

Children affected by armed conflict (CABAC)

Contact information

Ulla Nerenst, Danish Red Cross representative
c/o International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Semina 21
11000 Belgrade
Yugoslavia
Mobile tel.: +381 63 279 549
E-mail: ulla-nerenst@redcross.dk

Background/history

The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the six republics of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1992, the country became involved in a violent and relentless war, in which over 200,000 people died and another 20,000 are still missing. In addition, a massive population movement took place.

In November 1995, the war ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. As a consequence, the country is now divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the Republika Srpska. The agreement confirms the right of people to return to pre-war homes. This has resulted in another population movement, which has only just begun and is expected to continue for the next few years.

The first CABAC (Children affected by armed conflict) project was implemented in Banja Luka, the most highly populated area of the Republika Srpska. Some 50 per cent of the region's population is made up of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from all parts of BiH and Croatia. At least one member of most of the region's families served in the armed forces during the war, so a large percentage of the population have been in a state of prolonged, chronic stress for years. Children, too, suffer from the psychological consequences of armed conflicts and it is widely accepted that this may lead to a decreased quality of life and learning difficulties.

CABAC programmes have been supported in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Danish Red Cross (DRC) since 1996. A pilot project in nine schools in Banja Luka targeted vulnerable primary-school children, and the programme has expanded to cover 17 schools and some 1,600 children in the area. In 1997, the DRC set up a similar programme (targeting eight schools and 600 children) in BiH's Bihac municipality and is now preparing to hand the running of the project over to the local Red Cross. Also in BiH, the DRC and the local, Bosanska Krupa branch of the Red Cross launched a new project in September 2000 to work in six schools.

Two other CABAC projects began in August 2000 in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and in Kosovo, involving eight and 11 schools respectively.

Objectives

- To improve the living conditions and the learning ability of children who are psychologically traumatized by their experiences during the war and its aftermath.
- To help the children to build a new life and regain trust and hope in the future.
- To help the children interact with friends and teachers in a more positive way through conflict-solving skills and peaceful coexistence.
- To help to develop reconciliation and thus to prevent new conflicts.
- To enable the children to develop and learn as “normal” children.
- To assist the region’s Red Cross societies to develop and implement, through their local branches, psychosocial support projects in the future.

Brief description of activities

- The programme targets primary-school children affected by war: children who have lost one or both parents or other close relatives; who have witnessed or experienced atrocities; who, being refugees, IDPs or returnees, have lost their social network; children from disrupted homes; and those who have experienced loss of values, cultural uprooting and ethnic enmities.
- The main characteristic of the programme’s concept is that it is built upon an existing and recognized institution – the school system – and on a respected profession – teachers.
- The programme consists of three components: psychosocial workshops; nutritional support; and hygiene instruction.

Major elements of the programme

Psychosocial support workshops: The workshops consist of group-based and creative activities which allow the children to express their emotions and concerns in their own language. The creative activities include: music and dancing; arts and crafts; literature and storytelling; and sports activities. Group-based work seeks to develop group resources from individual helplessness.

Nutritional support: The children are served with food of a high nutritional value during the workshops. Eating highly nutritional food together forms part of the children’s social activities.

Hygiene instruction: The children are supplied with their own personal hygiene kits (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, etc.) to help teach them the basic rules of hygiene.

In cooperation with representatives from the national ministry of education, the local Red Cross and school directors, schools are selected for programme activities. Teachers are invited to conduct the day-to-day work with the children on a volunteer basis and are given regular support and input by the local Red Cross. Two annual three-day seminars, follow-up seminars and monthly meetings, facilitated by specialists in psychosocial group support activities, are organized for teachers in the programme.

The schools selected have a large number of vulnerable children suffering from the traumatic effects of war, i.e., children who are often more aggressive, lack concentration and the ability to learn, feel isolated, and/or show other kinds of distress. The programme emphasizes the

importance of vulnerable children being integrated in classes with others of their age; segregation would be detrimental to their recovery. Integrated classes are part of the healing process, helping the children to re-establish their networks and to encourage reconciliation. It also means that all the children will benefit from acquiring peaceful conflict-solving skills and learn to coexist in peace with others.

The Danish Red Cross supplies all materials used in the programme, compensates schools for the use of utilities and pays a monthly allowance to volunteer teachers.

Once a year, local Red Cross volunteers develop a plan of action for the year's activities in collaboration with professional facilitators. In each school, there are generally three workshops a week, lasting two hours each. The creative and active workshops aim to:

- encourage the children to talk about themselves and their concerns;
- share experiences by observing and listening to others;
- enhance their self-esteem and increase their confidence in other children and in adults;
- give the children the opportunity to work through their individual problems at their own pace in a comfortable atmosphere; and
- help them to develop an attitude of peaceful conflict resolution and coexistence.

Children with special needs are recommended for professional help.

Partnerships and alliances

The Danish Red Cross's CABAC programmes are implemented with the support of the International Federation and in partnership with the national Red Cross society. The National Society should eventually be able to take over the running of the programme.

Approval from the national ministry of education is obtained before the start of any project.

The programme coordinators work in close collaboration with psychologists and teachers specialized in working with traumatized individuals, who are employed by local non-governmental organizations. Their support is of particular importance as some local school authorities prefer to avoid a "foreign" influence in their schools.

Monitoring and evaluation

To evaluate social behaviour, a method covering nine characteristics related to post-traumatic stress was produced.¹ Children are evaluated by their teacher at the beginning and the end of the school year. The information thus collected allows the programme to be adjusted to take into account the needs of the most vulnerable children and helps assess the overall result of the group during the school year. However, it is a quantitative assessment and the programme is developing a more qualitative method of evaluating the impact on individual children.

The quality of meals and efficiency of food distribution are also continuously monitored. A Red Cross coordinator monitors the performance of teachers involved in the programme and any programme adjustments/corrections can be made at monthly follow-up meetings.

The project was evaluated in 1998 by Allan Staehr of the International Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support.

¹ *Psihosocijalna Pomoc u Skoli*. Petrovic, V. et al. 1996.

The future

Professionals generally agree that psychosocial support for the region's inhabitants will be needed for another five to ten years.

Individuals are facing a number of new stress factors: eviction from temporary housing, as refugees return; huge unemployment; and lack of social security.

In 1999, a programme for parents was introduced, as children generally do well if their parents are coping, if a safe and normal environment can be created for them, and if they can express their feelings and receive support.

Lessons learned

- The main strength of CABAC's programmes is that they are integrated into existing structures (schools), are implemented by respected and familiar figures in society (teachers), and work with the group rather than the individual.
- **Integration in schools.** Schools represent an important part of most children's lives, and symbolize continuity and stability, especially in post-conflict areas when the life of the community is often characterized by chaos and instability. Schools try to give children a positive orientation towards the future, by teaching them the knowledge and abilities they will need in their lives. It can also be the place to communicate society's norms and values and emphasize non-violent ways of solving conflicts and teaching mutual respect. Schools can help overcome the "lack of hope" that often is a consequence of traumatic experiences.
- **Working through teachers.** A teacher's role is often significant in post-conflict situations, especially for a child whose parents have been affected by the war. The teacher, by providing information and knowledge, helps his/her pupils to feel more secure and can help lessen the child's impression of living in an unpredictable world. The teacher can also support the children emotionally by being understanding and encouraging them to share their stories.
- **Working with groups.** To provide a supportive atmosphere and help develop a social network, it is important to work with groups of children who are of the same age and have similar experiences and backgrounds. Although some children may find it difficult to express their feelings, they will benefit from being with others who have lived through similar experiences: a feeling of shared fate may lessen their alienation and help them develop a more positive self-image. Working with groups of children therefore probably helps diminish their feeling of isolation, increases their social competence and strengthens relationships.²

2. Krigsramte børn - en helhedsorienteret anskelse af deres oplevelser, reaktioner og mestrings. Gurli Jensen. Psykologisk Skriftserie, Aarhus Universitet. Vol. 22, No.2, 1997.