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From Puppets to Empowerment: The Bosnia and Herzegovina Genesis Project

Genesis Project is a local, non-governmental, non-profit, humanitarian organization established in June 1996 in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska, BiH.

by Mrs. Dijana Pejic,
Genesis Project

What is Genesis Project?

The main project objectives are the following:

Interactive education of children through live puppet show performances representing diverse educational topics (mine risk education (MRE), children's rights, prevention of all sorts of addictions, etc.).

- Education of children and youth about healthy lifestyles .
- Community strengthening with the purpose of informing the public on freedom of speech, democracy and fundamental human rights.
- Assistance to war-traumatized children and their families.
- Development and support through various coexistence initiatives throughout BiH.

• Building of democratic governance. Since its establishment, the Genesis Project has mainly worked with the population in the rural areas of Republika Srpska by setting up libraries or organizing puppet show performances for children. Although the vast majority of Genesis Project activities have been focused on the whole entity of Republika Srpska, we have recently started to be active in some parts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

The Genesis Project staff includes local people and an international advisor on a voluntary basis. In 2003, the Genesis Projects was funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) BiH, the International

Orthodox Christian Charity (IOCC) and the European Union in BiH. In recent years, the Genesis Project was funded by the European Union—Commission Brussels, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the Open Society Fund-Soros, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the IOCC, and the Salvation Army.

Genesis MRE Project Goals and Objectives

The Genesis MRE Project has the following project goals and development objectives:

- Reducing the negative impacts that mines and UXO have on children and their communities in Republika Srpska.
- Achieving a permanent influence on the development of mine threat awareness, within child and adult population groups.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of most heavily mine-strewn countries in Europe, and it is mostly anti-personnel mines left over after the 1992–95 war that pose the greatest threat for the whole country's population. The Bosnia Herzegovina Mine Action Centre (BHMAC) estimates that there are still more than 650,000 mines and 670,000 pieces of UXO in BiH. To date, BHMAC has recorded more than 18,500 minefields.

Since the end of the war, more than 1,430 people have fallen victim to landmines. Out of that number, 63 were children. It is important to point out that the fight against mines is not just about the demining process itself. The fight also includes all other activities whose objective and ultimate goal is to decrease the influence of mines and UXO on society, the economy and the environment.

With this in mind, the Genesis Project staff, thanks to support from UNICEF BiH, developed a mine awareness puppet theatre in November 1999. Its purpose is to raise mine awareness among the population and especially to enhance the knowledge of children about the mine threats.



■ Genesis Mine Risk Education Project.

Genesis MRE Project Components

The Genesis MRE program consists of the following components:

- MRE interactive puppet shows for children ages five to seven, performed in preschool education institutions.
- MRE interactive puppet shows for children ages seven to 11, performed in primary schools.
- MRE discussions with adults on the topic: impact of mines on their daily lives.
- MRE education of adolescents

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through distribution of Genesis/ UNICEF MRE pamphlets, facilitated by school libraries/librarians.

- Local communities' capacity building (children and adults) for internal "fight" against mines.
- TV puppet shows for MRE of children throughout BiH.

MRE Puppet Shows for Children

The basic feature of our puppet shows is interactive learning. Children are not just passive observers and receivers of information during the performance— instead, they are active participants. Through the puppet show performance, children easily acquire new information and transform the info into permanent and sound knowledge. Games, music, and verbal communication between the actor, puppet, and child contribute largely to the interaction.



The Genesis Project/UNICEF mobile puppet theater performs for nearly 60,000 children.

One of the goals of the show is not just to change children's behaviour but also to try to develop and "train" their attitude toward and awareness of all kinds of danger that could come from mines and unexploded devices as well as to warn them about the consequences of their careless actions and thoughtlessness when faced with possible danger.

Also, through the puppet shows, we hope to encourage a positive attitude toward children mine victims and physically disabled persons and to provide some guidelines on how they could assist the process of integration of physically disabled children into society and into various social groups.

The Genesis Project MRE puppet show consists of three parts:

- Puppet show (consists of two

actors/mediators—a "deminer" and an "adventurous boy-fisherman," four puppets, and frequently used mines).

- Interactive education workshop (children, together with actors, conducting "role plays" of different situations).
- Distribution of educational leaflets with basic MRE messages.

From November 1999 until June 2003, we have been implementing MRE projects in primary schools and preschool education institutions in Republika Srpska and Brcko District. During this time, the Genesis Project/UNICEF mobile puppet theatre performed various MRE puppet shows more than 630 times. These shows were seen by 60,000 children ages five to 12.

Active Involvement of Schoolteachers in the Community/School-based Fight Against Mines and UXO

The Genesis Project has recognized the need to move from its role of "external" and the only Mine Risk Educator in the area toward the role of initiator, mediator and facilitator of activities that will be implemented in the future by the local community. Therefore, we have initiated a co-operation with schoolteachers that will lead toward independent and self-sustainable continuation of community/school-based MRE activities. To that end, the Genesis Project has introduced numerous activities as an important part of this project with the aim of empowering teachers to provide good quality MRE for their pupils.

First, we insist on having the largest possible number of teachers present during our MRE puppet show performances in order to have them see the methodology of our work, especially the part related to the interactive workshop. It is our goal to introduce them to the methods/skills of using interactive education in their work with children.

After schoolteachers see for themselves how we involve children actively in our MRE or disability awareness workshops, we present them with a *Teacher's Manual*—a booklet written by one of the Genesis project team members,

a professor of psychology and pedagogy. The booklet contains clear examples and detailed descriptions of nine educational interactive workshops, thus presenting the teachers with ideas on what methods they could use in their everyday work with children and for furthering MRE.

Subsequently, we organize workshops for schoolteachers with the aim of developing a specific and concrete community action plan for fighting against mines and UXO. In the course of our meetings and workshops with the schoolteachers, we include facilitators to initiate problem identification and analysis, development of plans and problem resolution. We apply a method of participatory community mapping. The community map (which we develop together with schoolteachers) indicates the following:

- Where the dangerous areas (mines and UXO) are.
- Who the people at risk are (vulnerable groups).
- Why, where and when they are at risk (vulnerability analysis).

After that, we initiate discussion with teachers on how to tackle the risk (risk = threat = vulnerability) by raising the following questions/issues:

- What should be done about the threat (minefields and UXO)?
- What can be done about the vulnerability (dangerous behaviours and their causes)?

In essence, at the end of the workshop, we come up with an "action plan" which actually represents a future plan of action that highlights all activities that schoolteachers and other relevant community members should undertake in order to protect the most vulnerable groups in their own community. At the end of the workshop sessions, every schoolteacher receives a copy of the Genesis Project/UNICEF MRE brochure with basic MRE messages. The main goal of these activities is to empower schoolteachers to take a more active role in the school/community-based fight against mines and UXO.

MRE Discussions with Adults

According to ICRC statistics on mine and UXO victims, the most endangered group is men from 19 to 40

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years of age. That is why we started developing a strategy, in close cooperation with UNICEF BiH and BHMACH, on how to make this group more aware of danger from mines and UXO.

In close cooperation with UNICEF BiH, we have produced an "MRE Brochure" for adults. In the course of making the brochure, we made sure that all information and advice is correct and understandable for people of different ages and education groups. We tried to make this written material attractive and interesting to the readers so that they continue using it even after they have participated in our MRE discussion sessions.

After that and with the assistance of the project team member, a psychologist, we developed a broad and flexible strategy of approach. The strategy is designed for adults and its goal is to make them fully aware of the influence of mines on their everyday life and activities.

In the course of our discussion sessions with the adults, it was an excellent idea and a useful strategy to use maps of minefields. The maps were provided by BHMACH and allowed the participants to see that the mines and UXO are situated in the immediate vicinity of their own homes.

Our aim is also to develop, together with them, a joint plan of community action for the fight against mines. A general idea is that the Genesis Project acts as a liaison between the local community and governmental and non-governmental institutions in charge of demining and MRE activities.

Within the framework of our activities, we have also developed an instruction leaflet through which we are introducing the adults to the procedure that should take place during the period from the moment when an unregistered minefield is discovered, until the moment when the demining process is fully completed. The leaflet also contains information on all problems and difficulties that the demining procedure encounters.

In addition, the instruction leaflet contains a list of institutions (including their contact telephone numbers) where citizens can report mines and UXO, as well as weapons they want to hand over. The leaflet also contains a list of priorities used while a certain location is being

electd for the demining process. In all our MRE discussion sessions, we distribute both the leaflet and educational brochure to all participants and guests.



Need for Change/ Further Improvement

Thanks to our experience in the field to date, we have realized that there is a need for capacity building among children, teachers, and local community members, which would ensure continuity in MRE. There is also a need to address the issue of disability awareness and to interact with survivors for assistance. Also we fully recognize that Genesis Project, through its MRE programs, can only benefit from closer liaison with BHMACH.

Therefore, we have decided to introduce a new approach through:

- Peer education
- Disability awareness and referral of mine victims to survivor assistance projects
- Active collaboration with teachers and with local communities
- Connection between local communities and BHMACH

It is the aim of the Genesis Project to develop the peer-education methodologies with children ages six (1st grade) to 12 (6th grade) at the beginning of the new school year (2003/2004). The peer-education methodology is considered one of the most efficient methods of transferring knowledge to children.

In previously selected schools, the Genesis Project members will carry out a series of interactive workshops on diverse educational topics, such as MRE, children's rights, healthy lifestyles (emphasis on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases), and tolerance and coexistence. Through these activities we would generate a core group of future peer-educators.

In all targeted communities, the project will try to increase the level of MRE

of children and community members and encourage them to adopt new, safer ways of behavior that will shield them from potential physical injuries and death.

Conclusion

From puppets to empowerment, the Genesis Project has completed the following initiatives:

- Moving from its role of "external" and the only Mine Risk Educator toward the role of initiator, mediator, and creator of activities that will be implemented further by members of the local community.
- Cooperating with teachers for independent and self-sustainable continuation of MRE.
- Developing instruments/tools that will assist the teachers, pupils and members of local communities to perform MRE activities. ■

**All graphics courtesy of the author.*

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