

Involving the beneficiaries

by Marc Vincent



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Television coverage of US marines wading ashore in Greece and of British paratroopers marching to Pristina under an umbrella of helicopters gave a glimpse of the sheer size of the NATO mission in Kosovo. The announcement of humanitarian plans to divide the province into geographic areas of responsibility and thematic sectors, each with its own lead NGO, plus plans to install a national civilian structure, was equally indicative of the level of resources, planning, organization and staffing in the Kosovo operation.

Yet with all this attention and in the frantic pace to rebuild the shattered province before winter, did anyone stop to ask the Albanians or remaining Serbs what they wanted?

In Rwanda after the 1994 genocide and the consequent war, over a hundred NGOs plus the UN and other intergovernmental organizations poured into the tiny country. The result was chaotic and there were far too many incidents where Rwandans were more or less told what they needed rather than asked what they wanted.

Since then there has been a lot of reflection on the role of international humanitarian assistance in post-conflict situations, the responsibilities of NGOs and ways to integrate a more people-oriented approach within UN programming. Unfortunately what often happens in emergencies is that new staff are not told about past mistakes or lessons

learned, everyone gets absorbed in day-to-day crises, and sound principles discussed outside of an emergency context begin to sound too lofty to be implemented in a vortex. Added to this mixture in Kosovo is the role of NATO: a huge complex politico/military organization, normally geared to fighting wars but now determined to play a role in humanitarian relief.

The idea of asking beneficiaries in a relief operation what they need and incorporating them in the management and design of programmes has been well developed - at least on paper. For example, included in the minimum standards identified by the Sphere project is a Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs, which states that:

Disaster response assistance should never be imposed upon the beneficiaries. Effective relief and lasting rehabilitation can best be achieved where the intended beneficiaries are involved in the design, management and implementation of the assistance programme.¹

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement state:

Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration.²

Finally, another example is in UNHCR's Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection:

Refugee participation is a major factor in determining whether or not a project will be successful [...] Do not make assumptions based on your own perception and stereotypes of roles, responsibilities or inherent capabilities. Because the society is in transition, traditional roles may no

longer apply. Find out from the refugees, women, men and children, how their roles have changed and are changing.³

While all humanitarian organizations clearly agree on the need to include beneficiaries in programme design and implementation, one hopes that the size of the Kosovo operation, the massive presence and weight of NATO and the integration of new staff will not diminish the goal to implement a participatory approach.

Admittedly, incorporating beneficiary views into a fast-evolving operation cannot be easy. There are several factors complicating the issue. In Kosovo, for example, who does one ask to represent the views of Kosovan Albanians or Serbs? Many Kosovan intellectuals or potential leaders were targeted by the Serbs and now many of the Serb intellectuals have fled. There are also few mechanisms that exist for Kosovans to express their views either on a national

level or local level since previous mechanisms either did not work or excluded Albanians. The challenges can be endless.

Kosovan Albanians want justice

Equally important is not only the inclusion of all Kosovo residents in the management of reconstruction but the timing of the inclusion. Integrating a gender perspective into programming is all too often done as an afterthought and to appease criticism. Not surprisingly, gender perspectives cannot really be effectively integrated unless women are included from the beginning of the discussions, in planning and in the implementation process. Likewise, any rehabilitation plan in Kosovo has to include all segments of the community and at an early enough stage to make a difference.

Even from a distance, there is one demand that is being clearly expressed and heard. Kosovan Albanians want justice. Before there is any talk of reconciliation those responsible for the massacres have to be held accountable.

The international community and particularly NATO justified its intervention on the need to protect human rights and the need for justice. Unless the international community stands by its promise to vigorously pursue and prosecute war criminals it will be difficult to keep ethnic Kosovans from taking justice into their own hands: something the international community would wish to avoid at all costs.

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1 The Sphere Project, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief, Geneva 1998, p7.

2 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement E/CN.4/1998/53/add.2 11 February 1998

3 Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection*, Geneva 1996, A 52-53

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