

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Social welfare programme

Contact information

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Background/history

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), with a population of 2 million people, has struggled economically since its withdrawal from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991. High labour and social costs have combined to make the few viable state-run industries non-competitive, and the result is that unemployment is high, underemployment even higher, and most large state-run industries are bankrupt. The situation has been exacerbated by the 1991-95 Balkan conflicts and the hostilities in Kosovo in 1999, both of which provoked a massive flow of refugees into the country. At the end of 1999, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 refugees remained in FYROM, mostly from Kosovo, but also including refugee minorities of Serbs and Roma.

In the early 1990s, the Red Cross of the FYROM initiated a social welfare programme (SWP) to assist the refugees from the conflicts in Bosnia. The war in Kosovo resulted in a new influx of refugees and the Red Cross was compelled to increase its services to help beneficiaries living with host families and in refugee camps. When the return of refugees to Kosovo commenced, the local Red Cross again needed to adapt its services to continue helping Bosnian refugees, who arrived with the first wave in early 1990s, as well as providing support to Serbian and Roma minorities, who had left Kosovo.

Objectives

- To assist both refugees and the most vulnerable people among the local population.
- To help beneficiaries recover from the psychological trauma caused by the war.
- To empower and assist them in meeting their basic needs (for example, food, housing and medical care).
- To help them cope with reduced welfare assistance.

Brief description of activities

The SWP has been operational since 1993. It was set up to serve the needs of refugees from Bosnia and other areas of the former Yugoslavia, as well as vulnerable people in the local population. The beneficiaries of the programme are still the same today, although the origin of some of the refugees has changed.

The SWP works in close cooperation with its local Red Cross counterparts, so that they will be able to take over activities in the future. It organizes social and community group activities, particularly focusing on women and children, and supports the involvement of volunteers in social welfare activities such as home visits and leisure activities.

The programme's staff interview beneficiaries and assess their needs. They are given counselling and information and, if necessary, are referred for specialized treatment. Another important SWP activity is to identify individuals whose skills may be of use to the community as a whole, and to ensure that everyone has access to the community's resources.

Major elements of the programme

The SWP's approach is one of "light" therapy; group activities and prevention aim at helping vulnerable people better support the difficulties of everyday life. Social and occupational activities are provided, and psychosocial support is available for those who need it.

At the Red Cross information centre in Skopje, the capital of FYROM, the SWP team assesses the problems and the needs of vulnerable people and explores ways to assist them. Sometimes their needs are minor; simply to be told where to go and what to do. On other occasions, individuals are referred to psychologists, social workers and/or Red Cross volunteers for psychological support and counselling. The centre also arranges for people to receive necessary items, whether monthly bus tickets, relief items, education kits or medical care. It also offers a telephone service, so that refugees can contact members of their family in other countries. Education is important, and courses include vocational training, mine awareness and self-care for adults. Special courses are arranged for children and youth and recreational activities are also provided.

The information centre provides a valuable service guiding refugees and local people through "the system". In some cases, when a beneficiary's needs cannot be met through normal channels, the SWP may be able to offer punctual financial assistance.

About 1,400 people a month contact the Skopje information centre. Refugees and vulnerable local people think very highly of the centre, which they consider "the" place to seek help and support.

The SWP is also active in the refugee centres of Shutka and Dare Bombol. The programme helps refugees to live a more "normal" life in the centres by organizing occupational activities and setting up group activities. Individual sessions are also held for those who need more specific therapeutic care.

Partnerships and alliances

The SWP in FYROM is run in collaboration with the local Red Cross and the International Federation. With support from the International Federation's delegation in Skopje, the Red Cross of the FYROM is responsible for the ongoing monitoring and implementation of the programme, which is funded by the delegation.

From the start of the Balkan crisis, the local Red Cross, together with the International Federation, has cooperated closely with the ICRC, government ministries, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and other United Nations' agencies, ECHO (the European Community's Humanitarian Office) and international and non-governmental organizations.

Monitoring and evaluation

Local Red Cross branches and headquarters will be responsible for the ongoing monitoring of the SWP, with support from the International Federation's delegation in Skopje. UNHCR monitors the relief programme and has funded observers who will interview recipients of SWP services. At the end of the year, a joint evaluation of the programme will be performed by the Red Cross of the FYROM and the International Federation delegation; key issues will be the number of people served and types of services provided.

The future

The local Red Cross values the SWP and its achievements, and would like to turn it into a long-term programme. However, the FYROM's financial situation makes this a difficult plan to carry out. The programme still depends on external funding.

At the present time, the SWP targets refugees and vulnerable Macedonians but, using the knowledge the programme has accumulated over the last eight years, the local Red Cross would like to extend the programme to include asylum-seekers.

Lessons learned

- The SWP has been operational since 1993, and is generally perceived as being very successful both in FYROM and in the International Federation's Secretariat. Its main assets are the recruitment of local staff, their high level of commitment and local knowledge, and the programme's relevance and cost-effectiveness.
- The keys to the programme's success seem to be:
 - the stability and limited turnover of staff;
 - employing local staff who have a background in the Red Cross;
 - good working relations with other programmes run by the Red Cross;
 - a feeling of local "ownership" of the programme;
 - a greater emphasis on social rather than psychological aspects;
 - solid local knowledge and good alliances with relevant power structures and authorities;

- that the programme is closely linked to the relief programme for refugees. The parallel provision of both psychosocial and material support is most likely to result in a stronger long-term impact;
- provision of basic information to beneficiaries. This service helps people to solve many problems before they become too overwhelming. The biggest need that refugees, host families or local vulnerable people have, is getting the right information;
- that the programme builds on the beneficiaries' previous and existing coping strategies: given the importance of the extended families, helping families to communicate and keep in contact through the telephone service is a simple, but important way of helping them cope;
- its flexibility: the programme has proved flexible enough to withstand influxes of new refugees and changes in the beneficiaries' needs. The SWP, already well-established in areas to which the refugees fled, became the place where they made their first, all-important contact in a new country. The programme was able to assess the needs of vulnerable people and was flexible enough to respond to many of them. It has also emphasized the necessity of building good relations with the people it works for, and has been able to make them realize that "SWP is here for you".