

# Negotiating Kosovo's educational minefield

by Marc Sommers and Peter Buckland

*As the Kosovar education system has been restructured under unchallenged international tutelage, what lessons does this innovative experiment in educational reconstruction offer for other post-conflict states?*

Five years after the NATO military campaign, the role of education in Kosovo remains politically charged and controversial. The viewpoints of Kosovar Albanians, Serbs and international educationalists do not often coincide. Perceptions of what has taken place in the education sector matter at least as much as the reality. Education policies and practices are influenced by the heated and unresolved political stalemate. In general, Kosovar Albanians aspire to independence while Kosovac Serbs wish Kosovo to remain part of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (successor to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia).

The first convoys of UN officials arriving in the Kosovar capital, Pristina, in mid-June 1999 encountered an extraordinarily tense environment. Education in large portions of Kosovo had ceased due to the intensification of conflict between the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) and the Serbian military. The UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) had only a matter of days to prepare for its role as interim civil authority following the cessation of NATO's bombing and was severely understaffed and ill-equipped.

A focal point of the rebellion of Kosovar Albanians against the rule of the Yugoslav government of Slobodan Milosevic was the 'parallel system' that they had constructed after being denied access to state education in 1991. UNMIK and the international NGOs which flooded into Kosovo inherited two debilitated education management systems – one Albanian, one Serbian.

## Starting anew

Soon after the cessation of the military conflict in 1999, international agencies began to deliver resources to support the rehabilitation of

school buildings. Their achievement drew heavily on institutions and resources made available by Kosovars. Most communities did not wait for the international community and quickly set about occupying school buildings, clearing them of debris and organising catch-up classes.

Within a year of NATO's arrival in mid-1999, UNMIK's leadership of the Department of Education and Science had retained little from Kosovo's educational heritage. Dramatic reform, even renewal, had become the order of the day. The UN was given a free hand, and it assembled a solid array of achievements. Many of UNMIK's successes stemmed from their decision to assign core tasks to international agencies. These agencies had the flexibility, experience and training to mobilise funds and implement programmes quickly and efficiently. They also allowed UNMIK's Department of Education and Science to keep its infrastructure relatively 'lean' – a key requirement of the donors bankrolling UNMIK's education operation. But it also meant that experienced local educators were marginalised. Many dedicated local educators withdrew from direct involvement in the management and reform of the system and instead were snapped up by NGOs.

A related consequence of UNMIK's decision to implement rapid education reforms was that Kosovars did not consider the process as either open or learning-based. UNMIK's top education leaders were widely perceived as not being receptive listeners. The handover process was limited, in large part because building capacity and trust and developing a receptive system were not awarded a particularly high priority. The choice ultimately came between actions that intentionally pressurised local leaders and more patient, perhaps

more painstaking, capacity-building work. In the end, trust was not built because trust was not sought.

In addition, UNMIK managers dealt primarily with hard-line politicians and were unaware of the pragmatism of many non-elite educators. UNMIK missed a major opportunity to promote, and provide training in, conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. UNMIK should have encouraged coexistence initiatives taking place between non-elite Albanians and Serbs. Programmes that demonstrate inclusion, rather than those that address Albanian or Serbian concerns separately, are sorely needed in Kosovo.

Under donor pressure to achieve quick results, UNMIK managed to get 80% of primary and junior secondary-school pupils back in school within three months. However, there are still high drop-out rates between primary and secondary school, particularly in the case of girls, ethnic minorities and children in rural areas. In 2002 fewer than 56% of Kosovar Albanian girls and 40% of Roma, Turkish and Muslim Slav girls attended secondary school. Higher education remains in crisis due to debate over recognition of a university in the city of Mitrovica which is dominated by former Serb faculty and administration members from the University of Pristina.

Access challenges persisted. Given that ethnic discrimination was seen to be one of the critical factors underlying the conflict, it was hardly surprising that the issue of ethnically separate schooling was a key policy concern in the eyes of both internationals and Kosovars. At the beginning of the post-conflict reconstruction there appeared – at least at the level of rhetoric – to be consensus that all children should be accommodated in a single, inclusive education system that respected the language and cultural rights of all.

However the decade of sometimes brutally enforced segregation and exclusion had taken its toll. In the first

three months after the end of the NATO campaign a new version of the old parallel systems was re-established as Kosovo's Albanian refugees returned to their villages and homes and many Serb and other ethnic minorities either left Kosovo or moved to areas regarded as safer.

Despite the shortcomings, the post-conflict reconstruction of education in Kosovo is a remarkable achievement that attests to the dedication of the people of Kosovo and the international community. Today most unqualified teachers are no longer teaching. The process of realigning the educational structure with European norms is under way. All teachers belong to a single payroll system and receive regular, if inadequate, salaries.

Conflicts can create unusual opportunities to introduce changes that - with time, patience and local involvement - can transform education systems. However, it is important to note that:

- Education systems with roots in the past have remarkable resilience and cannot be easily displaced.

- A balance must be struck between enduring traditions and visionary changes.
- Donors and international agencies must avoid creating unrealistic local expectations of what can be achieved quickly.
- Training in conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution and promotion of coexistence initiatives are vital.

Finally, working in a way that enhances capacity and trust and builds the necessary consensus to ensure that changes eventually become a sustainable and lasting part of the system is difficult and invariably takes time.

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