

After Speaking with Locals Themselves, What Mostarians Want Doesn't Fit the Dominant Narrative

By Anja Jerković

Our intention was simple: find out how people feel about their communities in Mostar. We wanted to close the gap between the local and the “external,” the world of ‘experts’: NGOs, development cooperation offices and foundations creating their own measurements for what progress, or a sign of “unity” looks like and feels like in our city. After all, 30 years post-war, we’re still working alongside the international community to try and rebuild the thriving sense of togetherness that our city was once known for. The issue, however, is in who defines what this looks and feels like. To do this, we, locals alongside the guidance of a knowledgeable colleague, worked as a team through “Everyday Peace Indicators,” (EPI) both an organization and a methodology whose approach prioritizes the voices and experiences of “everyday” people, meaning that local people themselves set the criteria through which later projects or practices in our community could be measured.

Our research was one piece in a larger framework. The United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office gave three million pounds to Mostar with the specific purpose of rejuvenating public spaces and activities in those spaces. Five organizations partner to carry out this project; in addition to EPI, the Czech humanitarian organization People in Need is the lead partner and three local organizations do most of the activities on the ground: the Youth Cultural Center Abrašević, Local Democracy Agency Mostar and Nešto Više. Our role was to help guide that funding in the right places by speaking to the people who would benefit, directly or indirectly, from such improvements.

How to find a population representative of all of Mostar? How to account for the various identities living in and around our surroundings? And who were *we* to ask them?

Despite plenty of money poured into the country for its post-war development, some of the most basic needs of everyday people are still lacking. We were keen on doing something different. However nicely we fit into the old pattern of outside agents, we still believed that the way forward wasn’t to drop this work entirely, but to do it *better*.

For our approach, this knowledge encouraged us to take care of two things: the first, to provide an honorarium for the time and lived experiences community members so freely shared to help us with our research. And two, to be very mindful of the way we communicated with participants, which we chose to do through the use of focus groups. If we bring them together, we thought, their voices would not only inform us, but one another, of their experiences. Our intention was to listen and probe to

understand the specific experiences of individuals and communities. And a potential benefit of this (and the ongoing work following the research) was that they can get together and hear from each other and hopefully even choose to act together to pursue their ideal life situations. This is the approach used by Everyday Peace Indicators, and we adopted it as our own.

As a principle, our approach was conflict sensitive. The fact that our research was taking place in a context nearly 30 years post-war meant that collecting information through the Everyday Peace Indicator methodology would look different than in other locations with entirely different histories where it has been utilized, such as Colombia and Oakland, CA. For starters, we quickly learned that terms like “peace” and “coexistence” could irritate some Mostarians. So many years after the war, they asked, why did we still ask to speak about these topics? Mindful of this and yet still interested in using keywords to invoke conversations in the groups we spoke with, we landed on two specific terms: ‘Life together’ and, despite our hesitation, ‘peace’. After all, the goal was to create indicators which would measure concretely the presence of such abstract concepts, and perhaps the critique itself would inform our work in a powerful way. How individuals interpreted these two terms looked different depending on the neighborhood context, and it turned out that precisely in those moments of dissection, conversations flourished.

The 7 Communities

Huddled over a map of the region, we discussed how to choose our 7 communities in the large municipality of Mostar, which included the city center and its periphery but also rural areas many kilometers removed. The Everyday Peace Indicator method usually takes months of canvassing neighborhoods to ask people where the perceived boundaries lie and which buildings/areas are included. Since we had only a 3 month window for all the research, we had to make choices, and fast. We chose the local communities (*mjesne zajednice*) of Bijeli Brijeg, Cernica/Bulevar, Podhum, Blagaj, Cim, Zalik, and Potoci, a mix of urban and rural, north, east, south and west parts of Mostar and more mixed and more homogeneous demographics.

The individuals we spoke to were divided into three groups: men, women, and youth (ages 12-25) which we met individually, each for a three-hour discussion, followed by a joint voting session with everyone present. We wanted to know: what do these abstract ideas look like to people who live in this context? How do they internally and often unconsciously gauge whether there is peace or a life together in their surroundings? Does “peace” mean only that there is no shooting or shelling, or does it mean that a mother feels comfortable sending her child to walk to school alone every day? And is life together, what *they* view as life together, present here? Or is it lacking a park or cafe which makes examples such as kids playing together or neighbors sharing coffee possible?

When we met with the community members for a voting process in which they ranked their most important examples of “life together” and “peace,” we saw what mattered. “Peace is that Bulevar’s circle is illuminated.” “Peace is that a person’s name is not important, but rather his/her value as a human.” “Togetherness means that Mostarians feel welcome in every part of town.” “Togetherness means that people greet each other with smiles on their faces in Zalik.”

What we found, from the micro to the macro, didn’t fit the dominant narrative of separation in our city. It was a counter-story to the insistent news cycle reporting on division and conflict, and the locals made that clear.

What do Mostarians Prioritize?

Health, tranquility, security, drugs and alcohol, sport, media, education, gender, and infrastructure, these were the key themes we gathered through sitting in over 63 hours of conversation with locals. What does that look like? It looks like a (public) pool in Potoci. It looks like tenants refraining from throwing garbage from their balconies. It looks like grown children helping their parents. Not only that, but it looks different based on gender and age.

Youth

Young people wished for more youth visibility: young people playing football in the streets, a night life, youth advocating for their communities. More so, they advocated against the separation we often hear about. They told us, “Parents do not instill hatred in their children by banning them from associating with children of other nations.” *That’s what peace meant to them.* In our groups, they varied in how much they spoke up. Perhaps they weren’t used to having their opinions asked of them, of what *they* wished for this place they inhabit. Simultaneously, they seemed shy; maybe they are somewhat removed from the topics their elders spoke about, or insecure about being approached? They were less bothered by graffiti, more interested in places to gather. In Potoci, an indicator of life together was something as simple as having a nearby restaurant to go for pancakes with friends. They seemed to have another picture of their community, one that wasn’t so much about separation as it was events, ways to compete against the mundane. Youth advocated for more places to gather, sports halls, football fields, the absence of organized fights between members of the local football clubs. Some of them ping-ponged off of each other’s responses, looking visibly happy to talk about their own perspectives of their communities, happy to be asked.

Women and men

Women’s groups felt like the types of conversations you come across sitting at a coffee table with them, discussing life in general. They let one another’s sentences run off into the others, adding onto each others’ suggestions. In Blagaj, the lack of

gathering spaces for women was a prominent topic. Women prioritized infrastructure and health. They told us, Mostarians should feel welcome in every part of town, and neighbors supporting each other to bring, cut, and stack firewood together would be an indicator of life together. In Podhum, men spoke about peace as represented through neighbor's socializing in one another's homes. Repeatedly, the importance of neighbors was vocalized throughout communities. They named specific sites, such as the facade of building BMR 35, that need repair, or for a covered bench at the bus stop to sit on in front of the cultural center. In the neighborhood of Cim, an indicator of life together would be community members taking care of the Basilica together. When they wanted to explain the lack of ethnonational division amongst their circles, they told us in food: for Muslim Bajram (Eid), they bring baklava to non-celebrating co-workers. For Catholic Easter, it's the same practice the other way around. Food became a symbol of cultural respect. It was the system, they argued, that separated people—not the people themselves.

Men's conversations seemed to mimic what one might hear sitting in a cafe in Mostar. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that in neighborhoods such as Bijeli Brijeg, they mentioned that a symbol of life together would look like people gathering without prior arrangements, like they did once, or that neighborhoods carried their own code of conduct. Here, governance was a big issue. As expressed by the women's groups, it wasn't individuals, it was the system. They spoke about jobs not obtained through connections of one to the other but rather, honest qualifications. In Potoci, people asked that spring water once again fill the irrigation canals. In Podhum, the sewage system should not clog whenever a heavy rain hits. Overall, Mostarians should feel welcome in every part of town, and find their place amongst a picture of a landscape renewed from the past, not still struggling from it.

When all the groups came together to vote jointly, we saw that indicators reflecting the idea of life together were much simpler than the news cycle would have us believe. *People in Mostar no longer consider those who are different as sick. Young people do not care how people are named. Both areas of the city are constructed equally. There are new clinics, sports halls, and football fields. Peace means that there are many free educational, cultural youth centers. Community halls have commissioners. All residents welcome people who have moved in. Parents allow their children to play outside in the yard without fear.*

Our conversations served as a megaphone for everyday Mostarians whose voices are often left out of discussions about their city. *Did we reach our goal?* Time and outcomes will tell. What is important now is that we share what we heard with whoever is interested to go beyond the stories of separation on a larger scale and step into the power of everyday stories. What we know now is that the wishes of the community don't need magic to be fulfilled, but rather, the inclusion of those within it— at every level.