

# Trees Coloured Pink. The use of creativity as a means of psychosocial support for children in Kosovo: an ongoing learning process.

*Truus Wertheim-Cahen, Mathijs Eeuwema & Miriam Nabarro*

*This article will aim to provide insight into the learning process connected to a long-term psychosocial intervention with children in Kosovo. In this intervention, creative activities and sports are fundamental. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews with the national teams, and by direct observation of their practical work. It is argued that drawing upon the experiences of national staff in this way, is a good, necessary, additional tool for assessing the impact and effectiveness of a psychosocial programme.*

**Keywords:** children, play, psychosocial support, trauma

## **Short history of the project**

*Political context.* After years of tension and increasing levels of violence in Kosovo (a province of former Yugoslavia), an open conflict broke out between Kosovar Albanian separatists and Serbian armed (para-) military forces in April 1999. Within a very short time an estimated 800.000 Kosovar Albanians (half of them children) were driven from their homes and forced to flee to neighbouring countries such as Macedonia and Albania. During three months of intense fighting, Serbian forces destroyed much of the infrastructure of Kosovo. At the same time a NATO-led bombing campaign caused considerable

destruction and many civilian casualties, not only in Kosovo but also in Serbia itself (it is estimated that 10.000 people were killed in the war). In July of 1999, Serbia succumbed to pressure and agreed to a peace deal. An international military force (KFOR) entered Kosovo and the province was placed under UN authority. Most of the refugees returned quickly, but realistic fears of acts of revenge caused an estimated 200.000 Kosovar Serbians to flee to Serbia. Since then, Kosovo has remained a de facto UN protectorate, where the remaining Serbians live in cramped enclaves, protected by KFOR soldiers. That this protection is essential became clear again in March 2004, when rioting Albanian mobs entered Serbian villages, destroying homes and displacing thousands of civilians. Nineteen people of both nationalities (Albanians and Serbians) were killed during these clashes (UN News, May 11, 2004).

*Project history.* In July 1999 War Child Holland sent an international team of artists, creative arts therapists, and community musicians to Albania to implement a creative therapy programme for Kosovar children in the refugee camps. Despite the uncertain situation that the team found there, several activities were initiated. When the war ended and the refugees

returned in large numbers to Kosovo, War Child Holland decided to continue the programme.

Three international teams (this time including child psychologists), set up bases in the cities of Peje, Gjakova, and later in the capital Prishtina. The original plan was to implement a trauma relief programme, based on the assumption that many children in Kosovo would be traumatized and in need of this kind of help.

As this was War Child Holland's first independent intervention, it was not yet clear how to apply the healing qualities of arts and play in the particular context of post-war Kosovo. Reaching out to the children of Kosovo therefore also became a search for an appropriate methodology and a learning process for War Child Holland as an organization.

For several years, War Child Holland teams operated in various settings using a variety of working methods and manuals. However, the main mode of intervention was termed a psychosocial creative arts workshop programme. This consisted of weekly one-hour creative workshops with groups of children, usually for periods of three to six months duration. The programme was conducted mainly in village schools, because the need for this kind of activity was perceived to be greatest in the villages as they were found to be more affected than urban areas during the war. Other locations that emerged were, for instance, special needs education facilities and temporary shelters for displaced people. As well as direct intervention with children, the different teams quickly became engaged in training activities for teachers and other (para-) professionals.

During the period of 1999 to 2002 the work was gradually handed over to teams of national staff, who received on-the-job

training from international team members. Beginning in 2002, the project was 'nationalized' completely: the local staff decided to register the organization locally and *World Child Kosovo* was born<sup>1</sup>. Since then the three teams have continued the psychosocial workshop programme, reaching some 2500 children a year. The trainings for teachers and other (para-) professionals have also continued with more than 1000 people trained in these World Child trainings since 2002. The teams have been slowly shifting their focus away from the 'pure' psychosocial workshop programme towards activities to bring together children from the different ethnic groups (peace building). War Child Holland continues to provide the organization with financial and technical support.

### **Rationale of the project**

In its mission statement, War Child Holland highlights creative activities as a key instrument in its psychosocial interventions with war-affected and displaced children. This approach relies upon the assumption that most children that have experienced conflict retain their powers of creativity even if, due to the experiences they may have had, this is no longer apparent. Many children therefore run the risk of stagnation in their development. Engaging them in art activities is a means of freeing their creativity and reinvigorates the child's drive/ability to play. Music, visual art, dance, theatre and play offer children the means to express themselves and involve the use of motor, cognitive and sensory skills. Engaging the children in these activities (Wertheim-Cahen, 1994), and in sports activities as well helps to clear the path for normal development. It also strengthens coping skills, and may prevent possible build-up of psychopathology. Through play, a child

connects its inner world with the world that surrounds them (Winnicott, 1971). Also, children tend to communicate and express themselves by playing, rather than talking. Not only is play a means for the child to have fun and relax, it's also an indispensable tool by which children can process difficult experiences, and digest life's difficulties and impediments. Using creativity in play enables a child to symbolically face fears, re-enact positive experiences, and act out bad ones.

Play is a vital factor in the psychological, social, and cognitive development of children. Guided creative activities give children the opportunity to express themselves and to develop constructive coping mechanisms to overcome difficult events and experiences. Healthy coping mechanisms make children more resilient and better able to deal with difficult experiences. It also enhances their normal development. Children learn and develop well through creative play. Through the means of offering creative arts activities and sports, War Child Holland tries to give children a chance to be children again. Play facilitates exploration of the surrounding world and is a way of learning social skills through imitation, competition, cooperation, and fantasy. Children play, even in difficult circumstances. It is their natural behaviour (De Jager & Jansveld, 2004).

The basis of the claim that creative arts therapies may benefit children lies in long-standing clinical use of arts, puppets and play in the treatment and assessment of children. However, little 'hard' scientific evidence for this claim has yet been produced (Foa, Keane & Friedman, 2000).

### **Development of the project**

In this project, which started out originally as an emergency trauma relief programme

for children in refugee camps in Albania, it became gradually clear that the original focus on traumatized children needed to change. This approach was based on the expectation that many, if not the majority of the children, would be traumatized (e.g., show signs of PTSD). However, when the project started in Kosovo this turned out not to be the case (International Rescue Committee, 1999). It was, however, found that many children experienced some forms of psychosocial problems that were either related to their current living circumstances (displacement, home destroyed, etc.), direct war experiences (witnessing atrocities, suffering injuries, etc.), or to the years of neglect preceding the war<sup>2</sup>. It was found that creativity could still be used as a means to address the needs of these children. The programme changed its focus and began to reach out to children who, for one reason or another, belonged to underprivileged groups. These included: children from poor, isolated villages; special needs children; or children from minority groups. Mobilizing the children's own creativity still proved to be a good objective, thus helping children to overcome certain developmental 'gaps' and strengthening their coping skills. Based on observations, certain psychosocial goals were set for each group of children at the beginning of a workshop cycle (which usually takes three to six months). These goals can include: improving concentration skills, cooperation skills or simply improving creative expression. World Child staff members then plan creative activities that will contribute to achieving these goals. After each workshop (and at the end of each cycle) staff evaluate the progress of reaching the stated goals. Based on this, modifications can then be made in both goals and the creative methods used to attain them. Another important method

was to stimulate the helpers' (teachers, professionals working with children, and War Child national staff) own creativity. Educated during a period of oppression and (post-) communism, most adults were unfamiliar with art as a means of personal expression. Moreover, people were still very occupied coping with the impact of war and were therefore in a state of mind that can conflict drastically with spontaneity and creativity.

As a result of these developments, the present main objectives of World Child Kosovo are:

- To use the psychosocial creative workshop method to meet the needs of vulnerable groups of children, by improving their coping skills;
- To use creative and sports activities for actively bringing groups of ethnically divided children together again; and
- To improve the available childcare, by providing training in the use of creativity to teachers and other (para-) professionals.

### The work in practice

In April 2004 we observed a workshop in a remote village inhabited by members of the Bosnian community. World Child workshop leaders S and E were conducting their fourth workshop in a series of twelve, with a group of 16 children aged between six and ten.

Getting out of the bus we see S & E entering a grey concrete school building. They arrive in the shabby classroom that is only decoration with a mural painted by the children in a previous workshop. One of the workshop leaders has brought her guitar and all of children are eager to touch the instrument. In the room, the small chairs and tables are put aside to create an empty space in the centre. Then all of the children form a circle and join

hands in anticipation. They begin with a ten-minute warm-up, imitating each other's movements and calling out each other's names. Then E. takes her guitar, while S. pins the text of a song to the blackboard. At home they have translated a children's song into Bosnian and written it out in big letters:

*A small gypsy girl is sitting on a stone  
Weeping and crying and very much alone  
Get up little girl, wipe your tears away  
Close your eyes and point around...*

The children enjoy learning the song and within ten minutes they are all singing it loudly and confidently. A game then begins. Each child takes a turn sitting on a small box, which serves as 'the stone'. The rest of the children stand in a circle around this box, singing the song. The child in the circle makes the weeping gestures, then dries their tears, gets up, turns around with their eyes closed, and when the singing stops points at another child. This child comes forward and together they dance holding on to one another while spinning around. The first child joins the rest of the group and the new child sits down on the stone. This goes on for about 20 minutes. The workshop leaders are careful that without pressure, the children stay involved. The classroom, in the meantime, has somehow been transformed from a place in which children are disciplined into a non-competitive, free zone. They continuously look around and pay attention to each child ensuring sure that almost every one, including the boys, play the part of the gypsy girl and are picked for a dance.

During the last part of the workshop they all play a cat and mouse game, in which all of children are involved. They have to chase, touch, and support one another while calling out one another's names. Here again the initiators skilfully help to stimu-

late and sometimes manoeuvre the children by engaging those who are left out, or are slower in their movements. They also give extra encouragement to children who seem shy or afraid.

Then the closure ritual follows: the children hold hands and form a circle. Three times they run to the middle, yelling louder and louder each time. They then help to put the classroom in order and go home, clearly looking forward to their next workshop.

Asked what they wanted to achieve in this particular workshop E & S respond: *'We have noticed that the boys in this village keep very much to their macho role, always playing typical boys games. They often seem to feel superior to the girls. In our game they are asked to walk and act like a girl. We hope that they will start to realize that girls can be their friends as well. We want to make both boys and girls feel more equal, and to become more aware of one another. In general, we felt that cooperation between the children was lacking. We think they will need to learn to cooperate in order to survive.'*

They add: *'Many children do not know any children's songs and nor do their parents. At home they are taught songs about battles and heroism. We teach them to sing children's songs again. This is an important aspect of our work.'*

Asked if the parents in the village share E & S's view on gender-issues they answer: *'So far they have not complained...'*

## **Background and motivation of staff members**

In Kosovo (as in many other post conflict areas) there was, and remains, a lack of qualified professionals with the necessary educational background and expertise. Recruitment and selection was therefore often subject to pragmatic realism. Most of the current World Child workshop leaders

started working as translators for the international teams. Although some of the staff had a background in working with children, or a creative background, none had both. For all of them the psychosocial field was a completely new experience. Here, they reflect on the personal effect of beginning to work with War Child Holland/World Child.

E: *'Participating in the workshops as a translator allowed me to feel like a kid myself. I liked the activities from the start, and that became the reason I decided to apply for training. The children are allowed to express and feel a mixture of different emotions, all at the same time. I like that for myself, and I recognize it as important for the children too.'*

X: *'I needed money to rebuild my house, which was destroyed during the war. My husband is a painter, so I am familiar with the use of art and creativity. But it was special that during the training I could feel like a child again.'*

D, previously a mine awareness teacher, recently started working for World Child: *'One and a half years ago my father was killed and my house was burned down. I badly needed money to support my child. This kind of work helps me to regain trust, to feel free again. It is totally different from my previous job. I do not have to caution the children or explain risks. Instead, I explain the rules of games. I do not have to make the children aware of dangers; instead I can make them aware of positive things. This work feels like therapy for myself. It gives me a feeling of freedom and of being normal again. From experience, I know how important it is that people really take an interest in you. In fact, that is what we try to do for the children.'*

V: *'The fact that we have no boundaries between colleagues, that we keep our doors open for one another at all times, is a totally new experience.'*

E: *'It is not just the fact that we earn money, but equally that we can give something to the children, and unquestionably, they give us something in return.'*

These answers make it clear that, although most workshop leaders probably started working for economic reasons, the training they have received and the new, dynamic methods of working with children and colleagues that they have experienced, have proven a strong incentive to continue doing the job. Also, in many ways the work seems to have been a ‘therapeutic’ experience for the staff: it has helped them to deal with their own war experiences and regain a sense of purpose in life.

### **What the staff members want to achieve with their work**

In interviews, staff members expressed themselves very clearly concerning their expectations, goals and motivations.

*M: ‘We were asked by the Ministry of Education to conduct a teacher training. At one point the whole group was engaged in drawing a house in the woods. I was sitting next to an older teacher with many years of experience. He expressed his amazement on observing that in my drawing, my trees were pink. Trees are green, he said. ‘Why should they not be pink?’ I responded. A passionate discussion between us followed. Finally I said: If you do not allow a child to use a fantasy colour you will inhibit them in many other aspects of their life. I am sure that growing up, the child will see that trees are green, but now they need their freedom. I don’t doubt that children in Holland take that freedom automatically. Not so the children of Kosovo. We have a bad education system, and I personally feel that I have suffered because of it. In the end, I succeeded in persuading him to agree with the idea that a tree in a painting can be any colour, and that being able to paint a pink tree means feeling free.’*

*S: ‘Our first goal is very simple: to enable children to have fun. I could even say that I might have reached my goal, if only for one hour I have meant something to a child. Other goals are to help children to express themselves and to teach basic skills such as communication and cooperation. Being able*

*to cooperate prepares a child for the future.’*

*X: ‘To provide children with the means to play and to let them make use of their own resources. It is vital that they know how to fill their free time. If we can prevent them from hanging around, listening to stories from unemployed and unmotivated adults, we have reached our goal.’*

*L: ‘We try to enhance the children’s imagination and concentration and make them feel free. For example, some time ago we heard that in a certain group many children had problems sleeping. To help them relax, we introduced the metaphor of the sea. To me the sea represents calm. But also many children in Kosovo have never seen the sea. We thought that playing with that theme might have a relaxing effect. At the same time it stirs the children’s imagination and trains their motor skills as well. Not only did we see that we made the children happy at that moment, but later we heard that they slept better.’*

*G: ‘How can children feel free and playful if their parents do not? Contact with parents is necessary, but it’s not easy to establish. They should see and understand what we are doing and why it is important. Otherwise, as sometimes happens, they will continue to take a child out of the workshop because he or she is needed at home.’*

*M: ‘A nice thing happened a few weeks ago. The principal of the school in the village where we were working told us about a parents’ meeting that would take place on the same day as our last workshop. He wanted the parents to see what we do. We decided to do a workshop in the hall in front of the parents. They first stood like statues, watching us working with the kids. Then step-by-step they joined in. It was so nice to see them take off their jackets, smile, play, and have fun. They liked it very much and it brought us a lot of appreciation. In the future we might use this experience as a purposeful tactic to get the parents involved. It is better if the parents can actually see and experience what we do.’*

*D: ‘We work with Roma children, some of whom are integrated into the Albanian community while others are completely segregated. We also work with*

*Ashkali, Serbian, Albanian, and Bosnian children. We prefer working within the school-schedule because it guarantees continuity. We work with children of all age groups. Teenagers we try to reach in youth centres. We also work with children with special needs.'*

*M: 'For me the hardest place to work in is G. (a Serbian enclave). There we work in a home for mentally handicapped Serbian children. It is very difficult to become close to people belonging to a nation we have just been at war with and to make their children trust us. Although I do feel that all children are the same. To me, they are the most innocent creatures in the world. I do not have that feeling towards the adults in the Serbian community. Immediately after the March 2004 incident I felt that I was risking my life going there again. One of the leaders tried to provoke us by setting the children against us. Her attitude brought back bad memories and provokes hatred in me. I accept that they do not like us and we do not like them. But a child is a child. If I see the children, I just see kids, and I love them. But, I remain sensitive to the hostility of the educators. That is the emotional price I pay for my work. But I am also proud and feel positive and professional that I am capable of working with those kids. It also happened that after seeing our work, a Serbian educator apologized to me. We talked for four hours and managed to restore trust between us. Now she even tries to follow our ideas in her work. I think that she acted very professionally. They really want us to keep coming. If we speak Serbian, it contributes to establishing trust. Also we do have Serbian friends. Believe me it is complicated...'*

From these interviews, the picture emerges of a national staff that has clear ideas on what are (or should be) the goals of their work:

1. Improving the coping skills of children on an individual level;
2. Improving the (creative) pedagogic skills of those adults who are supporting the children (most notably the teachers and parents); and

3. Improving the relationships and integration of children from minority groups and children with special needs.

It is interesting to see how the third goal has organically developed from within the national staff themselves (it was not one of War Child's original goals in Kosovo).

### **Effects of the programme**

Little empirical evidence is (until now) available with regards to the impact of the War Child Holland/World Child psychosocial programme in Kosovo. But the anecdotal 'evidence' presented below, in its detailed richness, clearly holds an intrinsic value.

*V: 'Seven year old Arbenita lives in a small village. She participates in a group of 25 children who seem unable to cooperate and in which she is often bullied. In a naming game during the warm-up she stands apart, looking unhappy and insecure. When it is her turn to call out her name, she does not respond. The children start yelling that she does not hear or speak. Visibly fearing the criticism of her classmates, and afraid to make a mistake, she manages to whisper her name. She is praised and encouraged by the workshop leaders. In school it was commonly believed that Arbenita has hearing difficulties, but in the workshops she seems to understand the rules of the games and the activities very well. One day she is given the role of the leader in a game called 'conducting the symphony'. The leading child holds a stick and conducts the children who form the orchestra. The members of the orchestra follow the conductor's instructions. Playing this game slowly helped Arbenita to feel more at ease. Gradually, she dares to say what she likes or dislikes, takes part in all of the activities, and is more and more able enjoy herself. The other children have stopped making negative comments.'*

*L: 'I remember a little boy who used to always come to the workshop, firmly holding the hands of his two sisters. During the war he had witnessed soldiers threatening to set his father on fire and after that,*

had poured oil over him. At that moment, his mother told him to hold on to his sisters and to never let them out of his sight. After the war he rigidly continued to follow his mother's instructions. He came to the workshops to play with the other children. He wanted to participate, but at the same time did not dare to let go of his sister's hands. One day, however, he did let go and stepped into the circle. This may seem small but I see it as a big achievement.'

D: 'The fact that we read the results almost daily in the children's faces makes us want to go on with our work.'

F: 'When we first approach the kids they are usually very shy. When they see that we do not take anything from them or demand anything from them, they start feeling freer. It makes me proud to see them happy and laughing, to see how they become more patient and cooperative. I have observed how, after a few workshops, the children change and become less shy, more friendly and social.'

D: 'With music wonderful exercises are possible. Children can listen but can also make music themselves. Many lead to some form of cooperation. In one exercise each child takes a turn leading the others with his own rhythm, which they then have to follow. They experience how it is to follow others, as well as how to take the lead themselves.'

G: 'Music-making proves a good tool to enable a child to take initiative. With music children easily express themselves, they enjoy it and are usually not shy to show themselves. I remember a very quiet boy who in the first three sessions did not dare to do anything. He surprised us as he took his first initiative in a musical game.'

L: 'One of the advantages of sports is that it keeps most children very concentrated and active at the same time. It often helps them to forget their worries.'

M: 'When I think about the part of our work that we earlier referred to as 'the magic', I draw a comparison with my own childhood. I missed that magic because I missed the opportunity for personal expression. When I was a child, our school system was very strict. Confined within that system I could

not express myself. If I had a problem I could not express that to the teacher. Now we give the children the opportunity to express themselves. I see how small children here carry schoolbags bigger than themselves. In school, the most important thing is discipline. We work from a different source.'

D: 'Not only are our activities new and exciting to the children, but also to their teachers, whom we slowly succeeded in getting interested. In a way we are liberating them too, and they need our interventions just as much. They frequently deal with the children by using corporal punishment to discipline them. In our seminars, we make them familiar with our tools and spread our knowledge.'

F: 'We are one of the few organizations with an official government license to train teachers. We receive requests to give workshops or seminars all the time. A nice example is our work within the Serb community. As the teachers observe how we dance and play with the children they become aware that play has a purpose. They no longer see it as a useless activity.'

The teams observe that their work has effects on two levels:

1. Child level. Workshop leaders see that the children's behaviour changes as a result of the work they do with them.
2. Teacher level. Through the World Child seminars, teacher's attitudes and approach towards children change.

## Discussion

Assessing the effects of the War Child Holland/World Child project in Kosovo is a complex undertaking. However, from the interviews with national staff we can see that by and large, on a child level, as well as on the level of the support structure around the children (especially teachers), team-members recognize that their work has a positive and real impact.

This example from Kosovo also shows that a psychosocial programme, originally aimed at relieving the stress of children

in a recent, post-conflict area, can have a long 'life-span', if the project remains flexible in both its objectives and programming. The needs of children may be different from those initially thought, or those needs may change over time. A focus on trauma and PTSD may limit the possible impact such a programme can have. Careful and continuous attention from the implementing organization for those working on a project, as well as the project beneficiaries whom they are trying to reach, may help ensure that a psychosocial programme remains valid within a given context.

The fact that this particular project could be flexible in its objectives, setting, and programming, may be due to the use of creative and sports activities in a psychosocial context. This specific approach touches on art, educational, as well as therapeutic/developmental psychological assumptions. These multiple influences might have been contributed to its adaptability in different settings, formats, and needs.

It is interesting that most of World Child's workshop leaders emphasize how, during their training, they felt their own emotional liberation and accordingly this now underlines their desire to improve the pedagogical climate in their country. Team members acknowledge that, in a way, their training helped them to cope with their own war-experiences. At present, they also point out, albeit implicitly, that in order to be able to 'feed' the children emotionally and creatively, they need to be fed themselves.

To some extent the teams express uncertainty about their capacities. Observation revealed that some team members hold on rigidly to the workshop format, or strictly follow the manual with games and assignments left behind by the international staff. The majority of the staff, although certain-

ly not all, lacks the confidence to introduce variations or adapt activities to the direct circumstances they encounter at any given time. This suggests that an 'internalized' explicit and consistent theoretical framework and methodology is lacking. There is also a need for a transparent training-program, not just for the Kosovo project, but also for the benefit of all War Child Holland's projects. Clarifying the multiple layers of its methodology will not only give more self-confidence to War Child Holland's field workers, and make them more flexible when working in different contexts, but it will also help improve the organization's professional identity.

Assessing the effects of the War Child Holland/World Child project in Kosovo remains as complicated as any psychosocial intervention in a post-conflict area. However, using the experiences of the national staff involved in such projects, listening to their stories of successes and failures, and continuously trying to address the needs that they see, could be useful *additional* tools for examining the impact and effectiveness of psychosocial interventions in different settings and with different organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors like to thank all the staff from World Child Kosovo (worldchildkosova@yahoo.comwww.worldchildkosova.com) for their cooperation and their openness.

<sup>2</sup> The parallel education system set up by Albanians was lacking in many respects (e.g. teachers often were not qualified and did not have the necessary pedagogic qualities).

*Truus Wertheim Cahen is an art - and occupational therapist, who specializes in working with survivors of war and persecution. She has been working in private practice with this population for 25 years. She also provides art therapy training and supervision in Amsterdam, Hasselt, and Lausanne. She has been a regular trainer for War Child Holland, focusing on creative arts therapies in a humanitarian context.*

*Mathijs Eeuwema is a child psychologist. He is currently working as a Project Manager at the War Child Holland head quarters in Amsterdam. Before that he worked as Project Coordinator, Content Supervisor and Head of Mission for the project in Kosovo.*

*Miriam Nabarro is a theatre designer and community artist. She joined War Child Holland in 1999, and worked in Kosovo as a Trainer and Content Supervisor. She has worked on many projects as a methodology/creative arts consultant and as Content Supervisor in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.*

*Correspondence address: mathijs@warchild.nl*