



PROJECT TO INSTITUTIONALIZE MULTIETHNIC PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING IN BULGARIA

ASSESSMENT AND FINAL REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

Following the toppling of Communist governments in Central Europe, internal political shifts in the former Soviet Union and loosening of governmental controls over national populations, ethnic conflicts have increased significantly in this region. Some of the conflicts are new but many of them are recent manifestations of disputes that have festered for centuries.

Ethnic disputes in Central and Eastern Europe involve a wide range of issues including: demands for total separatism and the founding of new states; pressures for greater ethnic group autonomy within federal systems; calls for greater ethnic representation in new parliamentary and local governmental structures; tensions regarding hiring in re-constituted agencies and institutions; controversies over expulsion and repatriation policies; problems with refugees; demands for recognition of special language and cultural rights; competition over the location of economic development projects; desires for greater economic inclusion of minorities; provisions for separate educational facilities; needs for the management of overt ethnic violence; and anti-Semitism.

While ethnic conflict and ultra-nationalism in this region have perpetuated tragic suffering in the former Yugoslav Republics, other scenarios prove equally devastating to affected populations. These include direct suppression of minorities and their culture or making life so difficult that they feel compelled to leave their nation. These dynamics manifest themselves in Bulgaria.

At the cross-roads between Europe and Asia and between Christianity and Islam, Bulgaria has had to accommodate diverse groups. The Bulgarian state of the Middle Ages was an amalgam of Turkish and Thracian peoples with

Slav tribes and proto-Bulgarians. Between 1396 and 1878, Bulgaria was a part of the Ottoman Empire and significant numbers of its population were assimilated into the Turkish culture. These events are cited as the genesis of the conflict between the Bulgarians and the Turks and, in fact, between Islam and Christianity. Since Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, national policies regarding the Turkish minority have oscillated constantly between assimilation and protection of the group and their treatment as aliens slated for expulsion.

During the Communist period, ethnic conflicts were suppressed and there was a massive initiative to force assimilation of all ethnic groups. The state initiated campaigns to forcibly change Turkish names; forbid Moslem burial, marriage and other rites; merge the Turkish and Bulgarian educational systems; close mosques; prohibit private instruction in Islam; and ban the uses of the Turkish language. This repression led to protests by the Turkish minority and an extremely high rate of emigration, resulting in approximately 370,000 Turks leaving Bulgaria within a six-month period in 1989. Eventually, more than one-half have returned, but the population shifts caused massive social and economic destabilization.

In 1990, following the collapse of communism, a Turkish rights movement—the Movement on Rights and Freedoms—was founded. It claims some 300,000 members and has gained representation in the National Assembly. The increased mobilization and strength of the Turkish minority has led to the restoration of Turkish rights. At the same time, it has sparked a rise in anti-Turkish feelings among the majority population. Many ethnic Bulgarians fear not only for their own cultural identity but

also for their territorial and national sovereignty.

Bulgaria today has a population that is approximately 85% ethnic Bulgarian, 9% Turk, 6% Gypsy (commonly referred to as Roma), and smaller numbers of Macedonians, Gagauz, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Russians, Tatars, and others. Of these groups, approximately 10% speak Turkish as their first language. The country is predominantly Christian (Bulgarian Orthodox) with a minority of Turks, Roma and Rhodope Muslim mountain villagers practicing Islam.

Peoples and nations that desire to move toward democratic attitudes, behaviors, procedures, and structures must find ways to respond effectively to the rise of ethnic nationalism and to manage differences between and among diverse groups within state boundaries. Managing the diversity and conflicts that result from ethnically different populations sharing the same territory requires:

- Building a positive consciousness toward diversity
- Preparing citizens with skills to manage differences within institutions and communities
- Building institutions, both within governments and NGOs, that can assist contending parties to resolve social problems with ethnic components in a non-violent manner
- Creating a legal structure that institutionalizes tolerance

This project is designed to assist citizens of Bulgaria to begin to achieve some of the above goals.

Since 1993, CDR Associates of Boulder, Colorado, in partnership with the Foundation for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution of Sofia, Bulgaria, has been conducting a unique, five-year project, to establish structures, change attitudes, build skills, and conduct procedures for promoting multicultural cooperation, participation, and democratic decision making in Bulgaria. The Project to Institutionalize Multiethnic Participation and Democratic Decision Making in Bulgaria has received four years of funding from the PEW Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia (November 1993-November 1995 and November 1996-November 1998). The project combines grass roots democracy building, community consensus dialogue, and citizen participation skill building to more effectively manage differences, solve community problems, and advance the development of democracy in Bulgaria. The project has operated away from the capital and the national political scene, in the communities and the neighborhoods where ethnic groups must learn to live together. This strategy reflects a consistent message we hear from everyone with whom we have worked and consulted. . .that in Bulgaria real progress and a significant difference can be made most effectively at the local level.

The project has resulted in the development of local multiethnic Commissions composed of Roma (Gypsy), Turkish, Rhodope Muslim and ethnic Bulgarian formal and informal leaders in eight separate communities: Assenovgrad, Haskovo, Ichtiman, Mineralni Bani (subCommission to the Haskovo Commission), Pazardjik, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Velingrad. These Commissions have been established as local, indigenous structures to build cooperation and understanding among different ethnic groups and to promote and institutionalize multicultural problem solving, democratic decision making, and conflict resolution. The Commissions have continued to focus their efforts on one of the greatest

sources of ethnic tension in Bulgaria today—the relationship between social and governmental institutions dominated by the majority (ethnic Bulgarians) and the communities they serve, composed to a significant extent, of minority group members.

The Commissions have all received official recognition by their local municipal authority and have convened joint cooperative projects in the area of social care, unemployment, housing, education, and culture. All Commissions (with the exception of Mineralni Bani) have registered as independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such status allows the Commissions to establish independent relationships with state and international institutions, to fundraise, and to increase their influence as local civil society structures.

The project included a training strategy as part of a broader approach to institutionalize multiethnic citizen participation and the practice of democracy at the grass roots level. Extensive training opportunities were offered to Commission members, members of local authorities, social institutions, and communities to help them successfully participate in local democracy initiatives and project work in their communities. The goals of the training component were to increase awareness,

appreciation and understanding of different cultures as well as to expand skills in problem solving, group work and team building, meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, negotiation, cooperative planning processes, and democratic decision making.

Furthermore, Bulgarian project partners developed and conducted a comprehensive "training-for-trainers" course for selected Commission members from different ethnic groups. Thanks to the joint efforts of Bulgarian partners and Commission members, a multiethnic training team, composed of Roma-Bulgarians, Rhodope Muslims, Turkish Bulgarians and ethnic Bulgarians, has been created for the first time in Bulgaria! In the second phase of the project, this training group was expanded to include "the Young Trainers Group," a multiethnic training team composed of young people from each Commission community. These multiethnic training teams have enriched the quality, depth, and scope of project work and contributed in a meaningful way to project sustainability.

The remainder of this report describes project accomplishments and activities, outlines project impacts, summarizes lessons learned, and future developments.

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

This project benefited from a previous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts that operated from November 1993 through November 1995. At the end of that period, the following elements had been achieved:

- **Creating civil society structures.** Local multiethnic Commissions for Intercultural Understanding were created in five Bulgarian communities. These have

become credible structures for building consensus among groups and for providing meaningful forums for dialogue and accountability about community concerns and public issues. The Commissions received local charters as non-governmental organizations and some have obtained local funding as well.

- **Creating successful consensus building activities.** Commissions have convened a series of public policy dialogues related to employment for minorities; school integration; creation of a multiethnic housing project; equitable distribution of job opportunities and social services; dealing with homeless children; media portrayal of minorities; promoting better understanding among youth of different communities; etc.
- **Development of procedural entitlement and a culture of accountability on the part of public officials, community members and social institutions— fundamental concepts for establishing democracy in a diverse society.** The Commissions are engaged in creating a culture of procedural entitlement and public accountability, in which community members have a constructive means for making their vital interests known and public officials are accountable to the citizens they serve. Through the Commissions, minority communities have begun to recognize and exercise their right to be heard and public officials have begun to understand the need to be held accountable for the decisions they are making and for the ways in which they make them. The Commissions are also helping social institutions to involve representatives of minority groups in decisions that affect the lives of their communities.
- **Development of democratically skilled leadership in ethnic communities and social institutions.** A series of programs have been conducted to develop the skills and awareness of key leaders in conducting consensus-building procedures, in sensitizing people to diversity issues, and in preparing community members for a more active civic role. A key element in these

programs has been the creation of a cadre of trainers and facilitators from diverse communities and ethnic backgrounds who provide a resource to the Commissions and their communities for conducting training and dialogue processes.

- **Changing the way people think.** To quote a Bulgarian colleague, “It is not enough to say to a Turkish person, come have a coffee or for grandmothers from different ethnic backgrounds to talk across the rose garden; instead, we must solve our mutual problems in a joint way without relying on the government to solve them for us...Now we have a small chance to change things...and everything depends on us.” This is a significant change from the kind of thinking fostered by centuries of externally imposed leadership, be it the Ottomans or the Communists.

The second phase of the project institutionalized and expanded the work of the first three years. The models developed and tested during that time were applied in new locations (Ichtiman, Mineralni Bani, Stara Zagora) and deepened and refined in the original project sites (Assenovgrad, Haskovo, Pazardjik, Plovdiv and Velingrad).

- The active multicultural facilitator/trainers continued to develop and apply their skills. They helped train and mentor new trainer/facilitators and promoted the organization of new Commissions. Particularly notable is the development of a “Young Trainers Group” composed of 30 youth in their teens and twenties from different cultures representing all of the Commission sites.
- New and existing Commissions were given the resources to establish a more permanent and prominent presence in their communities. They were provided with

office space, equipment, and some staff funding. In addition, they have been encouraged and assisted to obtain local and other funding to continue their work after the final two years of this project.

- A national steering committee of project coordinators was established to distribute a certain portion of the funds and to act as an ongoing coordination, planning, and development group for the work of these Commissions.
- Electronic communication systems were developed to promote better on-going coordination of activities.

More specifically, the second phase of the project (November 1996 - November 1998) focused on the following key objectives:

1. **Providing funding for two local staff persons (coordinator teams) at each Commission to coordinate Commission work and to improve outreach to minority neighborhoods and public institutions.** A local, salaried, multiethnic team of coordinators managed the work of each Commission; helped enhance its visibility, presence and reputation; and promoted work with public institutions and the community. These teams became the local project engines for their sites. The coordinators were supervised and advised by three Project Managers, Trendafil (Dafo) Meretev, Krassi Loikov, and Krassimira Damyanova. The Project Director in Bulgaria was Rumens Valchev. The Project Managers and Director have been involved since 1993.

The selection of the coordinator teams was done very carefully. A great deal of thought, strategy and diplomacy resulted in a seasoned group of coordinators, all of whom had prior experience as Commis-

sion members. The selection was accomplished without arousing any jealousy, competition or morale problems within the Commissions.

Furthermore, the relationship among the coordinators thrived. There was no turnover and all demonstrated enormous growth in their leadership capacities. The relationships between coordinators from different ethnic groups was particularly enriching.

2. **Providing office space and communications equipment to each Commission to enhance organizational infrastructures.** Each Commission established its own office in its own way to fit its unique set of circumstances.

- ***The Association for Understanding*** (Plovdiv) enjoys a strategic position in a building centrally located on the walking street of the old city, right next to the “Mayor’s House” (city hall). They share the office with the Open Society Fund’s National Debate Program and the Youth Education Center. Their well equipped office includes several conference rooms and space for providing training programs. They also have a presence in one of the minority neighborhoods where the Association for Understanding Consultation Center provides a gathering place for residents from any ethnic group who have a problem to raise or are in need of social services, retirement benefits, material assistance, employment, or legal services.
- ***The Association for Trust*** (Assenovgrad) offers a different strategy. Their office is in the home of the coordinator, Roman Kolev, in the middle of the minority neighborhood

and not far from city hall, and is in operation almost 24 hours a day. It has the support and trust of the minority community, is easily accessible, and is welcoming to the social institutions and local authorities as well.

- ***The Hope Association*** (Haskovo) occupies the former turn of the century home of a well-to-do Armenian family. Its offices are cheery and accessible to both the community and the local authorities and institutions. A Consultation Center is situated in an old building in one of the major minority neighborhoods.
- ***The Association for the Future*** (Pazardjik) is located in a remodeled building just inside one of the minority neighborhoods, next to branch offices of the major social institutions. Office space doubles as a consulting center and the place of business for the Commission. Community members who want advice on legal rights, employment and health matters regularly visit the center.
- ***The Association for Multicultural Cooperation*** (Velingrad) recently settled in remodeled office space inside a very modern, upscale building. Neighboring tenants include the George Soros Open Society Fund. The space is strategically situated adjacent to one of Velingrad's charming, downtown walking streets. Both the local authorities and the neighborhoods are within walking distance.

The new Commissions (Stara Zagora, Ichtiman and Mineralni Bani) have offices in their respective municipalities.

Office space has made a significant difference for each of the Commissions. They have a neutral place to conduct their business which serves as a locus for operations; they are more visible to the community; they have increased pride and confidence; and both the community and the local authorities treat them with greater respect, take them more seriously and view them as an important force and resource in the community that will be there for the long term. The presence of communication equipment including a telephone, computer, printer, and fax significantly aids in accomplishing the work that needs to get done.

3. Training an additional cadre of multi-ethnic facilitators through a training program involving technical assistance and material provided by CDR.

Bulgarian Partners, with assistance from CDR, have developed an intricate training strategy targeted at three different groups: a training-for-trainers program to develop an additional group of multiethnic facilitators; a training-for-trainers program focused on building a multiethnic cadre of young trainers; and a broad training scheme for community leaders, citizens, and professionals (social workers, employment counselors, media people, police, municipal staff, educators, and other social actors) designed to prepare people to effectively participate in a multicultural civil society and democracy at the local level. More than forty such trainings have been organized for approximately 1000 participants. More will be said about the training strategy later in this report.

4. **Organizing bimonthly, multiethnic community dialogues at each Commission in accordance with criteria to be established by a national steering committee of Commission members working with project staff.** Local coordinators working, in partnership with their Commissions, sponsored a wide range of community dialogues based upon broad themes established during semi-annual all-Commission strategic planning sessions. Topics included how to obtain multiethnic participation in the national polio campaign; school attendance and quality education for minority students; the role of the media in improving intercultural relations in Bulgaria; juvenile delinquency—prevention and intervention; incubating indigenous structures for a multiethnic grass-roots democracy in Bulgarian villages; human rights—a new life for Romas in Bulgaria; equal participation of Roma people in the social life of Bulgaria; building positive relationships between the community and the local authorities; etc.
5. **Convening two annual conferences to help develop a national structure to link the Commissions together.** The Project Director, in consultation with Project Managers and Coordinators, initiated monthly coordinator meetings to plan and implement project goals. This association of Coordinators served as an informal, national structure that linked the Commissions together. Coordinators brought project proposals to this group for funding approval as well as strategy input. Planning of such large projects as the International Summer Camp, the training-for-trainers program, intercultural training for citizens, municipalities and local authorities, the Young Trainers program, and establishing and running neighbor-

hood consultations centers were discussed in this forum.

Additionally, national Commission meetings were convened twice a year, in June and September. The coordinators developed a representation formula, based on a series of principles, which were used for allocating a certain number of slots to each Commission. A number of invitations were reserved for members from other NGOs and government entities engaged in intercultural work to enrich the session and support the cross-fertilization of experience. The agenda was developed by the Project Directors and Managers in consultation with the coordinator team. This larger team also facilitated these semi-annual planning and strategy meetings which were attended by more than sixty participants and received rave reviews.

6. **Creating a project Web site and e-mail capacity to facilitate communication among Commission members, trainers, local staff and NGOs involved in similar work in Bulgaria and the region.** Due to a variety of problems, including concerns regarding computer security and poorly timed (too early) computer skills training, the electronic component of the project was significantly delayed. Currently all the original sites have computers installed in their offices and computers have been purchased for the new sites. Only Plovdiv has its email system up and running and this has been extremely useful in communicating with CDR and in developing broad networks with groups around the world. The original project sites are in the process of installing email so they can communicate within Bulgaria and several hope to gain access to the internet.

PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACTIVITIES BY SITE—SOME HIGHLIGHTS

To provide a deeper sense of project accomplishments we have described a number of highlights for several project sites.

Assenovgrad—Trust Association

“A small room but a broad soul.”

Assenovgrad Commission Member (referring to the Commission’s office located in Coordinator Roman Kolev’s home, so often filled to capacity with Commission members, neighborhood folks and people from the municipality or local authorities coming together to work on community problems.)

“Our work has contributed to the unity of the people...to a unified entity. To work successfully as a Commission we have had to overcome potential sources of conflict. Our metaphor is that we are a kind of social umbrella working on projects for the benefit of the people in the neighborhood. Our methods involve these same people and other stakeholders in defining and solving the problems. We link community people, their problems and their ideas about what they need, with social and political actors who have resources but who need good ideas about how to solve problems at the local level. We had four objectives when we established the Commission:

- *Close cooperation with the local authorities*
- *Close cooperation with social care and other social institutions who have the most contact with the community here*
- *Close cooperation with the schools which are so important to the future of our society*
- *Practicing our principles of inclusion, tolerance and democracy with each other*

We knew if we were to resolve ethnic tensions and problems between government institutions and the ethnic community we had to have credible relationships with all sides of the problem. We have organized a very powerful working team of community volunteers and professionals. The community volunteers are organized by block so that each block in the neighborhood has a representative.

We decided to make the office here in my living room—and include a representative from social care so people’s needs could be met in quick time. We suggested the local authorities also establish a representative here. Our next question was how to organize our work so there would be no tensions between social workers and other institutions and the people from the neighborhoods. We decided to have these municipal and other institutional representatives in the reception room here and then as a Commission, to act as intermediaries between the neighborhoods and the local authorities. We began simply, by helping community people fill out paper work for different forms of assistance.

Since then the organization of our work has expanded and given positive results. Last year we submitted 1400 applications for different kinds of help to social welfare so as a result, we have handled and managed one source of ethnic tension. Nevertheless, the good work of the Commission with our trainings, projects and dialogues, is not a substitute for adequate jobs or a solution to poverty.”

Roman Kolev
Coordinator, Assenovgrad Commission

Other projects which highlight Trust Commission activities are the following:

Helping our children to attend school. The Association succeeded in enrolling 100% of all the eligible children from the minority groups in the first grade this year and 85 children at risk were enrolled in the special pre-school program. Assenovgrad is the only town in Bulgaria that has been able to accomplish this remarkable level of school attendance. The success of the project is due in part to the extraordinary trust the Association enjoys with the families and the school authorities. Another unique feature is the follow-up strategy. Neighborhood organizers developed by the Association follow each child's progress in school. They make periodic visits to the families and the school to identify and address any problems quickly. Sometimes there is an economic component to the problem of school attendance. Families may not have food, clothes, or money for school supplies. If this becomes a problem, neighborhood organizers bring this to the Association's attention and local authorities, such as Social Care, are immediately responsive with special assistance. This year there are five first grade classes—the most ever and all kids of eligible age have enrolled.

Partnership with social care. The Association has taken the initiative to recruit the best professionals, the most experienced and humane colleagues to work in partnership with this community. Currently representatives from Social Care, the Commission, and the community have launched the Early Marriage Project to try to educate the community about the difficulties involved when young people marry at a very early age. At the same time, because early marriages are part of some groups' culture, the project is trying to ensure that young people who do marry are eligible for some kind of special

employment and welfare assistance, regardless of their age.

Partnership with the schools. The Commission has convened many dialogues and informal conversations between the community and the school administration. This partnership has created a school that provides excellent conditions for the learning of children. The Commission, community, and school have worked together to become one of only three recipients in all of Bulgaria for "Step-by-Step" programs and project funding. Similar to Head Start, it prepares children to be successful throughout their elementary school experience. The school has made a concerted effort to provide opportunities for all students, not just those enrolled in "Step-by-Step."

Partnership with the Labor Office. Another important area of focus for this Commission's work is with the Labor Office in the town. The Commission provides information regarding jobs to the community on a weekly basis. They help people fill out job applications and direct them to the right place. Recently, 73 people from the community have been placed in skill building jobs learning to restore buildings in the old town.

Haskovo—Hope Association

"Of all that I have done so far in my professional life, this is my most favorite work. I had no clue at the beginning that it would be my favorite. I found a new role and a new place for myself. I have participated as a trainer in lots of trainings with Commission members and with the coordinators. I have found enormous value in our talks together. Acting as a trainer and a mentor for the Young Trainers Program has been a very special personal pleasure. I feel very close to this project for many reasons but perhaps most of all because it connects and links so

closely with my own personal vision and core values in the realm of peace and peacemaking. I've grown up spiritually and I've changed thanks to working on this project."

Krassimira Damjanova
Project Manager and member of the Haskovo Commission

"We have enjoyed close cooperation with other Commissions and engaged in many joint projects and joint trainings. The popularity of our Association has increased over the years. People from the community have taken initiative to come to us to find ways of joining our work. Inside the organization we have worked as a team and there is deep respect among us. We are very grateful to Pew Charitable Trusts for all of their support."

Todka
Hope Association Coordinator

"I have been involved in this work now for more than four years. During the first two years I thought we couldn't realize the project. We all had a certain disbelief. People coming from outside couldn't understand our problems. Over time we gained confidence, scored success, built a social atmosphere, and contributed to a better spirit in our society."

Shaban
Hope Association Coordinator

Media project. The Haskovo Commission convened a series of dialogues between NGOs interested in multicultural participation and grass roots democracy building and the media to explore the media's role in improving multicultural relationships in the region.

Political dialogues. The Commission convened a series of dialogues with the key political parties, local political figures, and community representatives to explore and discuss the social and political side of multicultural understanding. The Commission

anticipates continued economic hardship for many Bulgarians in the region and is trying to prevent politicians from playing the ethnic card as they prepare for municipal elections later in 1999.

Small village project. Mineralni Bani and Liubimets, two multiethnic villages near Haskovo where the Turkish minority predominates, are the sites of two new subCommissions initiated by the Haskovo Commission, as part of their Multicultural Project for Small Villages. The idea behind this initiative is to bring multiethnic involvement in democratic decision making to Bulgaria's villages. The focus of the Mineralni Bani Commission has been on employment opportunities and practices that are non-discriminatory. New Commission members include the curator of the museum, the director of the school which serves a mixed population of students, businessmen, and local authorities.

Luibitnets is a village famous for its vegetables and rich agricultural land. The Commission has been active in developing a land reform project in the village, whereby the municipality will grant agricultural plots to several landless Roma families for agricultural production purposes. The hope is to expose these villages to some of the progressive democracy building work that is happening in the region and at the same time, discovering a local village brand of participation and democracy.

International Summer Camp. Commission representatives helped staff the International Summer Camp in July 1998. Eight children from different ethnic groups in Haskovo attended this camp, along with children from each of the Commissions. Children from war-torn regions including Ossetia, Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia were also

present. The experience was a moving and motivating one for the adults and the youth.

Youth Commission. The Commission has convened a Youth Commission (youth component of the Haskovo Commission) to further embed and sustain a deep tolerance for differences and concepts related to democratic decision making in the next generation. These youth have participated in an intensive series of training programs in intercultural communication. The Multiethnic Commission Training Team conducted the training.

Pazardjik—Commission for the Future

“1994—remember the situation then? We were just a bunch of people who gathered around a good idea with a vague notion of what it meant and what to do. We tried hard. We are like a pyramid. The point at the top is our beginning. We were small and unstable. Through the years we have expanded and the work was developed and our support and strength grew. We went through some rough periods where some members dropped out. We have so far managed to overcome our most serious problems and the pyramid has become the roof of our common house. We are supporting each other in doing the work of a common household. We don’t discriminate about who is better or who is worse. We work for everyone.”

Pazardjik Commission Member

“In our team, each works according to his/her interest area. We have built strong relationships inside the municipality and have great support from the Deputy Mayor although our organization is non-partisan and Commission members come from many different political parties. We have good contacts with the media who report our activities and give publicity. The phones in our office are ringing and for the first time people now come to us seeking our advice and assistance. We have an infusion of young

people in our group which is a great source of strength for the present and the future.

Pazardjik Commission Member

“We had no notion of multicultural cooperation. We had no experience with it in the past. Over time, multilevel, multiethnic contacts and relationships have developed. We see the richness in our diversity with different people bringing different abilities and skills. I do this public work in my free time, as a volunteer. I have received enormous benefit from participating. It has made a difference in my life and I hope I have made a difference in the lives of others.”

Pazardjik Commission Member

Highlights of the Association for the Future include:

Consultation Center. The first Consultation Center in Bulgaria was established by the Pazardjik Commission. Located in the Roma and Turkish neighborhood, it provides legal, medical, psychological, and pedagogical assistance to members of the community. It is a place where people can come for help and be treated with respect and dignity. It was described by one Commission member as an idea where “lighting a candle turned into a fire.”

Mediation Services. The Commission often plays a mediating role when discriminatory practices have occurred within the community. Several months ago a Roma couple was planning their wedding and approached the manager of a local restaurant to arrange the reception. The restaurant refused to host the occasion and declined to provide an explanation. Suspecting discrimination, the couple approached the Commission for help. Several members from the Commission visited the restaurant and spoke with the manager who cited health department regulations as the reason for refusing to allow the wedding

reception to take place. As a restaurant, they were not licensed for such events, they claimed. The Commission contacted the health department where they have very good connections. The health department personally accompanied the Commission to speak with the restaurant manager and explained there were no regulations preventing the reception. The manager next suggested that the Mayor would not allow it. Again, the Commission took action, approaching the Mayor with whom they are on very good terms. The Commission returned to the manager stating that the mayor was supportive of the couple and expected the restaurant establishment to be cooperative. Out of excuses, the restaurant agreed to host the reception.

Equitable distribution of social aid. Fair and equitable distribution of financial assistance is a problem that plagues many local authorities and social institutions in Bulgaria. When the European Union was looking for a trusted local entity to distribute social aid; it selected the Pazardjik Commission. The Commission has had prior experiencing cooperating with Social Services to help broker the relationship between Social Services staff (primarily ethnic Bulgarians) and community members who qualify for assistance (primarily members of the Roma or Turkish community) to ensure those who really need the services receive them and that the families and the social care workers are treated with respect.

Building and maintaining trust in the community. Gaining and maintaining the trust of the community requires an ongoing effort by the Commission. Misperceptions about their role, unrealistic expectations about what a Commission can do, and other factors created initial suspicion of the Commission in the neighborhood. At first, some community members believed the Commission was

merely a group of people involved for their own personal gain. There were impressions in the community that all Commission members were being paid large sums of money that were really intended for the community. Trust was built over time. It required patience, education about what the Commission could and could not do and it required bringing the community together to raise and address problems as a group which made a difference in people's lives.

Fundraising. Thinking about how to be sustainable beyond the current grant period has occupied the Pazardjik Commission as it plans for the future. Although the concept of charitable giving is quite new in Bulgaria, the Commission, nevertheless, decided to experiment with a fundraising approach that targeted wealthy Bulgarians. Charity Disco Nights was organized by the Commission and raised over 1,200,000 leva for Commission projects.

Implementation of the National Polio Vaccination Campaign. The Commission and the Municipality worked jointly to implement a national vaccination campaign against polio. A community team of volunteers from the Consultation Center along with municipality staff canvassed the neighborhoods to educate families about the campaign, allay concerns and fears, and gain cooperation. The efforts of the Commission/ Municipality partnership resulted in almost 100% participation of families from all ethnic groups in Pazardjik.

Plovdiv—Association for Understanding

“I had a little experience, some knowledge and skills but mostly a lot of spirit and willingness to work. Everyday contacts with Krassi Loikov helped me a lot. My joint work with Natalie was very rewarding. We have specialized in some spheres. Each has an important role.”

Octai
Association for Understanding Coordinator

“Krassi and Octai make the job easy. The best thing about us is that we started together and we are now even closer to each other. We share responsibilities and allocate tasks among ourselves. Lots of thanks to Krassi and Octai. They did the greatest share of the work because I had to hold down my other job. I did my best to share information and create opportunities and to popularize the work at the Labor Office where I work. My greatest contribution is helping the Association take advantage of a new law that allows NGOs to act as an employer and be subsidized by the Labor Office. This is a first. We are making our first steps but we have had tangible results. We have a person employed by the Understanding Association under this new law. She is the key staff member at our Consultation Center. It has been a pleasure working with all the colleagues. Things won't stop after we've gone so far. We have to go on working and develop ourselves and our community.”

Natalie
Association for Understanding Coordinator

The Association for Understanding is an organization of 11 indigenous NGOs plus representatives from local government institutions (municipality, social care, labor, education) focused on strengthening interethnic relationships with a view toward improving the well-being of Bulgarian society as a whole. Their focus is on solving both ethnic and social problems which are often

inter-linked. Their work includes helping minorities and the poor participate in a variety of ways—finding jobs, improving education, cultivating young people, overcoming discrimination and isolation of minorities, developing greater governmental support of NGOs. Projects of the Association include Minorities Lives and the Media; Summer School for Interethnic Cooperation; Those Who Study, Succeed; etc. They have made it a core priority to institutionalize multiethnic participation in democratic decision making. Highlights include:

Staff position funded by Labor Office. The Association for Understanding was the first NGO to request and be granted a position to be funded by the Labor Office. Under a new law, NGOs are allowed to qualify for support from the Labor Office for certain types of employee positions. Working with the coordinator who is also a staff member of the Labor Office, the Association provided a test case to this new legal opportunity and was successful in gaining the position. *“We are making our first steps but we have tangible results. We have a person employed by the Understanding Association. She is working at our Consultation Center.”* Other Commissions will try to replicate this model in their communities. One of the factors contributing to Plovdiv's success is the excellent working relationship they enjoy with the labor office and with other institutions throughout their community.

Public policy dialogue forum. In order to create a system for dealing with clusters of community problems rather than handling everything on a case-by-case basis, the Association has established the Public Council, a regular forum for public dialogue providing input to local authorities and the municipality about community problems. This forum is convened and facilitated by the Association for Understanding. Regular members of the

Council include representatives from the neighborhood as well as representatives from Social Care, the Labor Office, the municipality, the police, the schools and other social institutions. The goal is to discuss and address community problems using a more multidisciplinary, community-involvement approach where a problem can be understood from multiple perspectives and resources can be joined and coordinated to address larger community problems more holistically. Dialogue topics include: police and minority relationships; juvenile delinquency; role of the media in promoting good relationships among different ethnic groups, etc. Multi-sectoral task forces or working groups have been created to explore and address these problem in more depth and have brought their recommendations back to the implementers.

The Council also acts as a pressure group or social coalition as it did recently when it drafted a letter to the Mayor requesting an office for social services be opened in the neighborhood to provide a more accessible and friendly location and promote more effective working relationships between the community, the municipality, and local social institutions.

Establishing a for-profit arm. In order to create a more predictable stream of funds to support its non-profit work, the Association for Understanding has created a for-profit organization called, Prometheus. This business provides translation services, copying, trainings, language training, computer courses, etc., as a way to make money for the non-profit. The Association for Understanding owns the for-profit organization.

Velinograd—Commission for Multicultural Understanding

“The Project was really in my heart, as if it was a real person. I learned things which I hadn’t known before—both as an ordinary man from the community and as a Commission member...communication skills, how to develop multiethnic cooperation at the municipal level and much more. I am thankful to the project managers and I believe this work will continue living within me for all the days of my life.”

Roman Chilev
Velinograd Commission Coordinator

“The people working in the municipality didn’t even know where the (Roma) neighborhood was. They didn’t have the concept of sitting down and having a conversation with us. I am pleased to have you as colleagues and thankful for your tolerance, for hearing us and for your help. The Association will go on with its work. It is important locally and for the local people here. We have convinced the ‘big cheeses’ to sit with us and have a normal talk and then to act on our behalf. We have a joint agreement with the municipality for joint work. I’m very patient. We have certainly made mistakes...still, it has been a great success.”

Velinograd Commission Member

“A single small man wants and needs help to ascend a long series of steps. This was the situation when we started our work. Our work has been a step-by-step process. We started with lots of talks and meetings with people in the neighborhood to get them familiar with the objectives of the project and to get them clear about the issues we faced. We started our Commission with people from different religious orientations, different ethnic orientations. Going back in time I can say we have achieved some things. If not solving everything, we have eased the tensions. Now we are a team of people who have a much clearer

vision of what to do and how to do it. In our step-by-step journey we have achieved the following:

- 1. We have learned how to deal with problems together. Together we grow stronger and we can accomplish much more.*
- 2. Gradually we managed to establish a Consultation Center.*
- 3. We are more visible in our work and have attracted energetic new members for our work. We have also incubated a new Intercultural Commission in the nearby village of Rakitovo.*
- 4. We have developed the art of acting as mediators in ethnic conflict situations.”*

Velingrad Commission Member

Procedural entitlement and accountability in the context of school attendance.

The Velingrad Commission succeeded in registering 240 “lost” children from the minority and majority community for the 1998-1999 school year. School authorities initially denied the existence of these children, claiming they did not exist because they did not want to deal with the problem. The Commission brought public attention to the issue and pressured the school officials to be accountable. Eventually the school acknowledged the problem and cooperated with the Commission to address the problem of school enrollment and attendance. The Velingrad Commission describes its role in the community as that of collaborative advocacy—raising community awareness

about key issues and drawing attention to the problem; convening a dialogue of interested stakeholders to determine how to address the issue; working together with local authorities and members of the municipality to solve the problem rather than “pounding the municipality or acting in an adversarial manner to reach its goals.” The Commission is currently employing the Assenovgrad model to address the school attendance problem in Velingrad.

Mediation and collaborative advocacy.

Recently, several Roma families in a Roma neighborhood did not pay their electricity bill. The municipality shut off the entire neighborhood’s power supply until a group from the Commission approached both the neighbors and the authorities. Their even-handed but firm approach pointed out the responsibility of the individual families to pay their bills (which they did) while at the same time indicating to the municipality that it need not behave in a racist way, acting out against the entire community for transgressions perpetrated by the few. The municipality has agreed to shut off power to only those families who have not settled their bill, after providing notice and an opportunity to work out a payment plan.

Incubating a Village Commission. The Velingrad Commission is in the process of establishing a Commission for Intercultural Understanding in the nearby village of Rakitovo.

KEY CONCERNS, ISSUES AND OBSTACLES

There were many challenges we faced in designing and implementing the project. Several dilemmas are mentioned below:

Computers. While computers were eventually purchased and put in place, this happened much later than we had anticipated. There are several reasons for the delay. 1) It took longer to implement a strategy to ensure the computers were secure and would not be stolen. 2) Computer courses were provided for Commission members too early. By the time the computers arrived most of the colleagues who had been trained had forgotten what they had learned and required retraining. All sites now have their equipment with the exception of Stara Zagora. The equipment is being held by the Project Director until the Commission is ready to receive it.

The new commissions. It was extremely difficult to launch the new Commissions in Stara Zagora and in Ichtiman. It was challenging to find the right people to serve from the community and local authorities. It was even more difficult to find competent local leadership. In one of the sites the leadership was engaged in constant battle with each other and it was difficult to determine who could be a credible representative of the community. Another obstacle occurred because the Project Managers were trying to start up these sites from a long distance away. What we needed was a full time staff person with leadership capabilities, working on site. Furthermore, the new Commissions were in a very different place, developmentally, from the more experienced Commissions. Many of the “all Commission” programs, including planning meetings and trainings, were

designed to address the needs of the experienced Commissions who were so

much further ahead. They were not oriented to the problems and issues the new sites were experiencing. A more focused strategy for nurturing the new Commissions was needed. Finally, leadership from the Project Managers and Director rotated. While all wanted to be part of launching the new Commissions, in reality, no one was in charge and the constantly shifting project staff failed to provide the important quality of continuity, predictability, and persistence so necessary at the outset of such a project.

Moving to a systems level. While the project was extremely successful at providing models for local communities to use to work on community problems, it was difficult to be engaged at a systems level—i.e., working with the Department of Education at the national level to develop systems for dealing with the school attendance problem. If the project is able to attract future funding it may be important to explore how to move from building and implementing local models to developing systems for the national level.

Sustainability. The Commissions continue to struggle with how to survive after external funding is gone. Developing a sustainability blueprint is particularly challenging in this part of the world. Bulgarian foundations and private giving are not yet well developed enough to sustain the Commissions into the future. Nor is fee for services a viable income generating strategy. While the Commissions have some grant

writing and fundraising success, there is no guarantee for their future. The best they can achieve in the short-term is additional grants and funds from local and international

sources. They are in the process of developing a concept paper for the Mott Foundation, among others.

PROJECT IMPACTS

There is no question that the work of the Commissions has had a significant impact on the development of civil society, multicultural participation, and democratic decision making at the local level in Bulgaria. One remarkable aspect is the extent to which project participants have really grasped the idea of coming together to work on multicultural issues in a collaborative way. Their own appreciation for diversity signaled a big change. They became much less racist. They gained a much better sense for what it meant to operate in a democracy. Procedural entitlement and a culture of accountability took root. All these changes demonstrated a major shift where initial externalized, imposed project goals became internalized in a deep and fundamental way. This was rather extraordinary. How much they accomplished and how much their interaction changed as a result are testimonials to the degree of transformation that has occurred within individuals, institutions, and communities touched by the project. Some highlights include the following:

1. **Promoting intercultural participation and democracy building at multiple levels.** At the local level, Commissions have made significant impacts on the way individuals and institutions handle conflicts and resolve problems. They have created a model of interaction between local authorities and NGOs and between social structures, agencies, and the people. Regionally, their joint activities have boosted their own self-confidence,

increased credibility from the outside, and influenced social institutions at the regional level. Networked together across Bulgaria, they have brought a national dimension to the ideal of intercultural participation and understanding.

2. **Creation of indigenous civic structures for working on local problems with a multicultural focus.** In addition to Commission structures, the project created six consulting centers in Ichtiman, Assenovgrad, Pazardjik, Plovdiv, Velingrad and Haskovo. These represent complementary, indigenous civic structures connected to the Commissions to support the local population—all cultural groups—in need. The Consultation Centers are located in the neighborhoods and are trusted by the local population and the institutions to act as intermediaries and honest brokers between local authorities and the minority community. They not only reduce ethnic tension but also increase participation from all groups in democratic decision making.
3. **Changing the character of local communities.** It was unthinkable in Bulgaria's recent past that there would be the kind of communication between people in such a new way as has been demonstrated through the work of the Commissions. It is a new way of communicating in the sense that people from different ethnic groups are communicating as respected equals, who are trying to

solve their problems together. Before, this never happened. This kind of communication has created a qualitative change inside communities. It is a critical feature of the new democracy that is being practiced at the local level in communities where the project is working.

4. **Development of model training programs.** The Project Director and Managers were instrumental in designing a series of training programs to expand the work of the Commissions. These workshops prepared citizens and the local authorities, journalists, municipalities, and other social actors in the area of citizen advocacy and participation, communication skills, problem-solving approaches, diversity appreciation and conflict resolution. More than 1000 people have been trained. The impact of this training strategy is a critical mass of well prepared people from different stakeholder groups able to work in the multicultural area. Unique for Bulgaria is another model program designed to prepare leaders from the community and the local authorities to become trainers and facilitators to prepare others for intercultural work. A variation of this impressive training-for-trainers program has been designed to develop the “Young Trainers Group,” a cadre of multiethnic young people recruited from each of the Commission sites to be developed as trainers.

5. **Leadership development for minority colleagues.** *“We educated the people from the minorities and we made from these people significant persons in their communities.”* Rumén Valchev, Project Director

6. **Building the vision and the capacity for collaborative advocacy.** *“I am a member of the Hope Commission and work for the*

Bulgarian Automobile Association. Before I joined the Commission, I was an outside observer of its work. The Commission was the first organization of its kind that really was open, seeking participation and inclusion of all the different ethnic groups. It was something new for us. Since then, we have developed relationships among ourselves and with the local authorities. Now people get much more attention, dignity, respect and results when they go to Social Care, the school authorities, Labor Office, etc. There is the spirit of a larger democracy in the air, particularly on the local level when there are situations between citizens and the authorities and social issues that need to be addressed. We have accomplished these results by building good relationships, ourselves, as a Commission, and with all the different stakeholder groups. We do not use coercive or adversarial approaches. But we do try to advocate for the rights of all concerned, including the local authorities in a way that builds collaboration and bridges among us. This way of treating people, of including people, and of solving problems was absent before. Moreover, our Association is called ‘Hope’. This is also a contribution of our Commission.”
Haskovo Commission Member

7. **Winning the confidence of the municipalities and establishing positive relationships with the local authorities.** Repeatedly, the credibility of Commissions with the local community and municipality was seen as its key asset and basis for it to promote interethnic and community dialogues. The Commissioners were able to sustain these relationships through several national elections over the course of the project as well as elections at the municipal level. The project is non-partisan in its approach and

has worked hard to build trust at the municipal level regardless of which political party is in power. The Commissions are a valuable resource for social care, local authorities and municipalities.

8. **The preparation of a two volume edition of the history of the project** which is intended to provide publicity to the project and visibility to the idea of inclusion and participation in a multi-ethnic democracy. The book is expected to be available this year.
9. **Council of Europe recognition.** The Council of Europe has selected Pazardjik and Velingrad as model communities to participate in the Project of the Council for Cultural Cooperation entitled “Education for Democratic Citizenship.”

10. **Conference requests.** CDR Associates has been invited to submit a proposal to make a presentation describing the Project to Institutionalize Multiethnic Participation and Democratic Decision Making in Bulgaria at the annual SPIDR (Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution) Conference in 1999. CDR has presented our work in Bulgaria at the annual CDR Practitioners Conference conducted in January 1999.

11. **Mott Assessment Project.** The Mott Foundation contracted with CDR Associates to conduct an extensive assessment of Foundation projects related to ethnic conflict resolution in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and the Transcaucasus. CDR was selected for this assignment in part because of its work and experience working in Bulgaria.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Life is lived forward, but understood backward.” Soren Kierkegaard

An impressive range of Commission activities, accomplishments, challenges and difficulties provides the raw material from which to extract lessons of potential value to NGOs, governments, and funders interested in bringing democracy and civil society to societies undergoing transition. Several important observations emerged from our work in Bulgaria. They are offered below.

1. **Think globally, act locally**—certainly away from the capital. A critical success factor is the extent to which the project operated away from the capital and the national political scene, in the communities and the neighborhoods where ethnic groups must learn to live together. This strategy reflected a consistent message we heard from everyone with whom we

worked, including our Bulgarian Partners, the US Embassy, USIA, the Peace Corps, and other NGOs. They advised us that in Bulgaria real progress and a significant difference can be made most effectively at the local level.

2. **Multi-focused interventions working across sectors are more powerful.** The Commissions as individual entities and as a network derived influence and power in part because they operated at multiple levels (local, regional, and national) to promote interethnic dialogue and democratic decision making and because they could operate across the governmental, community, and the NGO sectors. Working with municipalities and communities on a series of diverse interventions was synergistic. Addressing conflicts and problems at different levels made the project more credible and powerful.

3. **There is no cookie cutter approach that applies across all communities and cultures.** No one approach can be replicated to meet the needs of diverse communities, cultures, histories, and situations. The Commission in one village cannot exactly resemble a Commission elsewhere. In fact, if the goal is to develop multiethnic participation and democratic decision making, the approach may not be Commissions at all. What made the Commission structure work in a majority of our sites was the extent to which the organization of the work and the project activities were built around the needs of that particular community. One of the reasons for the difficulties encountered in establishing the Ichtiman and the Stara Zagora Commissions is related to not having an intimate sense of the character of either place. We didn't know the community and its needs and idiosyncrasies in the same way we knew and understood the original sites. Perhaps we tried too much to apply too similar an approach to locations that needed a different shoe size and style.
4. **Be students of our Partners.** Our Partners brought a wealth of experience and knowledge of the context and the local needs. They had a very clear sense of what kind of a vision or strategy would be acceptable in Bulgaria. We had to listen carefully, learn from them, and not simply proceed with some naïve, North American scheme. We had to slow down and refrain from pushing our agenda and our training. Listening to what they think they need works better and results in a superior product. Furthermore, jointly designing and implementing a project contributes to mutual ownership and procedures that are more sensitive and

appropriate to local situations, problems, and cultures.

5. **We are not primarily trainers, facilitators, or mediators**—we are catalysts, vision coaches, constructive critiquers and feedbackers, sources of hope, accountability figures and of course we have money. Our Partners looked to us more for inspiration than direction. They proudly shared their accomplishments with us and needed to have a sense that someone from the outside understood and knew what they were doing. They recognized our role was important but limited. What we had to offer were our good intentions, our compassion, but they reminded us that at the end of the day any nation or social group has to solve its own problems. We demonstrated a sincere wish to help. We formulated ideas, found resources, and created opportunities. We looked for dialogues, helped them see and seize opportunities, and showed them where something was possible. We were flexible. We brought lessons from elsewhere—from our own experience and from other places we had worked in the world. We brought people together and looked for what unites not separates us. We brought a passion and a desire and caring to our work. But our Bulgarian Partners had to discover and create their own models of work based on their own approach. *“Our colleagues from the U.S. and their visits were most important...to get out into the community, to share the pains of the people, even though the people knew nothing could be changed immediately. CDR brought a good memory and a wish to help.”* In speaking of CDR and our role, our colleague and Partner Rumen Valchev put it this way, *“Distance, language barriers, lack of permanent possibilities for contact—all these factors make it difficult for them to*

be equal Partners in the concrete developments and dialogue. But at the same time, they could be perfectly helpful as advisers, as participants in the dialogue over the development of the projects as a whole, as people with different ideas and enormous experience, as people to present different models and solutions from other social realities. In fact, the project established a model of international cooperation over the ideas of intercultural understanding.” But we had to take much more of a back seat, behind the scenes role than we were used to and that was difficult for us, initially.

6. **Our Bulgarian Partners wanted expertise that we did not come to share or even know we had** (about social security, welfare, legal services, sustainability, etc.) We realized talking about these topics from our experience was another opportunity to catalyze a dialogue among representatives from different groups... plus our substantive knowledge gave us credibility.
7. **Importance of procedural entitlement, culture of accountability and structures for cross cultural communication and conflict resolution.** The Commissions are engaged in creating a culture of procedural entitlement and public accountability, in which community members have a constructive means for making their vital interests known and public officials are accountable to the citizens they serve. Through the Commissions, minority communities have begun to recognize and exercise their right to be heard and public officials have begun to understand the need to be held accountable for the decisions they are making and for the ways in which they make them. The Commissions are also helping social institutions to involve representatives of

minority groups in decisions that affect their lives.

8. **Go with your Partner**—with all their foibles. Stay out of their internal politics. While we never fully understood all the internal workings and dynamics among our Partners, we were really lucky to have the Partners that we did. We realized that good relations among the Partner groups were critical to the effectiveness of the project. These relationships were based on trust, respect, common values, and a shared vision and this helped the project function effectively. In our case, extremely positive and meaningful organizational and interpersonal relations developed with the Director, Project Managers, and Coordinators. This relationship can never be taken for granted and requires a negotiation and nurturing of sorts that is ongoing.
9. **Everything takes longer.** Project development and the evolution of the local Commissions is a very slow process. In order to establish effective structures that promote civil society and democracy, we needed several years. During this period many tasks were occurring simultaneously, sometimes more accidentally than strategically. At the community level, convening activities explored whether a project was feasible. At the same time it was important to initiate working relationships with the local authorities. Building credibility for the Commissions, becoming known among the local community, beginning the realization of local projects, and bringing the first tangible results were critical tasks that were ongoing. Such activities were even more difficult in an environment of severe economic and political changes. It is particularly difficult to plan and anti-

pate how future events will unfold in such a fluid environment.

10. **Getting it (the project idea—local democracy and civil society, Bulgarian style; procedural entitlement; collaborative advocacy; institutionalizing participation of minorities in defining and resolving their problems; the strength and importance of democracy, etc.; understanding how to implement it given the local realities; discovering what people really need) was the hardest part**—once people (including us) got it, they became really committed and things started to happen. *“We had no notion of multicultural cooperation. We had no experience with it in the past. Over time, multilevel, multiethnic contacts and relationships have developed. We see the richness in our diversity with different people bringing different abilities and skills. I do this public work in my free time and as a volunteer I have received great benefit from making a differences in the lives of others and in my community.”* Pazardjik Commission Member.

11. **External events were more powerful than anything we could do at times.** The social and political environment which offered a deeper context for our work, significantly changed in January 1997, a date that marked the end of the neo-communist rule of Bulgaria. These events and the impacts at the local level promoted a different form and spirit of democracy than anything we had experienced previously. Changes at the national level quickly permeated through local authorities and their relationships toward the established Commissions. There was a new kind of openness in Bulgarian society, as a whole, toward the problems of intercultural and interethnic cooperation. This openness has been

expressed in a variety of ways by the media, the local social agencies, police, social care and the labor office. The Commissions gained significant support from the local authorities after these changes and it made our work more easily accepted and appreciated.

12. **Training is valuable if used strategically.** Training played a significant role in the project because it was closely linked to project objectives. Without being trained to effectively participate in the processes of intercultural dialogue—without such formative efforts—the idea of dialogue and understanding would have had much less of a chance for success. Training was focused on local problems and needs identified by the participants themselves. Training can sometimes be overused as an approach to building local capacity. Other times training may be inadequately contextualized to the local circumstances, delivered to the wrong people or presented at a time when participants are not ready to use the skills being taught. What was important to the project was the way in which the training was strategically integrated into the overall mission of the project and the extent to which the training model was really a Bulgarian approach, developed for Bulgarians by Bulgarians.

The style of the training (e.g., participatory, dialogic, democratic, experiential) provided by our Bulgarian colleagues was one of the biggest lessons of all. As most individuals in the region had experienced a fairly rigid education where the teacher is thought to have all the information, participants found it tremendously invigorating and empowering to engage in genuine dialogue where they have to develop their own answers. Interactive training has been one of the best ways to

model both the values and procedures of participatory decision making and conflict management.

13. Crucial to the success of such local projects is the relationship with the municipalities and local authorities.

For an organization to flourish in this field of work, it is not just a matter of receiving funds. The critical support of local authorities and the municipality is key. Their resistance, hostility or indifference toward the project and the ideas of intercultural understanding can block the future development of similar projects. *“We now know with the local authorities there are no viable solutions but we know how to educate them and how to press them in a friendly way to obtain their cooperation.”* Commission Member

14. Role of young people. We underestimated to some degree the work with the young people. Possibilities for change

are more limited with older adults. Project like this should pay attention to recruiting young people. After all, they are the actors most likely to change in personal and social dimensions.

15. Material support makes a significant difference in projects like this one, especially given the difficulty of finding committed volunteers from the communities who are often living on the edge of misery and cannot afford to volunteer much of their time. For them, material support is not simply a stimulus but a life necessity. We would have had much more difficulty finding excellent, committed, multicultural coordination teams if there had not been funds available for their work.

FUTURE PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS

“We realize now we cannot stop. Getting together with local people and trying together to solve problems has been meaningful. We meet on the street, stop, talk, and are friends. There are no divisions.”

Lilly, Haskovo Commission Member

In the October 1998 Planning and Evaluation meeting held in Primorsko, a seaside village located on the coast of the Black Sea, Commission members and Project staff discussed their future. Additionally, CDR had individual discussions with each of the Commissions and met with the coordinators for an in-service that focused on fundraising, grant writing and sustainability strategies. A summary of future steps is presented below:

1. Further development of each Commission.

- Creating a sustainability plan
- Developing a more effective division of labor within the Commissions to coordinate Commission projects and activities
- Expanding the role of the Consultation Centers in the community
- Training new Commission members, partner organizations and youth Commission members
- Building relationships with the broader community and the political sector
- Creating long-term agreements with the local authorities that include not

only an agreement to cooperate but provide for in-kind or other material resources for the Commissions, as well

- Broadening the impact of the Commission through implementing new projects, recruiting new volunteers, etc.
- Looking for additional resources and support from the community and attracting small grants from national competitions

2. Strengthening horizontal links between the Commissions.

Formalizing the establishment the Association of Commissions for Intercultural Understanding. The Association will provide two critical functions: 1) coordinating the efforts of the local structures in the field of training, joint project activities and grant writing for project development; and 2) lobbying and coalition building at a national and regional level to influence relevant policies and support local or national actions.

3. Establishing commissions for intercultural understanding in the smaller sites around the initial Commissions.

The initiation of such Commissions is in keeping with the new regionalization scheme for the country. This arrangement will position the Commissions more advantageously for coordination and planning future activities with the regional authorities, who will be key players as a result of the reorganization.

4. Utilizing the Commission structure as an implementation strategy for the new Bulgarian ethnic policy.

In September, 1998, the government formulated a new ethnic policy focused on the social integration of minorities without suppressing

their cultural identity. This policy provides new opportunities for the Commissions in several arenas:

- Building intercultural understanding; promoting participation of multiethnic groups in raising and addressing community problems; strengthening democracy and civil society at the grass roots level
- Implementing a proven intercultural training strategy to prepare different social actors in the intercultural field
- Refining and implementing a successful training for trainers approach
- Convening or participating in dialogues at the national level related to the new Bulgarian ethnic policy. A national dialogue might explore how to ensure minorities an equal place as partners in the government of the country; or how to include minorities in decisions that affect them at the local, regional and national level.

5. Establishing youth structures for intercultural understanding.

- Developing recruitment and retention strategies for involving young people as volunteers and activists in the Commissions
- Supporting through technical assistance, training, etc., the development of national or regional youth organizations for intercultural dialogue
- Developing a university course for young people involved in intercultural activities

6. Introducing a systems approach to commission work at the regional and national level.

- Involve Commission members as representatives in several large national projects or dialogues that are

looking at systems change approaches to improve intercultural understanding and to promote and increase multi-cultural participation

- Implement Commission initiatives that have been successful at the local level on a national or regional basis. The school attendance project, consulting centers, training for trainers in intercultural understanding and dialogue, and the project for education and training of young social activists are examples that could be appropriate to introduce on a much wider basis.

involvement in international projects and on their ability to raise funding from international foundations and governments. New Commission initiatives such as youth Commissions, institutional support for the association of Commissions, establishing community school boards for the schools with predominantly Roma students, etc., cannot be accomplished without financial support.

7. Linking commissions to international projects and funding. The future of the Commissions depends in part on their

APPENDICES

Photographs

Report on Action Evaluation of the Stara Zagora Multi-Ethnic Commission, Bulgaria

Krassi's Poem

*We TRUST each other
and believe in MULTICULTURAL COOPERATION
Our shared HOPE is that the FUTURE of human relationships
Is in UNDERSTANDING each other*