

SHAPING PEACEFUL CHANGE

A Field Report on Building Civil Society in Macedonia

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DEMOCRACY NETWORK PROGRAM, MACEDONIA

In 2001, against a backdrop of civil war, a number of communities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Republic of Macedonia showed that it is possible for people of diverse backgrounds and opinions to come together around shared concerns, work toward common goals, and shape peaceful change for a brighter future.

For example, in Kumanovo, a northern town in the hottest of 2001's conflict zones, volunteers from a local environmental NGO—ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, and Turks working together—continued their project of cleaning up roadside trash, even as heavy fighting continued nearby. As the conflict faded, the NGO joined a coalition effort to promote lasting solutions for solid waste disposal across Macedonia.

The story of Kumanovo's ecological volunteers is one of nine that this publication tells. All are drawn from the experience of the Democracy Network Program, a USAID-funded initiative begun in 1995 in Macedonia by the **Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC)**, an American NGO with an office in Skopje.

To help develop citizen participation in democracy, ISC provides grants, training, and technical assistance that strengthen NGOs working for the public benefit on local, regional, and national issues. ISC continues to build the capacities of a smaller, selected group of 23 NGOs that can be leaders for the sector.

ISC also carries out partnership projects with 11 communities across Macedonia. These community action projects engage diverse citizens in building priorities and strategies for low-cost, practical means of solving urgent local problems. The projects bring together local NGOs, government officials, businesses, and many community volunteers to achieve real results, while learning to work together in new ways.

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LOCAL WORK FOR LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Within site of fighting during the 2001 civil war, volunteers for the NGO "Flora" continued to clean village roadsides in northern Macedonia. Above, volunteer Milorad Grozdanovski, a school custodian, brings his tractor and trailer to a collection site as a peacekeeper truck passes.

FLORA, KUMANOVO

Much of Macedonia's picturesque countryside is marred by plastic trash. The nation has only one modern, protected landfill, so elsewhere dozens of roadside dumps lie open to the winds, letting plastic bags and bottles blow through villages and across fields.

In one northern town and several nearby villages, a group of volunteers—ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, and Turks together—decided to do something. The breakout of war did not stop them. The need to make changes in public structures, to solve this problem for the long term, has only energized them.

"We have very strong enthusiasm," says Rami Emini, a government market inspector who is president of the organization, *Flora*.

Formed four years ago, the group was first concerned with water pollution in the villages around the northern town of Kumanovo. As elsewhere in Macedonia, these villages depend on wells, often near garbage dumps that contaminate the water. Municipal solid waste utilities serve only cities and larger towns; the villages have no trash pickup, and many town residents dump garbage in villages to avoid the fees charged by the utilities.

"This is a problem in the whole society—in the structure of the society, not in the citizens," says Emini. "All the citizens have the same idea: to be clean."

"WE MUST HELP EACH OTHER"

When the NGO organizes cleanups of dumps and roadside trash, as it does virtually every weekend, ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, and Turks work together, and all four ethnic groups are represented on Flora's board.

"To see the area clean, we must help each other," says Flora's secretary Milorad Grozdanovski, a school custodian. "Some people say, 'I have a tractor, but I don't have any petrol.' I say, 'I will give you petrol!'"

Using members' wagons and tractors, Flora has cleaned more than 65 area dumps and disposal sites. In its project supported by ISC, members collected trash alongside the main road in and out of Romanovce, a mixed-ethnic village outside Kumanovo. With more than 100 volunteers, they also covered the village's big central dump, leveled and planted the ground, and created a children's football field. The work took a year.

When ethnic hostilities broke out in early 2001, Flora's work stopped for a few weeks. Then, within sight and sound of heavy fighting in neighboring villages, the volunteers went back to work.

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Emini shrugs. “We continued working together because we are living together,” he explains.

Throughout the conflict, Romanovce stayed peaceful. Flora continues to promote cleaner yards and streets, and to provide monthly school classes on ecological awareness. “This has a very positive influence,” says member and teacher Ridvan Avdiu.

“WE WILL SEE THEM WHEN THEY ARE GROWN”

Meanwhile, Flora joined an ISC-assisted coalition of five NGOs seeking long-term solutions to the solid waste problem. The initiative promotes public awareness and recycling; in the Kumanovo region, it developed an agreement among 10 municipalities to create a regional landfill. The NGOs also advocate for proposed legislation that would permit competition in solid waste collection.

“If this new law comes into force, this will bring a great change,” says Emini. Flora’s leadership believes competition for trash pickup will improve and extend these serv-

ices—and the NGO has developed a plan to create a local collection business for the Kumanovo villages, starting in Romanovce.

“If we do this, we won’t need foreign donors to sustain us, because we will have sustainability,” Emini says. “We want to have an ongoing process that will go towards a clean village. We didn’t want to work for a year and then stop.”

In August, as the fighting eased, “we were giving people trees to plant,” he recalls. “One person from another church came here and said, ‘Are you giving trees to both churches?’ We said, ‘Yes, we are giving to Orthodox churches and to mosques.’

“He asked for 10 trees. We gave him 50. And we said, ‘We will see them when they are grown.’”

In the village of Romanovce, about 100 multi-ethnic volunteers with the NGO Flora spent a year turning an unsightly, unhealthy garbage dump in the village center into this new football field for local children. Posing proudly after achieving their goals are Flora members, including its president, Rami Emini (third from left).



A COMMUNITY TAKES THE INITIATIVE

“People were asking, ‘Who are these people building their sewer system when there is a war going on?’”

DESHAT, DEBAR

A two-hour drive from Skopje through high mountain ravines reaches Debar, an ancient community that looks across a blue-green alpine lake at Albania. As old as the second century BC, Debar once prospered on a regional trade route—but the modern era has left it isolated, with about 5,000 of its 18,000 people unemployed.

Even so, when a partnership project supported by ISC developed a detailed plan for addressing Debar’s environmental problems, townspeople not only supported it—they donated a portion of their salaries to fund one of its first actions.

Debar had an overloaded wastewater system that also gathered stormwater, and flooded local homes during heavy rains. Installing separate stormwater piping was among the priorities outlined in the environmental action plan, whose development was coordinated by the local environmental NGO *Deshat*.

After the plan was published, citizens agreed in a referendum to devote two percent of all local salaries to funding the new pipeline. In

2001, Debar built 800 meters of pipeline. Local homes no longer flood.

“When there was fighting in the mountains, we were buying and transporting pipes,” recalls Bardhyl Kerishta, director of the local waste collection utility and a partner in the planning project. “People were asking, ‘Who are these people building their sewer system when there is a war going on?’ But the need for our project was greater.”

“THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING”

The action plan continues to guide local investment in cleaning up the town, making it more attractive for the economic development Debar needs. The project paid to install 34 new outdoor waste containers—and the waste utility has since observed that the areas with new containers are being kept much cleaner.

“This gives us motivation to increase the numbers of new waste containers, because we can see they really help us provide better services,” Kerishta says.

“As a municipality, we will provide a number of smaller waste bins, to be distributed around town,” adds Mayor Imer Ollogu.

In one highrise neighborhood with new waste containers, residents have followed up by planting trees at their own expense. “It looks very nice—and other citizens are doing the same,” says resident Munir Pacuku.

Project volunteers are now working to create a regional landfill, a recycling program, and a citizens’ committee in local government.

“The vision in the action plan is for 20 years,” says Fatmir Alili, chairman of the project’s technical committee. “This is just the beginning.”

In Debar, a city close to the Albanian border, a local environmental action project led to the placement of 34 new public waste containers to improve the cleanliness of neighborhoods. In this residential area, neighbors say the containers have made such a difference that they are now planting trees—and plan to create a children’s park alongside this basketball court.



OPENING WORLDS BEYOND SILENCE

ASSOCIATION OF DEAF AND PARTLY DEAF, SKOPJE



Denis Ploca (right), listens to fellow student Metodija Zekmanov at the new computer education center of the Association of Deaf and Partly Deaf in Skopje, as Project Coordinator Ana Momirovska looks on.

Denis Ploca is a bright-eyed 15-year-old whose strong emotions come through his hands.

“We used to go into town, and we would watch young people in Internet clubs using computers,” Denis says, speaking in sign language, because he is deaf. “And we didn’t know how to do that—so we felt frustrated.”

Now Denis has a different feeling. Thanks to a project of the Association of Deaf and Partly Deaf in Macedonia, he is one of 90 deaf people who recently completed the first training in computer and Internet skills ever offered to hearing-impaired people in this country.

“I can learn more than before,” Denis says, “speaking” passionately. “I can communicate with other people. I can contact other people—and I see more job opportunities in the future.”

“THIS IS A BIG CHANGE”

One of the oldest NGOs in Macedonia, founded in 1948, the Association of Deaf and Partly Deaf has 18 branches—“so we cover the whole country,” says its general secretary, Gorgi Gruevski. “Our mission is to integrate deaf people in the social life: to present and exercise their human rights, and to improve their education and rehabilitation.”

With financial, technical, and consultant support from ISC and additional funding from the World Bank, the association last year set up and equipped a small computer-learning laboratory in downtown Skopje.

“The problem of deaf people is a communication problem,” explains Project Coordinator Ana Momirovska. “The computers give them possibilities to strengthen their communication skills.

“This is just a start,” she adds. As part of its project, the association successfully advocated to make computer training a part of the curriculum in all Macedonian high schools for the deaf.

To participants in these trainings, there is little question how valuable they can be.

“I learned how to type, to email, and to use Microsoft Word,” says Metodija Zekmanov. “I think that’s most important, to know how to type in Word. I have friends in Greece and Bulgaria—and I want to use email to communicate with them.”

“This is the first time I actually learned how to use computers,” adds Denis Ploca. “This is a big change in my life.”

“Our mission is to integrate deaf people in the social life: to present and exercise their human rights, and to improve their education and rehabilitation.”

“TO BE AN EQUAL CITIZEN”

WELCOME, SKOPJE

TFor the first time, the candidates or their campaign managers in the September 2000 mayoral election gathered for a public candidates’ forum in a mental health facility.

The organizer was the NGO *Dobredojde*, “Welcome.” Formed in 1998, Welcome was the country’s first association to bring mental health professionals together with patients, their families, and volunteers to support the mentally ill and help them reenter society. Several newer NGOs now follow its model.

With a variety of projects and services, Welcome helps patients understand their rights as citizens, and begin learning to live outside state care. So the NGO’s project during the 2000 local elections was a logical, if bold, initiative. Building on an ISC voter-education project, Welcome aimed to inform patients about candidates and the voting process—then to release, on home leave, those who were able to go vote in their own communities.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

This prompted a major public debate. “In the middle of our process, there was a big ‘anti’ campaign in the media,” says Dr. Vlado Ortakov, a psychiatrist and Welcome board member. Critics said the patients—many of whom are routinely granted home leave, when their condition permits—would be dangerous outside the hospital, and could not form realistic political judgment.

“We anticipated this,” Ortakov says. “We know the stigma is very great.” Much of it, he adds, came from mental health professionals committed to the status quo. The press conferences and media interviews given by Welcome members challenged

and informed public opinion. In fact, NGO members now believe the project’s greatest benefit was actually to the general public.

“The resistance diminished. I don’t know to what extent, but it diminished,” Ortakov says.

Staying strictly neutral on politics, Welcome trained volunteers to deliver the workshops on how voting and elections work. Candidates’ forums were held in all three state hospitals; in the capital, all eight mayoral candidates or their campaign managers appeared to present their plans and platforms on mental health.

At first, many patients were nervous about attending the events, but in the end “they were very satisfied,” says Dr. Diana Belevska, Welcome’s president. “This was the first time they had a chance to hear people lay out their plans for the future.”

“I was a little bit surprised,” says one patient, recalling the forum he attended. “We were pleasantly surprised, most of us—that society has not forgotten us.”

The first organization of its kind in Macedonia, “Welcome” is an NGO that includes mental health professionals, patients, volunteers, and patients’ families in mutual cooperation. Sharing a morning at “Club Welcome” in Skopje are, from left: volunteer Jordancho Petkovski, NGO members Janko Stojkovski, Blagoja Andonov, and Gaetan Poseca, psychiatrist Snezana Petrovska-Dimovska, and member Jafer Bagram.

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More than 100 patients traveled home and voted, all without incident. Two months later, at an international conference of disability professionals in Washington, D.C., the Welcome project was recognized as the first time a developing democracy had an organized initiative giving the mentally ill a chance to vote.

"It's a great feeling, to be an equal citizen," says Welcome member Blagoja Andonov.

"We are usually ashamed to talk about our illness. This has been a completely new experience."

"I NOTICE CHANGES IN THEIR LIVES"

At Welcome, members receive professional and legal support, socialize with one another, listen to presentations by experts, and work with volunteers such as Jordancho Petkovski, a young music student.

"I can notice changes in their lives," Petkovski says. "Patients that have been isolated now go out, they date, they have jobs. And they are happy, because they don't depend solely on their families any longer."

"We try to do something—and there is effect," adds Snezana Petrovska-Dimovska, a psychiatrist who is a member of Welcome's executive board. "And that is very satisfying for us."

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CULTIVATING A FARM REGION'S FUTURE

ASSOCIATION OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS, PEHCEVO

In a fertile valley among the timber-clad mountains of eastern Macedonia, the town of Pehcevo is the center of a traditional farming region. Farmers here produce plums, cherries, potatoes, honey, milk, and *malesevsko sirence*, the country's top-priced sheep's cheese. The area has almost no pollution, and its products have a national reputation for cleanliness and high quality.

At the same time, the Pehcevo region is remote and little-developed, and its municipality has no local offices of the central government, which usually provide what services exist for economic development. So an NGO, the Association of Agricultural Producers, came together to fill the gap.

"The idea was to be of service to the agriculturalists, and to get them what information they would need," says Nickolce Stoilkovski, association president.

Below: At his small family farm in Pehcevo, Ljupco Pavlovski (left) shares a light moment with Nikolce Stoilkovski, president of the Organization of Agricultural Producers. The NGO recently helped Pavlovski increase his honey sales by nearly 50 percent.



"At the beginning, we identified the need by conducting an open poll among the farmers. We also organized a few lectures for them. Our idea got sound support. The farmers said this was the first time somebody had wanted to do something for their interests."

FEEDING NEW KNOWLEDGE TO FARMERS

With 84 members, all of them agricultural producers, and training and assistance provided by ISC, the association has become an important resource of information, advice, and help for the region's farm economy. The NGO distributes a bulletin three times each year with information on funding options, new technologies and production methods, government policies and programs for farmers, international assistance, and association events. It also organizes lectures and workshops that feature agricultural experts, and it provides daily consultation and support for farmers, beekeepers, and orchardists.

For example, the NGO recently conducted an experiment, along with the Ministry of Agriculture and with funding from the World Bank, that tried new cutting and pruning methods to increase plum production.



“We have good relations and contacts with the ministries, with foreign and domestic NGOs that work on these issues—and we receive bulletins from all the organizations that work on agriculture,” Stoilkovski says. Area farmers, he adds, “have very good opportunities to use this information.”

When area beekeepers recently sought to organize themselves, the association helped. “They gave us advice on how to be formed and how to build the organization,” says beekeeper Nikolco Velkovski. “We use their services very often.”

ECONOMIC PROMOTION AND PRODUCT PROTECTION

The association also connects different agriculturalists. For example, it was able to inform area plum producers, who depend on bees for pollination, that the safest time to spray their trees is early and late in the day, when bees are not active.

The association is now preparing a study for sustainable development in the region, working with another Pehcevo NGO that has prepared and is implementing a local environmental action plan, with ISC assistance. As a key need, the agricultural association has identified the protection and promotion of this region’s reputation for clean, high-quality farm products.

“This is our biggest opportunity—our environmentally friendly production,” says Stoilkovski. The group is promoting organic agriculture; it is also working with representatives of all area farm producers to develop a new label that will identify and promote farm products from the Pehcevo region.

“In our experience, we saw that the market wants to see where a product comes from, and how it is produced,” Stoilkovski says. The label will also help the public distinguish genuine Pehcevo farm products from those that claim to be, but are not.

One Pehcevo producer who has seen what good labeling can do is Ljupco Pavlovski, whose small local farm has cows, bees, fruits, and cereals.

“This organization helped me to produce a label for my honey,” Pavlovski says. With it, his honey sales were up 40-50 percent last year.

“My father and grandfather were also on this farm,” Pavlovski adds. “So the tradition is continuing.”

In the traditional farming region around Pehcevo in eastern Macedonia, the Organization of Agricultural Producers provides information, training, and advice to a variety of food producers—including beekeepers such as Nikolco Velkovski, shown at top of page tending one of his hives on a steep green hillside.

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At Sveti Nikole's water filtration plant, manager Marjan Davitkov, a co-founder of the NGO Sunrise, talks with organization members Sonja Blazeva and Katarina Zafirova.

CREATING LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

SUNRISE, SVETI NIKOLE

When an NGO called Sunrise began a local environmental action project in its community of Sveti Nikole in 1998, many local people were pessimistic. They didn't believe this dry, north-central region's serious problems with water quality and trash pollution could be solved—and they didn't think local citizens had the power to change the situation.

"People were skeptical," recalls Marjan Davitkov, manager of the local water filtration plant and a Sunrise co-founder. "They didn't believe in the idea."

The idea is a two-year commitment to action planning that so far has been completed in 11 Macedonian communities. ISC supports a local NGO partner in surveying local opinion, recruiting public interest and volunteers, and carrying out the planning process. In Sveti Nikole, Sunrise coordinated the creation and work of two key committees: a citizens' group to set priorities for action, and an experts' panel to analyze priority problems.

Today, Sveti Nikole's 50-page environmental action plan specifies affordable, realistic actions to improve drinking water quantity and quality; reduce water pollution; promote clean, organic food production; plant trees and grow forests; and develop long-term solutions for solid waste.

"THERE ARE BENEFITS TO ALL OF US"

Those actions have begun. The drinking-water plant has new filters, and will get up-to-date technology this year. Eleven illegal landfills have been cleaned up. This year, Sunrise and five other NGOs are carrying out a partnership campaign titled "Sveti Nikole—The Cleanest Town," which aims to educate people, clean public spaces, and raise funds for plantings.

The initiative to promote clean, organic food production is supported by area farmers.

"There are benefits for all of us—because our community will get ecological products that will be healthy to consume, and the farmers will get a better price for their products," says Igor Nikolov of the local cattle breeders' association. "All our members are interested in participating," adds Tase Cvetkov of the crop and produce growers' group.

Overall, Sunrise leaders see a deep change in public attitudes. "When people understood the initiative better, they supported it," says the NGO's president, Vladimir Gilev. Local government is now actively supportive; it has named the project's implementation team, set up to oversee follow-up work on the action plan, as the official municipal body for environmental monitoring and evaluation.

"We now see interest shown by all the people," adds board member and youth-initiative coordinator Katarina Zafirova. "When we invite them, they always come. All the sectors—business, the public, media, local government—feel that they are part of this. They are oriented now to solutions; and when they hear about a local problem, they know immediately whom to contact to get people together. They are now engaged all the time."

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A PARTNERSHIP FOR ONE CITY'S FUTURE

CENTER FOR CIVIC INITIATIVE, PRILEP

The years since 1990 have seen Macedonia's NGO sector grow from precious few to hundreds of organizations—yet, especially on local levels, the very idea of nongovernmental organizations can still be quite new.

In the small, central Macedonian city of Prilep, a busy local NGO called the Center for Civic Initiative (CCI) began in 2000 to help strengthen other NGOs, and has since worked with some 84 local organizations. The center found that local government had almost no understanding of NGOs or how to work with them, and NGOs were just as unfamiliar with local government.

"NGOs could not establish communication with local government—and we were very far from establishing collaboration," says Goran Trasjkoski, the CCI's NGO project coordinator.

During an ISC-supported effort that brought together public officials and 20 key NGOs, CCI staff realized how little the two groups understood each other. "Also, local government was still very closed to NGO needs and activities," says Trasjoski. "This is why we needed something even more concrete and firm."

The staff proposed to Prilep authorities that an information office for NGOs and citizens be opened in the municipal building, staffed by CCI and government representatives. The effort required much persuading: "many meetings, many night calls, daily meetings, and so on," says Trasjoski. "Finally the mayor said, 'Yes.'"

"THIS IS A PARTNERSHIP"

Each week about 20-30 people stop into the new office, says Monika Boceska, who staffs it for the Center for Civic Initiative. "This is a mutual project of CCI and the government; it's a partnership," she says.

During the office's first few months, adds Mayor Sasho Pirganovski, "We managed to come closer to the citizens, to see their problems and their real needs. At the same time, their comments, suggestions, and ideas show the direction towards which the local self-government has to develop in the near future."

The office has created a website, with email addresses of all municipal officials. It continues to learn what NGOs and citizens need, and how to meet those needs.

"This is a tool for NGOs to work more, to be more active," says Marina Boceska of CCI, which also advocates for human rights, runs a youth center, and provides local NGOs with office space and equipment, English and computer classes, and trainings in organizational development.

CCI's own report on the collaboration between itself and the Prilep municipality says its most important outcome is that the project "has painstakingly crafted a model of NGO-local government collaboration that other communities in Macedonia can adopt."

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In Prilep, the Center for Civic Initiative is a busy local NGO that has implemented more than 30 projects on local, national, and international levels. Along with a new information office for NGOs and citizens in the municipal building, the NGO runs a children's center and offers classes, such as this one in English.



BUILDING A PATHWAY THROUGH CONFLICT

MESECINA—THE HUMANITARIAN CHARITABLE ASSOCIATION OF ROMA, GOSTIVAR

When civil war erupted in Macedonia in early 2001, an interethnic NGO collaboration organized within one of the conflict zones by *Mesecina* (“Moon”), the Humanitarian Charitable Association of Roma, was already underway. Later that year, after the conflict ended, the collaboration project, which was supported by an ISC grant, reached its completion—just one month behind schedule.

Active since 1993, the Roma Association advocates for human rights, humanitarian outreach, ecological awareness, and education and opportunity for all marginalized populations. It occupies a modest white building in the center of Gostivar, an Albanian-majority city in northwestern Macedonia. People in Gostivar know this building as “the white house”—partly for its color, but also “probably because we work on building democracy in the community,” reflects Samet Skenderi, information coordinator for the association.

The white house was the focal point of the collaborative project. The Association of Roma engaged 20 NGOs from the Gostivar area in developing a mutual “codex,” or code of conduct. Its title: “Codex of the NGOs for Gostivar and the Gostivar Area for Interethnic Cooperation, Tolerance and Dialogue.”

COLLABORATION IN CRISIS

“We began with 10 public discussions,” Skenderi says. “We talked about different subjects that are important to this community—starting with the connection between interethnic communication, human rights, and resolving and preventing conflicts.”

The discussions built an outline for the codex, which was then drafted at two weekend-long seminars involving all the NGOs. All 20 organizations later signed the code of conduct. Now published, it orients NGO activity in various situations.

For example, the codex says that during a crisis, NGOs “should act to help, support, and protect the citizens that are affected by the crisis itself,” and should cooperate, if possible, with “other NGOs, government, or business organizations.”

“It’s very practical: it provides for very close cooperation and responsibilities for every NGO that has signed it,” says Muhamet Tochi, the Roma group’s coordinator of human-rights and multiethnic projects.

During the process of creating and refining the codex, “there were lots of points of crisis,” Skendari says. “But we made a strategy for continuing. We didn’t put Macedonian and Albanian groups together in one day. The key thing was that we were a neutral group.”

The whole process began with presentations by each NGO to the others. “Personally,” says Tochi, “I think a lot of people had their prejudices removed with that discussion. It’s very important for people not to have prejudice, when working in an NGO—and they did that here.”

The network of area NGOs now links to a network of national NGOs; communication about problems and needs now travel in both directions.

“What we’re doing with the codex is improving communication within NGOs, between them, and with the public,” Skendari adds. “What we’re trying to do is get the NGOs on a higher level in the community. This is not just our project; this is a joint project of 20 NGOs in the Gostivar area.”

MAKING COOPERATION “THE NORM”

“My personal opinion is that by making this codex, and holding the seminars, a general idea was created that interethnic relations in Gostivar are now on a positive level,” observes Nebi Ismaili, treasurer of the Roma Association.

The association itself is open to interethnic membership. It now has 125 Roma, Turkish, Albanian, and Macedonian members, in a city that contains all those groups—but usually in separation from one another. The success of this NGO’s projects clearly has built respect for Roma people in Gostivar.

“But we are not content,” says Tochi, “and we are not saying that Roma people are in the same starting position in the community.

“In every enterprise, there are people who are supporting you and people who are putting you down,” he adds. “The problems have been here a long time. They can’t be solved in a short time. But we are working on them.”

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The conflict of 2001 surrounded the multi-ethnic community of Gostivar, where the Humanitarian Charitable Association of Roma led an interethnic project by 20 organizations to develop a shared NGO code of conduct. Here, Muhamet Tochi (center) coordinator of multiethnic projects for the Roma group, speaks of lessons learned while the group’s treasurer, Nebi Ismaili (left) and its information coordinator, Samet Skenderi, listen.



POSITIVE CHANGE FOR A NEW GENERATION

The council now runs a local youth center where teens learn and practice English, computers, art, journalism, marketing and management, drama, photography, and music—all for free.

COUNCIL FOR PREVENTION OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, KAVADARCI

Among Macedonia's young people, research has shown a sharp increase in criminal behavior—often linked to drug and alcohol abuse—since the country became independent. Today a community-based NGO, having learned how to turn this tide in its own city, is leading an effort to prevent juvenile crime nationwide.

By the mid-1990s, the central Macedonian city of Kavadarci had a serious problem with underage drinkers, school truancy, teen drug use, and juvenile crime. Together with local educators, police attorney Lazar Nanev created the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in 1996, and went to work.

"In cooperation with the local government and the mayor, we started on some activities—public meetings, workshops," Nanev

said. "We started to explain that the problem with young people is really big."

Though it had strong local support, the Kavadarci effort lacked a plan. With ISC assistance, local volunteers developed an action plan that centered, first, on tough coordinated law enforcement—especially against underage drinking—and, second, on providing young people with positive alternatives.

REACHING TEENS BY THE HUNDREDS

At ISC training workshops, council members learned to build their organization and sustain it, to find financial support—"and to manage the projects, not just write the grants," Nanev says. The council now runs a local youth center where teens learn and practice English, computers, art, journalism, marketing and management, drama, photography, and music—all for free. Some 800 young people come each week to the center, which the municipality provides rent free.

Left: Teachers and students join together in an active-learning exercise during an English class offered at "Babylon," the youth center operated by the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in Kavadarci.

The youth center also offers "life skills trainings," helping young people learn healthy ways to cope with stress and problems, says Vladko Mrkev, its only paid staff member. And virtually every weekend, the NGO and local government organize youth sports tournaments.

Follow-up analysis has showed a major drop in juvenile crime in Kavadarci. With further ISC support, the council has now taken its cause nationwide.

In the late 1990s, the Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency organized a collaboration with 15 other NGOs and their local governments, along with the ministries of Justice, Education, and Internal Affairs, social service providers, and experts from the Institute for Sociological and Political Research. Using ideas and input from a public survey of 4,500 young people in the 15 towns, and from a series of public forums, the initiative developed a "National Prevention Action Plan" against juvenile delinquency.

"Our goal was to make a strategic plan for Macedonia, with priorities and actions that should be taken by the relevant institutions in each municipality," Nanev explains.

Young people can learn computer skills, and much else, at the youth center operated by the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in Kavadarci. Each week, some 800 local young people visit the center, where they can also learn about music, art, theatre, photography, journalism, English, marketing and management, and positive life skills.

FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL IMPACT

Issued in 2000, the plan sets out eight priority goals that start with the creation of a national juvenile penal code. In the newest phase of its work, still with ISC funding and other support, the council next led the drafting of such a code, with a series of town meetings for public comment. The draft is now being advanced by a national commission that will bring it before Parliament.

"When we started, we wanted to make something really useful for this community," Nanev sums up. "Now we are working on a national level."

In its direct work with young people, adds Vladko Mrkev, the guiding idea is to "show them respect, and ask them to respect you. Be honest with them. You must be on their level, and be a friend: exchange experiences, and give them your positive example."

Clearly, giving a positive example is just what the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency has done.

"When we started, we wanted to make something really useful for this community. Now we are working on a national level."



TO BUILD A SHARED IDENTITY

ISC Macedonia has sought to help build what is often called civil society. This is the community of organizations, separate from government, that help citizens address problems, make their voices heard, and achieve shared goals.

In a country where ethnic and religious identities have long defined much of society, projects like these help develop a sense of identity that connects people rather than dividing them. When people can work together to solve problems and build opportunity within their city, town, or village—or across a wider area—they also build a sense of civic identity. This is an identity that all members of a community, or a country, can share.

“Personally, I think a lot of people had their prejudices removed with our discussion,” said Muhamet Tochi, coordinator of multi-ethnic projects for Mesecina, a Roma NGO in Gostivar that organized a collaboration among 20 local NGOs, representing all ethnic groups, throughout the 2001 fighting. The collaboration produced a mutual code of conduct for NGOs in the area, which all the groups signed.

Tochi adds, “I was surprised by the openness of all the NGOs, about what was bothering them.” Now, he notes, “we know the different ethnicities. We’re in touch with them.”

TOUCHING THE FUTURE

In each partnership and each community, ISC’s aim is to leave behind strong organizations, models, and energy for continuing positive change. The NGOs and local collaborations supported by the Democracy Network Program have often begun new initiatives and problem-solving partnerships on their own.

For example, the NGO that led Sveti Nikole’s local action campaign now hosts a weekly meeting of young people who want to lead their own ecological projects.

“These young members will be an example for our community, and they will develop our mission among fellow students, parents, and relatives,” says Katarina Zafirova, youth coordinator for the local NGO “Sunrise.”

To inform and inspire young people is to touch the future. This is perhaps the most sustaining achievement of ISC’s work with the people, organizations, and communities across this ancient and beautiful country.

Across Macedonia, a wide range of people are participating in the initiatives developed by NGOs with support from ISC. The cover photos show participants in activities organized by (clockwise from upper left): the Council for Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in Kavadarci, whose youth center draws some 800 young people every week for various activities; the Center for Civic Initiative in Prilep, which provides computer classes and many other services to local citizens and NGOs; “Flora,” which is helping lead the effort to solve Macedonia’s solid waste problem; the Association of Deaf and Partly Deaf, which is providing the nation’s first computer-skills training to hearing-impaired Macedonians; and “Welcome,” an NGO that brings together mental health patients, professionals, and their families.



INSTITUTE for
SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITIES

ISC’s mission is to help communities around the world address environmental, economic, and social challenges to build a better future shaped and shared by all.

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