

Reflective report of

**Cara Gibney**

Voluntary Staff Member

**Centre for Nonviolent Action – Sarajevo**  
**Centar za nenasilnu Akciju - Sarajevo**

INTRODUCTION .....	3
DEBRIEFING OF MY TIME WORKING IN CNA .....	3
<i>Jobs, Achievements and progress</i> .....	3
Fundraising .....	3
Training .....	3
Report writing .....	4
Computer skills .....	4
Organisational .....	4
Language skills .....	4
<i>Uncompleted elements</i> .....	4
Evaluation before I left .....	4
LIVING & WORKING .....	5
Location .....	5
Office facilities .....	5
Accommodation .....	5
The team .....	5
The Times We Were Working In. ....	6
STYLE OF TRAINING .....	7
FUTURE DIRECTION .....	8
ANECDOTES AND ATTITUDES .....	8
The tram tickets ‘We’ll never get to Europe’ .....	8
Teslic .....	8
Sending Christmas .....	9
Progress in Sarajevo .....	9
Taxi .....	9

## **Introduction**

I arrived in Sarajevo to work for the Centre for Nonviolent Action – Sarajevo (CNA) in November 1998, and left in June 2000. During my time there I had various jobs including report writing, fundraising, training organisation, development, implementation, evaluation and documentation. When I arrived CNA consisted of 2 members of staff, when I left there were 5 staff members; 2 from Sarajevo – Adnan Hasanbegovic and Jasmin Redzepovic, 2 from Belgrade – Ivana Franovic and Nenad Vukosavljevic, and myself from Belfast.

Before I left CNA, Martina Fischer from the Berghof Institute for Constructive Conflict Management offered me the opportunity to come to their Centre in Berlin for a number of weeks and write a reflective report on my time in CNA. I accepted this offer happily, and my time here in the Berghof Centre has been an outstanding chance to reflect, discuss, meet people, get more informed, and think forward. I cannot thank Berghof enough for this opportunity to work out how to start taking stock of experiences in CNA and Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH), and where they lead me in regard to future work.

This reflection will be written from the point of view of my work in CNA and my personal experience in BiH. It will include a debriefing of my time working with CNA, living & working space, working environment, style of training, the times we worked in, my future direction, my future direction, anecdotes and attitudes.

## **Debriefing of my time working in CNA**

### **Jobs, Achievements and progress**

#### **Fundraising**

I got involved in the funding processes of CNA soon after I arrived. One of my first agreed CNA tasks was researching potential funders on the web and setting up a database. The Macedonia training events necessitated research and proposal writing within a tight deadline. This was the most obvious source of fundraising experience for me, and the lessons I learnt from that helped me greatly in further fundraising work/ proposal writing that I needed to do for CNA. I continued to research, contact, meet with and write proposals to potential funders throughout my time at CNA.

Any achievements made I cannot claim as my own. Actually reaching the stage of receiving a donation was a culmination of contacts, meetings, follow-ups, and proposal writing, editing and formatting by all and various members of the team. Reaching each of the stages involved before receiving any chance of a donation was an achievement in itself.

#### **Training**

During my time in CNA I was involved in two 10-day training events, and a number of short one or two day events. They were in English language, and most included participants from inside and outside former Yugoslavia. My language skills were not high enough to consider facilitating in local language. This did have a spin-off effect. Staff who were involved with the implementation of training were involved with the participant contact and organisation as well. Due to this natural task division I was less involved with the participants of the local language seminars, and more involved with other tasks of the office during that period.

The organisation of seminars was detailed work and time consuming. A lot of work was put into the organisation of 2 ten-day training events in Macedonia that were planned to take place back to back

over the space of a month. Due to funding difficulties this project had to be cancelled soon before it was due to start. I had been involved with the organisation of this project for several months and was very disappointed. However I did not feel that the work had been unproductive because the contacts could be used and for me the learning had been huge. Learning on logistics, teamwork, inter-office/inter-country communication, cultural differences, proposal writing, task and expectation clarification, and patience.

My involvement in the development and implementation of seminars and workshops was I feel beneficial to me and to the events. I gained ideas and insights and experience, and I also gave them.

### **Report writing**

I was responsible for quite a lot of report writing, one large reason for this being that they were in English. It was good for me to get practice at writing, at proof reading, editing, etc. I did have a sense of achievement when a report was finished, but the actual task on many occasions I found dry and sometimes even frustrating. Because of the language factor it made sense that I was responsible for reports. But others needed this practice as well and a decision was made eventually to pass this on to other staff members. It was awkward, the timing was bad, and these staff members had other things that needed to be done also within a tight deadline. The timing was never going to be good. I felt awkward at some stages, but I think we were all aware how necessary it was.

### **Computer skills**

Through support from staff members, from writing reports, documentations and proposals, and through having 24-hour access to the computer, I improved my computer skills. These skills are not great, but in comparison to my own skills before working in CNA they have progressed well.

### **Organisational**

The insight needed to cover all aspects of organising a seminar can only be gained, I feel, through experience. The amount of time it takes, the amount of detail, the amount of checking, how much you rely on others to respond within your time-lines, dates, travel, collection points, the list goes on. As dealing in detail doesn't come naturally to me I found this needs concentrated effort. But it paid off; the organisation of the seminars although not perfect did go well.

### **Language skills**

My Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian language skills improved, but not enough. I never got beyond the stage of basic conversation. My reading of local language was much stronger and I reached the stage of being able to read drafts in local language and give feedback, which is an achievement. But it's not good enough. I feel this affected my value to CNA. I recognise that this would be an issue with most international volunteers on the staff, at least for an initial period. However it is an aspect of my 'progress' as a member of the team that I am disappointed with.

## **Uncompleted elements**

### **Evaluation before I left**

I left at the same time that Training for Trainers II (TfT) was starting. I had been in Croatia for a week before that, and the rest of the CNA staff were focusing on organising the TfT. At the beginning of May we had implemented a 10-day Balkan wide training, after which we evaluated and documented

the event. The training had had difficulties, and the evaluation of it had been tough. Although it had put things out into the open, it had been hard, and I was not feeling good after it. We all needed a break after the training and documentation, and soon after that the preparations for the TtT II started, and I had various jobs to do and people to see before I left the country. This all for me justified not taking the space for evaluation of my time in CNA. Although all these issues are absolutely valid, at the end of the day I have to admit that they were too useful an excuse. I was still not 100% comfortable after the Balkan wide training evaluation. More over I was preparing to leave, mentally moving out, and therefore I was more than happy to simply be lazy. An evaluation never took place.

## **Living & Working**

### **Location**

The CNA office is 10-15 minutes walk from the city centre; a nice walk in the summer, a snowy adventure when winter reaches its height. (At times the snow reached my thighs). The last half of the walk from town is along a badly lit street that becomes deserted quite early.

Bentbasa, the area where the office is situated, runs along the banks of the Miljacka River, and the view from the balcony is the river and the riverbanks, leading up to roads and houses on the other side. It would be quite a perfect view if it were not for the rubbish dump on the riverbank where people tip loads of rubbish from the road and it rolls down into the river below.

### **Office facilities**

When I joined CNA there was one PC computer and one laptop. When I left there were 3 PC's and one laptop. All had Internet access. With 5 members of staff this meant that one person did not have their own specific working space, but it was ample resources for the work that needed to be done. The office is centrally heated in winter.

### **Accommodation**

CNA rents 2 floors from the landlord. The top floor has one bedroom and a large living room; the bottom floor has a large office space and one other room that was my bedroom. Advantages were that I did not have any travelling to do in order to get to the office. I had 24-hour access to the office facilities, which allowed working hours to suit me when possible, and suit difficult situations when needed. I wasn't living on my own, and as a stranger in a strange land I appreciated that. Disadvantages were that having a bedroom beside the office limits privacy, 24 hour access to office facilities meant that the office was present 24 hours a day, every day, and sometimes working and living with the same people can be exhausting (2 other staff lived in the flat upstairs).

### **The team**

One main aspect of the way that CNA works, is shared responsibility for CNA, for the process and consequences of the work. My experience was that in aiming at consensus, decisions were not made by one person. Everyone had the right and responsibility to an equal say in what was (or was not) being discussed, and in the decision making process. Difficult decisions such as whether or not to continue with a project benefited greatly from this. And I think the team and the work of the team did as well. People's knowledge, experience and questions could be shared, rather than presented as an argument for or against a decision or choice.

I worked in an atmosphere where everyone's voice was needed and desired, which was a truly empowering and constructive experience for me. Sometimes it felt that everything was discussed. In fact they could be discussed several times, with no real result at the end. This was a thin line for me, trying to work out how much of my feelings of frustration were impatience and not having a large amount of experience in this type of environment; and how much of it was space for improvement within our practice. Perhaps the atmosphere that encouraged discussion so much did not encourage enough preparation before the discussion. Or the atmosphere of healthy questioning did not leave enough time in the working day for working on the answers. Or maybe my need for a result, worked against my support of the process.

Within this environment, status became an issue for me. Staff members quite naturally had differing attitudes towards the history of each member. A certain background elicited more regard than another. On occasion I felt that this effected the weight of suggestions and arguments made by various staff members. I considered this at odds with the CNA ethos of equal say and responsibility. This was discussed, but was a difficult issue for me to articulate. I did not want to minimise the validity of anyone's background, but I went through phases of feeling uncomfortable with the balance of credibility within the team; and how this was transferred outside in presentation of CNA to other organisations and individuals.

Another issue that may or may not be connected with this was gender. There were instances when the males in the staff were the ones approached by other organisations, communicated with in meetings, asked for interviews or meetings, the names that were passed on as contacts by other groups, and considered to be the decision makers. I do not feel that this was encouraged by the male staff of CNA, but unless it was extreme, I do not think it was particularly noticed by them either. Perhaps comparative comments can be made about me and my level of sensitivity to discriminatory behaviour by internationals to non 'international' (from former Yugoslavia) CNA staff members. I feel I was sensitive to this, but perhaps not enough.

Conducting training in nonviolent communication did not guarantee that our communication with each other was always wonderful. With only 5 members of staff, CNA was full of different personalities, different cultures, different languages, different ideas and expectations. We all put effort into how we worked with each other. I felt 'how can I facilitate on nonviolent conflict transformation if I put more effort into seminar participants, than into the people I spend most of my time with'. My communication as member of the team ranged from bad to good. From being impatient or defensive, to sensitive and supportive. A quite healthy space was established to deal with issues, or to take a step back. A space that was essential considering the amount of discussion and shared responsibility that was taking place. I appreciated it very much, I felt that I could speak up, or share feelings, without being considered dramatic. I think this space is one of the strengths of CNA. I wonder how I will feel in future work places without it, or without this effort.

### **The Times We Were Working In.**

Early in 1999 the President of Republika Srpska (RS), Bosnian Serb radical Poplasen was removed by the Office of the High Representative. It was also decided during these months that the contentious municipality of Brcko would be a specific area that belongs to both RS and the Federation, and was not to be governed by one of them alone. Because of these decisions, feelings against the international community ran high in RS. This feeling was to become stronger in March, when violence exploded in FRY, on the ground and from the air.

The events in FRY stopped us in our tracks. Specific projects were postponed, the present time did not allow for people to travel. Also CNA needed time for itself. The different feelings of individuals inside CNA were very tangible, personal histories were in the foreground and much difficult discussion and reflecting took place. It was a painful and complicated time for us.

In June 1999 the Stability pact for South East Europe was launched, the first summit of which was held in Sarajevo in July of that year. A cross regional approach to work in the region became a focus for international organisations and funders. A focus I might add that took a long time to materialise in their funding policies, and by spring of 2000 donors that we approached were still unsure of funding issues in connection with the pact.

The death of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman in December 1999 and the following election victory of Stjepan Mesic of the Croatian People's Party, promised change for Croatia, BiH, and beyond. Mesic made a highly publicized visit to BiH soon after his election victory and the political atmosphere started to shift in a more positive direction. Municipal elections in BiH in April 2000 were perhaps too soon after the Croatian elections to benefit from political changes in Croatia, and Croat nationalists maintained their HDZ hold on Croat majority areas. Bosniak areas saw a shift from the ruling nationalist oriented SDA, and in RS the hard line SDS won in the majority of municipalities.

## **Style of training**

This is something I am still very much working on and do not have many clear thoughts to commit to paper. My work with CNA focused on a particular style of nonviolent conflict transformation training. Indeed facilitation rather than training. This facilitation heavily relying on voluntary participation of the people attending the training, not just physically, but mentally, actively taking part in the workshops. The facilitator's job not to direct the participants, but to elicit their knowledge, skills, and experience so that they are shared with the whole group. We all benefit from each other. This attitude then shares the responsibility for the process of the work and for the usefulness of the training with everyone in the workshops – participants and facilitators. This sense of responsibility and worth is worked on and transferred to the bigger picture, to the issues that participants are dealing with outside the training seminar. It is empowering and of concrete use to people who are active or want to become active in their communities. The aspect of responsibility is an important point for me. The aspect of individual responsibility.

This style does not suit all groups and personalities. Voluntary participation is effected by many different variables. And different responses to it affect the course of a training seminar and it's usefulness for the participants in many different ways. I want to learn more, get more experience, on how to use the best of this technique in working with people who are not ready or willing to take responsibility, or to participate. I am full of questions.

- ◆ What are the issues I need to consider when dealing with the aspect of responsibility?
  - Motivations for attending (E.g. Seminar tourism).
  - Never having worked like this before, maybe they don't actually recognise the point.
  - They disagree with the point.
  - Culturally different attitudes.
  - Previous training experience that has been good for them, but not worked like this.
  - More credibility and or respect for directive approach.
  - Maturity of individual.
  - Maturity of civil society from where the individual comes.
  - Personality.
  - Sabotage.
  - Issues with the training team.
  - Conflicting expectations of the training event
- ◆ Which of the above can/should be considered while selecting participants?
- ◆ How illustrative is it of attitudes towards taking responsibility for community processes?
- ◆ What techniques can I consider, what points are there to remember, what lessons to be learned when I am working with people who are not taking responsibility?

- ◆ Am I too focused on sharing of responsibility? What alternatives have I simply not considered?
- ◆ Where is the best place to start getting answers to these questions, and getting information on issues I have not considered in relation not just to training, but community work, conflict transformation, civil society? Do I carry on with the practice, or stop for a while and seriously study, or try to live in a world I haven't quite been able to create yet, where there is time and money for both?

Working with CNA has given me a concrete foundation to ask questions from. It is a foundation I did not have before. Just questions. It feels better starting to see how much I don't know.

## **Future Direction**

I left CNA, and BiH, and former Yugoslavia, because no matter how much I wanted to stay, it was time to go home and face my own monsters. My intentions are to get involved with the work in Northern Ireland that is needed to bring us beyond the 'troubled' province that we are at present. I start a job on my return where an exchange between South Africa and Northern Ireland will take place in the town of Lurgan, near Portadown. Apart from the value of this actual project, the job will also re-establish my presence with people and organisations working in the Northern Ireland community.

I see real value in exchange between former Yugoslavia and Ireland/N.Ireland, in sharing knowledge and experience. I have started researching groups in N.Ireland that are or may be active on this issue, and this research will continue for the foreseeable future.

As mentioned above, I am full of questions and have much to learn. My time with CNA has helped me beyond words with the decisions I have made and all those questions I have. I could not buy that with diamonds.

## **Anecdotes and Attitudes**

### **The tram tickets 'We'll never get to Europe'**

One afternoon a woman from Banja Luka, a woman from Belgrade and myself were getting the tram in Sarajevo. None of us had got the tram in Sarajevo before. We bought the tickets from the driver. There was a small hole punched in the top right hand corner, we all assumed that this meant it had already been stamped. Three ticket collectors came on a few stops later and checked the passengers' tickets. They jumped on the 3 of us when they saw that we had not stamped our tickets. We tried to explain we thought it already was stamped, they told us they had heard all of these excuses before. The fine was 15DM I think, a lot of money for BiH. We started to complain. As we did so a woman at the back of the bus started shouting at the ticket inspectors 'leave them alone, let them stamp their tickets', then another one joined in 'stop doing this, we'll never get to Europe this way', it turned into a chorus from several women on the tram, the initial annoyance they had felt towards the inspectors seemed to fade as they started to enjoy shouting at them, 'don't you have any other trams to check?' The inspectors bundled us off the tram at the next stop. I know myself and the woman from Belgrade paid the fine, I'm not sure about the other.

### **Teslic**

In Teslic, Republika Srpska I went to the post office to post some letters. I had written my Sarajevo return address on the back of them. I was ignored by the woman at the counter. She was talking with her colleague, and then started to count something. Eventually, with no eye contact, she took the



letters. On reading the return address on the first one she checked the others too. Then she left the counter and brought them to her colleague several kiosks away. They both returned to the window and stared at me. I had become nervous, perhaps I had broken a taboo putting a federation return address. The woman asked me did I live in Bentbasa in Sarajevo. I said yes. They looked at each other. 'We used to live near there,' they said, 'and we can't go back'. I didn't know what to say, 'I'm sorry, I'm lucky that I am there' was the best I could do. There was a silence, she took my letters, and I felt their eyes watch me as I left. I started to feel privileged and western again.

I went into the shop to collect the photocopying I had left in a few days earlier. It was a book of workshops and exercises. As I entered the shop the man jumped up and ran behind me closing the door tight. 'Come here' he said, 'I want to talk about this book'. He opened the page at the statement of Pastor Neimoller 'First they came for the communists...'. He was agitated and tapping the page with his finger 'I've never heard anything like this before' he said. Then there was a knock at the shop door, he closed the book and opened the door slowly. He knew the man outside. 'Come here', he said as he pulled him in and closed the door tight again; 'I want to show you this book'. He opened the page at Pastor Neimoller. The man read it, he didn't say much, he looked at me quite darkly. The shop owner asked me about my work, he shook his head as I told him. The other man flicked through the book at arms length. As I was eventually leaving I said to the man he should take a copy for himself. 'Oh no problem', he said, as he opened the door for another customer.

### **Sending Christmas**

Christmas 1998 I wanted to send gifts to my family. I've got a big family. Nenad and I went to the post office, where he started to show signs of not looking forward to this. I had bought them all Bosnian slippers and most were in separate envelopes. At the parcel counter we were told that they could not be sent in the envelopes, I need to buy boxes. So I bought 3 boxes. For each box I think 3 forms (in duplicate) needed to be filled in. These forms needed to be bought or stamped from 2 or 3 other counters. The man at the parcel counter didn't agree with the woman at another counter about exactly which forms should be bought, that took some time to sort out. Some of the forms needed to be stuck to the parcels, but there was no glue at the parcel counter, that took some time to find. The post office only accepted Konvertible Marks, instead of Deutchmarks, it took another 'few minutes' to deal with. We received our change from the Konvertible marks in Deutchmarks. Ten years later we left the post office. Nenad said to me 'I'm never going to do that again, I hope you realise how culturally sensitive I have been.' (In tolerating my desire to send small gifts to every member of my large family). It was one of the few occasions in my entire time with CNA that I didn't counter his comment.

### **Progress in Sarajevo**

During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia a friend from Belgrade came to Sarajevo for a few days. As we walked along the street she said 'all of this destruction, all these buildings, it really depresses me to think what Belgrade will be like'. I tried to be positive 'But look at all the effort that has been put into them, at the difference that has been made over the past few years'. She gave a dry laugh, 'that's what depresses me Cara'

### **Taxi**

I had already told the driver I was married; it cut out a lot of ambiguity. 'Where are you from?' he asked. 'Belfast' I replied. His eyes widened as he looked at me instead of watching the road. 'Where is your husband?' 'Belfast' I replied. 'He should come here' he told me. 'Why' I asked. 'Because Belfast is a very dangerous place'. I looked out the window at the streets of Sarajevo. I tried to tell him otherwise.

'Where are you from?' I asked,  
'Sarajevo he replied'.

'Maybe you should go to Belfast'.

He laughed 'What for? We have peace now'.

I laughed too 'So do we'.

'Do you?'

'Not really'

He turned off the radio and we drove in silence. 'I'm a Croat' he said, 'you're from Belfast, you know what it is like to be in a Catholic minority'.

'Well I...'

'Life is difficult, it's very difficult to be in a minority, this is my home and people don't want me to be here, .....your husband should come here, you shouldn't be on your own, tell him to come here, we need more Catholics, tell him to bring his friends.... '