

5

The Price of Rebuilding a War-Torn Town

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Maria's nongovernmental organization has operated in a small war-torn town for years. They assisted the local people and shared their struggle to survive in the midst of constant fighting, shelling, hunger, and despair. One year has passed since the war ended. Finally, there is electricity and running water, and a hope for the future has returned to the war-shattered place. Maria has been the director of the organization since the outset of the war. During the war, her organization's main goal was to provide emergency medical aid and food. Even though the humanitarian needs are still present, the time has come to refocus the work on postconflict development by helping people heal and rebuild their lives. At a recent meeting, Maria and her coworkers decided that the new priorities for the organization would be providing economic assistance and promoting inter-ethnic reconciliation through refugee returns.

At the staff meeting, one of the colleagues pointed out a perfect economic assistance project. A major source of employment in the town, a furniture factory, was completely destroyed during the war. As a result, the majority of the town population became jobless. Everyone in the organization agrees that rebuilding the factory would be an appropriate development project and a necessary step in rebuilding this war-ravaged town. Thanks to the high level of coverage by the international media and the organization's public relations department, donors were very generous in providing the funds for postconflict assistance. The decision of the best way to put the funds to use has not come solely from within the organization. One hundred and fifty families were interviewed and asked what they believed would be most helpful in rebuilding their lives. The overwhelming majority agreed that the best way to help would be to create jobs and revive

the halted economy. Poverty and unemployment, all agreed, are the biggest problems. Ivana, who lives near Maria's office, said in the interview, "My biggest wish is to work again. I was always able to provide for my family—I worked as a cook before the war. Now I feel helpless, because there is no job for me. I would work anywhere, just to be a productive person again. The feeling of helplessness is killing me." Most of the interviewed people expressed their desire to see the factory rebuilt, believing that the jobs it would create would bring the town back to life.

Another consideration that came at the top of the agenda was return and reconciliation of the refugees. A recent report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicated there was a large number of refugees and displaced ethnic minorities who wished to return to their homes in this town. The interviewed families were asked if they were in favor of their ethnic minority neighbors returning to their homes. About 60% of the families said it would be difficult to get along with them again, but they would try if they had to.

Since the end of the war, local politicians have done everything in their power to prevent ethnic minorities from returning to the town, and no projects could be carried out without their approval. Maria and her coworkers decided that in order to combine organizational priorities, the project of rebuilding the factory would be implemented in exchange for the return of the refugees. The hope was that an economic incentive would persuade the local government to do its part in the refugee and reconciliation effort. A colleague from the organization disagreed and warned that the inter-ethnic animosities are still fresh and that a refugee and reconciliation project should be undertaken when enough time had passed. He suggested that the current project should be limited to rebuilding the factory, in order not to alienate the local government. As the director of the organization, Maria had to make the ultimate decision. She thought about the suggestion, but decided that it is important to plant the seeds of reconciliation early after the cessation of hostilities.

Maria and her coworkers prepared the project plan and headed to meet with the leader of the town's refugee group before asking for the mayor's approval to carry out the project. At the meeting, they shared the project idea with the refugee leader, who was enthusiastic about the prospect of bringing his people home. The leader noted that that he felt concerned and uncomfortable living next to and working with the majority group, but he stressed that jobs and homes were the most important. He asked Maria's organization to be a mediator in getting the town's politicians to provide mechanisms to ensure the refugees' safety.

An appointment with the mayor was set. On their way to the mayor's office, Maria and John passed by the destroyed factory. Maria felt an enormous excitement visualizing the new factory, people returning to work, and the future of the town beginning. They soon arrived at the municipal building and the mayor greeted them warmly when they entered his office. After exchanging polite "good afternoons," the mayor said, "First of all, I would like to thank you for helping this town throughout the war. Your organization has been here with us through all of the hardships. You stood by us and we consider you to be our own people."

"Thank you," Maria replied, "We love this town and are happy to help in any way we can. We are here today because we have an idea for an exciting new project. My organization would like to help rebuild the furniture factory in exchange for allowing the ethnic minority refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes. The funds are available, and the project is ready. Your approval is all we need to begin the work."

To her dismay, after a moment of awkward silence, the mayor looked Maria straight into the eye and said, "I cannot be bought!"

"But . . ." she tried to reply.

"No 'but,' no discussion! You were here during the war. You have seen with your own eyes that their army—they—destroyed this city with shelling. Why should we allow them to come back here? This is no longer their town," the mayor said in angry excitement.

Suddenly, it dawned on Maria how little attention she paid to the ethnic hatred and intolerance factor in the situation. Perhaps they should have disregarded the reconciliation issue and proceeded only with the economic assistance. The organizational planning did not account for this kind of an obstacle. As thoughts were flying through her head, Maria realized that she did not anticipate this kind of a response from the mayor. In a last attempt, she said:

"The factory would help your town enormously. It is not a bargain. Furthermore, civilians, regardless of their ethnicity, have a right to return to their homes."

"They are all the same," the mayor maintained. "They are the enemy. Rebuild the factory, if you'd like, but no refugees! No enemies are allowed in this town."

Then he excused himself and left the room.

Immediately upon returning to their office, Maria convened a staff meeting. After a short briefing, she asked the staff to make suggestions about what should be done. Someone suggested that they go ahead and rebuild the factory and give up on the resettlement and reconciliation issue.

Others suggested involvement of other organizations and more moderate politicians in pressuring the mayor to allow the returns. Another suggestion was to carry out a similar project in another town. Maria thanked everyone for their input and informed them that she would make a decision by the next staff meeting. She thought how sad it was that there was a price for rebuilding the town's future and started thinking about different ways of approaching the problem.

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