



# Balkan Children & Youth FOUNDATION

## Strengthening Supports for Young People in the Balkans

*With the future economic, social, and political stability of the Balkans hinging on the positive development of the region's young people, IYF has been working with other public, private, and non-profit sector organizations—within and outside the region—to develop a comprehensive strategy to better meet children and youth needs. After nearly a year of research, consultation, and extensive dialogue with key leaders steps are now underway to launch a Balkan Children and Youth Foundation.*

*Below is a summary of key issues facing young people in the Balkans, the process, which led to the decision to launch a new regional foundation, and next steps.*

### The Balkan Youth Summit: A Call to Action

To further dialogue and engage key stakeholders in developing a long-term strategy for youth in the Balkans, IYF and the Open Society Institute joined in organizing a Balkan Youth Summit held in Helsinki, Finland on 9 February. Convened and chaired by then Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the Summit brought together key business, government, and NGO leaders from 20 countries across the Balkans and around the world. Its purpose was to discuss the critical challenges facing young people in the region and decide how best to improve their lives and prospects.

Those attending the Summit shared a common



sense of urgency to expand local and international support for the region's young people beyond basic relief programmes. Young people in the region are struggling to overcome years of ethnic wars and division. The situation is compounded in that the region is now overcoming not only war, but lagging economies, isolation, and a much slower transition than countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Summit participants recognized that ensuring economic development, peace, and prosperity in the region is contingent on forming deeply rooted democratic values and marketable skills in young people today. While each country has unique problems to overcome, representatives from the region echoed common concerns. Among these were:

*Tolerance*—Grave concern was expressed about the ongoing problems of intolerance and violence that still plague many communities. “Unless we act now, I see the potential of new walls of hatred and intolerance going up in the Balkans,” one NGO leader warned.

*Education*—Lack of education—formal, non-formal, and informal—is viewed as a common crisis across the region. A major effort is needed to rebuild war-damaged schools and to connect schools and students to the worldwide web. It is also essential to promote education and skills training outside the classroom, in homes, and places of work.

*Employment*—High unemployment among youth further marginalizes their lives and diminishes their dreams for a better future. Young people also feel they are being shut out of the global marketplace of ideas and technology. As one participant noted, Helsinki is the Internet capital of Europe, yet Kosovo only has a few thousand computers, and often no electricity to run them.

*Substance abuse*—The rise of drug abuse is a major problem. It was noted that there are hundreds of heroin addicts in the Croatia today, and Romania is struggling to deal with the highest number of HIV cases and abandoned children in the region. Contributing to substance use is a general feeling of helplessness among the region's young people and lack of hope in the future. A representative from Macedonia spoke of the many youth who feel their futures lie outside their own country.

Attempts by NGOs to address youth needs in the region are hampered by lack of long-term support for youth initiatives. Organizations have difficulty maintaining financial support for their projects, even when they are successful. “Hit and run” investments, often made by international NGOs, foundations, and governments responding to a crisis, result in projects being closed down, further diminishing a sense of hope among young people.



Lack of coordination among those working in the Balkans is a further obstacle to their progress. Because many NGOs work in isolation, they're forced to compete for money, for media, for support, and for people. As a result, they have little authority or long-term impact.

Seeking to maximize support for youth programmes throughout the Balkans, Summit discussions focused on the added value of a regional approach, which would facilitate the sharing of best practices throughout the region, and expand cross-border opportunities for young people to learn from each other's experiences.

### **Towards the Creation of a Balkan Children and Youth Foundation**

At the close of the Summit, a Working Group was created, chaired and convened by President Ahtisaari to set a strategic direction for a Balkan youth initiative. Comprised of 12 leaders of government, local and international NGOs, and international development agencies, its role was to develop an improved basis for cooperation among governments, business, and NGOs in addressing youth needs in the Balkans. Specifically, the Group was given the task to develop a plan of action, guiding principles, a programmatic framework, operational structure, and policies for the initiative, as well as identifying revenue sources.

Working Group members agreed that key goals of any proposed Balkan youth initiative should include:

- Creating a new model of regional cooperation that tries to unify a divided region around a precious asset—its children and youth.
- Increasing the effectiveness, scale, and sustainability of youth-serving programmes;
- Strengthening the capacity of children and youth NGOs through training and consulting assistance;
- Generating social investments from the business sector, governments, international funding agencies and NGOs;
- Making targeted grants to children and youth-serving NGOs to enhance their effectiveness, scale, and sustainability; and
- Enhancing tri-sectoral cooperation among business, government, civil society to build a new economic and social environment for the youth of the region.

Following several meetings and in-depth discussions over the best course of action, working group members reached overwhelming consensus around establishing a Balkan Children and Youth Foundation. The decision was made to locate the Foundation in Skopje, Macedonia was based on a variety of factors, including practicality, accessibility, and its location in the southern portion of the region where needs are greatest.

On 28 October, the first Board meeting was held in Skopje. The Board of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation include President Martti Ahtisaari, who will serve as Chair, Christiane Amanpour, CNN Chief International Correspondent; Stojan Cerovic, Co-founder of the Newspaper Vreme; Bojken Lako, Radio Artistic Director; Rick Little, IYF Founder and President; Vladimir Milcin, Executive Director of the Open Society Institute in Macedonia; Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic, Director Step-by-Step - Bosnia-Herzegovina; Dimitry Panitza, Former Managing Director of the Reader's Digest; Petrit Selimi, Post-Pessimist Organizations; and Rita Süssmuth, member and former President of the German Bundestag.

The Executive Director, Mr. Agon Demjaha, and the Programme Officer, Ms. Sasha Mishevaska, have been selected and they started their operations in November 2000. A first series of small grants have been awarded to good quality programmes in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. The Foundation was legally registered in Macedonia at the beginning of February 2001, and the Foundation is now fully operational.

Those programmes to be reinforced and supported through the Foundation will build upon existing best practices for youth development in the region. The following have been identified as chief programmatic areas:

- Promoting greater social responsibility among companies operating in the Balkans;
- Preparing young people for entry into the job market and self-employment, including strengthening school and community based programmes that provide young people with the personal, social, and technical skills to successfully participate in the economy;
- Strengthening young people's knowledge and use of technology;
- Providing greater opportunities for non-formal education; and

- Enhancing civic education and democracy building.

As part of its mandate the Foundation will strive to actively connect with youth development initiatives in other parts of Europe and elsewhere in the world. Forming relations with other youth-serving organizations and networks are viewed as critical in building regional and local capacities.



*For further information about the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, please contact Mr. Agon Demjaha, BCYF Executive Director ([bcyf@balkanyouth.org](mailto:bcyf@balkanyouth.org)).*

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"Consistent with IYF's core philosophy, we are looking not to reinvent the wheel, but to provide added value to existing efforts to support and expand youth initiatives throughout the Balkan region."

*—President Martti Ahtisaari, Finland; Member, IYF's Global Action Council and Chairman of the Board of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation*

