

Case 5 Comments: The Price of Rebuilding a War-Torn Town

What Is Wrong and What Should Be Done?

Eve Annecke

What to do now? Either focusing solely on rebuilding the factory or moving to another town would clearly mean giving up on the critical moment where a reconciliation process could become part of the town's healing.

Maria needs to take a process approach to building consensus around her challenge. Taking on board the various suggestions within her own organization, she needs to address with her staff the various suggestions they made. She needs to integrate the first two suggestions and point out that while they may yet end up moving their work into another town, she feels this should be their alternative only after they have given their best shot to a way of bringing resettlement and reconciliation into the economic project. She needs to help her staff, and herself, see that the mayor's refusal is a blessing so early on—as it is holds a role for what is very present in the town, that is, massive antagonism toward the refugees. But this is not the only role, or “voice,” in the town.

Maria then needs to rapidly meet with other stakeholders, organizations, and more moderate politicians, keeping the project of rebuilding the factory foremost in peoples' minds. She needs to enthusiastically discuss the promise of activity, jobs, economic development, and resettlement. In these meetings Maria needs to also quietly assess the attitude among the different individuals and groups as to the significance of this project and to the possibility of beginning the process of resettlement and reconciliation. She could use stories of other towns or war-torn countries where this has happened, thereby developing a sense of hope and renewal. She could use these meetings to point out that the process would be tough

and challenging but that isolating or alienating the refugees would only move and delay, and possibly exacerbate, the problem for the town, and in fact for the entire country. In addition, Maria needs to meet with the refugee leader. She now understands that there is no quick fix to her previously simplistic, rational, deal-making approach and that she needs his help to strategically attempt to slowly and painfully reintegrate the town through the rebuilding of the factory. The chances of moving the refugees back in at this point in time are slim.

In these meetings Maria needs to generate an understanding of the different roles and voices in the town. One is pro-job/pro-economic development. Another is of bringing the refugees back in immediately. The opposite view is to alienate refugees and never allow them to return. Most importantly, it would seem that Maria needs to maintain some level of neutrality and that she cannot merely continue in her previously dualistic, either/or approach. She should not target the mayor as her enemy. She needs him to successfully implement this project. She should avoid setting people up against each other.

Her sole aim in these conversations is to bring all the players into one room, including the mayor. Perhaps she should acknowledge her own naivety to him and apologize to him for her exclusionary approach. It would be wise if she could help the mayor see and understand the potential he has to exercise profound leadership within the town at a crucial time. Perhaps, through her conversations with others, she will find additional people in positions of power and invite them to participate in the process. The point is for Maria to fine-tune her focus on the process and to trust this process. Through dialogue, creating space for peoples' stories, and keeping focused on the possibility of rebuilding their town as a beacon of hope in war-torn times, Maria's communication with stakeholders possessing opposing views has the potential of building a deeper wisdom and strength within the community. However, there is no predictable outcome to this framework—what is required is an understanding of complexity, patterns, and transformation. And patience.

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Phil Morgan

Important assumptions that can be derived from the narrative are (a) Maria is a foreigner, at least not a member of any of the contending ethnic or “national” groups in the setting; (b) the donors are also foreigners; and (c) Maria and her organizational colleagues propose to change the mission of their organization, from one of emergency/survival services to economic development assistance *and* conflict resolution.

Maria should pursue a two-track strategy.

1. Economic Assistance

The organization should undertake a thorough assessment of the market for the furniture products and the competitiveness of the production process that will replace the former one before they actually commit to rehabilitating the old furniture factory. It is one thing to decide to change direction toward economic development assistance. Given the opportunity cost of reviving the former factory, as opposed to embarking on an entirely new job creation venture(s), the NGO needs to be sure that the furniture factory represents a robust and enduring economic entity. If the rehabilitation of the factory turns out not to be cost effective, those resources should be used to foster other economic ventures that will employ people in the community. That option will also require strategic assessment and should be linked with the region beyond the town itself. (It must be remembered that in a globalizing economy, furniture is no longer a labor-intensive process, unless it is of hand-crafted custom design.)

As the NGO embarks on a new direction of economic assistance it is important to remember that such organizations have very limited capital. Therefore, in coming to grips with factory rehabilitation versus other ventures, the “other ventures” have to be wealth creating enterprises that require very modest capital inputs. In other words, an NGO getting into economic assistance might well need to think twice about underwriting or contributing to a single venture. Rather, there might be a larger multiplier for the NGO, and the community, if it fostered a microfinancing institution—a type of “bank” dedicated to very small loans to support both “sure-thing” and more entrepreneurial ventures. Investing in many entities that create a few jobs each might be a better risk than betting the bank on one venture/employer.

2. Conflict Resolution

Simultaneously with the above assessments of how best to employ limited resources for economic assistance, the NGO will need to foster a broad community consultative process relating to conflict management. It is evident that Maria was not focused during the emergency services phase on the bitterness of the ethnic conflict. Her clumsy challenge to the mayor revealed that her political welcome could be at risk. Therefore, Maria needs to build on the more positive—even if somewhat skeptical—findings of the survey the NGO had done earlier in the community. She has to find a way to convey those skeptical but willing sentiments of the town's people to the local politicians. There is clearly a gap between community sentiment as revealed in the survey and the mayor's categorical position that all those who left and now want to return are "enemies."

As in doing the economic assessment suggested above, the skills involved in taking on conflict resolution as an additional mission for the NGO might not be readily extant in the organization. Somehow those new skills need to be brought into the organization. During the course of the survey the NGO staff might well have identified selected citizens who were more conciliatory than others, more articulate than others, more well-liked than others, and so on. The NGO could go back to that selected group and discuss ways in which they could signal their own town council persons, political party figures, teachers, clerics, and the like that the citizenry is perhaps more open to discussing ways in which the refugees could return than the mayor and his own group of supporters think. Such skills of mobilization, negotiation, and dispute resolution may have to be "imported" with NGO support.

In sum, the fact that the NGO recognizes that its previous mission can no longer be the centerpiece of its contribution is a sign of organizational learning. However, taking on new tasks—especially those as ambitious as *both* economic assistance and dispute resolution—requires strategic planning, especially an "environmental scan"—or a genuine incorporation of the facts of both the economic and social circumstances. Only then can one weigh the possible effectiveness of launching new initiatives.

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Lyuba Palyvoda

There are several problematic issues facing Maria:

- First of all, it looks like Maria's nongovernmental organization lacks a clear strategy. At the same time, it looks like Maria and her NGO had set very big objectives without carefully analyzing implementation issues. Or, as people say, it is impossible to eat a whole loaf of bread without cutting it into small pieces first. I would add that strategies and tactics for its cutting are important as well.
- Second, communication between Maria's group and the local politicians and governmental officials was woefully inadequate.
- Third, Maria had only one plan: The project was to be implemented in exchange for the return of the refugees. She had only that one idea; nothing else was ready to be put on the table.
- Furthermore, her meeting with the mayor demonstrated that she lacks presentation skills.

In the current situation, I would advise Maria not to be too upset because many organizations working at the community level sooner or later find themselves in such a situation. However, it is very important to spend some time analyzing the current situation and understanding what mistakes were made and to take remedial action to improve organizational operations and then move ahead.

First of all, it seems to me that it will be good for Maria and her organization to conduct organizational strategic planning. I suggest that they

- look back on organizational history, actions, missions, and priorities and analyze their strengths and weaknesses;
- analyze threats and opportunities that exist in the external environment, which includes local community, local government, politicians, and local and international organizations;
- develop detailed strategies and tactics for future activities with actual plans to involve external parties such as community groups, local government, politicians, and businesses.

Second, in the current situation it is important to work directly with the community. I believe that the needs assessment has identified other important issues, and Maria just has to look at its results again. Maria has already noticed that tolerance is a very important issue, and community members and representatives of local government definitely lack it.

Third, Maria's NGO needs to establish a new priority list. This is why it is necessary to involve the community and to make sure that organizational priorities reflect the priorities of the community. Or, in other words, it is important to develop community ownership.

Fourth, I would not initiate direct contact with the mayor or any other local government officials until strong community support and ownership of the new organizational priorities are developed. I would work toward a situation where the community pressures the mayor in order to get him to do what they want.

Finally, my personal recommendation to Maria will be the following: Compromises are good and very useful, but not on important and crucial issues. To my mind, her vision of rebuilding the factory in exchange for the return of the refugees is unacceptable. Certain issues could not be compromised even with the greatest intentions.

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