Bosnia's War Victims Let Down by NGOs

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Funding for victim support does not always translate into visible change for vulnerable groups.

Adila Tiro is 92 years old and lives alone in a small village near the town of Rogatica, in eastern Bosnia. With no regular income, she struggles to make ends meet every month.

“I beg God every night to take me,” she says quietly, knitting a sock in her tiny, cluttered kitchen, which she heats with a wood-burning stove.

She wears a brown headscarf and walks with two canes, which she also uses to shoo away stray dogs from her yard.

Rogatica was captured by Bosnian Serb forces at the beginning of the 1992-95 war. In 1994, they arrested Tiro, who was 75 at the time, and held her at a prison camp in Kula, near Sarajevo. She was released in 1995 after six months in detention.

In 2002, Tiro’s modest brick house was repaired with money she had received from the development organisation World Vision, and she returned home the same year.

That was not the end of her problems. Despite being a victim of war, Tiro has received no support from any of the numerous victim organisations that exist in Bosnia.

“No one has ever come to see whether I have anything to eat,” she said.

Across Bosnia and Hercegovina, there are many victims of the conflict in similar positions to Tiro, leading lives of extreme poverty a decade and a half after the Dayton peace agreement brought the war to an end.

Massive levels of need persist, despite the existence of large numbers of non-government organisations, NGOs, created specifically to help those who suffered in the Bosnian war. Some experts conclude that NGOs funded by various levels of government are all too often failing to deliver meaningful long-term assistance to those who need it.

In part, problems arise because the charity sector is as politically and ethnically divided as the state of Bosnia and Hercegovina itself. On top of that, IWPR has discovered that a number of NGOs are under investigation following allegations of mismanaged funds.

COMPLEX FUNDING STRUCTURES

A study conducted jointly by the Foundation for Social Inclusion and the Centre for the Promotion of Civil Society shows that in 2010, the NGO sector across Bosnia received government funding totalling 114 convertible marks, about 60 million euro.

Most of the funding, about 38 million euro, went to NGOs in the Federation, a Bosniak- and Croat-majority territory that constitutes one of Bosnia's two political entities. The other entity, Republika Srpska, accounted for another 17.5 million euro, while the self-governing district of Brcko took around three million euro.

These figures are for organisations engaged in all types of activities, but experts say victim support groups account for a sizeable proportion of all NGOs taking state funding.

According to Ranka Ninkovic Papic, director of the Foundation for Social Inclusion, one of the organisations that carried out the research, “If we take all the money allocated at all levels, we come to a figure [60 million euro]. That is high for a poor country like this. This doesn't mean any of those associations are getting [millions], but they do get a few thousand, which is enough for their operations and running costs.”

Despite this, Ninkovic Papic said, “I am afraid the real beneficiaries, their members, do not benefit from it.”

The structures of the Bosnian state only complicate matters, with two entities existing in parallel and NGOs getting funding from many tiers of government, from canton to entity to state level, more often than not with little coordination among them.

Within the Federation, the entity’s government allocates most of its funding to a group of “core associations” concerned with war veterans, demobilised soldiers, and the families of combatants killed in
the war. At all levels of government in the Federation, an average of eight million euro a year is spent on these associations.

According to the Federation minister responsible for war veterans, Zukan Helez, most of the money distributed to NGOs comes out of municipal budgets, he said.

In Republika Srpska, by contrast, the entity government itself is the biggest funder, and just three NGOs between them receive the largest share of this money. The Association of Soldiers receives between 200,000 and 215,000 euro annually, the Association of Concentration Camp Prisoners got 20,000 euro last year, and the Association of Imprisoned and Killed Soldiers and Missing Civilians was granted 35,000 euro.

A final complication in the management of NGO funding is the unevenness of the legislative framework. Not all victims of war have a status precisely defined in law, and even when they do, it may not apply across both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, the status of women raped during the conflict has been defined in the Federation, but not in Republika Srpska. A law outlining protections for victims of torture and civilian victims of conflict has failed to be passed at state level, in part because of disagreement among victim support NGOs.

LIMITED FINANCIAL CONTROLS

The transparency of funding mechanisms is also open to question. According to the study cited above, less than 20 per cent of grant money is allocated via public calls for applications, and over 40 per cent is assigned to beneficiary NGOs by internal decisions taken by local authorities. Observers say that this results in a less than transparent process in which some NGOs are favoured over others.

Ranka Ninkovic Papic, director of the Foundation for Social Inclusion, says distribution is a major problem. Funds, she said, “are not directed towards real needs”.

Many of the funders which the research study looked at claim they require beneficiaries to submit financial and narrative reports, although five per cent do not demand this, allowing recipient NGOs to spend the money as they like.

The minister responsible for war veterans in the Federation, Zukan Helez, acknowledges the lack of rigorous legal mechanisms to check on whether money allocated from official budgets ends up benefiting those it is intended to help.

“They are legally obliged to inform us on how they spend that money, but the ministry does not have a dedicated body to verify the truthfulness of those reports,” Helez said.

He recalled that in his previous post as a member of the municipal council in Bugojno, “we councillors requested that associations send us reports on their financial operations, but they never did”.

Furthermore, Helez said, “There were absurd situations where someone who sat on the municipal council was simultaneously chair of an association of war veterans. So he would apply on behalf of the association for funds that were granted out of the municipal budget.”

The head of the Stari Grad municipality in Sarajevo, Ibrahim Hadzibajric, said a system for tracking NGO spending was introduced there only two years ago.

The municipality allocates “a few thousand euros” to victim support groups like Mothers of Srebrenica and Women Victims of War, but the bulk of its NGO allocation – 76,000 euro this year – goes to seven war veterans’ associations.

“When I became the head of this municipality, I asked whether these [veterans’] associations should be registered on the payroll as our employees, because it really seemed that this was exactly what they were,” he said.

The municipality of Mostar in southern Bosnia, a town which suffered extensive damage during the war, does have control mechanisms in place, according to the head of its department for social initiatives, Bozo Coric.

Coric said grants were paid out in instalments, each one subject to the submission of reports on expenditure to date. If there was no financial report, no further money would be paid, he said.

The Mostar municipality increased NGO funding from 110,000 euro in 2010 to 135,000 euro this year. The funding will go to 12 associations.

In Republika Srpska, one of the ministries that distributes funds to NGOs told IWPR that auditing of grant money began in 2010.

POLICE INVESTIGATE ALLEGED ABUSES
Police in Federation say they are receiving more and more requests to investigate the activities of NGOs. Often such complaints are filed by members of victims' associations who are dissatisfied with the way funds are being distributed and spent.

IWPR also contacted police in Republika Srpska to see whether they were looking into similar complaints, but received no response.

Zulfer Dervisevic, chief of the financial police in the Federation, told IWPR that improper accounting was a huge problem in the NGO sector.

“As far as I know, not a single association is spending budget money in a transparent way. In every case – and we have checked a great many of them – we have spotted irregularities in their work,” Dervisevic said.

In 2010, the Federation financial police launched five lawsuits against victims’ associations for irregularities in their reporting. Dervisevic declined to name any of the NGOs which the police were investigating or prosecuting.

He did, however, list some of the areas in which his force had uncovered matters of concern.

“When we investigated the financial transactions of some of these associations, we found out that they made per diem payments to their staff for field trips that never took place,” he said. “Money was also paid for services that were never rendered. There were cases where conferences or other big events were organised and individuals were paid large sums of money without any description of the services they were supposed to have provided.”

Subcontracting work is another area where the financial police have found holes in the bookkeeping, including fraudulent invoicing.

“In order to commission work from a third party, NGOs are obliged to issue a public call to all potential contractors,” Dervisevic explained. “But most of the NGOs we have investigated never did that. Instead, they always choose the same company to do work for them, especially when it comes to building work. In some cases, none of the work is carried out but invoices are produced.”

IWPR has been told of a number of cases of alleged embezzlement that now form the basis for official complaints in the Federation. Two of them involve allegations that top officials of war veterans’ associations removed funds from their bank accounts and failed to account for their use.

FAILING TO DELIVER CHANGE ON THE GROUND

The intended beneficiaries often receive little of the money that government agencies allocate to NGOs. But more broadly, there is a widespread perception among victims and experts that given the funding levels, these NGOs are not doing enough to uphold people’s rights or to lobby policymakers to pass laws that improve their lives.

Rifet Dizdarevic, a wartime combatant in the Bosnian government army, told IWPR he received a package of basic foodstuffs from NGOs, but only on public holidays. The rest of the time, he said, “They don’t even know where I live – they don’t care.”

Dizdarevic is originally from Visegrad – now part of Republika Srpska – and now lives in Gorazde, also in eastern Bosnia but within the Federation. He is the sole breadwinner in a household consisting of his wife, two daughters and grandchild in rented accommodation, and he makes money by running small errands for the young men sitting in Gorazde’s cafes, buying football betting tickets or cigarettes for them.

He earns the equivalent of a few euro a day, but adds, “There are days when I don’t earn anything.”

Djordjo Rogic served in the opposing Bosnian Serb army, and now lives in equal penury in Banja Luka.

Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after the war, Rogic and his family live on the disability benefit payment he gets from the state.

“I am bitter,” he said. “Am I supposed to go around and collect cardboard boxes to sell in order to survive? I should get some petrol and set myself on fire, because this is no life.”

POLITICAL MANIPULATION

In both the Federation or the Republika Srpska, political favouritism is a potentially corrupting factor in the way government structures at any level identify and fund NGOs working with ex-combatants, the war disabled, and the families of dead soldiers.

Adis Arapovic of the Centre of Civil Initiatives says the extent of political influence on victim support associations is very obvious.
“Certain political centres inspire, finance and control NGOs in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and not just those that were established as a result of the war,” he said. “If you look at the funding sources, you'll see that certain organisations are getting millions of [euro] from budgets in Bosnia. He who gives the money dictates the terms – and these are often political terms.”

The problem is perhaps most immediately obvious within the relatively centralised funding context in Republika Srpska, where just three war-related associations get most of the grant funds issued by the entity government.

Branislav Borenovic of the opposition Party of Democratic Progress says the political manipulation of victims of war is more of an issue now than ever before in Republika Srpska.

“If individuals from various organisations aren’t prepared to react properly when the government passes laws harmful to the very population groups they represent, what else can it be except that they’re being controlled? They are easily manipulated via the entity’s budget money,” Borenovic said.

Nikola Bastinac of the governing majority party in Republika Srpska, the Association of Independent Social Democrats, denied all allegations of political interference.

The three main associations had special legal status as “special interest organisations”, and “regardless of who forms the government in Republika Srpska, it will always be in partnership with them”, Bastinac said.

All three associations reject claims that their funding comes with political strings attached. Nedeljko Mitrović, head of the Association of Imprisoned and Killed Soldiers and Missing Civilians in Republika Srpska, said the fact that funding came out of the entity budget did not create a political allegiance to the ruling elite. He said members of his association were not allowed to belong to any political party.

Patterns of influence in the Federation are more diffuse than in Republika Srpska, with a more diverse funding structure and a range of political parties at work.

Once again, NGOs in the Federation deny they have political affiliations.

Murat Tahirovic, president of the Association of Concentration Camp Prisoners in Bosnia and Hercegovina, said some other victim support groups were susceptible to manipulation, but his own organisation was immune from political influence.

Bakira Hasecic, head of the Women Victims of War association, told IWPR that neither she nor her members could be manipulated by anyone, least of all politicians.

"Not a single political party has ever given us any financial resources. They haven’t even given us printing paper,” she said. “I have to say that Mr Haris Silajdžic [head of the Party for Bosnia and Hercegovina] has given us several hundred euro from time to time, but not a single politician or party can influence our battle for justice."

Marija Arnautovic is an IWPR-trained reporter in Sarajevo.

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