

Creating a Significant Impact: Using the Most Significant Change Technique to Evaluate Generations For Peace's Programming in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Executive Summary

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Generations For Peace Institute Research | Programme Research | 7

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Research Conducted

This executive summary is based on research that was conducted for the non-profit, peace-building organisation, Generations For Peace (GFP). Based in Jordan, GFP trains volunteers in core conflict transformation skills, so that they can go back to their societies and run peace-building programmes. Through its volunteers, the organisation works to achieve conflict transformation in communities across Europe, Asia and Africa.

The report analyses programmes conducted by the organisation in the Republic of Macedonia (hereafter referred to as Macedonia) between 2013-15. To analyse these programmes, fieldwork was carried out during July-August 2015 at the two sites in which GFP has programmes in Macedonia: Skopje, the capital, and Tetovo, an Albanian-majority town in the country's northwest. The report looks at the following three questions: firstly, what were the most significant changes among the participants of the programmes (the Target Group, in this case children) and the members of the wider community who were indirectly affected by the programme (the Beneficiary Community, in this case the children's parents); secondly, to see if the programmes achieved their stated aims of improving inter-ethnic relations in mixed-ethnic schools; and, thirdly, to see what advantages the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach (described below), can bring to the existing GFP evaluation model.

The researcher used a mix of methods to assess the results of GFP programming in Macedonia: surveys were carried out with 45 respondents (Target Group members, Beneficiary Community members, and GFP volunteers) and ten interviews were conducted with GFP's volunteers. In addition, the researcher used the MSC approach, an open-ended evaluation method that does not use indicators.¹ The approach is based on asking stakeholders and programme participants to come up with a narrative to describe what they saw as the most significant change that occurred during the timeframe of a particular intervention. These stories are first of all *collected* to list a series of significant changes; following this, participants in the process discuss the significance of the stories and *select* the most significant. These results are then communicated back to the individuals affected by the programming. To use this approach, the researcher collected a total of 61 stories from the Target Group, the Beneficiary Community and the volunteers, and held four in-person workshops for MSC story selection. This method was used alongside the Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) model GFP already has in place and allowed the researcher to assess what advantages the MSC approach could bring to the organisation.

The report serves as both a detailed evaluation of community-level peace-building programmes working in contexts of ethnic tension as well as an assessment of the MSC approach – an innovative, largely untested, means of intervention evaluation. Through this, the report offers conclusions and recommendations for

¹ Rick Davis and Jess Dart, 'The Most Significant Change Technique: A Guide to its Use', 2005.

future GFP interventions, which have an internal relevance to the organisation and external relevance to the broader development and peace-building field.

Conflict Context

Conflict in Macedonia is closely connected to larger, regional hostilities resulting from the breakdown of the Former Yugoslavia. The country narrowly escaped civil war in 2001 and has deep-seated structural grievances as well as inter- and intra-ethnic tensions, chiefly between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority.² This ongoing conflict means that Macedonia has the potential for overt violence.

In its programmes in Macedonia, GFP brings together children from different ethnicities in local schools to improve their attitudes towards and perceptions of children from other ethnicities with the aim of reducing tensions and the potential for violence. These children are the Target Groups of the programmes. For both these programmes the children's parents served as the Beneficiary Community. In Tetovo, GFP works in the Andreja Saveski Kjikijish Primary School, while in Skopje, GFP works in Panajot Ginovski Primary School. Macedonia's school system is important in perpetuating the conflict in the country, which plays out in segregated classes, through stereotypes and prejudices.³ Thus, GFP's work deals directly with the micro manifestations of a macro-level conflict that has plagued the country over the past two decades. It is the effectiveness of this micro-level work that this report assesses.

Findings

The findings are discussed here as they relate to each of the three research questions: firstly, about what the most significant changes were, then about programme effectiveness, and, finally, about the use of the MSC approach for the evaluation of GFP programming.

In terms of what change caused by the programmes in Tetovo and Skopje was the most significant, the analysis of the MSC stories shows, firstly, that all groups focused largely on the theme of ethnicity, with 57 per cent of the Target Group and Beneficiary Community and 70 per cent of the volunteers telling a story that related to that theme. This shows that ethnicity was a major concern for all groups, in both field sites. Secondly, after analysing the themes and disaggregating that analysis by the three sub-groups involved, the researcher found that there was a degree of difference in attitudes towards what counts as a significant change between the Volunteers, the Target Group, and the Beneficiary Community. The researcher divided the stories thematically into different domains, in order to analyse the topics that they covered. While all three groups saw ethnicity as significant, each valued other changes differently. The Volunteers privileged

² Violeta Petrovska-Beska and Mirjana Najcevska, 'Macedonia: Understanding History, Preventing Future Conflict', United States Institute of Peace (2004).

³ Ibid.

communication – meaning changes in language skills/communication strategies – and learning – meaning lessons/concepts attained through programming – much more so than the other two groups. The Beneficiary Community valued behaviour and respect – meaning alterations in the children’s demeanour such as increased self-esteem, learning, and happiness – far more than the Target Group (41 per cent compared to seven per cent). In contrast, the Target Group emphasised other themes such as making friends through communication and social networks, which the Beneficiary Community valued far less; 44.5 per cent of the Target Group mentioned these compared to 16 per cent of Beneficiary Community members. These findings reveal a divergence in priorities among the main groups involved with or affected by the programmes.

In terms of programme effectiveness, the findings show that both the programmes achieved their goals in terms of outcomes (change arising from the intervention observed in the Target Group), but not in terms of impacts (change arising from the intervention observed in the Beneficiary Community). The researcher used surveys with MSC workshop attendees, interviews with the volunteers and the MSC stories themselves to assess whether the programming achieved its goals. These multiple methods revealed a discrepancy in terms of how different groups experienced change. While the Target Groups experienced a positive attitudinal shift – in Skopje 92 per cent and in Tetovo 93 per cent of Target Group survey respondents said that inter-ethnic relations had improved – the Beneficiary Communities were already fairly tolerant and accepting prior to the programme intervention. This was demonstrated by the fact that 100 per cent of the Skopje Beneficiary Community said that they were comfortable with their children partaking in a programme with another ethnic group. The MSC stories did not present anything different in terms of changes in the Beneficiary Community. In fact, from the MSC stories for both Beneficiary Communities, 100 per cent covered changes that had occurred in the *Target Group* rather than in themselves. As a result, the report concludes that the Beneficiary Community did not demonstrate significant attitudinal change.

This finding serves as an answer to the third research question on whether the MSC approach adds to pre-existing M&E processes for GFP. Clearly, the approach unearthed findings about changes that indicator-based approaches struggled to measure. It allowed the researcher to ask difficult and complex questions about sensitive issues to do with changes in inter-ethnic attitudes. As an evaluation tool, it provided detailed, informative answers to such questions – far more so than quantitative methods. This demonstrates powerfully the usefulness of MSC in programme evaluations, specifically how it can compensate for the weaknesses of more widely used methods.

Based on the MSC approach, the researcher found that there was a problem in the logic that underlay the programmes: the idea that the programmes would create a change in the Target Group (the children) and then would create a change in the Beneficiary Community (their parents) was problematic. While the programmes achieved their aim of bringing about an improvement in inter-ethnic relations among the Target

Group, as demonstrated by the sheer amount of stories collected that concerned ethnicity, change was not observed in the Beneficiary Community. Thus, the report argues that the selection of the parents as the beneficiaries of the programmes was incorrect; they would have instead been better conceived as stakeholders or supporters of the programmes. From qualitative analysis of the MSC stories, the researcher found that other children – the Target Group’s peers – would have been a more appropriate choice for the Beneficiary Community. Children were considered in the stories as being malleable, with an ability to internalise lessons and externalise them to others. This suggested that other children in the community were more susceptible to indirect influence from the programme than the parents of Target Group members.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings above have broad implications for GFP, which the researcher was able to turn into actionable recommendations. A selection of recommendations is provided below. For the entire list, please see the full report. The suggestions below are divided here into recommendations that concern the programming and recommendations that concern methodology:

Programmatic Recommendations:

- **Equal consideration of programme goals:** The findings reveal a discrepancy among the three main groups involved with the programme over what its goals should be.
 - The researcher recommends that equal consideration be given to the goals of each group during the programme design stage, in order to ensure maximum community buy-in. This could be achieved through prior consultation of the groups involved in the programme, such as the Target Group and Beneficiary Community.
- **Improve selection process for Beneficiary Community:** The findings powerfully demonstrate that the Beneficiary Community in both the Macedonia programmes was mistakenly identified.
 - In order to find out who in the community will be indirectly affected by the programme, consultations and community assessments should be conducted prior to designing the programme to ensure that the Target Group and Beneficiary Community have been correctly identified.

Methodological Recommendations:

- **The MSC approach should be used when measuring concepts that are difficult to quantify:** The findings show that the MSC process is particularly effective at shedding light on highly subjective concepts such as ethnicity, attitudinal and behavioural change.

- For GFP, the researcher recommends that for programming which addresses such sensitive issues, mentioned above, the MSC approach should be used to enhance the organisation's ability to accurately measure change.
- **The MSC approach should serve as an alternative tool when evidence yielded by other methods is inconclusive:** The findings show that the MSC approach uncovers issues missed by other tools.
 - For GFP, the MSC approach should be applied in cases where the effects of a programme are in doubt or seemingly not occurring; the findings of this report prove that the approach is able to unearth change or lack thereof where other methods fail to do so.

The findings serve as a vindication of the MSC approach. The method was able to shed light on difficult-to-research issues through being open-ended; it revealed what the different groups in the programme valued, demonstrating the inter-connectivity of the themes/goals of the programme; and, finally, it unearthed flaws in the programme that other methods had not. This makes it an incredibly useful tool when used for programme evaluations in conjunction with other methods. For GFP, it provides a valuable means of investigating change when other methods have not succeeded. Together, the recommendations provided through the report will contribute to improving GFP's programming and M&E processes; more broadly, these recommendations can be used elsewhere to help make programming and M&E processes more responsive to those they are designed to help.