

**HOW THE TECHNOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION COULD IMPROVE THE
INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN A
LOCAL COMMUNITY**

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In this paper I argue that the Institute of Cultural Affairs’ Technology of Participation method can serve as a useful tool for integrating refugees and internally displaced persons in the course of income generation projects by international humanitarian aid and development sector organizations. First, I briefly summarize the method and its history. I then describe a humanitarian NGO in Serbia, give an overview of its activities and single out areas where the Technology of Participation’s Participatory Strategic Planning could lead to an improvement of the organization’s work and an increased impact on Serbian society.

The Method

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), which developed out of the faith-based Ecumenical Institute, has been working in community development projects around the world since the 1970s out of the “*desire to release the creativity of the people involved and allow them to help shape their own destiny*” (ICA, 2006). Over the years, the ICA has developed and reviewed a wide variety of community development methods and its training and planning programs. It has registered a trademark, the Technology of Participation, which includes the popular Participatory Strategic Planning method (Umpleby/Oyler, 2003, 9). This method is a participatory approach for planning which enables facilitators to structure all group contributions in a short period of time even if they involve large amounts of data. By visually clustering the participants’ input on a board, the diversity of contributions can be used to strategically plan in a participatory manner. The following steps are part of the Participatory Planning Exercise:

Context	introduce the planning activity, review the background
Victory	envision the future, imagine the day after completion
Current reality	acknowledge strengths, weaknesses, benefits, dangers
Commitment	develop a clear, compelling statement of what the group is committed to accomplishing
Key actions	identify the tasks, cluster actions into task forces
Calendar	establish timeframes, each group places its actions on cards on the calendar
Coordination	finalize details, adjust the calendar to reflect coordination
Affirm and celebrate	conduct a celebrative Focused Conversation, create a catchy title or campaign slogan or visual image

Table 1. Steps in the process of Action Planning (Umpleby/Oyler, 2003, 9)

The Organization in Serbia

From August to October 2003, I worked as a trainee at a humanitarian aid and development organization based in Belgrade, Serbia. During the time of my traineeship, the organization was conducting an income generation program for refugees (from Bosnia and Croatia) and internally displaced persons (from Kosovo) with beneficiaries in more than 70 municipalities all over the country (NGO, 2003). It aimed at establishing their ability for self-reliance by financing equipment that enabled the beneficiaries to take up their previous profession. At the same time, the program was directed at integrating the beneficiaries into their new communities by making community work part of the requirements for receiving microcredit. At the beginning of the program, the humanitarian organization would sign a memorandum of understanding with the beneficiary and the local authorities agreeing on the type and duration of the required community work. The program had been in place since 2002, and an independent evaluation had already certified its success by early 2003 (Evaluation, 2003).

My task was to visit the beneficiaries and to collect information on their average monthly income and the progress of their business activities. After visiting beneficiaries throughout Serbia for more than two months, I came to the conclusion that in economic terms the program had been a success so far. Many beneficiaries had begun to earn a regular income

higher than the Serbian average. However, the community integration aspect was lacking and there was little evidence that the hours of community work had increased integration. To the contrary, the fact that “foreign” refugees and internally displaced persons made on average more money than the “native” population constituted a possible source of conflict.

Participatory Strategic Planning as a Potential Remedy

The importance of the refugees and internally displaced persons’ integration to communities can not be underestimated since Serbian communities still constitute a much stronger bond than communities in other regions. The humanitarian organization could thus have benefited from using Participatory Strategic Planning in the beginning of its self-reliance and income generation program. This method has already been successfully applied in other sectors in the region (Prytula/Umpelby, 2004).

The entrance point for the use of Participatory Strategic Planning should be the meeting with the local authorities. This meeting would include the refugees and internally displaced persons, the local authorities, the NGO representatives and also local citizens. At such a meeting, the community could then start to discuss the contextual challenges, such as that of integrating its new citizens, and formulate a vision for the future. By engaging citizens to articulate the current reality, it could try to secure a commitment not only from the beneficiaries of the self-reliance program but also from the locals. Additionally, it could foster joint-ventures between locals and beneficiaries in case of existing matches of their professions. The humanitarian NGO would play the facilitating role in this community project. This is all the more important since the Serbian local authorities do not have a promising record for participatory approaches and the Balkans are traditionally a culture with a high power distance (Ivancevich, 2005, 40).

By applying Participatory Strategic Planning, a potential challenge to the integration of refugees and internally displaced persons could be addressed in a participatory manner. Moreover, it would give the community the chance to address existing integration problems and formulate remedies with the help of an experienced humanitarian NGO. I am quite confident that this approach would attract much more attention from national and international donors due to their renewed interest in participatory strategies. Ultimately, it could enlarge the self-reliance income generation program into a much more holistic community participation and integration program.

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