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## **Too Much Civil Society? Donor-Driven Human Rights NGOs in the Balkans**

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### **Introduction: partnership or dependence?**

Since the first Danish Center for Human Rights anthology on civil society in 1992 (*The Role of Voluntary Associations*), there has been an explosive growth of civil society engagement in human rights.<sup>1</sup> What was once an emerging NGO sector has now fully blossomed. Especially in the years before 1989, the original core of committed, courageous activists had worked alone and had suffered harassment or imprisonment by the authorities. They were isolated from their own societies and existed only by the grudging tolerance of their regimes and with the help of Western assistance. This core of activists have now become essential cogs in 'the human rights industry'. Human Rights is no more simply a set of abstract values which we struggle for. It is now a set of institutions and routinized practices, of which local human rights NGOs are a part. In fact, with the exception of a few rogue states such as Libya or North Korea, human rights organizations of a professional calibre can now be found in every country of the world. Most important among these are the generic human rights groups

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carrying out monitoring of abuses, promotion of civic values, advocacy and education. These core groups are supplemented by the myriad of specific 'profile' organizations that concentrate on the rights of specific vulnerable groups such as women, children, minorities, prisoners, refugees, and the handicapped. The courageous activists who feared 'the knock at the door' from the police now train these same police in codes of conduct and prisoners' rights. Compared to a decade ago, the human rights discourse (much like the Danish Center for Human Rights itself!) has expanded to encompass just about every domain of human activity. Human rights are invoked by illiterate Roma to obtain welfare benefits, by displaced Bosnian Serbs to obtain lost property, and by American presidents about to conduct humanitarian intervention. Forget the post-modernist cant about 'the death of master narratives'. It is unmistakable that Human Rights has in fact become *the* new global master narrative.

This paper discusses the social processes which are both an outcome and a condition for this master narrative. One particular process which has fascinated me is the ongoing relationship between Western human rights actors (NGOs, aid programs, governments, projects) and their local implementing partners, who are often local human rights NGOs. The specific arena I will deal with are the various human rights initiatives and organizations in parts of Southeastern Europe (Romania, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo), where I have worked for a number of years in various capacities: as a researcher on democracy assistance and civil society, as part of various projects on NGO development, and as project appraiser and evaluator. While affiliated with an established university department of social anthropology and as a specialist on the Balkans, I myself am also a part of the human rights industry.

As is the case with NGOs in other parts of the world, Balkan human rights NGOs have been politically supported, financed, trained and monitored by foreign donor organizations. Originally, their activities were confined to exposing the abuses and crimes of the former communist regimes, monitoring elections for fraud or protecting themselves from government or police harassment. Western support was crucial in keeping these groups functioning, and keeping their leaders out of jail. Much has changed since the countries of Southeast Europe became democratized. In the new Balkan democracies, human rights has now become a part of national state policies, at least at the lip service level. Compared to the complaints of the NGOs found in the DCHR's 1992 volume, complaints of weak organizations, inadequate funding, or non-cooperation from the state, the situation in most

Balkan countries is now characterized by a wide range of cooperation between established human rights NGOs and state organs of justice. What were once marginal Balkan human rights NGOs now carry out a range of activities in human rights promotion, education, civic and voter education in schools and communities. They help government draft laws, contribute expert comment on legislation, publish basic human rights documents, support the newly established ombudsman institution, consult for local or foreign clients, train government officials, and contribute to government reports. In several Balkan countries, human rights activists who used to be threatened or intimidated are now on a first name basis with ministers of justice and chiefs of police. They have full social calendars and are invited to government receptions or travel to international conferences. They receive visiting delegations from Strasbourg and Brussels, negotiate with potential donors, attend regional network meetings and hold office hours for local citizens suffering bureaucratic or police abuse. This is true for the human rights scene in Bucharest, Sofia, Tirana, Skopje, Sarajevo, and now even Prishtina and Belgrade.

The evolution of these Balkan human rights NGOs has not been without its difficulties. One of the key problems is their dependence on foreign donors, foreign ideas and foreign organizational support. Insofar as local NGOs in the Balkans (as elsewhere) are still financed by international donors, they must continually adjust their activities to international priorities and to the demands of their donor organizations. The relation between the Danish Centre for Human Rights (renamed in 2003 the Danish Institute for Human Rights/DIHR) and its Balkan partners is no exception to this trend. It is just one case of a general problem of well-meaning Western actors who want to do good, who want to 'build capacity' so that local organizations can become more effective. Although articulated as 'partnership' (the DCHR's 'Project Department' has now been renamed the 'Partnership Department'), these relations contain relations of inequality, which in no way could be characterized as partnership. Partnership connotes an idea of an equal relationship where two parties have equal types of resources and therefore, roughly equal power of each other. Relations between husband and wife in the West are supposed to be partnership; relations between parents and children are not. The opposite of partnership is dependence.

Dependence is characteristic of the human rights industry as it manifests itself in Southeastern Europe. In particular, the flow of funds goes in only one direction: from the north/west to south/east. Evaluation missions go in only one direction as well. And if we

were to look honestly and forthrightly at the kinds of projects developed by local human rights NGOs in the Balkans (and elsewhere), we would find that many of these projects have their inspiration in the concerns of Western donors. This combination of donors' money and priorities taking precedence over local recipients is usually termed 'donor-driven'.

In this sense, one must confront the problem of human rights NGOs that are donor driven, and what precisely this entails. The relationship between donors and recipients is not simply that of active-passive, or of giver-receiver, however. The system is more complex. One could more accurately speak of a chain of donors, since all Western donor organizations administer funds given to them by other, higher donors and are themselves subject to evaluations and restructuring; the DIHR itself, for example, is dependent on the Danish state for its core funding, and then goes out to find other donors as well. This chain of donor-drivenness is thus a hierarchical chain. It is complex, but it is ultimately hierarchical; 'we' up north fund and then evaluate 'them' down south; 'they' do not fund/evaluate 'us'. In any normal setting we would call this a power relationship. For some strange reason, the aid community generally, and human rights aid in particular, calls all this 'partnership'.

The anthropologist Gudrun Dahl (in a paper for the Swedish aid organization Sida), has noted that 'partnership' discourse has a short-term, contractual nature linked to accountability and conditionality; either 'partner' can pull out if their interests are not served; in reality it means that the donor can pull out if they find corruption in the receiving government or if priorities shift. For Dahl, the contract of 'partnership' has replaced the moral obligation known as 'solidarity'. Dahl's point is certainly valid, but in a human rights context it is the missing power dimension which will be my focus here.

Of crucial importance is that the recipient in this power relationship is never powerless. Only the most doctrinaire critics would view the cooperation between Western human rights donors and local Balkan NGOs as simply a 'colonization of the mind', a 'Western hegemonic project', or 'human rights imperialism', to use some of the phrases popular in such circles. Local human rights NGOs have resources which they can use, even if they do not have the money that the Western donor has. They may have the capacity to identify those concepts or ideas capable of generating the needed project funds. This ability of local organizations to discover which discourses can lead to new funds is certainly valuable. Western organizations are aware that new, 'sexy' concepts or practices can generate funds. In trying to diffuse their

human rights their concerns or practices to other places beyond their borders, it is common for the donor organization (or implementing organization) to tell their ‘partners’ down South, ‘what’s hot’. A capable local Balkan human rights organization seeks to learn new things, build capacity and become more effective, regardless of the source. The essential question, however, is whether this relationship, despite the rhetoric of partnership, evolves into a relationship of dependency. In such a dependency situation, capacity-building is the primary activity. Capacity-building is about making local human rights organizations ‘more effective’. The question to be asked, therefore, is ‘more effective at what?’

Let us focus on this relation between partnership and dependence. I propose that we ask a series of questions related to this dependency: To what degree has the international donors’ agenda influenced the local human rights NGOs in their activities? Has dependency on international donors hindered the local NGOs from developing their own strategies and activities? To what degree could the withdrawal of international donors (due to budget cuts or changing priorities) affect the activity of local NGOs? Given the often unstable relationship between Balkan governments and civil society, and in view of these states’ lack of financial resources to support civil society organisations, how will local NGOs be able to achieve sustainability? Will surviving local NGOs simply chase after new sources of funds, jumping onto each new trend? Or do they risk becoming agents of state policy, helping to draft government White Papers and act as government delegates at international human rights conferences? If necessity is the mother of invention, can the NGOs’ continuing search for funds also spur them to develop their capacities? We all know the negative consequences of following the money, but are there unintended *positive* by-products of chasing after project grants?

These questions are related insofar as they reflect the operation of Balkan NGOs within a familiar international aid system of general goals, specific programs and short-term projects. In addressing these questions, I will first discuss the special nature of Balkan human rights NGOs. I will then deal with the process by which relations of partnership and dependence interact, in what I call ‘the world of projects’. Finally, I will reflect on the specific ways in which project life and Western NGO structures have influenced our pursuit of human rights.

### **What are Balkan human rights groups?**

One might think that the ‘field’ of ‘Balkan human rights NGOs’ is a well-delimited sector. In fact, the term ‘human rights NGOs’ is itself problematic, since it may be inclusive or restrictive depending on who defines it. In Bosnia, for example, a large number of displaced persons/refugees are organized into what *they* call human rights NGOs, although we might normally see them as advocacy groups for a specific constituency. Here I will use the term ‘human rights NGOs’ to mean those organizations whose activities are concerned with human rights promotion, monitoring, education, and legislation/rule of law in general. However, it is crucially important to recall that various organizations can enter and exit the human rights field according to specific human rights concerns and state priorities. Two recent examples are trafficking (‘in women’, ‘in children’, ‘in human beings’) and anti-corruption. Both trafficking and corruption can be viewed as human rights problems. The question is: Who does the viewing and under what conditions? More specifically, the views of donors, especially the highly placed donors, have a key effect on how local human rights NGOs act in the Balkans and whether these local organisations remain ‘in the loop’ (of information and funding).

The problematic definition of human rights NGOs also reflects their place within that social sphere known as ‘civil society’. Civil society can be viewed as all forms of social self-organization in which people organize to meet their needs or solve their problems. NGOs are thus only one form of civil society, alongside other forms such as political parties, trade unions, religious groups, mass media and informal groupings. The limits of civil society are marked by several boundaries: the coercion of the state, which sets up its projects for us; the structures of ascription, as in family ties and religious obligations; and the private interests of the market. Within these limits, the space of civil society operates as a myriad of social and juridical forms and concrete activities. Formally constituted non-governmental organizations (i.e., with names, statutes and bank accounts) and donor-funded projects are just one such set of forms and activities; they stand quite apart from informal groups (networks, cliques) or one-off events (mass demonstrations, collective actions). Human rights NGOs may take the form of a member association, an umbrella association (association of associations), or a foundation. Used here, ‘foundation’ is understood not as a grant-giving entity (as it is in the West) but as ‘resources with a purpose’. Whereas an association (‘people with a purpose’) has members, a foundation has no members; it has a board and a staff (paid or unpaid), which decides how to use the resources.

Most Balkan human rights NGOs are of the foundation type. Their voluntary and democratic aspect is limited to the board meeting, where decisions are presumably taken democratically, each board member having one vote (in contrast to other foundations or corporations, where votes are calculating according to shares). The foundation type of organization is certainly more flexible, since decisions need not be put up to the vote of a general assembly. But it is also more elitist, since grass-roots support or popular concerns can be ignored in favour of the foreign donor's concerns. Up to now, foreign donors' concerns have set the agenda for many NGOs in the Balkans, especially human rights NGOs. They are subject to more pressure by foreign donors than by their governments or constituents. The pressure is not always beneficial to the ordinary people, who may regard well-meaning NGO activists as an elite.

Within 'the NGO sector' of any given country, a sector which can include hundreds of organizations of all types—cultural, social, advocacy, hobby, political, human rights—there have been continuing efforts to assess the 'strength' of the sector. In this understanding, civil society is considered 'weak' where the number of NGOs is small, and 'strong' where the number of NGOs is large. Recognizing the inherent disadvantages of such a strategy, governments and donors seek to assess NGOs according to their activities. We thus arrive at various estimates that X% of the NGOs in Country A are 'truly active' or operate 'at a professional standard'. In my own experience as evaluator, the most frequently heard proportion of 'professional level' NGOs in most countries is about 10%. It is understood that the vast majority of formally registered NGOs in any country (including those in Scandinavia!) are one-person operations, one-project 'bubbles', or largely passive. For the Balkans, I would estimate that 7-10% of all registered NGOs are of professionally active and competent. Since Balkan NGOs normally receive little or no state support of any kind (grants, tax breaks, free space), they tend to be either foreign supported or, when support ends, largely passive. Foreign support usually involves foreign pressure for performance, which makes local human rights NGOs usually quite active while they are pursuing donor projects, and passive when they are not.

Within the elite of highly professional NGOs, the human rights NGOs stand out. Human rights NGOs in the Balkans achieved this capacity for several reasons: human rights was not a preoccupation of the former communist regimes, so that these initial groups of dissidents were often totally supported, morally, financially and politically, by Western donors. Unlike old style youth, women's or peace organizations, which operated as fronts for the ruling

party, communist states had never attempted to establish human rights ‘front’ organizations, nor to co-opt human rights groups. Hence, human rights activists tended to be anti-government, Anglophone, Western-oriented, intellectuals who had often suffered persecution and were often isolated in their own societies. Once the political changes occurred in Eastern Europe and human rights was ‘set free’, the former dissidents quickly learned the discourses and practices of Western human rights donors. Such practices ranged from how to run human rights campaigns to the techniques of grant administration and budget management. Whereas the former women’s and youth NGOs had to be purged of party functionaries and taught to act in a new, more autonomous way, the human rights NGOs had always been autonomous from the state. On the contrary, they now had to be taught how to cooperate with the state they once so bitterly opposed. Early on in the transition, human rights activists went to the West for training, attended conferences abroad, received Western specialists and donor organizations in their offices and assisted foreign donors in setting up various projects and networks. In these project activities, local Balkan human rights groups also became contractors for Western organizations, gathering data or conducting training for various target groups. As they learned how to operate in the world of projects, Balkan human rights activists became *human rights professionals*.

In this professional capacity, Balkan human rights NGO activists and project managers now participate in direct negotiations with their respective governments and in various regional forums such as the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe. The Balkan governments are under pressures of EU accession or EU association, so their tactics with the NGOs must reflect a willingness to collaborate. Balkan human rights professionals now sit on government commissions and accompany government delegations. They help train staff at the ombudsman’s office; develop programs for human rights education in schools and universities; participate in preparing or commenting on government reports; and occupy a prominent place at annual conferences celebrating UN Human Rights Day. In short, Balkan human rights organizations have ‘arrived’. And like all ‘arrivistes’, they suffer from the jealousy of the old guard (in the state apparatus) and the envy from other NGO organizations who feel left behind in the race for influence.

### **Consequences of professionalization**



This trend toward professionalisation among Balkans human rights NGOs is not necessarily to be criticized. Considerable skills and expertise are required to pursue a project of social activism, advocacy, and changing the hearts and minds of government officials. Balkan history is filled with failed attempts to carry out persuasion by peaceful means. Yet the question remains as to the consequences of professionalisation for the original mission of human rights and its everyday practices in these countries. To what degree does professionalisation entail a reduction in the original mission of human rights NGOs? This question has been applied to political parties, foreign aid and trade union activists, with the familiar accusations of opportunism or bureaucracy. We need also to consider this question in the field of human rights work, where millions of dollars are being spent, where thousands of people are now working, and where governments, private foundations and NGO organizations all have their own agendas.

One obvious consequence of professionalisation is elitism, or accusations of elitism. The juridical form of Balkan human rights organizations as non-member organizations (foundations) and their close relationship to Western donors and their projects has at times caused these organizations to be perceived as having ‘lifted-off’ from their own grass roots societies. One need only spend a few minutes in any Balkan café to hear people speaking about ‘the NGO mafia’, or to listen to government officials complain that ‘the NGOs are not serious’ to become aware of this underlying hostility or jealousy toward those working in the sector. Speaking about these problems with the leaders of these groups, who, regrettably, tend to be much the same people as they were a decade ago, one encounters a standard set of replies: ‘In fact, we *are* doing a lot of things, the government or public just refuses to recognize our activities’. ‘Here, just look at our report’. ‘Besides, we have to stay on the forefront, the people need leadership’, etc.

Accusations of elitism are not only made by the public or government officials towards the human rights NGOs, but also within the NGO ‘community’, with the usual infighting over who had what idea first, which organization is more transparent, who is an opportunist, who tried to appropriate whose donor, etc. Like any real community, the Balkan NGO community is characterized by cooperation *and* conflict. The conflicts are social, personal, political and ideological. Donors can manipulate these intra-NGO relationships, and be manipulated by them.

Here again, we must begin with the fact that the origins and ongoing activities of most Balkan human rights organizations are intimately tied in with foreign engagement and support. They are the results of the globalisation of ethics, of the practices of virtue, which took passionate grass-roots activists and moulded them into NGO leaders. This technique is usually connected with the idea of ‘capacity building’, while more cynical analysts would see it is a more insidious form of colonialism. Indeed, many human rights activists or OSCE functionaries are worried about whether we may be ‘imposing our values’ on our ‘local partners’. This fear seems to be exaggerated. Local NGO leaders are not ‘converted’ or immobilized by participating in a ‘conflict management’ seminar, by a ‘training of trainers’ session in Logical Framework Approach, or by a weeklong workshop in ‘project cycle management’ or ‘human rights and media.’ The idea of ‘imposing our values’ entails that values can be transferred as if they were things or specific sets of skills. NGO leader do acquire skills, they acquire an understanding of what Western project’s require, but they do not acquire values.

The real riddle is not whether ‘we’ impose ‘our’ values on ‘them’, but why ‘they’ all sit there and accept it. The cynical answer here is ‘for the money’. We are all aware of the many training sessions in which money is paid to participants, a phenomenon that one Albanian journalist termed ‘seminarism.’ Yet money, or access to resources, is only part of the story.

The view of human rights skills transfer as a colonial project is at the core of much of the donor criticism now known as ‘donor bashing’. In this discourse, the donors are accused of having imposed foreign values, having misused funds meant for locals, of refusing to consult with local leaders, of having pursued short-term interests to make themselves irreplaceable, and of having imposed their own organizational criteria with which to stifle local initiatives. Donor bashing is now common at virtually every gathering of development or human rights activists in which both international actors and local civil society representatives are present. It often begins with a critique of the lack of transparency on the part of ‘the donors’ or ‘the international community’. It usually ends with an acknowledgement by the donors themselves that ‘we have not been responsive enough’, that ‘we need to coordinate more’.

As the global human rights agenda goes from monitoring government human rights violations and promoting human rights standards to institutionalising human rights via networking and education, the Balkan human rights NGOs must reassess their relations with international

donors. Increasingly, donors who once pumped money into crucially needed projects are now demanding increasing sustainability. Sustainability is the process by which activities can continue once the donor grant has run out. The problem is that a truly sustainable Balkan human rights NGO should be able to *set its own agenda*. Such an agenda may differ in priorities and activities from that set by the original donor, and it may even deviate from the current politically correct list of priorities, now comprising ‘human trafficking’, ‘good governance’, ‘environmental rights’ and ‘anti-corruption’. In this process, certain local concerns, development and security, for example, may be overlooked or simply ignored.

The dilemma can be articulated thusly: Balkan human rights NGOs must accede to internationally determined priorities in order to remain in the mainstream and retain donor funds. But this adherence to global issues runs the risk of alienating them from popular local concerns about lack of economic development or bureaucratic abuse. Conversely, if the local NGOs resonate to these local concerns, they run the risk of becoming out of step with the international human rights NGO ‘movement’. And out of step means out of funds.

The dilemma of global issues versus local concerns ultimately threatens the survival of local human rights NGOs as organizations. This is a familiar dilemma in the life of any organization seeking to adapt to a larger environment while it seeks to maintain a local grounding. The solution is that Balkan human rights organizations should do both, i.e., that they should operate *as if* there were no contradiction between being part of a global movement and acting locally. Yet in the everyday practice of organizations whose financial resources may be uncertain and political support wavering, such dilemmas are not easily resolved.

One reason they are not resolved is the pervasive influence of project life in the Balkans. Human rights NGOs do not just pursue human rights. They carry out projects.

### **Project society**

Projects entail a special kind of activity: short term activities with a budget and a time schedule. Projects always end, occasionally being replaced by policy, but more often either dying out or being replaced by yet another project. Project society entails a special kind of structure, beginning with the donor and their priorities, followed by the project identification

mission, the appraisal, the selection of an implementing partner, the disbursement of funds, the monitoring, the evaluation, and of course, the next project. Project society is about the allocation of resources in an organized, at times bureaucratic, fashion. There is no project without a project application, a waiting period, a preliminary assessment, and the monitoring and accounting procedures that follow. The practices of project society demand a special kind of language, almost like the wooden language of Stalinism. Passing on knowledge is called 'training'. Passing on knowledge to selected cadres is called 'training of trainers' or TOT. Getting better at something is called 'capacity building'. Being able to say what you want to do is a 'mission statement'. When we understand what's going on we speak of 'transparency'. Trying to find out what's going on is called 'networking'. Figuring out who will benefit is 'stakeholder analysis'. Finding the money is called 'fund raising'. Making sure you don't waste it is called 'donor coordination'. Surviving after the money runs out is called 'sustainability'. People with money who don't see results are suffering from 'donor fatigue'. Taking your money somewhere else is an 'exit strategy'. Failure to find a recipient is a problem of 'absorption capacity'. And when there are too many donors and not enough recipients, you have what a Danish report referred to as 'donor constipation' (*donorforstoppelse*).

Participation in this world of projects requires understanding what are the latest key words and concepts which can magically generate money: this year its 'empowerment', then 'good governance', 'citizen participation' now 'income generation', but don't forget 'trafficking', 'peace-building', 'ethnic reconciliation' and 'anti-corruption'; and of course, there is the ubiquitous 'partnership'. In the field of civil society development, the ultimate goal is to create NGOs which are not only service providers but can also carry out 'advocacy', i.e., influence decision-makers. International aid interventions initially began as a humanitarian effort to help people in the Balkans during acute situations of 'post-conflict'. It has culminated by creating grant categories such as 'civil society', 'reconciliation' or 'human rights'. Those able to manipulate these categories can receive funds with which to carry out projects.

*Project society* is about the traffic in money, knowledge, people, and ideas. *Project life* is about what people do with these resources. It is a world with a premium on the most abstract of knowledge. Hence, those who manipulate symbols and concepts can occupy strategic positions in the chain of resource allocations.

The key concept of project society seems to be ‘capacity-building’. Since ‘capacity’ is subject to interpretation, it can never reach an absolute level. Capacity must continually be built. And building capacity requires training. Trainers used to be brought in from the West. Now they may be locals or come from other Balkan countries, all of them trained in the West, according to Western measures of needs and efficiency. One of the most important needs, of course, are ‘training needs’; hence the emerging ‘training needs assessment’ (TNA) industry. Beyond all this project activity is the wave of accountability, what one anthropologist, Marilyn Strathern, has called ‘audit culture’, and Michael Power, in a critique of evaluation, has termed ‘rituals of verification’.

It is this world of projects which ‘the internationals’ bring into the Balkans. It is the ideas and practices of this world which permeate down to a specific group of Balkan project managers and staff, their ‘local partners’ or ‘counterpart organisations’. The human rights NGOs and their project staff are the elite of these local groups. They are both more in touch with, and more important to, the foreign donors, because human rights is considered as basic to any kind of societal reconstruction; and because human rights abuses can grow into security issues, including issues of foreign intervention.

It would be premature to call these hundreds of local project coordinators, project directors, project assistants and NGO trainers a ‘class’ or an ‘elite’. Clearly, some of them do live differently, act differently and even think differently from their fellow citizens. Many were activists in another era, before the onset of conflict or before the post-socialist transition. Others have been fortunate enough to work as translators for international organizations and have then acquired management skills or been sent on training courses. The local staff have their own *private projects* of career, education, family or emigration. These private projects entail keeping as many options open as possible. Being Western-oriented and/or Western educated, many of them have obtained Western passports or permanent residency privileges in the West, and virtually all their children are studying or will study in the West. As a stratum with a specific lifestyle, they distinguish themselves by an attentiveness to what is new in the West, by their relations with actual and potential foreign donors, by intense relations (cordial or hostile) to specific internationals, and by an insecurity about what will happen when the donors leave.

This world of projects -- project resources, project hierarchies, project ideologies, project discourses and project practices -- has been exported to the Balkans. Like any such world, it operates with premises and assumptions that provide benefits to some and disenfranchise others. The world of projects is based on several ideas, the most basic of which is that practices of democracy and models of civil society can be exported from one society to another. Second, we operate with the assumption -- questionable indeed -- that the *models* of civil society, which we export, actually reflect the *realities* of our own societies. The problem for civil society development is that those who formulate the projects, those who implement them and those who are the targets may have swallowed our model in an unreflective way. This is hardly surprising, since posing questions about the model may result in donors taking their money elsewhere.

While we have exported project society, those in the Balkans have also actively imported it. By 'actively' I mean that they have taken some elements and reworked or adapted others to their local conditions or their private projects. The 'import' may be the import of human rights *projects* as a form of activity. The import or project life need not be the import of a set of values. The concepts of 'export', 'import' and 'transfer' are therefore not as self-evident as they seem in this context. In the jargon of modern social theory, they need to be 'unpacked'.

Aside from the premise of exporting democracy and exporting models, the world of civil society projects operates with other premises as well: there is the illusion of the 'international community', which is neither international nor communal; the illusion that Western NGOs and international organizations cooperate effortlessly with each other and with their home governments; the illusion that professional Western NGOs are based on voluntary commitment rather than paid staff, such that Balkan NGOs' requests for paid staff and long-term contracts are viewed as somehow selfish; the illusion that the activities of Western NGOs are based on the formulation of long term strategies rather than the improvisation that derives from following the money when new funding categories appear; the illusion that the right technique can somehow replace the missing social initiative which forms the basis of civic movements; the illusion that because people are consistently busy that they must also be efficient, conveniently overlooking the proliferation of wasted trips, delayed decisions, unread reports, and useless meetings common to virtually any large organization; the illusion that the only capacities that need building are those 'down there', and not our own; and the illusion that organizations 'down there' are chaotic rather than being adaptations to uncertain

conditions (a realistic assessment of these conditions is often overlooked: how many Western NGOs could survive very long on unclear laws, two or even three accounting systems, political harassment, daily electric blackouts, unheated offices, unchecked computer viruses, distrustful citizens who think NGOs are just another scam, unscrupulous journalists looking for scandal, and inadequately translated jargonistic project proposals emanating from donor offices under political pressure); finally, there is the illusion that the number of foreign funded NGO organizations is some kind of index of democratic development.

### **Global donors and local action**

The nature of project life may hide the underlying tensions that exist within most Balkan human rights organizations. An effective human rights organization in the Balkans is supposed to be in tune with all the major international trends and priorities. It is also supposed to have a grass-roots character, enabling it to adapt to local concerns and needs. Relations of dependence on foreign donors impel local NGOs to keep an extra eye on signals from abroad. It is these signals, forewarning a new trend in NGO activities that are converted into local project proposals, that the foreign donors can finance. But what happens when genuine local concerns cannot be neatly pigeonholed into a donor's grant category? What happens when certain problems are important locally but not globally?

Typical examples are the many activities that pursue economic development under the rubric of human rights. Establishing an Internet café in an interethnic neighbourhood or financing a driving school for women could be 'projecticized' under the label 'income generation' or 'job creation'. They would thus be 'development projects'. From a human rights standpoint, however, they could be reclassified as projects for 'interethnic reconciliation' or 'women's empowerment'. In effect, the café or the driving school are a donor's investment in a not-for-profit service enterprise. However, donors do not *invest* in businesses, much less non-profit businesses. Donors are not allowed to *invest* at all. Donors give *grants*. Hence, there must be a specific kind of 'needs assessment', a 'target group' and a 'sustainability' prognosis in order to reclassify this business venture into a 'human rights project'. Various skills training and commercial activities that would normally be called 'job creation' now masquerade under the rubric of 'human rights'. To carry out this conversion from one domain to another requires expertise in finding and manipulating the key words that will trigger grants. It requires proposal-writing skills that can channel donors' priorities in the correct way. Such

skills are called ‘fundraising’, now a major field of NGO expertise, just as ‘project management’, ‘strategic planning’ and ‘program evaluation’ have become fields of expertise.

One can view such processes cynically or instrumentally. Cynically, project life in the human rights world, and the professionalisation and elitism that goes with it, *could* be seen as inhibiting spontaneous social initiative. In its more ruthless form, the organizational requirements of project life can transform an informal group of friends and colleagues engaged in a mission into a ‘managed organization’, with all the accompanying ‘baggage’ of administrative hierarchies, management techniques, performance-based salaries, office privileges, social benefits, and subtle distinctions in titles. These trends are certainly present in the Balkans, where so many of the courageous intellectuals and ordinary citizens who protested government abuses are now card-carrying ‘executive directors’, ‘program officers’, ‘senior program officers’, ‘project coordinators’ and ‘program directors’.

Yet one need not lament this Weberian trend in the human rights field. Instead, let us view project life and project organization instrumentally: knowledge of project techniques enables NGOs to obtain the funds and skills they would otherwise not obtain, and to use these resources for a good cause. Who cares what you call it, or what category it falls under: does it help people gain control over their lives or not? Then, good.

The contradiction between professionalisation and local initiative arises in the case where project thinking forces NGOs to think ‘within the box’ (to use the recent hot expression). Adhering to the discourse and practices of international project life ensures the possibility of funding. Thinking creatively may lead to a loss of funding, inasmuch as donors -- for all their talk of creative initiatives -- are also risk-averting in their policies. After all, donors also have *their* own donors. This problem of professionalisation versus local initiative reflects the dominant view that (1) local organizations exist in order to carry out projects, and (2) that activities can be carried out only if there are funded projects. These unstated operational assumptions invariably come from donors, who in a Balkan context are also *foreign* donors. Labelling this complex set of relationships ‘partnership’ or ‘cooperation’ is more than euphemistic. It is misleading.

**Conclusions: movements, not projects**



The conventional wisdom on human rights in the Balkans and elsewhere is that ‘we’ (whoever ‘we’ are!) must first establish a viable civil society in the form of NGOs, and that these NGOs will ensure that human rights norms are respected and that human rights practices pervade society. These NGOs will become professional if they carry out projects, by which their capacity is increased. After a certain level of capacity is reached, the NGO sector should become sustainable. The ‘donor-driven’ aspect here is not simply the financial support from abroad. It is a ‘drivenness’ of the entire apparatus of how social initiatives should operate. Not money per se, but project thinking is what is driving Balkan NGOs into the danger of professionalism. Where is the limit? Is there too much project thinking in the Balkans, too many professionalised NGOs?

Let us think ‘out of the box’ for the moment. Is there a way in which people’s rights to live in dignity and security, both as individuals and as collectivities -- their human rights -- could be assured without the presence of professional staff, foreign donors and donor-driven NGOs? Can we at all envision a human rights regime in the Balkans (or elsewhere) *without* massive outside support for truly local professional NGOs? Can we define criteria of professionalism which are locally rather than globally based? Are human rights activities invariably going to be globalized, like beauty contests, beginning with the local observances of International Human Rights Day around the world and ending with the massive international conferences and Mary Robinsons, George Soros, Rigoberta Menchus and various other minor players?

The problem boils down to the relation between local actors and global discourses. These global discourses -- i.e., the conventional wisdoms, rhetoric and conceptual frameworks of knowledge -- are attached to powerful global players with all their resources. In Denmark, the DIHR is one of these players. It assimilates the latest tendencies in the corridors of power abroad and in Copenhagen—Brussels, Strasbourg, New York, Danida(?). It assesses possibilities to intervene or withdraw from specific problem areas (‘should we *go in* to China? should we *pull out* of Malawi?’). It mobilizes local players to convert their energies into project applications. It sets up ‘partnerships’ in solidarity, but also makes demands.

This *projectization of human rights* is not necessarily bad. Insofar as projectization is bureaucratic and ineffective, it certainly reduces the effect of civil society human rights pressure on potentially hostile governments. Governments are afraid of human rights *movements*; they don’t mind human rights *projects*. If projects are what human rights is all

about, then we can say that the Balkan human rights organizations have been enormously successful. There are a lot of projects out there, and a lot of project coordinators. The problem arises when a former human rights *movement* (civil society) becomes the administration of human rights *projects*. How do we maintain a genuine human rights movement? What would have happened a decade or two ago, if the original charismatic founders of human rights movements – Havel, Walesa, Sakharov, Menchu -- had had to attend courses in ‘project cycle management’?

Lest I be accused of cynicism, let me emphasize that projects can be an effective type of human problem-solving activity. It is certainly laudable that all of us, north and south, academics and activists, learn how to formulate strategy, plan an activity, allocate resources, reflect on our methods, and understand the impact of our activities. One wonders, however, whether all this project thinking would exist if it were not required by the donors in order to obtain funds.

The final question, therefore, is one of impact. What is the *impact* of human rights NGOs on Balkan societies? What is the impact of all these hundreds of projects carried out by Balkan NGO activists, of the seminars, media events, trainings, dialogues, capacity-building exercises, skills-transmitting courses, TOTs and all the rest? One could expect that the impact would occur in the political sphere, in the form of people’s political choices, in the voting patterns for parties. Regrettably, recent voting in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo seems to indicate little change in people’s political preferences. Political parties remain narrow-minded, nationalist, defensive, undemocratic, if not corrupt. One sees many of the same old faces and the same old policies, with lower voter participation. One hears many of the same provincial, if not racist, views. One might say that there has been some progress, that there is less violence and intimidation. But surely, after so many years and so many projects, one would expect more.

Perhaps it is time to ‘think out of the box’. To envision a human rights effort which does not rely on formally constituted, donor-financed NGOs fulfilling project requirements set up in far-off program offices, with their LogFrame matrices, sustainability prognoses and auditing procedures. Perhaps we need something that can supplement the now established patterns of dependence by which the latest foreign fashionable expressions are translated into local

project timelines. *NGOs used to be about movements. Now they are about projects. How do we get back to movements?* And what are the consequences if we continue on the same path?

Civil society risks becoming 'Civil Society' as a grant category. Human rights now risks becoming 'Human Rights'. The gap between human rights as movement and human rights as projects is growing. In this situation, human rights professionals need to undertake their own strategic analysis. The easy approach would be to advocate that project professionals 'make room for' local actions, that more priority be given to 'grass-roots initiatives'. Yet even here the concept of 'grass-roots' remains in question. Most local initiatives have outside actors or global components. The outside is not necessarily bad, nor is the local or grass-roots necessarily best. Rather, I would turn things around: if human rights is about movements for improving life quality and ensuring local initiatives, then it is the movement which needs to rethink the place of professionals. That is, what is the place of the professional in such movements? It remains questionable whether the global landscape of donors, local NGOs and professionally trained project managers, can allow spontaneous human rights movements to reassert themselves. Project society, I fear, may be evolving into an enemy of spontaneous human rights movements. In place of solidarity, we now have feasibility studies. In place of commitment, there is conditionality. Instead of a mission, there is a Mission Statement. If we are to truly understand the role of civil society in achieving human rights, we need to undertake a more serious reflexion of our own project culture.