tested and possibly improved during its pilot phase. Naturally, the dimensions that might come up for attention and scrutiny in this connection are as varied as the WSP enterprise as a whole: logistics, project preparation, training, action-research interconnections, and not least the question of the desirable extent of 'local' autonomy vis-a-vis CCU guidance.

Thirdly, lessons learned from the introduction of WSP in different contexts relate to the processes of interaction between various categories of actors involved in WSP in different country situations. They refer particularly to the kind of processes and relationships that emerge at the macro level in different situations, between government and external actors for example, and provide answers to the question of how and why WSP prompted such different response patterns. By implication, the lessons learned here might advance our understanding of the kind of social and political contexts in which WSP has a greater chance of making a useful contribution and might give some insight into the extent to which WSP might be replicated in different contexts.

It will be clear that there are likely to be important links among these three categories of potential lessons, and the actions and interactions underlying them. We might expect, for example, that actions determining lessons learned within the second category (interventions at the level of the WSP package introduced) would indirectly have an impact on the kind of lessons forthcoming in the first category: the more substantive and communicative dimensions of WSP. These in turn are likely to have an important bearing on the way WSP is perceived and positioned within the wider macro-political context, thus contributing to lessons in the third category. While *a priori* these various links might seem obvious, by their very nature they are not easy to identify and analyse.

Lessons of wider relevance can also be drawn: for example, although WSP-based lessons are derived from, and in turn initially applicable to international assistance in post-conflict situations, some of them may have relevance to development assistance more generally. This is because the performance of international assistance actors in rebuilding war-torn societies often reveals problems and patterns that are of a general nature but that become more visible in the extreme conditions pertaining in a post-conflict situation.

In each of the country reports produced as the first four years (1994-1998) of WSP come to a close, these questions and interactions are considered.

# Guatemala

## Launching WSP in Guatemala

Work to prepare the possible launch of a WSP project in Guatemala began in late 1995, with a visit to the country by SAG member Ruben Zamora to assess Guatemala's suitability for WSP activity. There was a follow-up mission in February 1996 by Zamora, WSP Senior Researcher Patricia Weiss-Fagen and a representative of UNOPS, Christophe Bouvier, at which a range of important internal and external actors were consulted, and then a visit in April/May of that same year by the proposed Country Project Director Edelberto Torres Rivas, to report on the availability of appropriate local resources and to assess the status of peace negotiations.

At that time, Guatemala had suffered more than 35 years of conflict, with the destruction of human lives, terror, weakened social standards, and loss of values with respect to human dignity that conflict so often brings. Trust – necessary in every social relationship – was still elusive, as were solidarity and the idea of helping one another. The respect of law, security and trust in public institutions and officials had been undermined and was still seriously questioned. This had all eaten away at the social relationships that rule community life and are the foundation of every society. By the end of 1996, however, Guatemala was headed for peace, signed between the government and the guerillas in January 1997.

Rebuilding trust, respect, security, solidarity, confidence – these are far greater challenges in a post-conflict society than the reconstruction of buildings, roads or other infrastructure. National reconciliation can only be reached by continued cooperation in pursuit of common objectives, and for more than one generation. It is a complex problem that requires time and will.

A number of other factors characterized the situation of Guatemala at the time of the Peace Accords. They contributed to the selection of Guatemala as a country where WSP was to be implemented and affected the modalities of the project.

Firstly, Guatemala had had long experience with bilateral and multilateral assistance and the work of international NGOs. Secondly, a number of private and semi-public research institutions had drafted reports on national problems, but from the standpoint of orthodox objective research and so consequently without the kind of consensus in their conclusions that might make them useful in the political process. Finally, there were a number of public fora in which aspects

*National reconciliation can only be reached by continued cooperation in pursuit of common objectives, and for more than one generation*

of the economic political and social life of Guatemala were debated, although they tended to be characterized by divergence and polarized points of view

All these factors – the entry of Guatemala into a post-conflict era the evident place of research and an obvious desire for debate and the interest of society to participate in national reconstruction – were documented and analysed in October 1996 in a WSP project document entitled *Rebuilding Guatemala WSP modalities (Reconstruyendo Guatemala la modalidades del WSP de octubre 1996)* Together with the national government's five-year plan for Guatemala and a series of documents on international cooperation, NGOs and the business sector, this document formed the basis on which WSP was launched in Guatemala

The project's objectives in Guatemala were to create an analytical and operational capacity to document the country's peace-building experiences, to analyse it through participatory research, to draw lessons and to formulate relevant policy recommendations for different actors The project also aimed to facilitate dialogue among the main actors external and internal, by initiating and supporting a process of collective analysis and problem-solving

To begin to do this, a Country Project Director had first to be appointed and Edelberto Torres Rivas took up the challenge He was joined by a Special Advisor, Bernardo Arevalo de Leon, five local researchers who would undertake research and orient the discussions in the Working Groups, and a support staff of two

## **Implementation I: Country Note and Entry Points**

The first step was to prepare the so-called Country Note, a national document that would attempt – through research, interviews and broad consultations with relevant actors – to provide a consolidated picture of the challenges facing Guatemala in the post-conflict phase, and recommending possible policy priorities for action This was done under the direct responsibility of the project coordination team between October and December 1996, as the peace negotiations accelerated In the process of the research information links and networks were also set up, actors were encouraged to become committed to the WSP process and contacts were consolidated with international organisations that would also cooperate

The results of the first research phase were published in January 1997 *Guatemala at the Crossroads 1997* gave a comprehensive and analytical vision of the situation in the country, describing the most important features that define it as well as the interests of the actors in a scenario qualified by peace and the will to rebuild society The process followed to produce this document, involving national and international actors in more than 100 meetings for discussion and information-sharing, was itself part of an important beginning of the consensus-building work of WSP

The Country Note identified five core issues central to the challenge of rebuilding and that need to be tackled to underpin peace, development and democracy

- the modernization and strengthening of the State
- social and economic development
- the administration of justice and public security
- recognition of the multicultural nature of society
- international cooperation

## **Implementation II: Project Group and Working Groups**

On 9 January 1997, only a few days after the signing of the Peace Accords, WSP was officially launched with the convening of the national Project Group the project's higher debate and decision-making body capable of examining all the project's proposals and recommendations. It was presided over by the Vice-President of the Republic and comprised more than 50 representatives from government, international agencies, research centres and organs of civil society. Such broad representation had never before been seen in the history of Guatemala.

The Project Group members expressed their will to work towards joint results on topics of national importance. To this end, they considered and endorsed the Country Note and accepted the five main topics chosen for action-research, known in WSP terminology as Entry Points. Around these topics, five Working Groups were created, comprising members of the Project Group whose interests coincided with the research topics. These Working Groups became places for discussion and collective analysis and specialised researchers were hired for each group to help develop key aspects of the research topics.

*Years of internal armed conflict and impunity had planted the seeds of fear, distrust and reticence, but gradually spaces of confidence and tolerance opened*

It was not easy. During the first meetings held in February and March 1997, the distrust among the various actors made effective collaboration difficult. In Guatemala, the long years of counter-insurgency had seriously disrupted social and political life and made living together in a community difficult. The years of internal armed conflict and impunity had planted the seeds of fear, distrust and reticence among the people. This became evident at the beginning of the WSP analysis and debate process, but gradually spaces of confidence and tolerance opened.

Additionally, during the first three months of the second interactive research phase from February to April 1997, the Working Groups were slow in deciding the direction their work should take. Partly this was because the peace that was now in place had not resulted from one single cause and the multiple factors underlying the peace had all to be taken into account, which was an enormous challenge. Indeed, building peace goes hand in hand with the task

of consolidating political democracy and political democracy is strengthened when institutional stability and economic growth are guaranteed. This meant that there were several different issues to be tackled at the same time, none of which could claim priority because they are all closely related and so should be seen simultaneously. This complexity caused difficulties at the beginning as the researchers tried to focus the debate and research agendas, but was clarified in April with the timely methodological intervention of the CCU from Geneva. Field work was also somewhat delayed because of budgetary constraints.

The Working Groups' mandate was to carry out collective research on the respective Entry Points in order to reach consensus around concrete operational policy recommendations. To achieve this it was necessary to generate group dynamics that would allow participants to identify shared interests and objectives among the representatives of the various sectors. An interpersonal dynamic developed in each group during the research and debate process, and this progressively strengthened the collective group identity and diminished the distrust that had prevailed during the first meetings.

Two different products resulted from the project's operational tasks: the specific policy recommendations that each Working Group agreed on for its Entry Point, and the capacity-building for the dialogue, trust-building and solidarity that are useful tools in many aspects of life.

The operational recommendations formulated by the Working Groups were not the result of simple debate, but rather of a research process by which group members collectively analysed the problem, compared the various perspectives, solutions and proposals, and identified the intersectoral points in common that would allow them to agree on policy recommendations. Each Working Group produced a final report.

*The decentralization of decision-making within the State*, by the group looking at the modernization and strengthening of the State, *Action plan for tax policy* and *Action plan for rural development*, by the Working Group on social and economic development. *A proposal for action in the field of public security and citizen participation* by the group considering the administration of justice and public security, and *Constitutional reforms related to the agreement on the identity and rights of indigenous people* by the Working Group on the recognition of the multicultural nature of society.

These documents were also used as background information at various other events, for example in the *Encuentros para la actualización* meetings promoted by the central government, at the multi-party commission to reform the Constitution and in the dialogue and consensus commissions set up as part of the Peace Accords. Similarly, the reports inspired the interactive method by which UNDP's *Human Development Report on Guatemala* was prepared.

Ten two-day workshops were organized to discuss the Entry Points and the key findings with Guatemalans at the local level. Most of the workshops were held in

the northwestern highlands, the area most affected in the last stages of the armed conflict. Río Hondo, Zacapa, in the eastern part of the country, was an exception since it was affected at the onset of the conflict.

The results of these local workshops suggested that, in general, Guatemala's centralized public policy institutions tend to lose sight of the diversity of local scenarios and the different realities that exist at the local level. Public policies assume a level of homogeneity that does not exist, and so lack the flexibility needed to fit a social reality rich in different hues. They are consequently often ineffective. This is also true of the design of municipal policies. In the case of Patzún, Chimaltenango, and Río Hondo, the municipal authorities supported the process but did not participate in the debate or did so cautiously, and at a distance.

The project ended in March 1998, two months later than anticipated but within reasonable time limits. The final cost of the project in Guatemala (US\$616,900) also seems appropriate in relation to the outcomes obtained: with one substantive result and two procedural ones: five operational recommendations delivered by WSP Guatemala to the national leaders of the Project Group, two hundred hours of training on interactive research and decision-making to each of the fifty participants in the Working Groups, 1,600 training hours on dialogue and consensus-building to approximately 200 participants in the ten workshops carried out in the interior of the country.

The scope of the recommendations from each Working Group, as well as their level of accuracy and technical sophistication, varies. Generally, the five Working Groups performed very differently: one group was unable to generate a real group dynamic (Group V) while another group decided to continue working after the project was formally concluded (Group III). Each Working Group set its own objectives and organized work in an *ad hoc* manner, based on their own criteria. As a result, even a minimum consensus reached constitutes a valid input to defining public policies. Moreover, they represent a point of social convergence on topics of the utmost importance to the national agenda in a society accustomed to confrontation.

## **WSP and the transition to democracy**

One of the most important causes of the civil conflict that tore apart society in Guatemala was the historical absence of democracy. Similarly, the ongoing reconstruction of Guatemala cannot be separated from a move towards democracy. It is therefore important to consider the contribution that a project like WSP Guatemala can make to the process of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.

Once armed conflict is over, one of the great obstacles to physical and social reconstruction is precisely the absence of the kind of participatory structures that allow people to collectively assume the challenges of reconstruction. In short, the authoritarian past becomes a negative weight. A direct legacy of civil conflict is

also the worsening of political and social polarization and the absence of dialogue. A culture of confrontation prevails and adversaries are excluded on the grounds that disagreement goes against society and that dissent is therefore anti-national.

This is Guatemalan society, it has gone through armed conflict that started in the mid-fifties, has been caught in a long-lasting authoritarian mould which defined the political system and caused deep divisions among different ethnic groups in the country.

It is within this context that the relevance of WSP to the Guatemalan transition to democracy has to be evaluated. When Guatemala was being considered as a candidate country for WSP activity, it was noted that a large number of fora for discussion existed, but that they were limited in a number of ways. The signing of the Peace Accords, for example, opened up the possibility of discussion of the most diverse topics in a way never seen before in the history of the country, including themes that a few months before would have been dangerous even to mention. Nevertheless, the dialogue in such events was limited because they tended to become simply platforms from which the political and social forces publicized their positions. They were also usually short, lasting only a day or an afternoon, and did not provide the continuity so vital to dialogue that might lead to consensus.

*WSP became a privileged actor that provided a space for dialogue among sectors that had never or hardly ever tried to build something together and whose relationships had been dominated by confrontation and exclusion.*

WSP, in contrast, offered a forum that soon became the most systematic process of consultation around post-conflict issues. The fact that a broad range of social forces participated from its first meeting up to its conclusion fifteen months later, was undoubtedly not only something new but also a real contribution to the construction of a democratic culture. One of the participants pointed out that this was the first project of this nature that ended with nobody withdrawing from the table. In this sense, WSP became a privileged actor that provided a space for dialogue among sectors that had never

or hardly ever tried to build something together and whose relationships had been dominated by confrontation and exclusion.

Why was this possible? Partly because WSP's arrival on the Guatemalan scene was timely. It began just when the need to develop dialogue became clear and when political conditions were ripe for it. But there were other reasons.

The first is that from the outset WSP was seen as an initiative that did not take sides in the internal struggles of Guatemalan society, in other words, the actors considered WSP an impartial space in which they could express themselves without being subjected to unwanted pressures or commitments. The fact that WSP came from outside Guatemala and was associated with the United Nations, although it was autonomous from any agency operating in the country, largely contributed to this perception.

A second element that positively contributed to the fact that WSP was perceived as a legitimate space for dialogue and consensus, was the careful preparatory work carried out over the months during which the Country Note was prepared and before the project was formally launched. Crucial to obtaining the trust of a diverse group of actors ranging from the private sector to indigenous organizations, municipalities and unions, the government and the Church, was the series of meetings arranged with each of them to explain in detail the project's aims and methodology and to ask for their opinions and suggestions, leaving the door always open to cancel the project if they thought it might have negative consequences for the peace process.

A third and final element that contributed to creating the privileged space that WSP earned in Guatemala, was the way the project went about choosing local staff. Three main characteristics were sought in the leaders: political independence, professional competence and dedication to the method. The first one was the most difficult to find, because of the polarization of Guatemalan society that puts political labels on both organizations and individuals. Fortunately in Guatemala the core team was led by a professional in social sciences highly respected for his intellectual capacity and who had lived abroad for some thirty years. All the members of the team were carefully chosen, their involvement was discreetly discussed with the main actors and their selection was, therefore, based on consensus.

The success of the project was also directly linked to the methodology adopted, which represents an important tool and can make a positive contribution to the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. This is further developed in a later section.

What then, has been the contribution of WSP Guatemala to the political transition in Guatemala?

Firstly, WSP Guatemala generated spaces in which civil society organizations normally excluded from discussions could constructively debate public issues, more precisely, WSP created genuine channels of access to public discussion that became useful tools for democratic development. This was largely because of the autonomous character of the WSP discussion forum. In societies like Guatemala, civil society organizations are not totally excluded from discussing public issues, but they usually have access to participation channels which are manipulated and paternalistic. The State grants access but in exchange demands support for the policies it is promoting and subordination to its political scheme. Similarly access can be achieved through the different political parties but in general these assume a paternalistic attitude by which entry to discussion is based upon subordination or affiliation to the party.

The problem is that these channels for discussion as well as the responses generated within civil society do not contribute to the development of a democratic culture. Those social organizations that refuse to participate under such conditions or that do not accept the *quid pro quo* offered by the system,

can only abstain from the discussion and withdraw, adopt an apolitical stance, or reject participation and confront the parties and the State

For many civil society organizations, WSP Guatemala became an open space for discussion and participation in the design of public policies that did not carry a political label of any kind. It represented an autonomous channel that was non-partisan. In other words, it preserved the autonomous nature of the participants, and achieved this within a context that was not against any party nor the State, since both the government and the political parties participated in the discussion.

A second feature was the fact that WSP Guatemala offered a non-confrontational discussion space. In societies like Guatemala, where authoritarianism persists despite democratic mechanisms (periodic elections, political parties, constitutional rights formally established), political exchanges are usually dominated by confrontation, and people and civil society organizations generally participate in the public realm by opposing rather than contributing. This is also reflected in the mass media whose communication is almost uniformly partisan.

The fact that WSP Guatemala offered an alternative mode of participation was one of the features that the actors involved highlighted and valued. For some,

especially at the local level, this was the first time they participated in such a discussion of national problems. The fact that they could do this in a pluralistic and constructive manner rather than in a confrontational one was completely new.

Additionally, the fact that the various political parties—the government, the business and labour sectors—sat down at the table not to confront each other nor to obtain votes but to discuss and reach agreement was also new for many. In Guatemala, citizens are mostly exposed to public discussion during election campaigns, when the political system ‘opens’ itself to them, but in a context in

which the citizen perceives national problems almost exclusively in the context of a competition to gain more votes and in which the negative and opposing features of the adversary’s position are stressed.

A third contribution that WSP Guatemala made towards the generation of a democratic culture was the fact that its methodology is a practical example of how to modify the relationship between civil society and the political establishment. In Guatemala, the relationship between the government and civil society is predominantly a vertical hierarchical one where the government knows and orders and the people assume a passive and receptive role.

WSP Guatemala carried out a sustained effort for more than a year to show practically that a different type of relationship is possible. WSP Guatemala repositioned the relationship in a non-hierarchical space in which government and

*WSP Guatemala became an open space for discussion and participation in the design of public policies that did not carry a political label of any kind*

political parties participated with civil society organizations in an exercise in which neither the government nor the political parties defined the outcomes but rather contributed to generating consensus with the other participants. It is clear that this 'democracy through discussion' continues to be relative, and that the State and the political parties, regardless of the level of participation in discussion groups, continue to have a privileged presence in that their positions weigh more.

Nevertheless, several participants acknowledged that their participation in WSP allowed them to change their ideas about their relationship with the government, since they did not perceive it any longer as a 'threat' but as a partner in the dialogue. WSP Guatemala also allowed participants to discover the limitations and complexities of governmental activity, regardless of the will or agenda of its leaders. Undoubtedly, the existence of a sound relationship between the State and civil society is indispensable for a democratic culture, and WSP Guatemala showed that, through dialogue and the search for consensus, it is possible to contribute to the healing of a historically unhealthy relationship.

A fourth contribution that WSP made to the process of political transition in Guatemala was its attempt to integrate into the project both the capital city and municipalities in the interior of the country. It is important to remember that Guatemalan society is characterized by an acute political division between the capital and the rest of the country, as well as an extreme imbalance in the distribution of power, worsened by a deep racial division (*ladinos* and indigenous). Power is concentrated in the capital city, which is where political discussions are developed and decisions made, the interior of the country has limited access to public services and is usually not taken into account in the decision-making process and only occasionally consulted (during the electoral process).

*WSP Guatemala showed that, through dialogue and the search for consensus, it is possible to contribute to the healing of a historically unhealthy relationship.*

WSP tried to mitigate this and designed the project as a combination of discussion and consensus-building at the national level, in the capital city, and in several municipalities in the interior of the country, through 10 workshops in which local people participated.

This was entirely new and the experience shows that a project like WSP can potentially serve as a tool for decentralized democratization. Local actors not only participated with enthusiasm but also acknowledged the importance of this process. Results were positive even in municipalities where a recent history of local conflicts seemed to add a note of distrust. It was possible to create a meeting ground among antagonists and generate discussion aimed at community participation and the solution of national problems. It is important to highlight that, when the workshops ended, several municipalities continued with these exercises.

Two critical notes must be made to qualify these experiences. The first relates to the temporary nature of the national and local exercises. Several interviewees, mainly national project leaders, pointed out that the local exercises had started too late when the national project was already nearing completion, and that this did not allow more effective interaction between the two levels.

One of the project leaders suggested that it would be more effective to start the project at the local level and then move up to the national level. This would however create some practical problems, since the choice of the Entry Points requires the participation of national actors. Notwithstanding the suggestion is valid in the sense that future projects should not be conceived as a national exercise to which the local dimension would be added as it developed, but rather as a 'national/local' project from the outset with both dimensions developed in parallel.

As a consequence of the delayed extension of the project to the local level, the interaction between the two levels was more formal and sporadic than systematic. They shared the themes but the conclusions reached by the local groups were not fully integrated into the final documents. Local and national groups only met once in a national plenary, so the interaction hoped for was not fully achieved.

A second criticism was the lack of follow-up at the local level. The introduction of WSP-type consultative processes is probably more urgently needed at the local level, but it is at the same time more difficult to sustain as it would require the continuous support and nurturing that only an established institution or agency could provide.

This problem was considered at the national level and one of the recommendations regarding follow-up approved by participants in the final meeting was that the action-research methodology of WSP be adopted to reinvigorate the national system of Urban and Rural Development Councils. These are legal local participation bodies which had fallen into disuse because of the absence both of an adequate and sound methodology and of political will. The idea was to relaunch the Councils using WSP methodology whose outcomes were considered positive even by governmental officials.

Finally, to fully understand the project's contribution to the democratization and reconstruction of Guatemalan society, consideration must be given to how WSP's consensus-building processes can positively affect the sustainability of policies.

It has been said over and over again that the authoritarian and excluding nature of the political system is one of the main causes for State inefficiency. Policies established on the basis of vertical decision-making and exclusion mean that people see them as something foreign to them with which they have not been involved. When these policies are the 'property' of the government, their fate is contingent on the officer in charge of them and they are easily abandoned, modified or replaced by a new government (and sometimes even a new minister) so that the sustainability of policies is under permanent threat.

The WSP exercise focused policy debate on themes that clearly were of key national importance but proposed a method that did not anchor policy debate and formulation solely in government but in an inclusive social process in which all social forces and actors were invited to participate. The fact that after more than a year of discussion participants agreed on public policy proposals on topics that in Guatemala have been controversial like tax reform, suggests that State policies founded on these proposals will be more sustainable, both because the consensus achieved will motivate the government to continue in that direction, and because once consensus is reached it discourages opposition.

One of the final recommendations made by WSP was the creation of an Academic Research Network. Guatemala has several academic institutions (universities and think-tanks) that work in social studies, but in an isolated manner. The first systematic and sustained effort to jointly develop positions to sustain public policies was made through WSP. Participating in the project helped them discover that, despite their differences, it was possible to produce academically sound products based on consensus. They decided to go beyond the project itself and systematically develop these efforts as a permanent activity. In other words, the institutions discovered that by working together they gave greater legitimacy and strength to their proposals which, in turn, increased their chances of being sustainable.

It is clear, then, that WSP became an instrument that has positively contributed to the transition to democracy in Guatemala. This is not the place to determine just how important this contribution was. What is important is to recognise the transformable potential of tools such as WSP. In this sense it can be concluded that the project carried out in Guatemala affected the country's democratization process in several ways:

- It promoted a culture of dialogue and consensus in a society whose authoritarian past had privileged exclusion and authoritarian rule,
- It generated the opportunity for meetings and for the constructive exchange of proposals in a society where politics was traditionally confrontational,
- It provided a neutral space seen as impartial by all social forces in a society where polarization normally forces individuals to take sides
- It redefined the relationship between the State and civil society in a practical manner moving it from its vertical and authoritarian configuration to a more horizontal practical one based on mutual recognition and respect
- It narrowed the gap in distribution of resources between the capital city and the interior of the country, by carrying out an exercise emphasising equality and common ground and promoting understanding between them,

*WSP became an instrument  
that has positively contributed  
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in Guatemala*

- It sought to generate greater legitimacy and sustainability of public policies, supporting them with a participatory structured consensus, and overcoming in that way the limitations of policies structured on government decisions alone

## **The State, civil society and WSP**

An issue at the core of the WSP experience is its relationship with government which is potentially full of ambiguities and contradictions. As a participatory exercise that aims to strengthen and develop civil society by involving a wide range of social and political organizations, WSP requires the broadest possible representation of these organizations to be effective. On the other hand, by applying PAR methodology to macro-social problems WSP inevitably aims to affect policies and government action, even if only indirectly.

This dual objective of WSP inevitably raises a series of contradictions and difficulties. This is all the more true in a country with a relatively undeveloped civil society, where political polarization leads government to perceive civil society in terms of friend/foe or servant/enemy and where the government has an authoritarian tradition which leads it to exclude or restrict civil society participation in the political life of the country.

Given this, what was learnt from the WSP experience in Guatemala? The first major lesson is that it is not possible to make *a priori* a general rule for how WSP should function and position itself in a given context, since its efficiency and the role it can potentially play will vary with the level of development of civil society, the political momentum in which the project will be developed, and the way government is composed and organized.

WSP projects in different countries have indeed taken different forms and their relation to government varies accordingly. They range from the one implemented in Eritrea where the project was executed in close relationship with government to the Guatemalan model where it evolved from being 'accepted' by the government, to a largely autonomous position mainly resting on the participation of civil society organizations. The Mozambique experience is somewhere between these two, since the project there was developed in a space of dialogue, active encounter and occasional conflict between government and civil society.

In the case of Guatemala it was evident from the onset of the project that the government was to play an important role and that WSP should seek a good level of government participation. Two circumstances favoured this: on the one hand, the new conservative government came to power as a political solution to the armed conflict was already under way, indeed the process came to an end during its first year in office. In other words, Guatemalan society was already in search of dialogue, enquiry and consensus and the government was already a player in this.

On the other hand, a personal relationship was established from the beginning of the project among government officials and WSP leaders and this greatly

facilitated formal and informal communication. It also reduced the distrust with which governments generally regard such initiatives, representing as they do a twofold uncertainty for governments: a potential platform for political adversaries, and a road to commitments that government is not prepared or is unwilling to undertake. In other words, governments feel reluctant to get involved in collective exercises which may move out of their control.

WSP was able to reduce this distrust thanks to the intense consultation and dialogue in the initial stage, and to the transparent attitude it maintained towards the Guatemalan Government, that went as far as consulting government on the appointment of the WSP Country Project Director. As a result, the Vice-President of the Republic was present at the opening ceremony of WSP Guatemala, and the government participated in the Project Group and appointed government officials to various Working Groups.

In the Guatemalan experience, the government's attitude towards WSP was thus favourable when it was launched. Relations cooled considerably during the active research phase, but improved again later, during the final stage of WSP Guatemala. The government never ceased to participate in the project and never attacked it, government officials in the Working Groups, however, were technical officers and, although at the plenary meeting they maintained a high-level political presence, they tended to assume a passive role. It is important to try to understand the reasons for this: from interviews with government and non-government officials, two possible answers arose that once again are related to the difficult and complex relationship between the State and civil society. It is essentially a matter of who sets agendas and who is to lead such an exercise.

From the initial contacts, the government of Guatemala had certain ideas about what to expect from WSP, but these did not necessarily correspond with those of the leaders of the project. The Guatemalan Government saw WSP as a tool to implement a predetermined agenda, that established by the Peace Accords they had recently signed. The government saw no sense in discussing and debating which Entry Points to choose: rather they saw this as a waste of time and, indeed, as dangerous since it could redirect the effort from its logical and necessary course, since the theme to be dealt with was included in the Peace Accords and WSP's task was simply to develop it.

On the other hand, WSP leaders thought it inconceivable to 'impose' a predetermined agenda since the essence of WSP was that it was a participatory consensus-building exercise and the themes to be dealt with had necessarily to be decided on by all participants.

This clear difference in expectations became evident at the end of the project but was ambiguous at the beginning because WSP was introduced within the context of the Peace Accords and as a tool to further them. This was politically correct but created an ambiguity that allowed government officials to expect results that were not delivered nor deliverable by the process and that ultimately distanced them from it.

A general lesson learnt is that projects like WSP face a double agenda throughout their development on the one hand the one determined by the government and related to questions of legitimacy and governance usually short-term, and on the other hand the agenda that arises from WSP methodology that is, from discussions with project participants. There is no doubt that the various actors within civil society and the political parties also have their own specific agendas but these are not so explicit and could be channelled through WSP group discussions.

Nevertheless, in the final phases of WSP Guatemala the government again moved closer to the project, and the reasons for this are clear. The themes that the different discussion groups chose, the tone of the discussions and the results and recommendations produced made it clear to the government authorities that there was no hidden agenda in the WSP exercise. It became evident to government that the project coincided with the agenda and problem-solving methods stated in the Peace Accords and was complementary to them. In this way, the WSP Working Groups reached a goal that coincided with the government's agenda, but in their own way.

*The results and recommendations produced made it clear to the government authorities that there was no hidden agenda in the WSP exercise.*

In short the Guatemalan experience shows that it is indispensable to make it clear from the very beginning what WSP is, and how it works. It is also necessary that the government clearly understands the need for participation as an instrument that strengthens and strategically coincides with democratic objectives.

The other element that affected the relationship between WSP and the Guatemalan Government was competition for leadership of the consultation process. It is commonly said that governments tend to occupy as much of the political arena as possible, or at least attempt to channel autonomous initiatives to their own benefit or purpose.

WSP was no exception and, in fact, the Guatemalan Government developed its own initiative to convoke civil society organizations and political parties to enter the participatory process a few months after WSP had started. This initiative was called *Encuentros para la Actualización* and its similarity to WSP was clear.

To suggest that the Guatemalan Government was following WSP Guatemala's lead may be to presuppose too much, but the fact is that no initiative like the *Encuentros* figured on the government's agenda before WSP Guatemala came into being.

The Guatemalan experience shows that it is possible for two participatory initiatives to co-exist without one cancelling the other and without unnecessary duplication of efforts. It also shows how difficult it is to integrate or coordinate parallel initiatives of this type. Everything seems to indicate that both the

government and WSP Guatemala decided to follow a policy of not 'mixing' the two initiatives, although WSP Guatemala made repeated efforts to coordinate with the *Encuentros*, with little response from the government

A comparison of WSP Guatemala and the *Encuentros* is important because to a large extent the same actors were participating in both initiatives and WSP was frequently compared to the *Encuentros*

The first point of comparison is the agenda, since the government's main objection to WSP was that the project wanted to pursue its own 'non-agenda' (ie of letting it be defined by project participants), and the government wanted to implement the Peace Accords agenda. In contrast civil society organizations considered the 'non-agenda' to be one of the main advantages of WSP, since everything dealt with during the exercise was discussed with participants and not imposed from outside. What is important here is not the originality of the WSP agenda (in any case framed within the Peace Accords) but the legitimacy that the participatory exercise lent to it. In contrast one of the most serious problems that the *Encuentros* had to face at the very beginning was the reluctance of civil society organizations to accept the government's agenda.

On the other hand actors contrasted the environment in which both initiatives evolved, in the sense that WSP became a space that fostered dialogue, that discussions within the Working Groups were less ideological in nature and that actors expressed a greater will to build consensus. The non-binding and informal character of consensus decisions reached in the WSP forum as opposed to the binding character of negotiated conclusions reached in the *Encuentros*, greatly contributed to this difference.

Additionally, several participants pointed out that the *Encuentros* took place in the media spotlight, and this transformed discussions into a confrontation of ideas that left little space for consensus. The level of discussion within the WSP fora was also seen as more profound since the point of departure for each Working Group was not the particular positions of its members but the technical materials provided by the researchers, who helped the Groups throughout the process. Despite these caveats all the participants agreed that both initiatives were parallel efforts and not opposing ones, they insisted on the different functions each performed: *Encuentros* as a forum for expressing political positions by social and political groups, and WSP as a forum for building consensus without expectations that they would automatically be implemented.

Participants pointed out that WSP had low media coverage and that journalists did not participate in large numbers in the discussion groups. As a result WSP had less impact on public opinion than the *Encuentros* did.

Although it is true that the involvement of the mass media can have a negative effect on initiatives of this kind, it is also true that the participation of key actors such as the government can be encouraged by media profile and this also allows a greater number of people to learn about the new culture of dialogue.

Low media profile was consequently a weakness of WSP Guatemala, and this points to a clear need to design and implement a clear and intelligent strategy for public communication. This is especially true in a country like Guatemala, where the mass media have a relatively high level of development and autonomy.

If we try to weigh both initiatives, a general working hypothesis would be that WSP has a better capability to develop citizens' participation in the discussion of public themes from the participatory/dialogue point of view. Judged on the basis of concrete outcomes, however, in terms of policies or public decisions, then the *Encuentros* are more effective since the conclusions were directly picked up for implementation by the government.

The benefit of having two parallel initiatives – one governmental (*Encuentros*) and one autonomous (WSP) – complementing each other is clear. In general, when government-generated initiatives complement civil society-generated initiatives, there are advantages, especially in societies undergoing political transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. A combination of two such initiatives could contribute to reducing the contradictions that are normal in transitional periods, for example the need to implement pre-existing agreements as opposed to the

need for large sectors to perceive them as national agreements, the government's trend towards 'controlled participation' versus the need to approach themes in a participatory manner from the outset by all elements of society, the need for transparency during participatory dialogue expressed by its public nature versus the need to reach agreements based on a serious analysis of the themes incorporating scientific knowledge, and finally the need to reach decisions in a politically expedient way versus the time requirements of a complex and long process of research, analysis and dialogue that participatory decisions and consensus inevitably require.

*The benefit of having two parallel initiatives – one governmental and one autonomous – complementing each other is clear.*

Summing up, the WSP Guatemala experience shows that PAR can make a fruitful contribution to the State/civil society relationship. This is important because this will be one of the key issues of good governance in societies in the immediate future. In addition, the experience of WSP Guatemala indicates that a positive contribution will mainly depend on

- An accurate understanding of the development of civil society in the country where the project will be implemented, and a clear understanding of the type and level of its relationship with the State.
- The awareness that initiatives like WSP originate from the perspective of civil society, and that they are instruments to broaden and consolidate its participation within the political life of the country. This can only be achieved if the initiative has a good level of government acceptance and support.

otherwise it will become one more instrument in the controversy between government and civil society. Additionally, it is important to understand that WSP cannot and should not expect to be the only expression of participatory dialogue during a transitional phase, but rather should expect to develop a 'productive complementarity' with other initiatives, especially governmental ones

- The awareness that the relationship between a project like WSP and government will always be dialectical and that the government's attitude towards a WSP-type project will oscillate between attempts to use it to further its own agenda and rejecting it on suspicion that it is furthering the oppositions' agendas. This implies the highest level of transparency and clarity by WSP in order to avoid generating false expectations. It also implies the development of a sound working relation with the State throughout the development of the project so that the project can safeguard its space and be truly effective.
- A very careful preparation and introduction of the project to society is necessary precisely because of the problematic nature of the project/State relationship. Key elements that will ensure that both government and civil society properly appreciate the project and its potential contribution are open and non-bureaucratic communication channels with government authorities, the recruitment of respected local staff and international support.

## **Thoughts on WSP methodology**

WSP attempted to respond in a new way to the obvious need to search for new approaches and responses to the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. Instead of focusing on a case study or specific aid agency to develop a model of external assistance, WSP proposed that the problem should be placed in the context of the society that had gone through the war.

The aim of WSP was to see the challenge of international assistance to war-torn societies not only from the assistance agencies' point of view but also from the perspective of the society that received the aid and, furthermore, to see society not as a passive recipient of assistance but as a society with its own specific internal problems, where external cooperation is just one element at work. WSP thus attempted to begin by looking at external cooperation not through the eyes of experts but from the viewpoint of recipients and beneficiaries, that is, from the perspective and participation of war-torn societies themselves.

This called for methodological innovation from the outset. WSP was designed with two fundamental pillars: first, each project should have a national character and should be led and developed by the nationals of that society and not by a head office somewhere else, for example in Geneva. In other words, the national character of each study was indispensable and was to be reflected not only in the relationship with the project CCU in Geneva, but also in the way personnel were chosen, in the themes to be developed and in the concrete mechanisms to be used.

The second pillar is the use of participatory methodology. Currently, and particularly in the field of conflict resolution, participatory techniques are widely employed (for example through the process known as Interactive Conflict Resolution) so it is not surprising that those setting up WSP focused on such methodology. And yet they proposed something more daring and innovative: the use of PAR at a macro-social level, which goes beyond simple participatory techniques and places social science research at the heart of national political dynamics.

The WSP methodology as proposed and implemented is not only full of risks but also requires a significant amount of 'sociological imagination' to make it successful, and also the ability to learn through experience. This was well summed up by the WSP Guatemala Project Director when he said, "now that the project has come to an end, I have come to understand it and would be capable of leading it"

There are two clear challenges in this new methodology: one is related to its innovative and experimental character; the second is the difficulty of its being assimilated by the project's researchers.

PAR as it was introduced by WSP was not so much a structured method but rather a set of methodological guidelines derived from an analogical consideration of the research/action relationship. There remained many ambiguities in the methodology but there was also much latitude for those implementing the guidelines to interpret them according to the situation. The WSP approach thus opened spaces for creativity within the project, and this forced the project leaders to constantly review and adjust their research.

But probably the greatest difficulty was the assimilation of such an experimental methodology by the national teams, since none of the social scientists was familiar with a PAR approach. It was necessary to fight over and over again the tendency of the researchers assigned to each Working Group to place themselves in the role of a traditional social scientist who attempts to see the subject of study objectively and thus unconsciously transforms it into an object. It is not easy to make a researcher aware that his/her new role is as a 'co-participant' with the object of analysis.

On the other hand, the method demands skills from researchers that are not usually associated with a researcher's tasks. The researcher has to be at the same time the group animator and therefore familiar with animation techniques. In this sense, the researcher had to share a leadership role with the project directors. There was resistance among researchers who did not see their position as being akin to social workers, or who resisted the idea of the Working Group seeing the researcher as being at their service and not the contrary.

*The WSP approach opened spaces for creativity within the project, and this forced the project leaders to constantly review and adjust their research*

Finally, the proposed methodology attempts to subvert the relationship between the researcher and its object of investigation. Traditionally, the 'objectivity' of research is largely based on the separation of researcher and object of study, but WSP postulates that the object of the research (society) itself carries out the investigation and reaches conclusions, with the professional researcher playing a supportive and animation role. It is natural that a professional who believes in the separation of researcher and research object, and who assumes a hierarchical relationship between the one who knows and the object of that knowledge, will have negative reactions to WSP's redefinition of these roles and will subconsciously try to move to a better known space and a more comfortable zone which reiterates his/her role as a normal social investigator.

All these attitudes and deviations were detected and analysed throughout the project. It was necessary to conduct three intensive seminars for the project staff where the methodology and its practical application were discussed and analysed with the participation of the Geneva CCU, as well as a great number of bilateral meetings throughout the fifteen months of WSP implementation to be able to overcome these difficulties. The participants' final assessment indicated that this is one of the most critical areas which must be worked on in future WSP projects.

What WSP Guatemala illustrates in this field is that researchers should be chosen carefully. Besides education, political independence and good will, the WSP methodology requires a continuous training effort in the new methodology and the ability to look critically at the conventional role of the researcher. It is likely that the results would have been more productive if this had been carried out from the outset in a more systematic manner.

From the methodological point of view, the critical relationship is the one between the researcher and the Working Group. The project's success or failure should therefore be measured not only by the relationship of the project leaders with the government and other social forces which are of course politically crucial, but also by the project's capacity to develop and sustain good working relations between the researchers and the participating social actors.

The difficulty of conceiving and accepting new relations between researchers and object of research also applies to the members of the Working Groups. This is why certain participants assumed a passive attitude in their relationship with the researcher and saw themselves first as a legitimizer that allowed the expert to carry out his/her task with the community on the Entry Point topic and then as a validator once the product was ready. This passive behaviour is more common at the local level than the national level, and it is precisely at the local level that the danger of manipulation by the researchers is greater.

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WSP projects carried out in other countries have shown that it is possible to implement this methodology but that it requires a very high level of 'nursing' by those leading it. In other words, the replicability of the methodology is thus an important issue to be addressed. The effort to explain the nature of the methodology and the way it works, as well as to enrich it through a comparative study of the four country projects where it has been implemented, is a task that WSP has tackled in the dissemination phase undertaken at the end of 1998.

Finally, the question about the universality of the methodology is important. There is no doubt that the selection of countries in which WSP was initiated gave WSP a very clear African connotation. Nevertheless, the fact that the methodology was applied in Guatemala with different characteristics from Eritrea, Mozambique and Somalia, suggests that, although cultural and historical differences are important, these can be factored in to the PAR methodology. Certainly no problems arising from geographical/cultural factors were detected during the implementation of WSP in Guatemala.

But can WSP methodology be used under any circumstances? The careful phases that the WSP leaders went through in order to launch each country project suggests that the methodology requires certain basic conditions in order to

develop. In fact – and outside the considerations of political support or tolerance already described – experience shows that setting up WSP requires three basic conditions:

The first is that armed conflict has come to an end, that is, the usefulness of this methodology lies in the post-conflict rebuilding phase. To assume that open dialogue among opposing factions can take place in a systematic manner and from a neutral space in the middle of civil war is unrealistic. Moreover, priorities at that stage are different. The Somali case, where WSP has been working although armed conflict continues in some areas,

does not invalidate this assertion. There, precisely, WSP has started to work in the regions where there is no armed conflict. The scope of the WSP Somali Programme is thus sub-national rather than national and WSP exercises are built up from the local level rather than from the capital city of the country.

The second necessary condition is the possibility of creating a 'neutral space' or one perceived as such by most of the national social and political actors. It seems that without this precondition the methodology would be doomed to inefficiency or would betray the objective of consensus-building. Obviously, the existence or possibility to create neutral spaces can only be evaluated from the concrete situation of each country. For example in Guatemala, these spaces did not exist until the signing of the Peace Accords created adequate conditions for the development of WSP in a neutral space of encounter.

*To assume that open dialogue among opposing factions can take place in a systematic manner and from a neutral space in the middle of civil war is unrealistic*

A third condition for the effective operation of this methodology is the need for a core of qualified social researchers who can implement it. Just importing them from outside the country is not viable. The researchers do not necessarily need to know the methodology in advance, but the nature of this methodology calls for a combination of research and action and, if there are no or few researchers who are nationals or thoroughly integrated into the national culture, then the exercise has no sense.

To summarize, the WSP methodology offers an instrument whose usefulness stands out in the processes of democratic transition. In this sense, linking WSP simply with reconstruction, as has been done in the official literature on the subject, does not do justice to its potential, which lies above all in its capacity to promote conditions for better governance. More than a technique to bring opposing parties to the table, it is a method that transforms sitting at the table into a key tool to solve governance problems during the transition phase. It is this direct link with governance that gives the method its privileged character in the realms of political transition.

### **WSP and the centre/periphery configuration**

It is commonly said that one of the most obvious disadvantages of external assistance and an important hindrance to the development of poor countries is the foreign nature of assistance. Invariably, programmes are so determined by the interests and cultural focus of the donor that they remain alien to the recipient country and may then become ineffective. Ultimately, they can contribute to creating a syndrome of dependency on external cooperation. The artificial nature of these programmes obstructs change in the society in which they are implemented and may stop them reaching their original objectives. This becomes even more important in the case of post-conflict society, since reconstruction usually attracts greater attention from cooperation agencies.

This is important for WSP in as much as the project itself had an external arm, the CCU in Geneva. Its relationship to the project implementors in Guatemala is consequently worth considering in some detail.

There is no doubt that WSP was generated outside Guatemalan society, what is more, it had already been implemented in other countries in Africa. Nevertheless, the project's objective is to produce changes in the attitudes and political practices of national and external actors. In other words, projects such as WSP run the risk, by definition, of becoming a 'democracy exporter'.

*It is WSP's direct link with governance that gives the method its privileged character in the realms of political transition*

and thus failing simply by ignoring something as evident as the fact that democracy – like revolutions – is not an export product and that, if something is imported it is little more than a caricature of true democracy

In other words WSP sits somewhere on a fence full of contradictions and problems in which clear vision is required. How did WSP cope with this difficult position?

The starting point for an answer to this question is the repeated insistence by WSP's leaders that the project 'belongs to Guatemalans' and that Guatemalans, not the CCU, should determine how to lead it. In reality, however, the global design and methodology of WSP were conceived in Geneva, the funds for its development were sent from Geneva, and the leaders of the project were chosen by the Geneva office.

The WSP Guatemala experience both demonstrates the difficulties of 'nationalizing' a project like WSP and also affirms the possibility of achieving it. Not one of the Guatemalan interviewees pointed out the external nature of the project nor did any interviewee express the view that he/she was participating in a United Nations exercise, nor in a research programme headquartered in Geneva. On the contrary there was a firm and developed conviction that WSP was a Guatemalan project for and by Guatemalans. Some interviewees expressed the opinion that the only case of external 'imposition' was the introduction of the international cooperation theme as one of the Entry Points but they also pointed out that the Working Group set up to explore that theme was not able to work and they stressed that this fact demonstrated that Guatemalans were leading the work. This shows the high degree of ownership Guatemalans assigned to the project. It should be noted though, that in reality the Working Group discontinued its work for rather a different reason: it was felt that the issue of international cooperation was an over-arching issue to be addressed by all the Working Groups rather than in isolation. This was done, even though international actors felt somewhat reluctant to be involved in discussions of key national concern and so the issue remained fairly marginal.

This internalized perception that actors had about the project can be explained from a set of elements that converged in the case of Guatemala.

A basic consideration to explain this situation lies in the need that WSP Guatemala filled. In the field of external cooperation there are four types of project: (i) those generated by the donor's needs or perceptions and which have very little to do with the needs of the recipient/beneficiary country; in general these projects, at least from the perspective of the beneficiaries, fail; (ii) projects that refer to objective needs of the society in which they are developed, but which are not perceived or do not want to be perceived as such by the beneficiaries, these are projects that are sustainable *per se* but which, if seen from the beneficiary's perspective, lack a subjective basis or justification; (iii) projects that donors feel should be developed and which governments and NGOs of the recipient country formulate and submit because there is money available for them; the success rate

for these projects is very low and the potential for corruption is very high, (iv) and finally, there are projects that address the needs of beneficiaries objectively and subjectively, in this case the success rate increases, and the capacity to absorb and nationalize the project by the local agency or institution is much higher, because the need addressed has been already internalized

In the case of WSP Guatemala, consensus-building as a tool for facing the challenges of post-conflict rebuilding was one of the objectives the project set itself. This was widely recognised as a need by a large variety of Guatemalan sectors. It is also evident that Guatemalans wished to participate in the search for ways to achieve that goal. The timely appearance of WSP not only explains its success, but also how it succeeded in transforming itself from an external initiative into a Guatemalan project.

All this has to be put in the context of the beginnings of WSP. It was originally conceived as a means of addressing the problems of international cooperation and was looked upon as a vehicle for finding the answers the external assistance agencies needed. In Guatemala, as elsewhere, this original goal became diluted and the project was appropriated by national actors and increasingly became governed by their concerns. It seems clear from this that the issue of international cooperation is not so easily absorbed into the methodology of WSP once it is applied to a concrete national setting, and that national issues tend to dominate the agenda. If WSP is to successfully address questions of international assistance, then perhaps it will need a third stage of development, when it is 're-internationalized'. This question is being examined by the CCU in Geneva as WSP nears the end of its first four years of operation.

A second element to be kept in mind is the relatively high level of development of civil society in Guatemala. Despite the authoritarian regime, a network of social organizations has been able to develop over the years, which facilitated the appropriation of WSP by the participating organizations. A comparison of the WSP Guatemala experience with the WSP experiences in Africa shows that the role of the CCU in Geneva was more dominant in the African projects, probably because of the greater weakness of their civil societies.

More importantly, perhaps the development of an institutional capacity in the social sciences through universities and research institutes was a factor facilitating the localization of WSP in Guatemala, providing a ready 'home' into which it could be absorbed. In this sense the initial assessment made before the project was launched, which insisted that the core problem in Guatemala was not to create scientific knowledge nor public policy alternatives but to make links between knowledge-producers and other bodies, was appropriate and suggested a real and possible place for WSP.

A fourth factor that explains the nationalization of WSP in Guatemala is its strong national leadership. The choice of Edelberto Torres Rivas – a widely known and respected Guatemalan personality in the social sciences field – provided the national dimension required by the project. The fact that the project also gave him

the chance to return to national life after many years was an extra bonus for the country. Interestingly, this echoed a similar situation in Mozambique where the presence of a well-known national figure to lead the project contributed substantially to the national appropriation of WSP.

Finally it is necessary to highlight the attitude and policy of the project leaders in Geneva, who were very clear in affirming constantly that WSP's success depended on its being taken on by national actors. The CCU in Geneva developed a flexible policy with respect to the development of each national project, paying special attention to the uniqueness of each one.

This was not always easy. What came to be known in WSP as the difference between 'bureaucratic time' and 'anthropological time', for example, was sometimes problematic. 'Bureaucratic time' is determined by the timetable established as part of central project management, and is ruled by financial flows. 'Anthropological time', on the other hand, is determined by local issues, the dynamics of local politics and participants and national calendars. It is naive to assume that these timings will coincide. Trying to make the national plan subject to the Geneva-defined plan necessarily implies undermining any possibility of it becoming something undertaken nationally.

On the other hand, had the project been left entirely to local dynamics, the minimum goals would not have been achieved and the necessary coordination among the different national projects would not have been achieved. As a result the funds for the project overall would not have been raised. The only solution to this problem: open channels of communication between centre and periphery; the development of mutual trust between the two leaderships and constant consultation.

In the course of the WSP experience in Guatemala, two more issues arose that are relevant to this discussion: the first relates to external assistance actors on the ground in Guatemala, who were invited to participate in the project but either did not respond or attended as passive observers of the process. In most cases the representatives of cooperation agencies and diplomats chose not to participate in the Working Groups and attended only Project Group meetings, even then taking primarily an observer role. The second relates to the Working Group on international cooperation (Group V) which had difficulties establishing itself from the very beginning, never managed to develop systematic dialogue and eventually suspended its work.

These two factors shed light on the question of internal/external relationships. The passive attitude of the external assistance actors was not because they were not interested in WSP. On the contrary, they frequently asked how it was progressing and expressed opinions, although always in private in bilateral meetings with the project leaders. Their reluctance to participate is explained on the one hand by their belief that the matters being discussed were exclusively Guatemalan and that the intervention of foreign actors was not necessary and could be counter-productive, and on the other hand by the feeling held by many

external actors that the international presence is sometimes resented by important sectors of Guatemalan society. To this extent, there was a desire not to increase such concerns, especially in a situation where foreign officials might be put in a position of being seen to side with one group against another. In short, many external assistance actors thought that their active presence might damage the Guatemalan effort. Many Guatemalans seemed to agree.

A further reason for the relative lack of interest of external actors to participate actively in WSP Working Groups in Guatemala is the fact that numerous mechanisms for consultation among external actors already exist, where issues of international cooperation and their impact on peace and development can be discussed. The difference between these existing mechanisms and that proposed by WSP was nevertheless significant: while existing mechanisms provide for consultations among external actors, or between them and government, the WSP formula proposed a mechanism where external actors would interact directly not only with government but with a wide representation of social and political actors from civil society.

The premature termination of Working Group V on International Cooperation seems to confirm the belief that problems identified by external cooperation agencies but not shared by local actors are not soundly based. Although no-one could deny the crucial role played by international cooperation agencies in implementing the Guatemalan Peace Accords, the issue of external cooperation as such was introduced into the WSP Guatemala agenda by the CCU in Geneva and not by the Guatemalan team. It corresponded to the original design and objectives of the global project but did not appear to be of prime concern to the local actors. They thus showed little interest in establishing dialogue or consensus on this issue. In assessment interviews, many participants said they thought it wise that Group V did not function because the topic was 'strange'.

From the Guatemalan experience it is possible to extract one lesson that offers the basis for a productive relationship between the international leadership and the national one, and one that allows a consideration of the global (Geneva) and national (Guatemala) interests: flexibility in the substance and loyal adherence to the methodology.

The fact that Geneva remained flexible and did not predetermine or intervene in the project's substantive aspects (what topics to choose, who would participate, agreements reached, how to organize each Working Group, etc.) but was doggedly inflexible in its insistence on remaining faithful to the methodology sums this up.

*The issue of external cooperation corresponded to the original objectives of the global project but did not appear to be of prime concern to the local actors.*

Finally, the method employed became a key element for the project's 'nationalization'. A participatory research method can only be developed if participants see themselves as the subjects and not the objects of the research. In this sense, both the theme to be dealt with and the results reached encouraged commitment from the participants and allowed them to see that they were dealing with something that was relevant to them. In this way they judged the project as something national and claimed ownership of it.

A consideration arises from this brief account of the centre/periphery relationship that some might find surprising. The effectiveness and efficiency of external cooperation seems to increase to the extent that the central/peripheral distinction can be overcome. But this leads to another consideration, even more surprising, as this centre/periphery dichotomy is overcome, the political nature and impact of external cooperation projects becomes clear because, as these projects are appropriated by national forces, they become part of the national political reality.

The end of the Cold War helped to dispel the image of international cooperation as 'apolitical'. Now, as an international consensus emerges around values and objectives such as democracy, international assistance towards achieving these becomes more legitimate. Nevertheless, to intervene without recognizing the political nature of intervention from the outset will lead to failures and misunderstanding, especially if the need for international projects to be appropriated and developed by the citizens of the country is ignored.

## **Assessing the project**

A fundamental question suggested by these reflections is to what extent it is possible to evaluate projects like WSP. Such initiatives are time- and effort-consuming, not only for the national team but also for the CCU in Geneva. A significant number of people with a high level of training and commitment become involved during the months and years of this task. Therefore, it is necessary to assess whether this effort is worthwhile. If the financial cost of the project is also taken into account, then WSP undoubtedly constitutes a project whose costs deserve serious consideration.

An assessment based on quantitative aspects or 'product-oriented' methods is not enough in this case. Attempts to evaluate WSP Guatemala from the product perspective – final documents – would suggest that WSP Guatemala cannot be justified in terms of the time and resources consumed. On the other hand, measuring the political and social impact of the project and assessing the processes generated by WSP Guatemala raises entirely different questions. What is the value of bringing political and social actors together to build a common agenda, to help them to listen to each other, to discuss and to reach agreements? How valuable is such an achievement in a society like Guatemala if the most entrenched political adversaries sit at the table for more than a year and reach a common understanding on social, political and economic issues?

Is it worthwhile to create spaces seen as 'neutral and impartial' by the various actors, thus allowing them to talk to each other with a minimum of trust?

A fundamental reason why WSP cannot be evaluated in a traditional way is because it is an initiative whose key importance lies in the social process it generates and not in the material results that are produced. Its impact is targeted at modifying cultural characteristics (to the extent that it is possible to refer to an authoritarian political 'culture' rooted for more than 500 years in Guatemalan society), its value lies in its potential to modify the behaviour of key actors and to widen their horizons.

And yet, the fact that traditional assessment criteria cannot be applied to projects like WSP does not mean that they do not need to be assessed. It only makes it more pressing because one of the most serious dangers for projects like this is that they could become instruments for manipulation, or self-gratifying exercises for their leaders.

What is needed is to develop a set of clearly pre-established criteria to assess the project's efficiency. The design of WSP had built into it the need to assess the performance of the whole exercise, but the criteria on which this should be done were not made explicit. WSP Guatemala carried out its own assessment by means of an *ad hoc* team comprised of participating organizations. The project leadership from Guatemala and Geneva did not intervene, providing information only upon request. The assessment ultimately contains a series of useful observations and recommendations for improving WSP. As part of the thoughts on WSP Guatemala, and taking the African WSP experiences into account, some global assessment criteria should however be developed, possibly along the following lines:

- Although the material products' (final report, recommendations, consensus agreements) should not constitute the only or the most important criterion for assessment, the demand for the process to express itself in some fashion or to produce some type of concrete results should be maintained.
- The most important criterion for assessment is the response of participants in other words: the level of sustained participation and commitment to the project by the sectors and organizations involved.
- One measure of the usefulness and shortcomings of projects like WSP is to compare them with similar experiences developed or implemented in the country or in neighbouring countries (civil conflicts tend to have a regional character). Additionally this instrument becomes more useful to the extent that it becomes a participatory exercise by the participants themselves,

*WSP cannot be evaluated in a traditional way because it is an initiative whose key importance lies in the social process it generates and not in the material results that are produced*

the different response levels and the comparison carried out by participants constitute useful keys to analysing these types of experiences

- The level of project appropriation by participants is a key criterion since it is one of the safest indicators of whether the process is being assimilated or not by participants and whether or not it responds to the country's needs. In this respect, an analysis of the language used by participants to refer to the project is a useful indicator.
- The fate of the project after its official closing and its ability to play a 'catalyst' role should be taken into account. The project is essentially medium- to long-term in nature, and aims to modify historically structural behaviour, but an exercise developed during a couple of months or years is too short to show lasting results. Whether the project leads to initiatives for continuing the processes it has created becomes an important criterion for assessment. In this regard, it is important to understand 'continuity' in its broader sense and to accept that it could take different forms depending on the country.
- It is important to gauge the repercussions the project has in wider society and whether the project was able to move out of the circle of closely related personnel and reach a broader public. Here the relationship between the project and the media becomes crucial.
- The level of participation in the project of a wide range of individuals and organizations is crucial. How broad was representation in the project? Who was excluded and why? Did any groups exclude themselves and, if so, why?

These criteria are useful for assessing the efficiency of projects like WSP. The ability to do so may become increasingly important for international cooperation. Not only are such projects crucial for the development of societies affected by armed conflict but, since good governance is becoming a key element in global stability, they will grow in importance and potential impact. International cooperation agencies must consequently involve themselves with projects like WSP that take risks and must be able to assess such risks effectively.

It is a positive sign that, one way or another, international cooperation agencies are either observing or participating in projects like WSP. It is their responsibility to be ready for this, and one way to prepare is to learn from the experience of WSP – a forerunner that has gone some way along the risky but productive road towards democratic political change.

## References

*Peacebuilding report on the development of the War-torn Societies Project, lessons and experiences*, Document presented during the fourth meeting of the national Project Group, Guatemala, 12 March 1998

*Rebuilding Guatemala WSP modalities* (working document) Guatemala, October 1996

## **Annex I: Chronology of events**

### **Preparation Phase**

#### **November 1995 - August 1996 (10 months)**

##### **November 1995**

An initial visit is undertaken by a SAG member to explore the possibility of establishing a country project in Guatemala

##### **February 1996**

A second visit is carried out by a SAG member, the CCU Senior Researcher and a UNOPS representative to assess the situation in Guatemala. Consultations are held with several of the main internal and external actors

##### **April/May 1996**

A mission is undertaken by the proposed Country Project Director to

- assess the status of peace negotiations
- identify local resource people and facilities in view of establishing a WSP office

##### **August 1996**

The project sets up operations in an office on United Nations premises

### **First Research Phase**

#### **September 1996 - January 1997 (5 months)**

##### **September 1996**

Core staff is hired, and the WSP team begins to prepare the Country Note by

- collecting and analysing relevant literature
- establishing links with major academic centres
- carrying out in-depth consultations with the main national and international actors involved in the rebuilding process

##### **October 1996**

A project document outlining the modalities of WSP in the Guatemala context is produced to facilitate contacts with potential interlocutors

##### **October - December 1996**

The Country Note, a stock-taking of the challenges facing post-conflict Guatemala is produced

##### **January 1997**

WSP Guatemala is officially launched. A national workshop is held, creating the WSP Guatemala Project Group, a forum where key internal and external

actors can discuss rebuilding issues. During the meeting, the Country Note is discussed and five main areas for research (Entry Points) are identified around which Working Groups are formed.

## **Second Research Phase February 1997 - November 1997 (10 months)**

### **February 1997**

Experts from 15 sectors of society are invited to attend a seminar to help identify the focus of each Entry Point. The Working Groups begin meeting, first to discuss and agree on the research themes, methods and agenda, then for substantive discussions on each Entry Point.

### **April 1997**

The progress of the Working Groups and the research agenda are discussed and evaluated at a workshop held in Antigua. The WSP Head of Operations and Regional Researcher attend.

### **June 1997**

A second Project Group meeting is held, attended by the WSP Director. A mid-term report on Working Group progress is presented and discussed and some of the Working Groups present their early research results and report that they are meeting weekly in order to advance more efficiently. It is decided to extend research to the field so that grassroots views are incorporated in the process.

### **August 1997**

Field visits take place in several towns.

### **September 1997**

A second workshop is held in Antigua to assess the Project's research results to date. An extension is agreed upon to

- allow the Working Groups to complete their reports
- increase the involvement of external actors and government representatives in the Working Groups
- extend local-level research

### **November 1997**

A third Project Group meeting is held to present and discuss the results obtained in the Working Groups. It is decided that

- the conclusions and recommendations of the Working Groups will be more widely disseminated
- an assessment of WSP's interactive methodology should be initiated
- the possibilities for continuing the WSP methodology in Guatemala should be explored

## **Reporting and Evaluation Phase December 1997 - March 1998 (4 months)**

### **December 1997**

The Working Groups begin a process of self-evaluation that focuses on analysing WSP's objectives, its methodological clarity, and its relation to similar initiatives

### **February 1998**

Follow-up and Evaluation committees are created and begin meeting

### **March 1998**

The final Project Group meeting takes place. Participants review and discuss the Final Report and the reports of the Follow-up and Evaluation committees, and agree upon further initiatives to develop WSP's interactive methodology in Guatemala

## **Successor arrangements From March 1998**

The WSP methodology is further developed in Guatemala through the following initiatives

- in March 1998, the Working Group on public security decides to pursue its activities as an inter-institutional group that conducts research and makes policy proposals,
- in April 1998, Funcede, a Guatemalan NGO, together with the Arias Foundation in Costa Rica, initiates a pilot project applying interactive research (based on WSP methodology) at the local level in the province of Solola,
- from September 1998, an Academic Research Network is set up to integrate existing resources at Guatemalan universities and research institutes,
- from September 1998, the possibility of using the WSP interactive methodology with the system of Development Councils to help the councils fulfil their roles of promoting decentralization of government is explored

A 'WSP Guatemala Network' has been established to coordinate the different initiatives in Guatemala and permit their links to other WSP-related initiatives around the world. The former WSP Country Project Director is heading this process

## **Annex II: WSP Guatemala project staff and Working Group members**

### **WSP Guatemala project staff**

Project Director	Edelberto Torres Rivas
Special Advisor to the Project Director	Bernardo Arevalo de Leon
Coordination Assistant	Carla Aguilar Stowlinsky
Researchers	Luis Everado Estrada Vasquez Roberto Estrada Gomar Oscar Lionel Figueredo Ara Julio Eduardo Arango Luis Raul Sanvado Cardoza Luis Alberto Padilla Menendez * Tanya Palencia * Leopoldo Urrutia
Assistant Field Researchers	Carlos Federico Amezquita Galindo Jorge Victor Murga Armas Sergio Pivaral Leiva
International Researcher	Ruben Zamora
Assistant to International Researcher	Luis Everado Estrada Vasquez
Visions Project Producer	John Dunn
Office Staff	Ingrid Montes de Oca Maria Salome Ordonez Gomez Maria Eugenia Chew Mejia

\* hired specifically to produce working documents

### **WSP Guatemala Working Group Members**

#### **Modernization and strengthening of the state**

AGAAI (indigenous group)  
FUNDAMAYA (indigenous group)  
NIM POPPB L (indigenous group)  
ASDENA (NGO)  
ASINDES (NGO coalition)  
CIDECA (NGO)  
CONCAD (NGO)  
DEFAM (NGO)  
PRODESA (NGO)  
ANAM (association of municipalities)  
CGTG (trade union)  
Colegio de Abogados (lawyers' professional organization)  
GUCONOFE (cooperative)

FEPYME (private sector)  
INFOM (government)  
SEPAZ (government)  
FRG (political party)  
UCN (political party)  
IDIES/URL (university)  
USAC (university)  
UVG (university)  
AVANCSO (research institute)  
CIEN (research institute)  
IRIPAZ (research institute)  
EU  
*WSP researcher/facilitator Luis Everado Estrada Vasquez*

#### **Economic and social development**

CTC (farmers' association)  
Asamblea de Presidentes de Colegios Profesionales (assembly of professional organizations)  
GUCONOFE (cooperative)  
CACIF (private sector)  
FEPYME (private sector)  
INFOM (government)  
SEPAZ (government)  
DCG (political party)  
FRG (political party)  
IDIES/URL (university)  
UVG (university)  
CIEN (research centre)  
IRIPAZ (research centre)  
FUNCEDE (research centre)  
MINUGUA (United Nations monitoring mission)  
*WSP researchers/facilitators Roberto Estrada Gomar and Oscar Lionel Figueredo Ara*

#### **Administration of justice and public security**

CONADEHGUA (NGO)  
Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu (NGO)  
SEPAZ (government)  
UCN (political party)  
Colegio de Abogados (lawyers professional association)  
IDIES/URL (university)  
UVG (university)  
CEDECON (research centre)  
ICCPG (research centre)

IEPADES (research centre)

IRIPAZ (research centre)

*WSP researchers/facilitators Julio Eduardo Arango and Bernardo Arevalo de Leon*

**Multicultural nature of society**

Comite del Decenio (indigenous group)

Majawil Qi j (indigenous group)

UPMAG (indigenous group)

SEPAZ (government)

UCN (political party)

DCG (political party)

IGESP/DCG (political party)

USAC (university)

UVG (university)

ASIES (research centre)

IRIPAZ (research centre)

*WSP researcher/facilitator Luis Raul Sanvado Cardoza*