

Perspectives of using Theatre and Art in Peace-Work

In October 2014 the collaborating partner organizations OWEN from Germany, Peace Dialogue NGO from Armenia, and Union Women of Don from Russia organized a three-day workshop for peace building and human rights activist women. 13 activists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia (Rostov region, Chechnya, St. Petersburg), Ukraine and Germany attended the workshop that was held from 10th to 12th of October in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. Attendees of the workshop were mostly the initiators, partners and participants of two regional projects: “*Let’s See... Let’s Choose... Let’s Change...*” (LSLCLC), implemented in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict affected regions (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh) and Delta-2, which was implemented in Russian Federation.

The aim of the workshop was to support the participants in developing new impactful approaches and strategies that will help them to ‘safely’ work in their communities taking into consideration new social political challenges and obstacles that exist in the post-Soviet area. Based on the lessons learnt and experience gained from those projects, the participants of the workshop used the space provided to finding answers to the following fundamental questions:

- 1) *What is the current situation of civil society actors in the region?*
- 2) *What are the challenges and risks for civil society actors in their respective contexts?*
- 3) *What is the current role of civil society actors in the processes of non-violent transformation of conflicts?*
- 4) *What are useful activities (practice) for the empowerment of grassroots to overcome apathy, fatalism, acceptance of violence? How to increase the attractiveness of civil society organizations/actors?*
- 5) *What kinds of collaboration are needed and (still) possible (exchange, cooperation, and networking)?*

Current political and social dynamics in the post-Soviet region

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, most of post-Soviet countries inherited unsolved issues and conflicts; consequently, now they face a large number of internal and external challenges and long-lasting conflicts. There are several unresolved violent conflicts in this area: between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia, internal conflicts of the Russian Federation in the North-Caucasian region and the recently broken out conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

There is constant danger that all of the unresolved conflicts will have new escalations. They are not single phenomena but have to be seen in a wider context of regional and global interdependent conflict dynamics.

All participants agreed on the fact that in almost all the conflict affected post-Soviet countries, the situation has become very challenging for non-violent forms of conflict transformation and local civil society actors who work for peace building processes in their societies and across the conflict lines.



An atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and apathy, a culture of violence and militarization of the societies hinders the intentions and the activities of civil society actors who promote nonviolent forms of conflict transformation and development of civil society and democracy from the bottom up.

“We know that outside of the region, the representatives of our nations have good relations, but back home they behave completely another way, because people are affected by oppression and propaganda.” one participant from Azerbaijan said. “It means, dealing with peace-making we had a problem with them (our society), because we are perceived as kind of traitors...”

Even the younger generation, who grew up after the collapse of the USSR is affected by the ongoing conflicts and violence. They lack courage, opportunities, interest and experiences in raising their voices for human rights issues, justice, democracy and peace.

Another participant from Armenia shares her perspective: “There was a negative treatment of society towards us – civil society representatives. They did not take us seriously. They called us “grant-eaters”, “Spies”. They considered that we were pretending that we do something important, but in reality, we just earn “easy money.” For them (the local population) to be a citizen is not important, it does not mean something valuable,” –

“There is a real fear among the society towards the permissiveness of the government, in some regions of RF there could be threat to life...” (participant from Russia)

“Patriotic” reconstructions of history, the perceptions of certain collective identities, cultural traditions of nations“ and religions, images of victimization and heroism are widespread and accepted and used to legitimize human rights violations, lack of democracy, and violent attitudes. Traditional gender roles and images are

promoted and used to construct collective “victims”, “heroes”, “internal and external enemies”, the “ours” and the “others”, as well as for the legitimization of violence.

A participant from Chechnya shared her opinion: “We realized that there is a completely different perception about violence within our society. Our society does not accept or perceive many kinds of violence as such. We (our society) have completely different perceptions about domestic values, as well as about power relations within the family and the country.”



Using mass media and even the educational system, the authorities are constantly reminding the citizens that the greatest value is manifested in their dedicated love and unconditional commitment to the motherland. In a country at war, any criticism and appeal for civil disobedience is marked as a betrayal and willingness to sell the homeland to enemies. Nationalism is identified with patriotism.

In this atmosphere of fear and hate, the activities of peace promoting NGOs and other social actors became very limited and restricted.

It has now become very difficult for civil society actors to promote dialogue processes that cross the conflict lines in Armenia-Azerbaijan, Russia-Georgia, Georgia-South Ossetia and Georgia-Abkhazia or even more Russia-Ukraine. There are very few local NGOs, groups or initiatives, who work with partners across the “conflict lines”.

Because of the very tense situation and very effective “patriotic” propaganda, it is very hard to find individual actors or civil society groups that have the courage to criticize the militaristic patriotism in their own (Russian) as well as Ukrainian societies.

Defamation strategies, propaganda and mistrust hinder the acceptance of actors who promote peace and NGOs by the population. Without the link to the communities, the work done at the civil society level completely excludes participation of the ordinary citizens (grassroots) in peace building processes and has little impact on their conditions, attitudes and behaviours.

The lack of access to and trust by communities leads to a donor driven activism with very little impact for social change and peace building.

According to the participants of the workshop, there is a strong need to make the necessary connection between the Micro- and Macro-levels of the conflicts in order to change structural violence as well as to analyse and face the deep-rooted causes of conflicts. Most peace-building activities are not rooted in communities, and do not tackle the underlying structural and cultural conflict patterns of the societies they are

aiming at. Therefore, the mobilization of broader population groups for peace processes remains very weak.

Exchange and reflection related to experiences and lessons learned coming out of the two interregional projects DELTA 2 (Russian Federation) and LSLCLC (South Caucasus)

During the two-day workshop, the participants were asked to present to each other their peace building initiatives and to jointly analyse the positive and negative effects of their initiatives on a personal, relational and community level.

The regional project “Let’s See... Let’s Choose... Let’s Change...” (LSLCLC).

The project “Let’s See... Let’s Choose... Let’s Change...” was supported by the zivik (Civil Conflict Resolution) programme of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa) with means from the German Federal Foreign Office.

A participant from Azerbaijan said: “After the first training, I went back and talked about Forum-Theatre to my colleagues, they started to laugh and said that it would not work in our society. However, once we organized a forum performance about domestic violence, both – the wives and the husbands were listening with great attention and started to talk about the violence.”



Peace Dialogue NGO and its German partner OWEN launched the project “Let’s see... Let’s choose... Let’s change...” in the framework of its three-year youth strategy “See Who We Are, Choose Who We Want To Be” at the beginning of 2011.

During its first phase, the project was mainly aimed at empowering young men and women in Vanadzor (Armenia) as key actors for additional grassroots: civic and peace activism. In 2012, the project was expanded to involve more young people: first from other cities and regions within Armenia and then from the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict involved area.

The project encouraged young people to use their creative and intellectual potential to achieve better understanding among all parties, promote nonviolent problem solving practices, and mobilize peers in their community. The name “Let’s See... Let’s Choose... Let’s Change...” already expresses the organizers’ approach, which is to visualize different issues that exist within the society as taboos, provide an

opportunity to choose mechanisms to solve those problems and, with the help of the organization, take steps to solve those problems by means of non-violent actions. The project was based on the concepts of Paulo Freire's Liberation Pedagogy and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed approach. Both concepts perceive dialogue as the only way for people to develop the ability to critically analyse their context, to resist violence, and then to find ways to change their reality.

According to the project implementing organizations Peace Dialogue and OWEN, there are two reasons for using the theatrical techniques. First, these methods are active and interesting and with their help it is possible to touch upon, visualize and raise taboo themes. Secondly, they reduce the risk of aggressive reaction from the state, which unfortunately is actually possible in this political context. Thus, for instance, it is less possible to get a permission to organize a discussion on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue at a university or a school from the directorate than to enter to these institutions with a theatrical performance on the same issue – hardly anyone will be against this. The activities are very energetic and that is why all the participants liked them. Great attention was paid to creating an atmosphere of trust so that the participants would feel comfortable. As it was noted the theatrical techniques also help to overcome language barriers in case of work with multinational and multicultural groups. One of the participants of the LSLCLC project said,

"I started to understand the reasons for several of the problems within my society deeper and clearer. I became more attentive and started to pay more attention to the problems existing in my society and my country as well."

Outcome of the project:

- *Peace Dialogue has become the leading organization in various sectors of community awareness especially in the field of civic activism in Vanadzor. The organization has become a platform for young people from Vanadzor where everyone has the opportunity to implement an initiative and receive appropriate support if the initiative does not contradict peace-building principles that have been adopted by the staff. During its activity, the organization has been recognized by and received numerous offers for cooperation from local, regional, and international organizations.*
- *Peace Dialogue is a platform where young people from Vanadzor have an opportunity of self-expression, self-realization, and learning about current political and social events.*
- *A group of young activists has been formed in Vanadzor who possess analytical skills, understand the situation in the country and the region, and are not the victims of state and nationalist propaganda; most importantly they are able to express their own opinions.*

- *Faith and positive attitude towards change have been formed among youth from Vanadzor.*
- *A group of young people from different cities in Armenia (Yeghegnadzor, Spitak, Hrazdan, Jermuk, and Alaverdi) have had an opportunity to develop their skills.*
- *Dialogue and cooperation was formed with youth representing parties from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this regard, the stereotype among the conflicting parties and foreigners that it is impossible to have a peaceful dialogue between the conflicting parties has been proven wrong.*
- *Small groups of youth who are not indifferent to the current socio-political processes have also been formed in Stepanakert and Baku.*
- *With the support of partners, the organization has created an opportunity for youth from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh to meet and discuss the topics of peaceful resolution of the conflict and share their perceptions.*
- *There is a dialogue between young community members and civil society actors in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. NGOs are trying to involve many young actors in positions of responsibility and they share their experiences with one another.*
- *Groups of key actors exist in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh who realize the necessity of changing their reality and are ready to take responsibility for changing themselves and their environment.*
- *Several young people from Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK raised a variety of topics using the theatrical and video tools they received in the trainings organized in the frame of the LSLCLC project.*
- *There are several local groups within the societies of the parties involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Members of these groups are now able to critically analyze the work of the media and not be influenced by nationalistic and militaristic propaganda.*

DELTA 2 Project

The project "Delta-2" was supported by EU: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Peace Nexus Foundation and Black Sea Trust Program of the German Marshall Fund.

The aim of the project was to empower people in local communities (in St. Petersburg and North Caucasus) to become interested and actively involved in problem solving and decision making processes on a community level, and not to wait for someone else to do it instead of them. In addition, there was an intention to create a community-based democratic system of governance via intergenerational dialogue, creating tolerance and solidarity between the local communities, by exchanging opinions, approaches and interests of different social groups and between each other.

The project was initiated and implemented by the "Union Women of Don" with the support of German women's organization OWEN e.V.. Several organizations and groups were also involved in the project as well as „Democratic union of young people“

(St. Petersburg), „Cintem“ NGO (Chechen Republic), Youth Organization „Afon“ (Republic of North Ossetia-Alania) and Charity fund (Kabardino-Balkaria.)

„Union Women of Don“, a Democratic union of young people“, „Cintem“, „Afon“ and „Progress“ are partner organizations and members of OMNIBUS 1325



network. „The Democratic union of young people“ is a partner in the frame of „Delta 2“ project. All partners already had access to diverse communities and work for the empowerment of (conflict affected) grassroots communities as actors and citizens for change (women, children, youth, pupils, students). They are trusted in the communities they work with and are experienced in intercultural, interregional, international dialogue projects.

Since the Russian Federation is a big country, people from different regions of RF do not feel themselves as citizens of one country because of many stereotypes, prejudices and misunderstanding. Each generation has its own "language" and sometimes there is a huge gap between the different generations. There are also a lot of socio-economic, political problems, as well as ethnic and religious differences and contradictions between the representatives of different nations and ethnicities who are the citizens of RF. But the government has no intention to solve these problems, because it is more convenient for them to use this fact and divert the attention of the citizens from more real and important issues in society.

Forum theatre methodology has been chosen to help people to recognize, realize and find solutions for their problems themselves. But even during the implementation of the activities there were a lot of communication problems because of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A Forum theatre group has been created by the partner organization and initiative group members in each community. The methodological stuff has been provided by OWEN e. V., and the local activities and monitoring processes were implemented by parties of the project.

These teams went through two training workshops where they were introduced to the basic principles of Community Theatre, its concept and method. Between the workshops the teams worked in local communities. Forum Theatre presentations were held for different society groups. In addition to the planned events, a training workshop was organized which touched upon the role of the joker, which empowered all members of the teams.

In addition to the presentations in the local communities, a Forum Theatre Festival in Novocherkassk was an exciting project event. On the festival, all theatre groups presented a Forum. This event was able to fully reflect the results of the project by uniting all the teams and highlighting the local problems and finding ways to solve

them by representatives of the local communities. Besides, the project team was able to adapt the Forum Theatre method to the local conditions.

One participant from St. Petersburg said, "I saw the power of Theatre of the Oppressed, and got acquainted with the methodology. I found many friends and colleagues. I understood all the possibilities of Theatre of the Oppressed, as well as learnt to trust young people. Furthermore, I developed my capacities and knowledge for my farther activity. I found new people sharing the same values, and in a real way I discovered the North Caucasian people..."

According to the project implementing team, there is a lack of critical thinking in the society. That is why we could not reach more people with critical thinking and give this kind of skills to more people. They stated that in their regions, people are too apathetic. They hardly come into contact and not always have the will to discuss values or to change them.

However, several interesting observations on gender and generational issues were presented by the Delta-2 project teams:

- *Conflicts between family members often have a central place in Forum Theatre (FT) presentations. These conflicts reveal a strict hierarchy in gender-sensitive relations (males dominate).*
- *In Forum performances, the participants rarely acted as individuals, but mainly in their expected social and cultural roles. Personal desires and demonstrations, that might be able to transform the conflict but do not fit into the social roles and code of conduct were often neglected or rejected altogether.*
- *Noticeably strong is the movement to the traditional gender roles and gender relations, especially in the Caucasus region. The participants believe that the tradition and culture are particularly important for "saving the national and ethnic groups" from destruction. It is believed that a strong collective identity is an effective defense against a perceived but undefined threat to the "nation".*
- *People interpret human rights and citizenship based on fixed cultural roles and social relationships and stand up for them.*
- *Forum performances created opportunities for voicing the concerns, enhancing the perception, expressing desires, feelings, and thoughts that usually remain unexpressed because of the political situation and the conflict environment. People also felt the need to discuss taboo subjects and the relationship between family conflicts (micro level) and the "bigger" conflicts in their communities.*

In discussing the outcomes achieved by the project, the Delta-2 implementing teams have mentioned the following achievements:

- *Partners in Novocherkassk, Grozny, Nalchik, Beslan, Vladikavkas, St.Petersburg set up Forum-Theatre-groups, which were attractive for a growing number of people of different generations in diverse communities.*
- *The theatre groups developed and presented diverse Forum theatre on stage where diverse issues of concern coming out of the communities were in the center of the performances.*
- *Due to the Forum-Theatre-performances the audience had an open dialogue related to their concerns and conflicts and tried to find solutions on stage which could be realized also in their real life. People in diverse communities set up new citizen initiatives and started to use forum theatre in their environment (at schools, universities, women groups, youth groups, soldiers' mothers and other citizens' initiatives.)*
- *The theatre groups found other NGO/Initiatives in their regions who became interested in learning about Forum Theatre and using the methodology for working with their „target groups“ and their issues of concern and concrete conflict experiences.*
- *Due to continuing exchange, common learning, and cooperation during the project the partners and theatre groups who came from diverse regions, backgrounds and cultures overcame existing stereotypes, mistrust and communication problems. Moreover, they became allies and friends who are willing to act together for peace promoting changes in their societies and communities.*
- *The partners and theatre groups learned about regional specific issues of concern and violence, attitudes and behavior of people in coping with conflicts and oppressive power but also about common aspects seen in all involved regions. They discovered the links between concrete experiences of violence on the micro and the macro levels of the society.*

Lessons learned from the two projects

Developing and performing Forum Theatre with diverse communities we could deeply learn about and reflect on issues of concern and conflicts, oppressive power relations and people's attitudes and behaviour toward power related conflicts in families, communities, and societies. The following issues were dealt with during the theatre work in the communities:

Micro level family:

- *Violence against women, bigamy, forced marriages, intergenerational violence f.e. parents-daughter/son or mother in law-daughter in law, brother-sister, drug abuse*

Community/society:

- *Bullying, corruption in the educational system, state health and welfare system, xenophobia towards people from the Caucasus; ethnic discrimination, systematic breaches of law by state structures and businesses and ignorance towards human rights.*

Power and power relations:

- *Power is mostly understood as power over someone (as individual or a social group) and realized as a FORCE to exert top down pressure on people.*
- *Strong gender and generational related patriarchal hierarchic structures and the culture of top down power relations. Traditional gender roles and gender constructions determine and legitimize the male dominated oppressive power relation towards women, women's social roles and "female identities". The older generation dominates the younger generation.*
- *Power positions in society (state, public institutions, private business sector) allow the power holder to act according their own rules, ignoring the laws and rights of the society, constructing and abusing personal dependencies.*

People's attitudes and behaviour toward power related conflicts.

- *Especially in the Caucasus region the traditional gender roles and gender relationships are seen as part of the tradition and culturally important for "saving the national and ethnic groups" from destruction by (strange) enemies.*
- *The fixed cultural roles and social relationships are set and narrow or even closed which effects the limits to people's awareness that they are individuals who have individual desires, human and citizen rights beside the fact that they belong to a certain social group, culture, nation.*
- *Very often, the oppressed protagonists in the forum scenes and also the audience accepted the "power" of the antagonist as well as his/her oppressive violence. They did not believe that the protagonist himself/ herself could have the power she/he needs in order to realize her/his desire. Very often the idea for the „solution“ of the conflict was, to find an external powerful actor who is able to oppress the antagonist and in that case violence and illegal acts were accepted as possible and realistic solutions” .*
- *Often it became evident, that it was very difficult for the protagonists to define and express their desire (what she/he wants to get) but even more clear what she/he does not want, or what should be stopped. The protagonist presented herself and was also perceived by the audience more as a helpless victim “who needs to be helped but not supported in an empowering way so that she/he is enabled to change the oppressive situation and to realize her/his desire.*

The potential of the Theatre of the oppressed in peace work

A participant of the workshop from St. Petersburg said, "My stereotypes had been broken about me and about the society. I realized that there was something wrong within the society" – she said.

According to the participants in the workshop from the South and North Caucasus and St. Petersburg, the concept and methodology used were very useful, because it provided a platform for people to express their concerns, enhancing the perception, expressing desires, feelings, and thoughts that usually remain unexpressed because of the political situation and the conflict environment.

People also felt their need to discuss taboo subjects and the relationship between family conflicts (micro level) and the "bigger" conflicts in their communities. They came into real dialogue and started to overcome the internalized „culture of silence”, internalized victimization and apathy.

Many rehearsals for developing the piece and the characters on stage and the performances made all the problems and challenges visible that people in the regions face in their daily life.

All involved, regional partners, theatre groups and involved communities learned about the deeper and often-invisible aspects of people's attitudes and behavior towards experiences of personal, structural and cultural violence. They could learn how the conflicts on the micro level are connected with the conflicts (past and present) in the society but also the ongoing international conflicts in the post-Soviet region.

One of the most important lessons learned was that it is very crucial for those who are working with community theatre based on Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to have a deep and systematic reflection on what is happening on stage and with the audience.

Follow-up: Planning upcoming strategies for cross conflict line cooperation of conflict affected post-Soviet regions

Coming together and sharing their experience dealing with peace building in the Caucasus Region and in several regions of the Russian Federation, the partner organizations developed a new initiative called "ARENA: Community Theatre and Public Art". The project is based on experiences and lessons learned by OWEN, Peace Dialogue, Union 'Women of Don' and its regional partners in the Post-Soviet Area. The current project includes OMNIBUS 1325's pedagogical approaches and lessons learned during the work with the civil society actors from South and North Caucasus and Germany. The work of the civil society groups and NGOs in this project aims at empowering the society and creating a safe space for mutual dialogue across and between the conflict lines.

The three-year project “ARENA: Community Theatre and Public Art” is aimed at improving the impact of peace-building on a community level, making mobilizing efforts more effective, developing suitable strategies for community based peace-building and creating a safe space for those civil society groups who, despite the repressive and unfriendly conditions in their respective environments, continue their peace building efforts throughout the Caucasus Region, Russian Federation and Ukraine. The project intends to empower these civil society groups so that they are able to develop joint strategies and methodological toolkits in order to continue their work, based on the important principal: ‘do no harm’.

The first phase of the project is called “ARENA: Systematization of Experience.” The project will accompany existing peace-building practices on the community level with a learning and reflection process. The project will bring social actors together for the collective mutual empowerment and the development of strategies aimed at an extension of community mobilizing and community-based peace building. The methodological approach will provide the tools for a participatory and profound analysis of conflict dynamics and social change, which will be the basis for bottom up peace-building strategies suitable in specific local contexts. This will extend the impact NGO-activities and reciprocal effects have on local dynamics.

Systematization of Experiences will be aiming at observing, collecting, documenting and analyzing concrete experiences of civil society groups in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Russia, and the unrecognized secessionist regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who are implementing bottom-up peace building initiatives in diverse communities using community theatre and Public Art as an effective means to achieve changes in societal attitudes, perspectives, and acceptance of diverse positions. The creative and participatory atmosphere of Theatre and Public Art supports civil society actors in developing long-term strategies, forming a public interest towards their activities and avoiding the rejection of new ideas that often happen in their respective communities.

The participants agreed that based on their experience in working with people from conflict-affected societies, during the first year of a three-year project “ARENA: Community Theatre and Public Art” OWEN, Peace Dialogue and Union of Don Women will:

- *Support civil society actors involved in peace building activism in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, as well as in non-recognized entities Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Ossetia.*
- *Provide tools for learning from people’s concrete experiences and perspectives and from activities of civil society actors aimed on mobilizing, raising critical consciousness, and non-violent actions for conflict transformation in conflict affected communities.*
- *Analyze the efficiency, the limits and the challenges in applying community theatre and art as mobilizing tools.*

- *Facilitate learning and reflecting upon community theatre and art as tools for participatory conflict-and actor's analysis, strategy development, planning processes.*
- *Support the creation of a network of peace activists, independent theatrical artists, designers, journalists, and filmmakers from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine; as well as in non-recognized entities Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Ossetia.*
- *Provide safe and secure space for dialogue between civil-society actors from the different regions involved in this project.*