Politics of Welfare Reforms:
Lessons from Introduction of Family Group Conferences in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Since the early 1990s, a variety of international stakeholders have labeled Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) both as a 'country in transition' (from socialism) and a 'post-conflict developing country' (due to the 1992-1995 war). Both labels initiated a set of externally led welfare reforms in this South-East European country. The author examines the politics of different reform stakeholders and the impact they have on the overall social welfare and social work practice at the grassroots level.

The case study elaborated upon in this text concerns a project which aimed to introduce Family Group Conferencing (FGC) to social/community work practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was a project conceived and run by a group of community workers and lecturers associated with the Professional University of Social Work, Amsterdam, with support from the OSCE Mission to BiH, and in collaboration with the Centres for Social Work in Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

Examination of the case study in question points to the central role politics between different stakeholders (international agencies, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, grassroots practitioners and service users) play in preventing wider reforms.

Keywords: International assistance, Bosnia and Herzegovina, social welfare, Family Group Conferencing, post-conflict societies

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, a variety of international stakeholders have labeled Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) both as a 'country in transition' (from socialism) and a 'post-conflict developing country' (due to the 1992-1996

war). Both labels initiated a set of externally led welfare reforms in this South-East European country. Based on two case studies, the author examines the politics among different reform stakeholders and the impact they have on the work of the overall public administration, as well as social work practice at the grassroots level.

Essentially the case study represents the story of the author's first-hand experience with reform practices evidenced through the effort to support introduction of Family Group Conferences (FGC) to social/community work practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Statement of the problem

The term 'transitional' was sweeping format painter slapped on all 'East European' countries moving from 'communism' to western-style democracy. The 'West' came to the rescue of their newly liberated brethren and the first item on the agenda was intervention to shape, manage and speed up the transition, i.e. redesign the transitional countries in conformity with the western model. The very term chosen for this process, *transition*, implies dynamic forward movement (i.e. *progress*) to construct a new model from the debris left over by the old system. Having been termed a transitional country, Bosnia and Herzegovina actually defied such definition for a long time. It was indeed 'formerly communist' (never mind the specifics of Yugoslav socialism, or that it has little in common with e.g. Poland or Bulgaria), and indeed it made (an especially violent) break with its past. However, an exception among all of its neighbours, Bosnia actually moved very little ever since the Americans designed the new country from scratch in Dayton in 1995.

There is lively academic discussion of failures of international community's intervention in the reconstruction of (especially post-conflict) countries and their political systems. Basically there are two different disciplines in what I call the emerging science of 'AIDology': study of intervention in the 'third world'; and transitional societies. Actors ('stakeholders' in aidology jargon), problems, processes, and especially duration of experience (more than half a century against little more than a decade) differ in the two cases, necessitating their separate study, although common grounds exist and different issues are sometimes comparable.

As for the study of international intervention in transitional societies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, two distinct narratives have been formed in discussion of its perceived failures. The first one centres upon design flaws inherent in the current model of international intervention, as well as failures in the implementation stage. Discussion of design and implementation flaws largely reflects the ideological divide of interventionist discourse in the West, pitting e.g. neocons against the leftist liberals, or purist leftists against the pragmatic centrists. The second narrative largely focuses on failures on the *beneficiary* side (government, country, society), blaming the recipient of international assistance for its failure. The root of the failure is found in the recipient's lack of accommodating capacity, or just plain incompetence, corruption, obstinacy, and the like.

Far from attempting to fuse different approaches to the study of international intervention in transitional societies, I will nevertheless try to identify some of the key contributing factors to the failure of assistance, based on more than a decade of first-hand experience in the field. One of the predominant features of international assistance in the post-Cold War period is multilateralism. For most of the past century, countries were assisted either for strategic reasons (by one of the great powers of the day), or because of some sort of moral debt incurred by e.g. former colonial masters. The collapse of the Cold War system based on balance between the two super powers warranted the demise of exclusive regional and national zones of interest where either of the two exercised complete dominance. For some countries, the demise of a strategic rationale for support represented a virtual death sentence (Somalia). Other countries faced security and humanitarian disaster (Afghanistan) or economic collapse (Cuba) due to withdrawal of their principal backers. However, the demise of the USSR as a totalitarian overlord produced immense benefits for is former Eastern European satellites. Blocks of countries opened up, causing, in the West, the political, security and economic equivalent of the Gold Rush. Multiple powers were competing, meaning that, regardless of its status as the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States will never play the dominant role that the USSR once did in this part of Europe.

Arrival of new countries in need of assistance to reform their political, economic and social structure was accompanied by an unprecedented rise in the number of actors compelled or willing to provide such assistance.

The European Union[1] quickly seized the opportunity for its 'great march East'. In addition to the EU, individual member states also jumped on the opportunity to increase their influence and further their interests in different fields, by providing advice and money to those who required it. In addition to international organisations and nation states, different sub-state actors also appeared on the scene, most notably different international NGOs (INGOs) and quasi-NGO aid organisations. In the majority of Eastern European countries things were clarified pretty soon due to the imperative of EU integrations governed by clearly set criteria (Maastricht and Copenhagen). The 'Western Balkan' region (another Aidologism) meanwhile became the favourite playground for a multitude of intervening actors. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and to a lesser extent the other former Yugoslav republics (minus Slovenia, plus Albania), rivaled traditional 'markets' for the aid industry in Africa and Asia.

Very early on, the arrival of '*stranci*' (foreigners) caused resentment on the side of intended beneficiaries, mostly professionals in fields which were the focus of early interventions (social protection, health, education, etc.). A great many learned articles and books were written on the issue of (the failure) of international-national interaction, so I will not dwell on the matter further.[2] What strikes me, as well as the other researchers with practical experience in the field, as one of the chief contributing factors that adversely affected the intended results of intervention is precisely the multiplicity of actors involved in almost all reform attempts we witnessed.

Another important concern in relation to international (donor) driven assistance to, otherwise much needed, reforms has been the issue of sustainability of intervention and lasting commitment by the donors. It is widely recognised that one of the principal problems of intervention is the short time span of donor commitment, governed, among others, by the merciless logic of the "project cycle". Restructuring of beneficiary societies

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[1] Throughout the text I will refer to various historical incarnations of this supra-state structure by its present name.

[2] See for example Stubbs (2001), Deacon and Stubbs (eds.) (2007) – Chapter on BiH was written by Reima Ana Maglajlic and myself. However, my all-time favourite critique of international intervention in BiH remains Šimunović's article on health reform in post-war period BiH (Šimunović, 2007). Even thou not as eloquent or comprehensive as some other works, this article seethes with raw energy, or should I say frustration, coming from local professional with first-hand experience with international intervention in his domain.

requires long-term investment that will not produce immediate tangible benefits, not least because change of people's mindset takes a long time. The second case discussed in this paper amply illustrates these points.

Family Group Conferences (FGC)

Being involved in resolving the problems associated with the FGC experiment allowed the author to document a range of issues that continue to affect new initiatives in social work practice in BiH: Why some social workers cannot avoid politicising their work (always a sign of trouble in fractured post-conflict society), while some others draw a clear line distinguishing between their profession and politics? Why, having been exposed to new knowledge and practices for over 15 years, many social workers – even from the new generation that graduated after the war – are still unable to change their mindset so firmly set in the times of socialist top-down statist management that stifled individual initiative? Why the international involvement in social policy in transitional countries in SEE always seemingly repeat the same pattern of initial enthusiasm > overly optimistic strategy > inability to grasp the gravity of political considerations at the expense of those who wholeheartedly embraced the concept > resulting in the concept which represents nothing more than lowest common denominator that all sides could agree on (which often compromises the essence of the intervention itself)?

What is FGC and why it would make sense to implement it in BiH context?

The concept of Family Group Conferences originated from a decision-making model that has been used by the Maoris of New Zealand for centuries (Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009). Essentially, this was a gathering of the extended family where it was debated and decided on the best way to support the family and take care of their child (NZ Ministry of Social Development, 2012). During the 1980s, the government of New Zealand realised that the child welfare system is failing the indigenous Maori population, due to a failure to take into consideration their culture and social mores. Faced with a disproportionate number of children being taken into care, the state decided that families should be entitled to set up

and implement care plans of their own, with official sanction. Thus the concept of Family Group Conferences was born, proving very successful in a short period of time (Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009). The concept remains central to New Zealand's child protection system, where more than 50,000 conferences have been convened since 1989 (Harris, 2008: 3).

A number of countries followed New Zealand by introducing the FGC methodology in the context of youth welfare. Besides youth, experiments have also been made in some of countries, most notably the Netherlands, to apply the FGC to other population groups. Pilot projects were implemented with victims of domestic violence, and with people with physical and intellectual disabilities. However, youth welfare remains the focus of the FGC worldwide, and little is known about the potential and effects of FGC outside of this focal area (Huntsman, 2006; Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009).

Countries that have introduced FGC on a systemic level (although nowhere as a standard) include Australia, Canada, USA, UK, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Studies carried out in these countries demonstrated that conferences have generally produced successful outcomes (Pennell & Burford, 2000; Marsh & Walsh, 2007; Huntsman, 2006). Findings "suggest that conferences lead to greater feelings of empowerment by families, are usually able to produce a plan that is acceptable, mobilise greater informal and formal support for families, and would seem to increase the safety of children and other family members where violence is a concern" (Harris, 2008: 2). Perceived success of the FGC and related practices led to their introduction in some form to over 17 countries by 2005 (Nixon, Burford, Quinn, Edelbaum, 2005:4-7).

In the Netherlands, whose practices its proponents hoped to introduce to BiH, the predominant view of Family Group Conferences is positive (Huntsman, 2006: 8; Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009: 27). The FGC and related practices are based on the philosophy enshrined in the 2007 Social Support Act, namely that "all people (should) be able to participate in society, regardless of age, ability level or the existence of any limiting factors" (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2004:7, quoted in: Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009: 27). The philosophy essentially encourages people to be "self-reliant to the greatest possible

extent, when necessary with help from those around them, rather than being dependent on government services" (Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009: 28). The government, in other words, steps in only when people themselves, and their friends and families, exhaust all means to provide the required care.

It is obvious why the practice enjoys high support from the government. Self-reliance on an individual's own capacities to help, as well as those of his family members and friends, increases social cohesion among the more vulnerable population groups, but also promises major savings in related government spending. On the other side, the practice could also be criticised as a barely disguised neo-liberal agenda wrapped in empowerment speak, due to its emphasis on self-reliance, which in turn absolves the state from having to provide certain services. Some practitioners in BiH will echo the same sentiment, as discussed below.

Background of the FGC introduction to BiH

The effort began in early 2009 when a group of Dutch social workers met one the author on the fringes of the 1st ENSACT Conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia, and proposed cooperation whereby the Dutch offered to transfer their experience with the organisation of FGC to their Bosnian counterparts.[3] The Hogeschool van Amsterdam, University of Applied Science (HvA), organised a workshop on social conflict and reconstruction during the Conference. At the invitation of the organizers, representatives of the Centres for Social Work (CSW) from Sarajevo and Banja Luka also participated in the workshop.

What ensued during the next two years was at times a fascinating story illustrating many of the problems faced by social workers striving to introduce new practices and having to scale seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to achieve their goals. To further complicate the issue, the well-intended, but ill-thought-through, support from international actors failed (like most of their predecessors did) to recognise the gravity and nature of problems that affected the efforts of their local partners implementing the project.

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[3] The 2009 Dubrovnik Conference was one of the first initiatives of the European Network of Social Action (ENSACT)

Reasons for introduction of Family Group Conferences as a new method of community care practice made a lot of sense when discussed in preparation of this exercise. Satisfaction of the population in countries where it was introduced was one of the important reasons, of course. As noted earlier, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a society suffering from a range of social ills, as a consequence of protracted political instability, economic hardships, post-conflict traumas and forced migration (Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2007; Stubbs & Maglajlić, 2012). Post-conflict societies in general suffer from a breakdown of traditional family structures, perceived loss of social values, as well as conflicts between people who migrated to new places of residence as a result of war and those who inhabited given places for generations. Far from being an exception to this rule, social peace in BiH is further adversely affected by the impact of frozen conflict, whereby many of the lingering traumas are impossible to resolve, given the nature of a 'peace' settlement where victims of ethnic cleansing end up living side-by-side with their wartime tormentors.

The literature on FGC practice in different countries cite a number of instances where social ills closely resembled the problems social workers encounter in Bosnia and Herzegovina: large number of children in out-of-home care, perceived disintegration of traditional family structures, and need for recognition of bi-culturalism and demands for respect of different communities' values and culture (Huntsman, 2006: 2; Research and training centre De Karthuizer, 2009: 28-31). What originated as a problem of recognition of aboriginal Maori culture in New Zealand, or immigrant communities' customs and mores in the Netherlands, could easily be recognised as potentially applicable in situations affecting refugee communities from rural areas which resettled on the outskirts of large urban centres in BiH.

Essentially, there are two types of FGCs: The care and protection FGC, if there are concerns for the child's safety; and the Youth Justice' FGC, if the police believe a young person has broken the law (NZ Ministry of Social Development, 2012). Both of these issues often result from the prevalence of specific social ills affecting different population groups: unemployment, alcoholism, high school drop-out rate, juvenile delinquency, and the like. All of these problems figure prominently in many Bosnian cities, including Sarajevo and Banja Luka, both of which experienced a significant influx of refugees during and after the war (Belloni, 2007: 123-150; City of Sarajevo Demography, 2012).

The other reason why the introduction of FGC in Bosnia and Herzegovina seemingly made a lot of sense is equally as important as user satisfaction. Available literature on Family Group Conferences lists several important benefits of this methodology when utilised in addition to the existing care services. Among other reasons there is: a shift towards minimizing government interventions; decentralization of government services to encourage locally-based solutions; and lightening the cost burden on the state by having families take more responsibility for children (Huntsman, 2006: 2).

Since the FGC essentially presumes the community assuming its share of responsibilities for resolving a range of social problems, it perfectly complements the current social work framework in the country. Social workers are few, ageing (which in the local context means not inclined to much proactive engagement or thinking), ill paid, and often ill-equipped (and therefore ill-motivated) to take on the huge challenges that the current situation poses to them (Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2007). Due to destruction caused by war, economic crisis, and failures of post-conflict reconstruction, governmental Centres for Social Work, where most social workers are employed, cover large areas, inhabited by up to 50,000 people.

Increases in the needs of the population, together with the creation of new service user categories (refugees, disabled, war veterans, civil victims of war) were not matched by comparable increases in investment and development of welfare sector. Rather, capacities decreased due to physical destruction during the war, under-investment after the war, loss of authority of public sector care providers, and competition (until early 2000s) with foreign-funded NGOs as service providers (Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2007; Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2008: 126-127; Stubbs & Maglajlić, 2012). During the last decade, withdrawal of international support and funding for NGOs as an alternative (although competing) service providers placed additional strain on the shoulders of already overburdened statutory social workers – not used to roles other than as bureaucratic case allocators. On top of this, the severe economic crisis that hit the country in the aftermath of the 2008 worldwide recession has led to near bankruptcy of public institutions, forcing the government to appeal to the IMF for emergency funding twice in the past three years, in 2009 and 2012 (Alić, 2012). IMF loans always come with strings attached, usually demanding cuts in public expenditure, including social services and benefits, and Bosnia was no exception to this (Alić, 2012).

FGC and social workers in BiH: profession vs. politics

Apparently, it was logical to presume that social workers and other public-sector care givers would be receptive to the practice whereby the community will take over some responsibilities traditionally entrusted solely to social work professionals. Participants in the preparatory meetings and workshops organised with the purpose of establishing FGC in Bosnia and Herzegovina heard so many times that social workers regarded the implementation of the FGC "primarily as an opportunity for reducing the pressure on social work" (FGC, 2009: 4). Social workers seemed keen on sharing their tasks and responsibilities with families and other social networks, given that they are"currently experiencing both pressure, as well as expectations, from clients and the government as being disproportionately heavy" (FGC, 2009: 5).

The guiding principle of the initiators of the Dubrovnik meeting was long-term cooperation between the Bosnian and the Dutch institutions and study programmes for social work (FGC, 2009: 2-3). Dutch partners included The Hogeschool van Amsterdam, University of Applied Science (HvA), and Eigen Kracht Central (Eigen Kracht is Dutch term for the FGC, meaning literally "own strength"). Bosnian partners were the Centres for Social Work in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, and the respective Faculties of Political Sciences, which in both places house Departments of Social Work responsible for training social workers. Sarajevo and Banja Luka were chosen as the largest urban areas in the country, suffering from most of the social problems explained earlier, making them ideal testing beds for introduction of the FGC practice in BiH. Political considerations were customarily taken into consideration as well, the cities being the capitals of the two BiH Entities: the Bosniak-Croat majority Federation of BiH and the majority Serb Republika Srpska. Involvement of the faculties was considered important as well. One reason was that academics were to work together with social workers to study the introduction of the FGC and adopt the practice to best suit the local environment. The other intention was to use this pilot project to strengthen the links and cooperation between academia and social work practice, which is currently very weak.

Somehow surprisingly, workshops that brought partners together were organised with support by the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. OSCE does not usually support these kinds of projects, being above all a

political and security organization dealing with issues on the highest levels of government. It was our understanding that OSCE's involvement was due to personal support by a member of the staff, who happened to be Dutch. Whatever the case, due to scarcity of funds, OSCE's support was welcomed by all. However, its involvement immediately introduced an unnecessary political dimension. Language used in the project documents demonstrated this shift and attention that will be paid to political considerations. It was surely unintentional, but referring to participating social workers from Sarajevo and Banja Luka as coming from "both sides (the former enemies)" (FGC, 2009: 1) signified the politicisation of an endeavour that was not supposed to have anything to do with politics.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country suffering from protracted political conflict, which evolves over time. While hostilities between different ethnic groups are no longer causing outbreaks of physical violence, the underlying tensions are palpable and influence every walk of life. Politicisation in the Bosnian context in effect translates into rather vulgar neglect of the profession at the expense of 'higher' ethnic (i.e. nationalistic) considerations. Interests of one's ethnic group are paramount, and no one is exempted from this sacred duty to prioritise ethnic interests over everything else. Consequentially, contrary to tendencies prevailing in modern social work practice, where social workers are encouraged to become more political, the only safe way for social work practice in BiH is to completely divorce social work from politics.

The Dutch partners, acting as principal sponsors of the project, were from the very beginning advised by the author, who was their first contact and liaison within BiH, to insist on sponsoring only a programme that would be *jointly* developed and implemented by the practitioners in Sarajevo and Banja Luka (or "two sides" as OSCE would have it). Arguments in favour of a unified project were many: avoiding putting social workers into two ethnically-denominated groups; Bosnia is a very small place anyway, a small number of FGCs could be expected to be convened, at least initially, and considering them as part of a joint endeavour would enable associated academia to make comparative research and produce recommendations to best adopt the practice to BiH as a whole; creating synergy between social workers and members of academia from both cities, helping build links between practice and social work educators, and bridging artificial divides. Any other alternative risked sinking the entire endeavour

into the nationalistic quicksand that ruined so many well-intentioned projects after the war.

The advice was initially heeded, and representatives from Sarajevo and Banja Luka agreed both in Dubrovnik, and in the first workshop that brought social workers together, that they were interested in a joint FGC programme (FGC, 2009: 2). The OSCE representatives also concurred, professing their enthusiasm for setting up "a joint research and development programme for Bosnia-Herzegovina based on the theme of FGCs" (FGC, 2009: 2).

Having agreed in principle to form an independent NGO that would run the project and apply for the funds (one of the conditions was that no public institutions could be recipients of donor money), wrangling soon started over the seat of the NGO that was yet to be formed, the number of representatives from 'each side' that would be represented in steering bodies, whether that NGO should be registered on the state level, or with the entity authorities (limiting possible scope of action), and so on.

Eventually, social workers from Banja Luka came up with the demand, or rather ultimatum, that two NGOs – one for each entity – be formed instead of one. The reasons provided were rather prosaic: Sarajevo and Banja Luka are so far from each other it would make it impossible to co-operate effectively (actually it is a two hour car ride, journey frequently undertaken by many social workers for professional or private reasons); different legal frameworks in the two entities (laws do differ slightly but social work practice is still very much the same, after all most social workers got their degrees from the same Department of Social Work in Sarajevo before the war); and so on.

Upon closer examination, none of these arguments held water. It was clear that whoever initiated these demands simply played along the lines of current hard line separatist policies that dominated political life in Republika Srpska (RS). The author of this article, still active in his informal advisory role, strongly opposed seeping politicisation of what was supposed to be a strictly professional exercise. The Dutch partners, however, naively questioned whether such arguments could indeed be the product of mere logistical and practical concerns. Only energetic intervention by the author prevented them from approving creation of two separate, ethnically denominated, projects. Instead, a single independent NGO called "Family Network" was formed, based in Banja Luka.

Having to agree on a single organisation, the Banja Luka 'side' kept insisting on technicalities that would ruin any chances of cooperation with Sarajevo (writing the statute of the new NGO, and then proposing three-member Supervisory and Management Boards, in both of which two members would be delegated by the RS side, and so on.). These efforts led to further interventions by the author, which, inevitably, had unfortunate consequence that the split was by now becoming visibly political. This in turn led to cooling of relationship between him and the Dutch, who decided that from that point on his advice would largely be ignored. In effect, sensing trouble, and trying to appease the 'sides' that were by now considered political adversaries, international sponsors allowed nationalistic considerations to dominate the organisation of the project, thereby jeopardising the intended learning aspect of close cooperation between the CSWs.

Professionals' resistance to change

It took more than a year to establish the Family Network as an organisational framework for implementing the FGC concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Very little actual work was undertaken during this time, mainly two OSCE-funded workshops in Sarajevo and Banja Luka. One could not escape the feeling that the participants of these workshops claimed very little ownership over the whole FGC effort. Discussions in the workshops and interviews with the participants demonstrated this time and again. The great majority considered the FGC as simply another donor-funded project, in which they will be happy to take part, but not assume any unwarranted responsibilities, let alone ownership. No service users were involved at this stage either.

Unfortunately, most social workers had in the post-war period participated in many similar projects, which brought benefits – additional pay, a chance to travel and attend seminars and conferences, receiving extra education – but were always dominated by a pre-scripted donor agenda, which completely disregarded local knowledge, practices and needs (Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2007; Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2008). A decade and a half of being exposed to these kinds of external interventions taught social workers that the best strategy to thrive in a donor-dominated environment is to play by the rules and claim the benefits. Local ownership was not cultivated as most interventions were short lived, and

sustainability of such practices was close to zero over time (Stubbs, 2001; Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2007; Maglajlić-Holiček & Rašidagić, 2008; Maglajlić & Rašidagić, 2011; Stubbs & Maglajlić, 2012). Evidence of continuing prevalence of local partners' attitudes are visible from interviews with protagonists in which the majority – questioned about the management of the FGC project in BiH – preferred "the Dutch" to make decisions and "instruct" them what to do.

The FGC, however, was not such an intervention. Dutch partners from the beginning made it clear that they were to act principally as sponsors of the initiative that should be entirely locally owned and run. Furthermore – and probably more importantly in the short run – with the 'golden era' of ample donor funding long gone, the project was implemented practically without a budget. The Dutch side had their travelling and living expenses covered, while the OSCE funded two-day workshops in BiH only. Initially there was a lot of jockeying for positions within the FGC project, friends and family were suggested for the role of FGC Coordinators (conveners of the conferences, acting ina logistical role), and there was a lot of competition for places on the Family Network boards. However, enthusiasm of local partners waned drastically when, a year into implementation, it became clear that no external funding is forthcoming, and that the Dutch side is actually expecting from the local social workers to come up with sources of funding within their communities.

Probably sensing how feeble the original proponents of the project were starting to look – not having money, refusing to *order* the *locals* what to do, and having *allowed politics to sway the entire FGC endeavor* – local social workers soon started rebelling against the principal tenets of the concept they so enthusiastically supported at the beginning. No additional funding available to pay for their extra work meant that very few social workers and local Coordinators were eager to actually commence convening the FGCs. Social workers were initially eager to stress how overburdened they are and welcome the FGC as a mean of relieving them of some workload. However, they were now becoming fearful that the project will take away some of their traditional responsibilities and put them into the hands of – horror of horrors – lay community activists. Institutional interests dominated every discussion from that point onwards, with social workers, seemingly unable, or unwilling, to grasp the very essence of the concept whereby the communities they serve are drafted in to contribute to their own wellbeing.

Institutional resistance to change is, of course, a time-honed tradition in all professions, and social workers are no exception to this. Study of experiences related to the introduction of the FGC practice in different countries demonstrates that

> "the degree to which organisations adopt new approaches varies markedly. A number of factors influence the degree to which new ideas and practices become known, are perceived as desirable, and are more or less easily adopted. The predominant approach to understanding the adoption of new practices is described by diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 1995). Research in this broad field has focused on identifying factors that either promote or inhibit acceptance of an innovation, and the process through which these have an influence on adoption. A steadily growing volume of literature has identified numerous predictors of the degree to which initiatives are likely to be implemented, such as the influence of leaders, whether there is a perceived need for change or innovation, the ease with which innovations can be implemented and evaluated, whether the structure of organisations facilitate change, the broader political and social environment, and who has an interest in introducing change (Braithwaite, 1994; Lundblad, 2003; Rogers, 1995; Valente, 1996)" (Harris, 2008: 4).

Studying the adoption of the FGC by local councils in the United Kingdom, Brown highlights the importance of many of these variables and suggests that weak leadership, the decentralised structure of child welfare provision, limited resources, weak evaluation research, and conflict with pre-existing structures and beliefs, have all contributed to a situation in which conferencing remains on the margins of child protection practice in the United Kingdom (Brown, 2003, cited in Harris, 2008: 4). The situation in social work and the care sector in BiH in general seems to confirm very much the conclusions of the above studies. Weak leadership in the social work sector was further compounded by the near absence of leadership in the FGC project, the Dutch partners (again somewhat naively) hoping that leadership will emerge among the local partners eager to champion conferencing practices. Limited resources are always an issue in Bosnia, especially if the expectations of financial benefits are not matched by donor funding. Pre-existing structures and beliefs are again very hard to change, given that most social workers are middle-aged or close to the end of their careers, having been schooled in a completely different tradition,

one dominated by a bureaucratic and administrative approach to social work (Stubbs & Maglajlić, 2012: 4-5).

Two years into the implementation of the FGC concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is very little observable change on the ground and among the social workers involved in the effort. Only three conferences have been convened so far. While the available literature show that such a low rate is expected at the beginning of the project, more worrying is the lack of tendency to continue with adopting conferencing into the social work practice in the country. Interviews with the local protagonists of the FGC project demonstrate that professionals are still hostages to their professional training, expectations, mindset, and work framework they are used to. For example, discussing the organisation of the conferences held so far reveals that no fundamental questions of child wellbeing are ever asked. Instead, social workers who act as conference sponsors, and coordinators picked up by them, profess to making up their mind beforehand about what solutions are the most appropriate for service users. In effect, they use the conference simply to facilitate the measures they intend to take anyway. Even at this late stage – at the workshop held two years into the project – Dutch trainers felt the need to again emphasise the intended role of FGC as solution finders, not ways to legitimise decisions made by professionals.

A significant part of the problem was that the entire Family Network was staffed mostly by out of work social workers, or friends of relatives of social workers involved in the FGC project. FGC coordinators were actually supposed to come from society (NGO activists, volunteers, friends of service users) to distinguish the FGC from being considered yet another methodology employed by the CSWs in dealing with their clients. However, for reasons described earlier, social workers considered it necessary to remain in control of the entire FGC effort. Coordinators (actually social workers) carried this philosophy further, acting and thinking as professional CSW staff, only, as it turned out, without pay.

As a result, thinking and methods throughout the Network never ventured away from established routines. It also affected the ability of coordinators – who were no longer considered impartial and independent from the social worker in charge – to recruit a wider circle of people for the conference and propose solutions that would be accepted by the family. One could not escape the feeling that the Family Network was in the process

of being organised into yet another institution, concerned mostly with planning how to fund its activities, staffing schemes, cosying with local political elites who could provide access to funding, and the like.

The only credible critique of the FGC concept, coming from the small majority of social workers involved in the effort, seemed to be that the concept of the FGC originated and was borrowed from liberal democracies with developed welfare system providinga range of high quality services and benefits. FGC fits nicely into such a setting with its emphasis on self-reliance and greater ownership. In poor, fractured, disorganised societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the role of social workers are ill-defined; the state provides scant services to families, and almost no benefits to service users. Users are anyway largely left to their own devices to try to survive in such a challenging environment. It is therefore unfair to expect of this family to go even further and assume the lion's share of responsibility for its own welfare. The state in such setting would simply be regarded as washing its hands of responsibilities it should have to assist its population. One of the interviewed social workers put it succinctly "the system has let these people down, they deserve to be assisted by the state, it is kind of hypocritical to absolve the state and professionals of responsibility to assist the individuals (service users) and try to resolve their problems".

Conclusion

Both case studies point to the central role politics and non-professional considerations play in preventing necessary reforms to take place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international actors sponsoring the introduction of the FGC concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina were hoping that "the actual implementation of the principle of FGC will result in an exchange of perspectives within social work. Professionals will decreasingly set to work on the basis of the conviction that they know 'what's good for the clients' while clients and their social networks will take a less dependent position and find taking care of their own responsibilities and tasks much more a matter of course" (FGC, 2009: 8). The reality, however, was that, sometimes, the results were completely the opposite of those intended.

The FGC project effectively split into two distinct endeavours, with no possibility to accomplish the intended cooperation and exchange of

experiences, and build synergies between the international and local practices, as well as between the local partners from Sarajevo and Banja Luka. Actually, as research demonstrated, inter-communal/inter-entity cooperation ended up in some aspects even more limited than before.

Very few conferences were convened, while research into attitudes of conveners demonstrated that their preconceived ideas about the best solutions could easily influence the outcome of the conferences. There was complete failure to establish the links between academia and practice, with only lip service paid to responsibilities assumed in the beginning of the project.

International sponsors of the FGC concept were well-intentioned, but unprepared and unaware of the nature of the problems they will face. There was no clear blueprint for implementation, no thorough mapping and evaluation of issues and capacities on the ground. Instead, deeply committed and firmly believing in the value of the FGC, international actors were simply hoping that their local partners will understand the potential of the concept and embrace it fully. To their credit, neither did they want to impose ready-made solutions top-down. Also, no thought was given to identifying and supporting local 'agents of change' – either institutions or individuals – who could assist in the FGC implementation and bridge the information divide and overcome mistrust between the partners. These problems are indicative of the wider problems in the development field, including the West-East (or sometimes North-South) policy replication and translation.

Local actors were mostly social workers who quickly retreated to their entrenched professional positions, once it became clear that 'foreigners' did not bring ready-made solutions (nor funds to implement it top-down), but were instead counting on *them* (social workers) to take the initiative and make the concept work. Selection of community activists by the social workers made sense of course, but, due to absence of mentoring/oversight, it quickly degenerated into selection of family members/friends, who were hoping to make some additional money. There was therefore no true community representation or voice, which is the essential component of family group conferencing.

Politics (or rather, vulgar politicking) typically adversely influences reform processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless of the merit of reform proposals The whole idea of piloting FGCs in two locations was based on

the premise that social workers and community activists would be able to interact seamlessly, work on the same range of problems, learning from each other, and benefitting from the inclusion of academia and occasional mentoring from international sponsors. Again, obvious benefits were ignored for the sake of advancing the nationalistic agendas.

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Politike reformi socijalne zaštite: Lekcije iz uvođenja porodičnih grupnih konferencija u Bosni i Hercegovini

Još od ranih devedesetih različiti međunarodni akteri Bosnu i Hercegovinu (BiH) označavaju kao 'zemlju u tranziciji' (iz socijalizma) i 'postkonfliktnu zemlju u razvoju' (zbog rata 1992-1995). Oba termina inicirala su set reformi socijalnog sektora vođenih izvana. Autor preispituje politike različitih reformskih aktera, kao i utjecaj koji su one imale na socijalnu zaštitu i praksu socijalnog rada na nivou bliskom korisniku.

Studija slučaja koja se elaborira u ovom tekstu tiče se projekta koji je imao za cilj uvođenje modela porodičnih grupnih konferencija (FGC) u praksu socijalnog rada i rada u zajednici u Bosni i Hercegovini. Ovaj projekt je osmislila i izvodila grupa radnika u zajednici i predavača s Profesionalnog univerziteta za socijalni rad u Amsterdamu, uz podršku OSCE misije u BiH i u saradnji s centrima za socijalni rad u Sarajevu i Banjoj Luci.

Istraživanje ove studije slučaja upućuje na centralno mjesto koje politike različitih aktera (međunarodnih agencija, javnih institucija, nevladinih organizacija, socijalnih radnika i aktivista, kao i korisnika usluga) igraju u sprečavanju realizacije širih reformi.

Ključne riječi: međunarodna podrška, Bosna i Hercegovina, socijalna zaštita, porodične grupne konferencije, postkonfliktna društva