

Civil courage: Good people in an evil time, building and promoting resilience

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From the perspective of the continuing relevance of studying the efforts directed towards rebuilding a resilient community in the former Yugoslavia, and more specifically, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the experiences of a local non-governmental and non-profit organization are both valuable and relevant. Eleven years after the violence was ended by international intervention, the region still suffers many serious social ills. Life is incomparably more difficult now than at the outbreak of the war fifteen years ago. Despite the tragic fact that the violence was politically initiated and orchestrated, reconstruction efforts have often been designed along ethnic-nationalist distinctions, thus further engraving lines of social division between people. Social incoherence did not lead to the violence. But, it has become one of the tragic consequences of the war, the peace agreement that divided the country along ethnic-nationalist lines by constitution, and, to some extent, of many efforts for resilience and reconciliation.

As a result, large scale activities aiming for resilience have perhaps left the region less resilient than it was. What does this mean for the understanding of a resilient community and what can the experiences of a practitioner/an NGO contribute?

Civil courage: Good people in an evil time

Refusing to believe that nothing human existed amidst all the madness of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that society was destructing itself from within, I searched for the humanity behind the headlines. I started going to the war zones in January 1993—initially as a cardiologist determined to help at least one person lacking proper medical care because of the war.

But while providing care for the people of three major ethno-national backgrounds—distinguished as

Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosniaks, and Eastern Orthodox Christian Serbs by nationalist politicians—I felt their need to open their souls and talk as human beings, without being judged about their fates in the war. From their short, spontaneous confessions in the cardiology ward, I understood their need for truth, which in places where bombs were actually falling, was surprisingly nuanced and refined compared to the dominant much more simplistic pictures of the Bosnian war zone.

I was told stories of individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina who had the courage to stand up to crimes being committed against the innocent, even when they had no weapons to help them. These people served as genuine examples of the goodness, compassion, humanity, and civil courage that continued to exist in these times of evil. They broke free from the identity of the *bystander*, that person who chooses to look away, to ignore, and to silently accept the suffering of others. Instead, these human beings provided compelling examples of *upstanders*, people who stick to their moral convictions and norms, and demonstrate great civil courage through their acts, even in a situation as horrific as the Bosnian war. My book *Good People in an Evil Time* is a collection of 90 first-hand testimonies from people who survived the war, illustrating the ways in which anonymous people were upstanders.

Some people may dismiss these stories, believing that wartime examples of violent behavior reveal far more about human nature. I disagree. We must pay careful attention to these stories, because they hold up a mirror and require us to reflect on our own acts and behavior. They clearly demonstrate the possibility of choice, even in the most trying circumstances. When shared, these stories can therefore encourage more people to stand up and speak out against evil, and to act in accordance with their moral norms. The hundreds of interviews I've conducted, and the reactions from the tens of thousands of people with whom I have shared these stories, have repeatedly confirmed this idea. Indeed, I've found that imparting upstanders' actions can have the very real and enduring effect of inspiring others to follow their example.

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These examples of individual human resilience affecting the human community where external assistance was absent, have led me to found NGO GARIWO in Sarajevo. Its purpose is to teach young people about the individual's capacity to protect people of other faiths and ethnicities from crimes against humanity. It educates young people about the multiple acts of both kindness and courage that many people selflessly performed during the tragedy that befell Yugoslavia little more than a decade ago. Learning about those who stood up against mass hatred and atrocities in the worst of circumstances serves reconciliatory purposes, because it demonstrates the goodness of individual human beings and not the evil of socially constructed groups. Moreover, it helps the current youth here realize that they too have a choice. Either they keep quiet and accept things the way they are, or they decide to defy immorality and injustice for a better future.

The effects of the war that ended just over eleven years ago continue and social destruction will persist if not countered. Intolerance, ethnic division and impunity inspire hatred, fear and mistrust and impede the country's progress and development. This is why the primary focus of our program is to help people look forward, not back. Learning about civil courage inspires people to act. GARIWO therefore conjoins educational

with civic activities in order to stimulate civil courage and enhance its effects. Its regional network of young leaders is continuously expanding and providing ever greater opportunities for (international) collaboration.

How does this contribute to the development of a *Resilience Index*?

The focus on good people, rather than on victims, perpetrators and ethnic-nationalist groups, aids confidence, social action and collaboration. As a result, raised awareness about individual, human, civil courage can be fostered. This builds resilience. Every act of civil courage serves as an example that restores faith in humanity and opens perspectives for social coexistence. In the end, all real positive changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and elsewhere, will depend on the individual who lives up to his responsibility to act against prejudice, bigotry, inhumanity and violence. This is the subject of civil courage, which is relevant not only in public emergency situations but also - of greater immediate relevance - in the moral challenges of everyday work and social life. It is also how, I believe, NGO GARIWO's objectives of and the testimonies of good people in an evil time can contribute to defining resilience, understanding the resilient community, and the development of a *resilience index*.