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## A general theory of community-building in its application in a multi-ethnic setting: the Kosovo case

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This paper discusses the evolution of community-building in conflict-prone Kosovo. While analyzing the application of a general concept of community-building in a concrete multi-ethnic setting, current needs and prerequisites for multi-ethnic community development are discussed and a set of policy recommendations is proposed. Community-building usually refers to a participative process of responding to local challenges through organizing and strengthening social connections and building common values. However, to understand that process in a multi-ethnic setting within the context of ongoing decentralization in Kosovo, the issue of civil and ethnic identity and identity-related perceptions and values are considered as well.

**Keywords:** community-building; multi-ethnic community; policy; communication; social change; leadership; institutional development

### 1. Introduction

For centuries, the Balkans has been known for its unique blend of national traditions and ethnic aspirations that, interweaving through history, ensured exchange, peace and prosperity (Bailey, 2000; Hammond, 2004; Milojkovic-Djuric, 2006). This diversity has fascinated and influenced the outside world, but, at times, it caused suffering, terror, and wars (Glenny, 2002; Mazower, 2002). And today, when the struggle between the forces of global unification and ethno-national seclusion persistently brings the issue of multicultural society into focus, the very notion of diversity becomes important within the context of the modern quest for social deconstruction under democratic principles of pluralism, equal opportunities and respect of the rights of all the members of society (Riggs, 2002). And Kosovo's efforts and prospects in multi-ethnic community-building are in the spotlight.

Progressively attracting international attention since the beginning of the conflict, this issue has been considered vital for peacekeeping and development in Kosovo as well as for overall stability in the region. Among many other countries, Japan has also supported the process. In her opening remarks at the Seminar on Community Building in the Multi-ethnic Societies of the Western Balkans, Japan's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prof. Akiko Yamanaka, proposed:

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On political front, capacity building of local authorities is one of the important key elements of the community building. Protection of minority rights as well as the return and settlement of refugees and internally displaced persons could be facilitated if local capacities were properly enhanced...Media is also important for reconciliation. Multilingual broadcasting and ethnically unbiased programs are viable tools to promote mutual understanding. (Yamanaka, 2006, § 6)

There seems to be a common understanding of the overarching goal and recognition of the need (Cocozzelli, 2010; European Stability Initiative, 2006; Independent International Commission on Kosovo, 2004). However, this evident target of a multi-ethnic society in Kosovo has not been materialized in any tangible strategy yet (Kazhoyan, 2008). It still lacks a vision, and, therefore, no benchmarks can be set to measure the progress. Therefore, the process of multi-ethnic community-building still needs to be conceptualized in order to establish viable approaches and policies for developing sustainable collective action.

The purpose of this paper is to propose such a policy framework by introducing and explicating the general theory of community-building in its application in a multi-ethnic setting. Community-building usually refers to a participatory process of responding to local challenges through organizing and strengthening social connections and building common values (Ledwith, 1983; Philips & Pittman, 2009). There were many examples of successful cooperation and capacity-building in community development processes (Anderson, 1990; Eade, 1997). In addition to models of community development that emphasize skills training and the setting up of formal organizations, Alison Gilchrist advocated for a view of a community development “which aims to create and maintain the conditions in which people with different identities and competing interests can manage disagreements and resolve conflicts” (1998, p. 75). She proposed a 12-step community empowerment process in the following order: recognition, tolerance, information exchange, dialogue, empathy, mediation, shared commitment, negotiation, trust, coalition, alliances, and resolution and justice – and provided a framework for conflict resolution.

However, with their specifics and unique development contexts, the conflict-prone communities face certain challenges. Christine Bigdon and Benedikt Korf (2004) analyzed the practical experience of traditional relief and development projects working on complex emergencies in the field of community development. In contrast to the conflict resolution or conflict management models, they propose a conflict transformation approach. Referring to Rothman and Friedman (2001), they argue that the framework of identity (critical for any conflict transformation discourse) involves a paradigm shift away from the logic of conflict management towards logic of local empowerment. Referring to Edward Azar and John Burton, they write:

This model recognizes that the most intractable conflicts are really about the articulation and confrontation of individual and collective *identities*. Such conflicts find their source in threats to or the frustration of deeply rooted human needs such as dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (Azar 1990; Burton 1990).

They conclude that:

Analysts working within the identity frame do not see conflicts as problems to be resolved, or even managed. Rather, they argue that they offer opportunities for growth, adaptation and learning (Lederach 1995). Conflicts can lead all parties to clarify for themselves their needs and values, and can thus help them to better understand just

what causes them dissatisfaction and satisfaction. (Baruch Bush and Folger 1994; Bigdon & Korf, 2004, p. 7)

Therefore, to better understand that process in a multi-ethnic environment, the issue of civil and ethnic identity and identity-related perceptions and values should be considered. At the same time, John Kretzmann and John McKnight proposed a shift from the traditional approach of responding to the needs of communities to the “path” of capacity-building, “because the needs-based strategy can guarantee only survival, and can never lead to serious change or community development” (1993, p. 4). Furthermore, in a multi-ethnic setting, often the cultural diversity itself, dialogue and exchange provide opportunities for development and are among the major community assets (Tishkov & Filippova, 2002). Although there were several projects of successful capacity-building in a multi-ethnic setting implemented in Kosovo,<sup>1</sup> there were also, and still are, cases, when traditionally practiced need-based community development approaches did not tackle important civic and ethnic identity questions, failing to provide viable solutions. As a result, representatives of ethnic minorities were often secluded from the mainstream of development processes, which, at times, has led to turmoil in different parts of Kosovo (Chigas, 2006; Hoxhaj, 2005).

Conflict transformation through identity-based empowerment and inclusion implies also a shift of the research paradigm. Since in essence it is about change; the research should also lead to change, and therefore change must be incorporated into the research process (Stoeker, 1996; Todhunter, 2001; Winter, 1989). Because of that, and also due to the participative nature of the process, when it comes to methodology, community members and many donor or development agencies usually refer to the cyclic framework of action research.

The advancement of action research is often credited to Kurt Lewin (1946), who used it as a methodology for intervening in the post-war social issues and described it as a cycle of planning, acting, observing, fact-finding about the result of the action, and re-planning. Gerald Susman (1983) specified five phases within each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data are collected for diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of possible solutions, development and implementation of an action plan. Then the results of the intervention are analyzed and the outcomes of the action are defined. At that point, the problem is re-assessed, another cycle begins and the process continues until the final goal is reached.

Robert Rapoport defined action research as the method that “aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to goals of social science by joint collaboration within mutually acceptable ethical framework” (1970, p. 499). The method is widely applied today also through its various ramifications, such as participative action and research (Fals Borda, 2000; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), collaborative inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), and developmental action inquiry (Starr & Torbert, 2005). However, some researchers consider that, epistemologically, action research addresses more “improvement” problems than “construction” issues, because action research problems mostly are initiated by clients (Iivari, 2007). Nevertheless, there is always a possibility that, during the action research, construction will also be initiated and implemented, and limitations for constructive change can be overcome if the process is driven by a shared long-term strategy or common vision of the end result (Friend & Hickling, 2005).

Also noteworthy is that, in the context of the ongoing decentralization in Kosovo, local strategies must fit in the government's development discourses, action plans and policy trends. For example, such actions as abolishing the mechanism of fair share financing for ethnic minorities in legislation and lack of approaches for proportionate subsidizing of communities need to be addressed through a research and guidance from the public policy domain (Peci, Dugolli, & Ismaili, 2006).

The article is organized into four sections. Following the introduction and a discussion of local identity, a process model of community development is tackled and the question of how to apply the general theory of community development in a multi-ethnic society. That integrative model was previously developed as a result of a research of the traditional approaches in understanding and managing the process (Kazhoyan, 2009). During the past decades, different approaches have been developed and successfully used in participatory assessment, planning, communication and social action (Bacon, 2009; De Souza Briggs, 2003; Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, & Lewis, 2002; Mattessich, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2001). However, while exploring different traits of community development they usually did not integrate civic or ethnic identity considerations. Meanwhile, application of an identity-sensitive approach would help the stakeholders and other participants of the process to apprehend the multi-ethnic community-building in its entirety and continuation, including the multi-ethnic leadership, interaction of driving and resisting forces and institutional development in the broader process of communication for social change. Indeed, when the entire process and its components are viewed through the prism of its participants' identity, it becomes possible to answer the question of how the community members of different ethnicity come together and develop their capacity for carrying out sustainable social change.

The article concludes with a summary of recommendations.

Applications of this approach in different situations for better understanding of the context and complexities of community development and determining the necessary policies or action steps were tested and its benefits discussed in projects and working contacts with Kosovo Albanian, Roma, Ashkali and Kosovo Serb community members from the most ethnically mixed regions of Kosovo, such as Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, Prizren, the Serbian enclave of Štrpce/Shtërpçë, and Roma and Ashkali community members in Sallahane/Salahane and Dubrava villages of Ferizaj/Uroševac municipality. Their ethnic composition makes them unique among other municipalities in Kosovo. Publications, working documents, and reports of development organizations and donor agencies were also used.

The culture of action research is being developed in Kosovo. It has been used, for instance, in developing the Youth Action Plan<sup>2</sup> and a model for a Humanitarian Ombudsman,<sup>3</sup> in designing curriculum for nurse education,<sup>4</sup> and so forth. It is hoped that the approach itself and the policy recommendations would be useful for researchers and practitioners in developing strategies and realizing multi-ethnic community-building initiatives.

## **2. Community-building: a general concept**

Community-building can be defined as a sustained collective action to achieve common objectives (Warren, Thompson, & Saegerst, 2001, p. 11). It may involve residents, community leaders and external professionals working together to achieve agreed social, economic and environmental outcomes. In the process of