Peace Education as a Democratizing Process[1]

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the dynamics of implementing an internationally-funded peace education project at the local level. Drawing on the author's personal experience as Albanian National Coordinator for the Peace and Disarmament Education Program, a project of the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs, and the Hague Appeal for Peace, the article evaluates the impact, challenges, and lessons learned at each stage of project design and implementation.

In this article, I seek to evaluate the impact of foreign assistance in a pilot peace education project in Albania. I draw mainly on my experience as a co-developer of the project proposal, and later on as the national coordinator of the project. After clarifying my role and how peace education relates to democratization processes in Albania, I will trace the development and implementation of the project. I will then discuss the impact and challenges of the project, and reflect on the lessons learned. While this was a peace and disarmament project, most of the local work involved some form of democracy building in schools, as well as in school curricula. Contrary to many critiques about international intervention in the Balkans, this project did make a difference at

the local level by providing spaces and procedures for local people to voice their concerns.

Background: Peace Education and Albania

The Peace and Disarmament Education Project (PDEP) was a local-international partnership to promote democratic social change that operated in Albania between 2003 and 2005. The UN Department for Disarmament Affairs (UN DDA) collaborated with the Hague Appeal for Peace (HAP), an international NGO that works in promoting peace education globally, to initiate and support school-based peace and disarmament education programs in four countries with recent histories of violence: Peru, Cambodia, Niger and Albania. Its goal was "to contribute to the transformation from cultures of violence into cultures of peace" (IPP 2002: 8). Conceived as complementing approaches to combatants —including for example participatory weapons collection programs (Weiss 2005: 8)—PDEP was designed to address longer-term challenges, and sought to bring about "demilitarization of mindsets and the reduction of the level of violence —especially gun violence— among young people in selected communities in four host nations" (IPP 2002: 8). An obvious locus for the activities was schools, and PDEP's specific objectives started with curriculum development and teacher training as a basis for introducing peace education programs into the national education system, with the goal of ultimately spreading principles of non-violence, dialogue and civic participation in the broader community (IPP 2002: 9-10).

Peace education is seen as an integral element of the promotion of a culture of peace, defined by the UN as "a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiations among individuals, groups and nations" (Dhanapala 2005: 12). The UN DDA/HAP project was guided by the assumption that changes in attitude, awareness and skills are necessary for the physical disarmament to be successful (Burkes 2005: 22; see also Reardon 2005). To bring about such change, UN orthodoxy supports partnerships with northern NGOS (like HAP) and also local institutions and organizations. In the field of education, in particular, UN agencies stress the importance of participatory educational methods, so that pupils learn *"how* to think about disarmament, rather than *what* to think about it" (UNESCO 1980: 5).

Albania represented multiple challenges for this vision. One of the poorest countries in Europe, Albania's post-Cold war era had been marked by political

and financial instability. After the collapse of unregulated pyramid savings schemes, the civil unrest of 1997 left 2000 civilians dead, the country flooded with illegal weapons looted from armories, and the state trying desperately to rebuild legitimacy (Vickers and Pettifer 1997). Among the discredited institutions was the education system: schools had been characterized by authoritarian patriarchal structure that often violated the basic human rights of the pupils, and the state lacked the resources to fund effective reform from within. Additionally, the country is often viewed as still exhibiting 'gun culture' as a residue of the traditional *kanun*, a body of customary laws that guided Albanian mountaineers for centuries (Schwandner-Sievers and Cattaneo 2005).

Project Development (1): First Steps

The planned implementation of the project is summarized in a detailed account authored by HAP's pedagogical coordinator (Burkes 2005: 19-23; see also Veritas 2005). At the heart of the approach was a commitment to shared process and locally contextual strategies, as the international coordinators wanted to stress the local ownership of the project, notwithstanding its initial origin from the desks of foreign NGOs and the UN in New York City (Weiss 2005: 8). Prior to developing curricula, then, the project set out to carry out a needs assessment, and develop a community-based team to lead the project. With these goals in mind, Hague Appeal for Peace and United Nations representatives came to Tirana, Albania's capital city, for a needs assessment in early 2002, funded by the UN Foundation. After visiting various UN agencies and the Ministry of Education, and further discussions with the UN office in Albania, the international coordinators took a preliminary decision to implement the peace education project in two of the poorest districts, Gramsh and Shkodra. Gramsh, a town that produced weapons during the communist era, had been the initial site for the UNDP weapon collection program, and Shkodra, the biggest town in the North, had recently been added, so the projected peace education program would directly build on ongoing efforts in these locations. On brief visits to both districts, the HAP team met with community leaders, mayors, school principals, NGO representatives, teachers, and some pupils. The HAP pedagogical coordinator, Betty Burkes listened to their various ideas, and sought to incorporate their perspectives into the plan of action. She and the other international coordinators identified local support for peace, community building, local participation and gender equity, and left with a sense of commitment to the Gramsh and Shkodra communities.

On the day before departure, they also recruited a local partner to develop the project further; me. Because I was involved in various international peace networks, the President of Hague Appeal for Peace had contacted me to serve as translator and cultural guide during the visit. Working in that capacity, I was impressed by the energy and enthusiasm in the local communities we visited, and by the openness of the HAP approach, exemplified in Betty Burkes' empathetic listening style and lack of preconceived notions of what needed to be done. In the course of the needs assessment visit I saw that the team and the project shared my core values, and we developed mutual trust. When they offered me the opportunity to play a significant role going forward, I was of course pleased and —as this article makes obvious— accepted the job.

Outside-in: Analysis and Experience

The fact that I was a part of the process that this article seeks to analyze demands further discussion. I had returned to Albania in 2001 after five years of undergraduate and graduate studies in private American universities: As a student first at the American University in Bulgaria, and subsequently at Notre Dame, I had become convinced of the value of working for peace and democracy in the Balkans. This conviction had an idealist cast, as I came to see myself as a missionary of peace who would struggle against corrupt violent politicians and incompetent international bureaucrats to transform the region. Although the encounter with reality —described further below— made me realize that I had naïvely caricatured both the actors and the challenges, nonetheless my university education did give me some vital skills: a basic knowledge of accounting, familiarity with the major theories of peace, democracy and development, and perhaps most importantly, ability to use not just English but its particular variant that Sampson dubs "project-speak" (Sampson 1996: 123) or the language of proposals. This knowledge helped me considerably in developing the project by translating local issues into fundable priorities.

I thought of myself as international as well as local, a cultural mediator between local concerns and international actors. This manifested itself in interesting ways after I took the job: besides dealing with local stakeholders in rural Albania, I was also asked to represent a kind of 'authentic local voice' at two United Nations conferences in Geneva and New York (Skendaj 2002, 2003). Although I was glad to present the project's strengths, and thus publicize the peace education efforts of both international organizations, I was somewhat frustrated to be seen as a representative of an identity that I saw as

shifting, fluid and contested. I disliked and resisted the implicit essentialization, and tried to make clear that I could not represent any unified or singular 'local' voice, in large part because many other 'locals' disagreed with me. At the same time, my own close friends and colleagues would often comment on my attitudes as too 'liberal' or 'Americanized.'

This particular hybrid position, I hope, partially offsets the qualms that readers might justifiably harbor that an account based on personal experience would be one-sided. In the communities in which I worked, I was an insider because as Albanians we shared the same challenges —ranging from power cuts and bad roads to ineffective national governance and corruption— and could complain about them in a shared language. At the same time I was an outsider not only because conditions in Tirana, my hometown, were much better than in small towns, but also because I enjoyed better working conditions, was paid five times more than the high school teachers I was working with, and had contacts with important NGO and donor networks abroad.[2]

Studies of foreign-funded civil society projects make clear that they sustain the livelihood of civil society entrepreneurs and their families (Mandel 2002; Sampson 1996). This was no exception: the project was for me a source of income that allowed me to build up personal savings and help support both my parents' livelihood and my brother's university studies for a few years. My status also enabled me to gain access to travel visas that were denied to the majority of Albanians. I acknowledge all these elements as shaping the way in which I thought about the project at the time, as well as the way I write about it now and in the past (Skendaj 2005). But my perspective has also been shaped by my scholarly training from before and after my involvement in the project, and informed by the various evaluations of the project I collected over its course.

Project Development (2): Proposal-writing, Problem-solving, Team-building

Appointing me as project developer and, later, national coordinator, was one part of the UN DDA/HAP commitment to participatory approaches. More critical was the commitment to treating ordinary people in local communities not as passive beneficiaries but instead as active agents of change. From the

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[2] Because both my parents are teachers as well, I was acutely aware of the salary differentials.

beginning, the teachers, pupils, directors of cultural centers, and NGO partners helped in the design and implementation of the project. What this meant for me is that during the six-month development phase I spent a lot of time visiting and talking with potential participants and stakeholders. I hiked and socialized with high school students, met in cafes with many teachers and educators, as well as networked with national and local NGOs. In Shkodra, I also relied on a local peace and reconciliation NGO to help me connect to local schools. All this gave me a good sense of local priorities. What I also needed to write the proposal —and did not have, when I first took the job— was at least some form of institutional support in the country: a workspace, a computer, and internet access. We found a temporary solution in collaboration with a US NGO operating in Tirana, Albania's capital city, who hosted me. The working group came up with a draft education program that would touch on the various constituencies — pupils, teachers, educators, community centers. The New York international coordinators also contributed, especially in preparing the budget section of the proposal in an acceptable form. We finished it up, sent it in, and three months later, we learned that it had been approved.

After all the goodwill and cooperative impulses of that first phase, the promise of funding quickly created some new challenges. Again, analysts have pointed out that competition for funding often creates strains amongst NGOs (Sampson 1996: 132): but it was a shock to experience this. It soon transpired that my temporary host, the American NGO in Tirana, wanted to be the national implementer of the project, and tried to bypass the Hague Appeal for Peace and create their own direct relationship with the UN, with me as their agent. The Shkodra NGO, meanwhile, laid claim to sixty percent of the regional funding for their own organizational expenses — thus effectively taking on the role of implementer. HAP, obviously, wanted to preserve their ownership of the program: through a combination of loyalty to HAP, comfort with the degree of independence they granted me, and our shared sense that most of the resources should go to local schools and community centers, I continued to work closely with them. Over an extended period, we broke off relations with both the American and the Shkodra NGO, and several months after we had started to implement the project, I created the Center for Peace and Disarmament Education (CPDE) as a support NGO.[3] Still, our program was known mainly as a UN/HAP partnership. The CPDE was therefore both

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[3] The website for the Center constitutes a valuable archive for the project. <www.cpde.net>.

a proxy actor for international organizations and a source of domestic legitimacy for my work as well.

For my core team, I relied on Western-educated friends that I trusted. An old friend who had graduated from an Italian university became the project assistant and driver. Another friend who had done a Masters in Human Rights in the Netherlands helped with some initial translation as well. This informal network of friends sustained me throughout the project, as I relied on these existing, strong ties to build the project. Such informal networks attract criticism and accusations of patronage or cronyism (Sampson 1996). However, they also address the problem of lack of trust toward strangers that is endemic in post-socialist environments (Howard 2003).

The difference between working with trusted friends and less well-known personnel was brought home by another credibility problem we encountered in one of the communities, where a local partner stole from the project. Because of an ineffective banking system, we usually used cash to organize our activities in the schools and community centers. The local coordinator would usually sign a receipt in order to receive the cash, and then provide a detailed account of how the money was spent with other receipts. In this case, our local coordinator was the principal of one of the two schools we mainly worked with. After a tip-off from a local teacher, we discovered discrepancies between his signed receipts and what he actually spent on local projects. This was an enormous blow, as we had already invested in a debate club, school library, student governance system, and many other projects in the school. I had to dismiss this local coordinator and create an alternative way to work with the same pupils and teachers — recognizing that the risks of this kind of abuse, which would undermine trust in my judgment, and the project as a whole, were ever-present when working with strangers.

A wholly different challenge to our legitimacy —which I did not anticipate— was delay of funding created by UN bureaucracy. The UN Foundation for International Partnership funded the project and disbursed payments to the UN DDA. UN DDA in turn had a memorandum of understanding with HAP, which in turn had memoranda with each country coordinator. Money had to travel along this chain —with signatures required at each point— before reaching projects on the ground. These multiple bureaucratic and accounting demands generated friction in the aid chain, causing funding delays — a problem exacerbated by some organizational issues at the start of the project, which stalled the pledged funding for six months.

Forman and Patrick (2000: 8-9) argue that delays in pledge disbursements undermine the credibility of both donors and actors on the ground. This was

certainly my experience. Initially, I could not pay my colleague and friend who had agreed to be the project assistant/driver. Our partners in the schools kept asking when the project would start. In a cultural context where many people believed that those in power steal funds for themselves, my reputation for honesty came into question. I felt compelled, two months before the funding arrived, to put up my own savings to organize some initial, small-scale activities with the schools. Over the next two years, funding delays happened a few times, and each time I had to borrow from my savings to pay for immediate accounts. While the sums involved were never substantial, it seemed comic, and even absurd, that two major organizations were in debt to me, an Albanian citizen, who was effectively advancing them credit. Anecdotally, I know that other NGOs had to make similar arrangements as well.

On the programming side, by contrast, once the funds did become available, we were able to be nimble and adaptive. Monitoring and audit procedures were of course in place to ensure the quality of the program. But as national coordinator, I enjoyed having the flexibility to respond quickly to local demands. An example of this came in the Gramsh project where we were initiating various cultural, sporting and debating activities to bring kids from different backgrounds together. Some of the urban kids resisted this: talking about the rural kids, they said "Oh, but they smell." I took this as a crude and derogatory slur. Then one day, we went for a visit to the school dormitory where the rural kids were staying, and I was startled by the stench. The dorm director explained the simple facts: because their families lived in mountainous villages, the rural pupils would typically go home every two weeks, but had clean clothes only for one week at most. The dorm director had petitioned the municipality for a washing machine, without success. After a brief discussion, we decided to go ahead and buy a washing machine and detergent for the dormitory, even though this was not in our peace education budget.

I was humbled that my theoretical model of building peace through fostering opportunities for rural-urban interaction had overlooked simple realities: kids playing sports get dirty, and if some of them can not get clean afterwards, it has consequences for social interaction. I realized that for the project to effectively respond to local issues, I could not adhere to a budget planned two years ahead. This is a case where local NGO leaders get caught between the demands of donors and local communities, risking credibility with one as they respond to the other. I was fortunate in my international partners, who generally supported my independent decisions (like the washing machine purchase); their trust in me allowed me, in turn, to get things done locally, energizing support for the project.

The ability to flex and take opportunities as they arose also served us well at an institutional level. A trainer from the Institute for Pedagogical Studies mentioned that since some of our teachers had written and published peace education activities, they might be certified as national trainers in peace education. The certification would increase the teachers' status, allow the Institute to contract them as trainers in other educational settings, and potentially accelerate salary increases. We were able to sponsor their certification. Availability of funding also enabled us to have some of our locally developed curricula adopted at the national level, and to support an effort by the National Institute for Pedagogical Studies —the Institute that has the mandate by the Ministry of Education to produce national curricula— to create a book with extracurricular activities for the whole year. We could not have included these as line items from the start: being able to respond to emergent demands was vital to our reputation for effectiveness.

Implementation Processes and Outcomes

While these improvisations and shifts in priority were important, the core of the program unfolded along the lines we had originally envisaged. Project activities included teacher training to increase quality of teaching; the development of student leaders and government to increase pupils' voice in the school; and debate clubs to foster critical thinking over issues of disarmament, peace, and other pressing local and global issues. The goal was to create synergies between these domains, and also harness other resources, wherever possible.

For example, after delivering some training to the debate clubs in Gramsh and Shkodra, we introduced the topic 'Do Weapons Increase Security?' to both schools. The pupils researched issues around disarmament and weapons spending (using, among other sources, UN websites, that were accessible because our project had supplied computers and software), and discussed them in classes. In parallel, the school newspaper opened up conversations on linked topics among pupils and teachers. Through this collective dialogue, knowledge of issues in peace and disarmament were covered while the skills of critical thinking, public speaking, and problem solving were strengthened.

In all this work, we used methods and technologies developed by Western theorists and practitioners, and sought to localize them. For example, in a summer school 'Toward a Culture of Peace,' students worked through a series of exercises to first envision an ideal outcome, identify the main obstacles

to this vision, and then focus on the personal and community means to overcome the obstacles. The design and implementation of the exercises drew on ideas of the theater of the oppressed (Boal 2002), the concept of group work and open space workshops, and creative performance and role-play.[4] But this 'foreign' approach was directed toward those problems that the participants themselves identified as pressing human security problems in Albanian society, such as trafficking, blood feud, or gender discrimination.

In feedback on the workshop, the chair of the Gramsh student government reported "I suddenly realized that whatever action we do, we have the choice, to stay passive and do nothing like most of the people around us, or to be active in achieving our goals. There is so much that depends on us." We tried to build on that sense of widespread, shared responsibility to offset problems like that created by the corrupt principal mentioned earlier. Over time, we increasingly encouraged schools to propose projects of their own in the field of peace and disarmament education, and provided necessary resources. To make the opportunities as open as possible, we created a mini-project application form. We also trained our principal collaborators in project application and implementation. By so doing, we insured a horizontal and participatory approach to peace education, and prevented dominant individuals from usurping the process.

Through the new system, many of the mini-projects organized during the second year were proposed and implemented by the local pupils and teachers. Our NGO provided funding, as well as training and contacts when needed. For example, teachers and pupils of Shkodra school organized a series of activities titled 'Missionaries of Peace' during which teachers and pupils held meetings with community peacemakers who worked to prevent blood feuds, police representatives and judges. Teachers of the same school organized a creative set of activities titled 'A Passion for Sociology,' in which pupils learned how to create, administer and analyze questionnaires on values, and conduct a survey of the whole student population: the process culminated in a school-wide discussion on understanding values. In a more humanities-focused vein, the teachers and pupils of the Jordan Misja school in Shkodra collected folk songs and games promoting peace in the community, and organized and staged a performance around them for the whole town.

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[4] Theater of the oppressed is a game in which participants act out the social problem until they figure out a solution that is accepted by the group. Open space workshops are informal group meetings that revolve around a set of social issues that participants want to work on. I became aware of both these interactive exercises through various international training for trainers workshops I attended after my university years.

The After-life of a Project: Assessing Impact

International projects to promote peace and democracy have many critics, who have reported on short-termism's ineffectiveness, the hubris of importing simplified models of participation, and the dysfunction of NGOs caused by competition in donor-driven markets (Siani-Davies 2003; Sampson 1996; Cooley and Ron 2002). Our project certainly had its share of problems, including the American and Shkodra NGOs' efforts to co-opt the project, and the corruption in one of our schools. And despite our plans for sustainability, the project stopped after two years. Worn down by NGO work, I applied successfully to graduate school in the USA. The project assistant planned to take over CPDE, and we applied for further funding. It did not materialize, and a few months later, he found a good job in the Albanian government. CPDE exists now only online.

What, then, if any, are the legacies of our work? The evaluations conducted in the course of the project report higher awareness, and increased use of conflict resolution strategies among pupils and teachers involved in the project than before. They expressed enthusiasm for the project, condemned violence and indicated an academic improvement in the participating pupils' written and oral work (Kajsiu 2005). Pupils and teachers were enthusiastic about the project and supported the idea of including peace education in schools and communities. They believed that such education creates social change — and pointed in particular to the introduction of the concept of student government. They expressed optimism for a future in which weapons played no part on local life, and clear commitment to continue peace education work.[5]

These findings, of course, are hardly surprising. The independent evaluation was commissioned by HAP and UN DDA, to address or forestall criticisms over accountability and effectiveness. The evaluators followed good practice of conducting baseline, mid-term and final evaluations. Yet this does not alter the reality that evaluators also have vested interests in the outcomes of evaluations: they rely on the people whose programs they evaluate for their future business, and are aware that negative evaluations are not necessarily sought or welcomed. Down the aid chain, the pupils and teachers in the project were beneficiaries of the project activities and funding, and so were not disposed to provide negative feedback. Funding constraints limited the evaluation surveys and interviews to the schools and communities in

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[5] See the full evaluations online at <http://cpde.net/presskits/evaluations-en.php>. Accessed 3 December 2008.

which the project was being implemented, and ruled out including 'control' communities. Beyond this, education projects pose particular impact evaluation challenges, as the social changes envisaged may take years to emerge, and again, international agencies rarely maintain their interest beyond the short-term.

From the beginning, I viewed the external evaluations as legitimacy-enhancing devices, rather than knowledge-producing investigations. I relied more on semi-formal and informal discussions with teachers and pupils, and also looked for longer-term, incremental signs of change. After each workshop, for example, we would ask a few questions about what went right or wrong, and what could be improved. But beyond that, I paid attention to testimony that was less obvious. When some teachers started complaining that students were demanding their rights in school decision-making, I took it as evidence of a growing sense of student empowerment, and opportunity for voice. After we subcontracted the national debating NGO to create a debate team in Gramsh, results showed up in different domains over an extended period. Some of the Gramsh debaters won prizes in later national debate competitions and by the second year of the project, students were organizing activities of their own: debates, theater performances, exhibitions and so on. With teachers, the project contributed to an intangible sense of professional pride that was only partly measurable by their enthusiasm for certification and greater recognition. It surfaced for me when one teacher who had been skeptical at the outset thanked us: "We did not believe you in the beginning when we first met," he said "but now we do."

The clearest signs of our accomplishment, though, are still emerging. Three years after the end of the project, I still keep in touch with many pupils and teachers. Some of the best pupils have gone abroad to study in Italy, France, and Russia. I have talked with some of them, and they plan to return and create more change in Albania. The hardware that we bought for the schools and community centers —computers, sound systems, sports equipment— is still in use by the teachers and local state institutions, and the teachers with whom we collaborated are still hard at work. Many of them tell me they are nostalgic about the project.

I am less confident about the project's impact on broader country-wide processes of disarmament or democratization. Now that the Albanian government wants to enter NATO, there is little public debate about the costs and benefits of this decision. While we promoted critical thinking and more participation in some schools and community centers, how will this translate into government accountability on a national level? Even if our group of

students and teachers experimented with democratic decision-making, will this translate in the long term into less fraudulent elections, or a more informed citizenry in general? While peace education became part of the national curriculum through the extracurricular activities manual, will it remain part of the educational curricula in the midst of rapid changes in the education system in Albania? I do not know the answers to these questions, nor am I certain when and how one might expect to get answers.

Overall, my field experience made me question many of the platitudes that often get recycled in development work. I am skeptical of top-down social engineering of the type criticized persuasively by James Scott (1988), and share his view that massive social engineering and intervention can cause immense harm. At the same time, current participatory models that emphasize local agency may romanticize, essentialize, and uncritically condone corrupt local practices (Chambers 1997; Cooke and Kothari 2001). The key lessons I learned from the project was the importance of listening and being open to learning from all possible sources; in this case, local Albanian, international and also cross-national, from the projects in Cambodia, Niger and Peru (Levitas 2005).

Building relationships with local communities takes time, and carries costs, but if done mindfully, and without rigid demands, deadlines, and restrictions imposed from outside, produces the best results on the ground. Where tensions arise between donor priorities and budgets and genuine local needs, my own experience suggests that changing the budget to fit the local demand contributes to success. I remain skeptical about larger impacts: but as pupils and teachers continue to engage in participatory activities such as debating peace and human rights, writing critical articles in school newspapers, and teaching each other, my hope is that small changes will accumulate mass and velocity, and widen throughout schools, communities and the country.

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