

# Negotiating the Transnational Politics of Social Work in Post-Conflict and Transition Contexts: Reflections from South-East Europe

Paul Stubbs\* and Reima Ana Maglajlić

*Dr Paul Stubbs is a British sociologist working as a senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Economics, Zagreb, Croatia. His main research interests include: social policy in south-eastern Europe; transnational governmentalities and policy translation; and social movements and computer-mediated communication. Dr Stubbs also has experiences in working as a community activist during the war in Croatia and as a consultant to a number of international and local organisations across south-east Europe and internationally. Dr Reima Ana Maglajlić is the Research and Monitoring Director at the Mental Disability Advocacy Center, an international organisation advancing the human rights of mental health service users and survivors and people with intellectual disabilities. From 2007–2011, she worked as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the Swansea University in Wales, UK. Prior to moving to Wales, Dr Maglajlić worked as a freelance consultant on social and health care reform in south-east Europe for a variety of supranational, international and local organisations, including UNICEF, UNDP, Save the Children UK, USAID and the EC, as well as an activist supporting service user-run initiatives. Her main research interests include reform processes in child and adult social protection; co-operation between relevant stakeholders (i.e. service users, carers, grassroots professionals, students, policy makers) in education, research, policy making and practice innovation; social work and political conflict and impact of international and supranational voluntary sector organisations on social welfare reform in developing countries (particularly in south-east Europe).*

\*Correspondence to Paul Stubbs, Senior Research Fellow, The Institute of Economics, Zagreb, Croatia. E-mail: [pstubbs@eizg.hr](mailto:pstubbs@eizg.hr)

## Abstract

Based on the pre-war, war and post-war experiences of social work and social welfare reform in south-east Europe, particularly the former Yugoslavia, the authors reflect on the reasons for some of the paradoxes regarding the politicisation of social work over the past two decades, given the centrality of political factors in both the conflict and post-conflict environments. The text explores the often neglected history of social work and social welfare in former Yugoslavia prior to the 1990s. It then addresses the dominance of 'psycho-social' and medicalised approaches to welfare during the war and, finally, examines the role of international organisations in supporting welfare

reform in the post-war period. The latter two periods include examples from the authors' own practice. Based on these experiences and the available literature, the text emphasises the need for a longer-term engagement in war and post-war communities, based on practices that build alliances between social workers, community activists and service users.

**Keywords:** Political conflict, social work, politicisation of social work, community work, service user involvement, south-east Europe, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, international organisations

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## Introduction

This article explores some of the reasons for a general lack of politicisation of social work in the former Yugoslavia and the post-conflict states that have emerged after its break-up. Given the centrality of political factors in both the conflict and post-conflict environments, as well as in relation to the wider economic, political and social 'transition' in post-socialist countries, this lack of a political dimension amounts to something of a paradox. This paradox is actually compounded rather than altered by the presence of many international actors. Based on our experiences since the early 1990s as practitioners and teachers of social work, and—perhaps even more so—as activists, researchers and consultants on social welfare reform across south-east Europe, we attempt to address the paradox through a series of interlinked reform examples. The text seeks to explore the complex politics of social work in which diverse actors create complex meanings and contested practices in conflict, post-conflict and transition contexts. We suggest that, in the absence of detailed existing research evidence, the flows of ideas, practices and people is, perhaps, best captured, not through grand narratives but, rather, through reflexive case studies (Geertz, 1973) exploring the nature of this depoliticisation and the problems and possibilities for a repoliticisation of social work in local, national and transnational spaces.

The text is divided into three broad historical periods. We first explore the legacy of social work in the former Yugoslavia, largely unknown to an English-speaking audience. The second section seeks to address the role of social work during the conflicts and the impact of the large influx of international humanitarian organisations. It also explores the problems of transition to the new forms of social work and social policy in the immediate post-war environment. The third section looks at more recent attempts to promote reforms and to develop strategies regarding social work and social welfare in line with aspirations for membership of the European Union (EU). Whilst most of our examples are taken from the

two post-Yugoslav countries most directly hit by conflict in the early 1990s—namely Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia—we also address wider regional processes when necessary and relevant, due to the historical inter-linkages between the post-Yugoslav countries and an increasing external focus on the regional dimension of south-east Europe (e.g. from the lens of EU accession or in relation to the regional actions initiated by international organisations).

## Before the wars: social work in socialist Yugoslavia

There have only been a few studies on the history of social work in the former socialist countries in Europe, and even fewer available in English (Zavirsek, 2008). There are also only a few accounts that acknowledge the origins of social work in parts of central and eastern Europe in the nineteenth century or its development and professionalisation between the First and Second World Wars (Chytil *et al.*, 2009). Western European academics usually viewed the post-Second World War socialist and communist countries in the region as if they were all the same, sharing ‘a simplified view that communist parties refused the social work profession as a bourgeois institution’ (Zavirsek, 2007, p. 195). Those Western scholars who collaborated with their counterparts in Eastern Europe corrected, to some extent, such a picture (Deacon *et al.*, 1992). However, the overall impression was that these diverse countries could still be labelled collectively in relation to their ‘post-socialist’ status that implies that they are still very similar, which is hardly the case (Zrinscak, 2003). Each of these countries had diverse histories, culture and development. In some of them, the myth that there was no social work as such prior to 1990 does not stand up to even the most cursory scrutiny.

A more nuanced view of the history of social work would show that social policy and social work in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was rather well developed and quite specific, combining elements of Yugoslav self-management socialism, Bimarckianism and the continued influence of some non-state actors, including religious organisations (Stubbs, 2001). Prior to socialism, the term ‘social work’ was first introduced in Yugoslavia in the 1930s, but only in connection with the activity of the Yugoslav Union of Women (Zavirsek and Leskosek, 2005). However, after the break with Stalin and the development of a specifically Yugoslav socialist model, social work was reintroduced in the 1950s and professionalised. The first degree-level programme in social work was founded in Zagreb, then part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Croatia, in 1952, with other Republics (Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, with the exception of Montenegro) developing their own training programmes soon afterwards. These promoted inter-disciplinary learning and prepared future social workers to work in benefits administration, social, mainly child,

protection, juvenile justice and on emerging social problems such as alcohol and drug dependence (Zavirsek, 2008).

Whilst the first, pre-socialist wave of social work was led by women involved in charity and philanthropy, the reinvigoration of social work in the 1950s was initially led by men, particularly men who were themselves war veterans and war-disabled, due to a country-wide commitment to socialist planning (Zavirsek, 2008). In the 1960s, as the training of social work expanded, more women were drawn into the emerging profession. The development of social work theory and practice had several influences (Zavirsek, 2008; Chytil *et al.*, 2009). The first, and dominant, influence was social casework, particularly as developed in the USA, and some university staff were sent to the USA to explore relevant ideas and practices. The second influence was derived from countries sharing a Bismarckian heritage, particularly from neighbouring Austria and Germany. The final, third influence was derived from socialist ideology, particularly the theory of self-management socialism, seen as a kind of corrective to imported foreign ideas and practices. This third element, often little more than a set of footnotes and addenda to the translated Western ideas (Zavirsek, 2008), was abandoned in the early 1990s, following the break-up of former Yugoslavia. One of us was a social work student in Zagreb in the early 1990s, and remembers students being told to 'skip' the parts on socialist ideology in their textbooks that were published during the eighties.

The impetus for the development of social work came from a need to address the consequences of the Second World War, including large numbers of children and young people whose parents, fighting as Partisans, had been killed during the war, as well as caring for those disabled by the war. In addition, after the break with Stalin, there was a political recognition that poverty and deprivation would not simply wither away under post-war socialism, but would need to be addressed at all levels of the new society. In the context of massive post-war urbanisation and industrialisation, this led, for example, to a practical focus for social workers on mitigating the social impacts of out-migration from rural communities and emerging juvenile offending in large cities (Sukur, 2003).

Social welfare was government-funded through insurance contributions and through special funds in each of the six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia). Public social welfare provision was, and largely still is, organised through the de-concentrated, local Centres for Social Work (CSWs) and traditional long-stay residential institutions for children and adults, including children and adults with disabilities. The network of CSWs, established in the early 1960s, covered large geographical areas, with one social worker generally responsible for around 10,000 population. CSWs varied in terms of internal organisation, although most were based on specialised responses by client group (people with disabilities, children and adolescents, marital issues and so on), while some organised according to specific geographic areas

(Kljajic, 1998). Social workers dealt with monetary poverty, placement of vulnerable children and adults in residential institutions, and some insurance-based services. Whilst the majority of staff were trained social workers, most casework was managed through the 'opinions' of a multi-disciplinary team, including lawyers and psychologists. Many CSWs also employed sociologists to engage in data collection and social planning. The mandate for CSWs was diverse—from monitoring and study of welfare problems, preventive activities, direct individual casework, child protection and guardianship, substance misuse screening, to family and marital counselling (Hadzibegic, 1999). In practice, however, the work tended to be more bureaucratic than case-oriented.

Social work was also practised outside of CSWs, in the state-owned economic sector, in the employment services, in health care and in schools (Dervisbegovic, 1999). The link with the economic sector was strongest in those former Yugoslav republics where late industrialisation and an emphasis on full employment led to factories being built in some locations not solely for economic reasons, but also due to social and political factors. Subsequently, social workers in those factories focused on the employability of vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities or those at risk of alcohol misuse. The role of social workers in factories was particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 37 per cent of all pre-war social workers were employed in the economic sector (Dervisbegovic, 1999). In the 1980s, marked by a prolonged economic crisis, high inflation and increasing introduction of market principles into socialist planning, significant numbers of people were pushed into early retirement, and forced to rely on social protection rather than employment-related social support. The shift from employment-related to welfare-related support led to a recognition that the existence of a social safety net, based on agreed social rights, was needed (Zrinscak, 2003). Although the system was meant to be able to respond in flexible ways to the changing circumstances, bureaucratic inertia, combined with the sheer scale of the crisis and its severe social impacts, led to a rather slow and limited response in practice.

An emphasis on user participation in socialism enabled and encouraged the creation of citizen associations, including those of people with particular disabilities. Such associations provided mutual aid throughout the post-war period, and particularly during the 1980s. Some of these, in alliance with social workers, began to yield the first radicalised practices just prior to the war. 'The Society for the Protection of Madness' was initiated in 1989 by junior social work academic staff, radical practitioners and service users in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the republic that had seen a growth of self-styled 'social movement' activities throughout the 1980s (Stubbs, 1996b). Traces of this radical practice remained in Slovenia and elements of critical theory, if not yet of practice, spread to the neighbouring republics. Unfortunately, the wars caught up with social work before these politicised elements could develop on a larger scale.

## Social work in war: crisis and the new humanitarianism

Most of the literature on social work in the former Yugoslav countries during the 1990s wars focuses on medicalised notions of trauma, in terms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (cf. Ajdukovic, 1998; Ajdukovic and Ajdukovic, 1998; Agger, 2001; Ai *et al.*, 2002; Barath, 2002; Kozaric-Kovacic *et al.*, 2002; Miller *et al.*, 2002). Some of the wider social policy implications of war were addressed, not least in the *Croatian Journal of Social Policy*, established in 1994 by the School of Social Work in Zagreb, Croatia. There is very little literature that explored changes within social work in this period, going beyond a narrow understanding of professional change to address social work in the context of wider social, economic and political change.

Across central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, the changes after 1989 led to a growth in previously unaddressed or unknown social problems such as unemployment (Wolchik and Leftwich Curry, 2010), homelessness (UN-Habitat, 2005), trafficking and prostitution (Hajdinjak, 2002), discrimination against ethnic minorities (Bieber, 2004) and widespread poverty (Matkovic, 2006). The war-affected countries such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo also experienced destruction of communities, violations of human rights, forced displacement of large numbers of people and family separation (Chytil *et al.*, 2009) as well as huge loss of life, the creation of a large number of people disabled by war and severe damage to housing and social infrastructure (Puljiz, 2001; Bisogno and Chong, 2002; Wegelin, 2003). Wars brought international attention to the region and led to an influx of international organisations. These agencies failed to recognise cultural traditions or the formal welfare system (Zavirsek, 2007), but became important actors in both identifying relevant social welfare issues and defining responses to them. The knowledge base, reflected in the references above, is primarily derived from studies conducted by international organisations, including the UN agencies and the World Bank. Although local researchers were often involved, these studies were framed in terms of the understandings of international organisations who also, rightly or wrongly, distrusted official state statistics.

The 'humanitarian space', whilst professing to be technical, non-political and oriented to immediate needs, was in some ways deeply political, substituting 'neutrality' for decisive intervention to stop the wars and represented a kind of 'sovereign frontier' marked by a 'mutual assimilation of donor and state power' (Harrison, 2001, p. 669). International non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the main implementers of international programmes, created what amounted to a parallel set of humanitarian interventions using local institutions, including CSWs only as distribution hubs for assistance—if at all (Stubbs, 2008). As a result, state-run social welfare provision remained unsupported and unchanged from its pre-1990s structure,



and most internationally supported practice was not developed with any reference to the local traditions and institutions. In parallel, many CSWs suffered physical damage and loss of staff through displacement or deaths (Kljajic, 1998; Sucur, 2003), and saw local NGOs competing for new, young, professionals or—in most cases—seeing professional qualifications in social work as irrelevant (Stubbs, 2008).

International efforts were largely uncoordinated and organisations distrusted each other due to competition for donor funding (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007). Their services and support tended to be provided fitfully, both over time and in terms of geographical coverage, and often focused on target groups defined by donor priorities more than actual individual and community needs. For example, very few initiatives worked with refugees, displaced people or overall communities to promote integration and to reduce levels of mistrust on the ground (Stubbs, 1996a). Rhetorically, NGOs were committed to reform, but this often involved labelling all public institutions as nationalist and outmoded, thus becoming a vehicle for a narrow marketisation and privatisation, more widely associated with a neo-liberal global agenda (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2005).

Social work was not only squeezed by a kind of neo-liberal charitable and humanitarian impulse. As indicated at the very beginning of this chapter, it was also heavily constrained through a focus on ‘psycho-social support’, on a hitherto unprecedented scale, to those seen as suffering from various kinds of war-induced ‘trauma’. The idea of ‘psycho-social’ functioning, relating to a ‘person-centred’ approach, emerged in the developed world in the 1960s, based on a fusion of sociological and psychological understandings (Gregory and Holloway, 2005). In its translation into the post-Yugoslav space during the wars, psychological approaches tended to dominate over any interest in social or community-based approaches (Mimica and Stubbs, 1996). Such therapeutic interventions were emphasised at the expense of, and with no connection to, broader counselling, peace-building, life-skills, self-esteem and self-help activities (Pupovac, 2001). The result was that the psychologists took the initiative to provide individual and group psychological assistance based on essentialist notions of large numbers of people suffering from PTSD, at the expense of a wider focus on social and community development. This also served to limit any politicised critique of the effects of living in refugee centres that, by and large, promoted passivity and emotional numbing (Pupovac, 2001) and amounted to a ‘medicalisation of the consequences of war’ (Pecnik and Stubbs, 1994, p. 36).

There was too little focus on skills retraining and income generation for refugees and displaced people to facilitate their access to and integration with host community resources and markets (Mimica and Stubbs, 1996). The dominance of psychological understanding of reactions to war-related experiences can also be perceived as a therapeutic mode of social control

(Pupovac, 2001, p. 360), giving it wider political significance. This is particularly relevant if considering evidence that the best recovery from traumatic events is ensured if individually experienced violence is placed in the context of collective struggle against it (Richters, 2001), instead of a narrow focus on individual vulnerability (Pupovac, 2001).

A notable exception to a narrow focus on psycho-social interventions was an initiative by local young professionals and students entitled 'Suncokret' ('Sunflower'), which combined ad hoc volunteer responses to the refugee crisis with an emergent grassroots radicalism and basic community work. During the wartime, it was the only organisation in which those who aimed to work with refugees and displaced persons did not merely visit refugee camps to distribute humanitarian aid or offer counselling and support services, but volunteers actually lived in the camps, in the same accommodation as the refugees and displaced persons. It was founded by Nina Pecnik, who was at the time an Assistant Lecturer at the Social Work Programme in Zagreb, and Wam Kat, a Dutch peace activist. Both were involved in the wider Anti-war Campaign in Croatia (cf. Bilic, 2010), but also keen to offer direct, practical support. Key initial activities included local and international volunteers organising activities for children across the majority of refugee camps in Croatia, and later also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These were often open not just to the children living in the camps, but also to the local children, in order to break down barriers between the local population, refugees and displaced persons. Through such activities with children, volunteers got to know their mothers and grandmothers and started organising support for them—depending on what they needed and wanted to do and the resources available. Links were also made with local CSWs, local health services and others (Pecnik and Stubbs, 1994).

Whilst truly international, 'Suncokret' was created and led by local professionals for local people. It also successfully recruited many refugees and displaced persons with skills and/or motivation to work within the organisation, hence enabling 'Suncokret' to promote self-help more than external support. 'Suncokret' was a rare example of a politicised, bottom-up, intervention, based on people's expressed needs, rather than seeing them solely as aid recipients. It grew based on those needs and wants and at a rather low cost. 'Suncokret' embodied working with individuals, as well as families, groups and communities, founded on respect for experiences and demands. Activities included whole-day and after-school activities for children, learning support for children of school age that struggled to keep up with their schoolwork due to war-related gaps in education, help with access to in-kind support and gaining formal refugee status, free-time activities for adults, creation of community work for refugees (e.g. access to land that they can cultivate for their own needs) and support for separated families. Later, in the context of increased funding and greater professionalisation, some of these founding ideals were lost (cf. Stubbs, 1997). However, the



example still shows what can be achieved if support promotes service users' own self-actualisation and relies on community development to address local needs.

## Social work after war: strategies, partnerships and capacity building

Recently, particularly in the context of EU accession requirements and requirements under key UN Conventions, there has been broad support for the development of community-based support services and deinstitutionalisation (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007). This was mainly approached as a technocratic and managerial exercise rather than an opportunity for the development of a greater politicisation of social work. In particular, the mobilisation of service users, members of local communities and grassroots professionals has been co-opted by the commitment of supra-national organisations such as the World Bank within the planning processes they initiated in individual countries. The reasons for this continued apoliticisation of social work are many and complex. In part, they relate to the extension of a conflict-specific 'projectisation' to the wider 'post-conflict' arena. This is characterised by programmes supported by international organisations that promote top-down strategic development, and build capacity in ministries and public agencies. Whilst there has been a kind of 'cognitive Europeanisation' (Guillen and Alvarez, 2004) in the region, which has led to a new framework of social inclusion, and has empowered advocates of human rights, gender equality and anti-discrimination, it has not touched the core of social work and social welfare sufficiently. The level of competition rather than coordination between agencies also limits the possibility for wider political change or, even for consistent political and policy reform messages (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007).

A relevant example stems from an analysis of World Bank and UN influence on child protection, often developed in the wider frame of 'social protection'. Across the region, child and social protection planning has been under the influence of country-wide strategic planning, promoted primarily through World Bank efforts. This mainly relates to the poverty reduction process that was introduced between 2001 and 2004 (Council of Ministers, Government of Albania, 2001; Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2002; Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2003; Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004), with some reference to the UN Millennium Development Goals, the first of which is to reduce poverty (further details are available online at [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)). However, numerous other strategies followed, including national strategies and action plans in relation to children's rights (Council of Ministers of the Republic

of Bulgaria, 2000; Office of the Minister of State for Co-ordination in Albania, 2001; Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2002; Council for Child Rights of the Republic of Serbia, 2004; Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2005) or, in some countries, strategies on the rights and needs of the specific target groups of children, such as children with disabilities, street children or juvenile offenders (Council of Ministers, Republic of Bulgaria, 2003*b*, 2003*c*, 2003*d*, 2003*e*; Office of the Minister of the State for Co-Ordination in Albania, 2001). Social Protection Strategies were the last to emerge, in the mid-2000s (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Albania, 2005; Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Protection of the Republic of Serbia, 2005; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2006). In Bulgaria, there is also a separate strategy on child protection (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2003*a*).

These built on the experiences that the World Bank (in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had gained through poverty assessments and programmes undertaken in other parts of the world in the 1990s, mainly in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe (including the former Soviet Union) (World Bank, 2000):

As of July 1998, 49 participatory poverty assessments had been undertaken—28 in Africa, 6 in Latin America, 11 in Eastern Europe, and 2 each in South and East Asia... which are part of the Europe and Central Asia Region at the Bank (World Bank, 1999, pp. 40–1).

In this respect, the Bank advocated for the process to rely heavily on participatory methodology, designed, in their view, to ensure local ownership:

There is a strong belief, backed by empirical evidence, that more progress in poverty reduction has been made in countries where the strategies pursued were fully owned by the government and by society at large.... This decision has three major implications: countries, not donors, would lead the process, assuming management and ownership; the formulation of strategies would be broadly participatory and the Bank and the Fund [IMF] would work much more closely together and with other development partners in support of country-owned strategies (World Bank, 2000, p. 36).

Since these strategies were developed in the region from 1999 onwards, the EU accession processes also had a major impact in terms of their content and focus on 'social inclusion'. This was mainly reflected in the key issues and themes, such as: decentralised governance and bottom-up policy planning (not just in social protection); pluralism of service providers (promotion of the role of non-governmental and private service providers); community-based care (and the related deinstitutionalisation of current provision); and improved targeting of material assistance (Europeaid, 2007). However, the degree of similarity between these strategies, with the same issues highlighted in each of the countries of the region, begs the question regarding the nature of 'local ownership'. Tight timelines

and the existence of clear conditionalities also raises concerns regarding whether these strategies were locally or donor-driven. Concern regarding such a 'blanket approach' was noted in a draft report of a regional study by UNICEF, which is still publically available ([UNICEF Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States, 2007](#), p. 18), but is missing from the final version of the same document ([UNICEF, 2008](#)). The 'cut and paste' approach to strategy development includes a straightforward 'translation' of concepts from one setting to another, which contributes to confusion and, in the end, to further depoliticisation, since there is little shared understanding, or even true dialogue, in the rapid transnational flows of agencies, actors, resources and, above all, concepts.

Further evidence of this approach exists in the fact that new bodies were created within different parts of national governments in the region to implement these strategies and action plans. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Economic Policy Planning Unit was set up to coordinate the creation and monitoring of the Mid-term Development Strategy. In Serbia, the Council for Child Rights was set up to formulate the Plan of Action for Children. In Albania, the Technical Secretariat for Children was established following the National Strategy and Action Plan for Children 2005–2010. These are the reform 'contact zones' ([Pratt, 1992](#), p. 6) in which previously disconnected actors now share a physical space but, in the context of 'radical asymmetries of power' ([Pratt, 1992](#), p. 7), struggle to share a conceptual space. It is an approach that seems to be driven by a form of systems thinking in which every element can be tied to each other and which is amenable to a kind of social engineering in which changes to different elements, if framed logically and implemented in the correct sequence, will produce desired outcomes. The sheer complexity of elements, borrowed concepts and actors makes this extremely difficult. This is particularly apparent in attempts to transform practice in constructed regions such as 'south-east Europe' or the 'Western Balkans', which is increasingly a target of international agency efforts attempting to model the EU's 'Open Method of Co-ordination' in candidate and prospective candidate countries.

A related example of a lack of conceptual clarity, chosen here because of our own direct involvement as external consultants (we were, respectively, authors of two key background papers: a sub-regional overview based on four country reports ([www.unicef.org/ceecis/SEE\\_CC\\_multicountry.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/SEE_CC_multicountry.pdf)) and an analysis of International Organizations and Child Care System Reform ([www.unicef.org/ceecis/IO\\_and\\_CCR\\_SEE.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/IO_and_CCR_SEE.pdf)), was UNICEF's Regional Consultation on Child Care System Reform for South East Europe, culminating in a conference in Sofia in July 2007 (the website ([www.unicef.org/ceecis/protection\\_7062.html](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/protection_7062.html)) provides an overview of the consultation and relevant background papers). UNICEF's Regional office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, in collaboration with the World Bank and with funding

from the Government of Sweden, hosted the event that brought together ten countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and Kosovo) to examine 'just about every aspect of child care reform in South East Europe with a view to learning from experience, discussing major stumbling blocks and reaching a consensus on a way forward' (UNICEF, 2008, p. 6).

In the end, a rather stage-managed consensus was reached, in terms of a rhetorical commitment to a child-care reform framework that appeared rather 'cut and pasted', as highlighted above. The level of crossover in terms of content and approaches was extremely high. Despite their geographical proximity, each of the countries had different historical, economic, social and political developments that simply seemed to be ignored. Whilst the universalising approach contained many relevant and progressive elements, such as the commitment to community rather than institutional care, the real gap was between these rhetorical statements and actual practice.

Key concepts such as 'statutory services' or 'gate-keeping', frequently noted in the regional strategies and during the Conference, may not be universal, not least since these concepts are also embedded in other systems from other contexts and may not 'translate' either easily or literally. During the Conference, a significant gap emerged between those fluent in such concepts, those pretending to be fluent because they realised these were 'buzzwords' and those who were rather concerned with the lack of time spent on achieving a basic definitional consensus. The way in which words become keywords and the contested nature of this are best expressed by Raymond Williams in his classic book *Keywords*, in which he argues that 'the complexity ... is not finally in [a] word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate' (Williams, 1976, p. 81).

Such fragmentation and proliferation of projects, programmes and, even, strategic support involving international actors (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007) make any concerted progressive alliance between (ideally) politicised social workers and service users almost impossible. Positive impacts of the development of some community-based services and user participation during the wartime and immediate post-war period were quickly lost as international community interest turned elsewhere (e.g. to Afghanistan and Iraq) and internationally run projects faced dramatic cuts in their budgets. Innovations that had not had a chance to become institutionalised were quickly lost as these agencies hastily developed 'exit strategies' involving transition to being run by local staff, mainly through the creation of new local NGOs.

Whilst touted, rhetorically, as promoting local ownership and sustainability, the reality was very different. Systematic training and support were replaced in practice with time-limited and rather chaotic seminars and workshops with different foreign consultants, as part of 'technical capacity building' instigated by funders. This term represents an additional

depoliticised concept that disconnects capacity from both the political will and the commitment of resources that are needed to 'get things done'. On a state level, such exercises appear to have a rather instrumental value, convincing donors that money has been spent successfully, and allowing policy makers opportunities to travel without much real exchange of ideas. On a grassroots level, local staff, whose original reason for being hired was often little more than having the ability to speak English, got trained to reinforce, rather than critique, an administrative-technical approach to the work without insight or clarity into the above-noted conceptual understanding of the work they were asked to do, or the history of social welfare in their own countries (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007). Rather than being driven by principle, local organisations, understandably perhaps, pursued project funding at all costs, willing to move from one theme to another as donor interest changed and funds were diverted from one issue to another extremely quickly (Maglajlic Holicek and Rasidagic, 2007). Hence, for example, one leading organisation that supported the country-wide development of community mental health services in the late 1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the money for this reform ran out, had no problem, conceptual or otherwise, to subsequently implement programmes that 'strengthened the capacity' of staff working in institutional care for children without parental care. Ten years on, in the late 2000s, once there was renewed interest in mental health reform, the same organisation returned to work on service user involvement and support for the development of community-based mental health services. Such conceptual and ethical U-turns were common practice and rarely, if ever, subject to internal or external reflection regarding their impact on the livelihoods of service users that are meant to benefit from these reforms.

## Conclusions

In their different ways, the case studies offer an opportunity to reflect on a number of interlinked common themes that amplify a continued depoliticisation of social work in the region. They show the problematic nature of the use of English-language terms and concepts as a base for policy translations and implementation. They also address the pervasiveness of short-term, project-based reforms and reform pilots over the last two decades, and the donor-driven, trend-based nature of the focus of reforms in which certain groups are prioritised over others. The examples demonstrate the absence of a holistic approach to reform and of genuine local ownership of reform strategies.

In addition, some other factors contribute to this absence of any locally driven reform processes and a lack of wider political engagement by social workers and service users. The appropriation of participatory methodologies by supranational organisations resulted in little attempt to

transfer meaningful knowledge on how to use these methodologies in practice. In a study that enabled social work students, practitioners and service users to act as co-researchers and explore the nature of social work education and practice in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and England, the results were surprisingly similar (Maglajlic Holicek, 2009). In both contexts, whilst pursuing locally generated themes and interests, these three groups of social work stakeholders concluded that they need social work practice that does not focus exclusively on individuals, but supports community action and the creation of community-based support systems rather than a narrow focus on casework. The vision expressed as required to address current needs included social workers focusing on rights and acting as change agents on the local level. In conflict and post-conflict areas, such initiatives are seldom initiated by social workers (Lavalette, 2010) and rarely attract sustainable funding from donors.

These types of reforms, as well as a wider politicisation of social work, require a long-term focus on and investment in local communities. Whilst wary of the dangers of projectising politics (as in proposals we have seen for external actors to establish anti-poverty coalitions throughout the region), the importance of transnational alliances between social workers, community activists and service users would seem to be crucial in any serious attempt to move beyond the current status quo. In contested and complex post-conflict states, the need to connect such radicalised social work with peace-building and political activism, challenging oppressive and discriminatory attitudes and practices, is even more necessary. The need to learn and act trans-nationally has to be built on a set of principles that seek to delink social work as a profession from processes of one-way policy transfer in which post-conflict societies are seen as emerging markets for northern and Western experts. The experiences of practitioners in south-east Europe have much to teach us in our quest for more democratic forms of social work practice, but have yet to be 'processed' and reflected on in the wider international social work context.

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