

PEACE THROUGH EDUCATION

POLICY APPROACHES TO PEACEBUILDING IN BOSNIA- HERZEGOVINA

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 1995, its education sector remains fragmented and politically contested. While education is widely recognized as a key instrument for fostering peace its potential remains unrealized due to structural and political obstacles. Despite the challenges, several peace education initiatives seek to integrate peace into the BiH education system. Most of these initiatives have been non-formal, which means that they occur via workshops or extracurricular activities, rather than as a part of official school curricula. Non-formal education plays a crucial role in postwar societies but cannot sustain peace alone if the formal education system perpetuates division and inequality (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Clarke-Habibi 2023).

This policy brief focuses on six initiatives seeking to integrate peace into the formal education system, including ministries of education, teacher training programs, and school policies. These initiatives operate on a relatively small scale, often reaching individual schools or teachers rather than the entire system, but they provide critical insights into how peace education is understood and institutionalized in post-war societies.

Drawing on theoretical literature on peace education and interviews with leaders of six education initiatives, this policy brief addresses three central points:

1. The potential of education as a tool for peacebuilding while highlighting the structural and political barriers that constrain its effectiveness in BiH.
2. The strategies and values of ongoing peace education initiatives, including how they navigate fragmented governance and political resistance.
3. Concrete recommendations for practitioners and policymakers to strengthen the institutionalization and impact of peace education in post-war contexts.

By mapping peace education initiatives, analysing their strategies, and identifying lessons learned, this brief highlights both the potential of and the barriers to peace education in BiH. It concludes with recommendations on how to support more contextual and politically informed approaches to peace via education.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Peace education is grounded in the belief that education can be a powerful tool for preventing violence and fostering tolerance, and even social harmony. It seeks to promote a “culture of peace” by encouraging critical thinking, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution skills, while also addressing the root causes of conflict, such as inequality, injustice, and prejudice.¹ In post-war societies like BiH, peace education becomes particularly crucial, as it provides a means of healing and rebuilding communities that have been fractured by lingering effects of war.

Peace education is sometimes differentiated from peacebuilding education – twin concepts that share goals but differ in scope. Peace education traditionally focuses on fostering peaceful attitudes and behaviours, rooted in interwar peace movements and interdisciplinary peace research. Peacebuilding education, emerging in the 1990s, emphasizes postwar reconstruction and institutional reforms aimed at reducing conflict (Bush & Saltarelli 2000). This paper largely refers to “peace education.”

Historically, peace education has been influenced by concerns that schools reinforce nationalism and conflict (Harris 2004). Early proponents like John Dewey, John Rawls, and Maria Montessori advocated for education that fosters international understanding, social justice, and democratic values. After World War II, organizations like the UN and UNESCO promoted peace education through policies and funding, adapting it to regional contexts (Harris 2008; Tinker 2016). Over time, peace education evolved to address structural violence and systemic inequalities (Galtung 1969).

By the 1990s, education was increasingly seen as a tool for postwar peacebuilding, recognized in UN frameworks like “An Agenda for Peace” (1992). Initially, efforts focused on rebuilding infrastructure and ensuring safety, but later expanded to include curriculum reform and policy change (Novelli et al. 2015). Scholars distinguished between education’s “positive” and “negative” roles—its potential to foster peace versus perpetuate inequalities (Bush & Saltarelli 2000; Shah & Cardozo 2015).

Recent discussions emphasize social justice and decolonization in peace education (Bajaj 2015; Zembylas 2018). Approaches such as the 4Rs framework—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation—aim to create more equitable education systems (Novelli et al. 2015). In BiH, scholars call for integrating traditional educational values that address both intellectual and moral development (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Clarke-Habibi 2023).

resulting in a fragmented system with parallel curricula for different ethnic groups (Keil and Perry 2015). The persistence of “two schools under one roof” and monoethnic schooling exacerbates social fragmentation and limits opportunities for interethnic dialogue (Magill 2010; Torsti 2009).

Efforts to reform education have faced resistance due to political, nationalist and religious/sectarian divisions. While international actors, including the European Union and the OSCE, have promoted integrated curricula, teacher training, and textbook revision to foster interethnic understanding, these initiatives have achieved mixed success (Keil and Perry 2015; Torsti 2009; Emkic 2018). The technical approach to reform—focusing on curricula and pedagogy—often neglects deeper political and structural issues, such as institutionalized segregation and nationalist agendas, limiting the potential for transformative peace education.

Exposure to ethnonationalist views in schools should not be equated with belief in them – in 2017, students in Jajce protested against the segregation of their school, demonstrating that some young people reject divided schooling.² Nonetheless, the structure and content of education in BiH fosters notions of top-down separateness rather than enabling bottom-up unity (Hromadžić 2015).

Despite the challenges, international and local actors have been working to integrate peace into the formal curricula for decades (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Clarke-Habibi 2023). In the immediate aftermath of the war, local organizations began focusing on providing trauma support, care, and integration through education. One such initiative was the STaR project, which aimed to help communities heal through educational programs.

As the years passed and funding increased, the early 2000s saw a significant growth in peacebuilding NGOs—by this time, hundreds of organizations had emerged, working on both education and peacebuilding

(Stabback 2007 in Emkic 2018). Recognizing education as crucial for sustainable peacebuilding, international organizations, including the OSCE, began supporting projects such as revising biased textbooks and fostering interethnic integration within schools (Torsti 2009). Early peace education efforts, focused particularly on reforming history and geography textbooks, aimed to remove exclusive, nationalistic content that reinforced divided worldviews (e.g., Bartulovic 2006, Murgescu 2002, Kreso 2008, Torsti 2007; Listhaug and Ramet 2013). The OSCE also supported the work of Education for Peace around 2008–2009.³

In addition to the OSCE, other international actors like the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundation, and CIVITAS worked to analyse and revise the curricula, which were highly nationalist and exclusionary in their content and flavour (Emkic 2018). The fragmentation and in turn hyper-nationalization of teacher training, which hindered effective pedagogy, was another major concern. As political parties resisted changing curricula, teacher training became another avenue through which to address curricula indirectly. International organizations invested in teacher training initiatives, hoping to improve the quality of education and promote peace through more unified teaching practices (Clarke-Habibi 2017, Galloway 2006, Weinstein et al 2007).

However, despite these efforts, systemic reform in the educational sector has faced significant challenges, and progress has stalled in the last fifteen years (Kreso 2008, STaR project n.d.). Nonetheless, numerous peace education initiatives persist, offering both in-school and extracurricular programming aimed at promoting peace, which we turn to next.

1 The concept emerged from UNESCO’s work on peace education and the broader goal of promoting global understanding and human rights.

THE BIH CONTEXT: FRAGMENTATION AND POLITICAL COMPLEXITY

Postwar peacebuilding in BiH attracted substantial international investment, particularly in security (Zürcher 2011; Emkic 2018; Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017). Education remained fragmented due to war legacies and the governance structure established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which decentralized educational authority and reinforced ethnic divisions in schools. During the war, schools were destroyed, and curricula were adapted based on the majority ethnic military group occupying a locality (Torsti 2009). Dayton’s constitutional framework left education under the jurisdiction of Republika Srpska, the ten cantons of the Federation, and Brčko District,

2 <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/20/bosnian-pupils-rally-against-ethnic-segregation-in-schools-06-20-2017/>

3 EFP-BiH - Education for Peace

CASE STUDIES

Interviews with leaders from six peace education organizations reveal that personal motivations play a significant role in their ongoing work. For many, their involvement in peace education stems from their own life experiences—such as their identities, personal histories during the war, and involvement in activism. Each organization was founded in response to specific post-war needs, and over time, they have evolved to address the changing needs of communities in BiH. Below, we introduce the organizations interviewed in turn.

Sezam started in 1995 in Zenica to provide psychosocial and trauma recovery support to children via workshops, the arts and therapeutic interventions. It grew out of an International Medical Corps (IMC) initiative that ended in 1995 when four of its members decided to found a local NGO, Sezam, to continue to address the needs of refugee children. Over the years, the organization and its programs have evolved. In 1999, Sezam connected with Marshall Rosenberg, an American psychologist and mediator, who trained the team in nonviolent communication. While Sezam started by working directly with children, the staff soon realized that in addition to parents, teachers have a large influence on the lives of children, and shifted their work to train teachers in communication and social skills. In 2003, the organization expanded their work beyond Zenica, and worked in the Republika Srpska for over a decade. Sezam works with eight schools and focuses their efforts in the areas around Livno and Konjic, near the Herzegovina region, focusing on smaller and more isolated communities that have less opportunities.

EuroClio (European Association of History Educators) is an organization based in the Hague, the Netherlands since 1992, and opened a chapter in BiH in 2003. In 2004, “EuroClio HIP BiH” became a registered NGO in BiH aiming to modernize the teaching of history, hold seminars for history teachers, train teachers in innovative methodologies, and collaborate with professional and other organizations on the teaching of history. This work includes developing alternative history curricula and training teachers in both content and methodologies, as well as fostering collaboration between history teachers across BiH, the Balkan region including Croatia and Serbia, and Europe. Today, the core network of members in BiH is strong, consisting of over 200 members from across the country, including many cantons in the Federation and teachers in the Republika Srpska.

In 1996, the Center for Civic Education from Calabasas, California, the Council of Europe and the United States Information Agency initiated the formation of **CIVITAS BiH** to support the transition from socialism to democracy via civic education. Since the beginning of its work in BiH, CIVITAS has worked to integrate civic education into the formal system. The first efforts were focused on introducing civics in elementary and high schools to teach students about the constitution and structure of the government, and to inoculate the values needed to be educated and informed citizens in a modern democracy. As raising awareness about the constitution is insufficient to form active citizens, CIVITAS organizes numerous activities focused on active and informed citizenship, such as Project Citizen which trains students in public policy and advocacy. CIVITAS also works with teachers to instill democratic values and more interactive strategies. More recently, CIVITAS has started to work with universities so that democratic values, knowledge, and skills are reinforced at all levels of education. They have also started to address cross-cutting issues like cyberspace, development, and girls education. Today, the organization works mainly with teachers and educational experts to train teachers to teach civic education in schools.

Catholic Relief Services (**CRS**) is a US-based international organization that started working in BiH in 1993 to provide emergency relief during the war. Over the years, circumstances and needs have changed, and today CRS focuses more on development. CRS ran a large-scale peacebuilding project called

Pro-Future II, funded by USAID, with a vision to work across all levels of government – municipal, cantonal, entity, and state – to create a common vision for peace in BiH. It builds on two prior peacebuilding projects, one working with former prison camp survivors and another (Pro-Future I) focusing work on local communities. One focus area of Pro-Future II is promoting peace education in schools as a way to increase understanding and acceptance of others and reconciliation. The intersection of peace and education is a newer area for CRS that started three years ago as a key way to reach a wider range of youth, especially those not always engaged by NGO work. CRS realized that working with schools is not only a way to engage young people in peacebuilding, but also to diversify the formal curriculum, enrich it with topics that are not covered with formal or informal curriculum and provide more opportunities for interactive teaching styles. CRS developed guidelines for teachers and nine different workshops on topics related to peace, including prejudice, stereotypes, communication skills, critical thinking, resilience to ethno-nationalist rhetoric. These workshops have been well received by teachers as an engaging and effective way to open students' minds.

The **Peace Education Hub** at the University of Sarajevo based in the Faculty of Philosophy started in March 2020 as an academic institute aimed at bringing together the formal and informal sectors to infuse peace pedagogies and values into the curriculum, policies, strategies, courses, and syllabi of higher education. It grew out of an ongoing AHRC project started in 2018 called “Peacebuilding Pedagogies in Higher Education” that includes academics from The Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex), The University of the Arts, (London) The University of Rwanda, The University of Sarajevo and Los Andes University (Bogota, Colombia). The goal of this project is to document peace pedagogies and how they have been integrated into higher

education – not just what is taught in relation to peace, but how peace pedagogies are implemented. To date, key activities of the Peace Hub include teacher training, seminars, and research. Although in the early stages of its work, the very establishment of the Peace Hub means that peace education is now more visible at the University of Sarajevo, and more teachers now have the opportunity to receive training and support.

The **Nansen Dialogue Center (NDC) in Mostar** began as part of a Norwegian educational initiative in 1995 and registered as a local NGO in 2001. It is part of the Nansen Dialogue Network, which includes offices across the Western Balkans, including in Sarajevo and Banja Luka. NDC Mostar focuses on four different projects that aim to promote peace and dialogue via education: joint projects at ‘two schools under one roof,’ peace education in mono-ethnic schools, social cohesion projects, and policy dialogues. In 2008, NDC Mostar began dialogue seminars with students and teachers at ‘two schools under one roof.’ As many schools in the region are monoethnic, with a majority of students from one ethnic group but also a “silent minority,” in 2012 NDC Mostar started to also work with these schools. In 2015, the organization began more structured, systematic and frequent activities in two schools under one roof (called the Nansen Model for Integrated Education) and in mono-ethnic schools (called Peace Education). Their work includes training teachers in peace pedagogies and running extracurricular activities with students during the school year. Via small grants, NDC Mostar enables students who participate in their workshops to apply the new knowledge and skills to community projects. Finally, NDC Mostar also engages in strategic dialogue to lobby stakeholders to formally recognize the Nansen model and peace values as a formal extracurricular activity and official part of the curriculum.

1. How do the initiatives understand peace education?

Peace education is conceptualized across the initiatives as both an individual and systemic process, bridging personal transformation with broader societal change. Several initiatives emphasize personal growth and interpersonal skills. Sezam focuses on inner peace and communication, using arts-based and experiential methods to help teachers foster emotional and social well-being in their students. CRS incorporates practical workshops on resilience, communication, and stereotype reduction within existing curricula, though its emphasis is on providing tools that enhance formal schooling rather than individual transformation.

Other initiatives adopt a more systemic perspective, connecting peace education to larger societal frameworks. EuroClio HIP BiH integrates peace education into critical history teaching, equipping educators to navigate sensitive historical narratives as a means of fostering reconciliation. CIVITAS BiH also embeds peace education in broader societal goals, blending democratic skills with nonviolent communication to develop active citizens who can engage constructively with societal conflicts. The Peace Education Hub employs critical pedagogy to challenge structural inequalities and promote ethical awareness among educators, targeting the roots of divisiveness.

These conceptualizations reflect shared commitments to peace as both a personal and societal endeavour while showcasing differences in emphasis—whether on individual transformation, the enhancement of formal education, or systemic critique and transformation. Notably, few focus substantially on policy due to political challenges.

2. What values do the initiatives foster?

All the initiatives promote core values of empathy, responsibility, and mutual respect, recognizing these principles as essential to fostering peace. However, the ways in which these values are prioritized and expressed vary across contexts. For example, Sezam and the Peace Education Hub share a focus on nonviolent communication and interpersonal trust but emphasize these values in different ways: Sezam prioritizes individual transformation, fostering inner peace and confidence as a foundation for societal peace, while the Peace Education Hub emphasizes intercultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility within a culture of peace. Similarly, EuroClio HIP BiH and CIVITAS BiH align in their commitment to democratic values and active citizenship but differ in their focus. EuroClio emphasizes reconciliation through the exploration of contested historical narratives and dialogue among teachers from different backgrounds, cultivating trust and openness. In contrast, CIVITAS integrates democratic engagement with nonviolence and social justice, promoting shared responsibility for the common good through civic education. Meanwhile, CRS’s Pro-Future II program shares with other initiatives the goal of fostering acceptance but focuses its efforts to dismantle stereotypes and build resilience against divisive ethno-nationalist rhetoric. These differences in emphasis highlight how each initiative tailors common values to its specific context and objectives, illustrating the diversity of approaches to peacebuilding.

3. How do the initiatives approach institutionalization?

The initiatives adopt diverse approaches to institutionalization, varying from grassroots efforts to formal integration into educational systems, while also navigating relationships with government and political institutions to scale their impact.

Grassroots and Formal Integration: Initiatives like Sezam and CRS emphasize collaborative, relationship-driven models. Sezam builds trust through workshops and community engagement, establishing direct relationships with schools and



teachers before expanding its reach. This grassroots approach is complemented by securing broader acceptance through partnerships with ministries and pedagogical institutes. CRS also works closely with ministries of education (there are 10 cantonal, 2 entity-level, plus a Department in Brcko) to integrate its workshops into formal school frameworks, providing teachers with the flexibility to adapt content to local contexts. These initiatives acknowledge that their workshops account for only a small part of children's learning experiences.

On the other hand, initiatives like CIVITAS BiH and EuroClio HIP BiH focus on embedding peace education more directly into formal education systems. CIVITAS BiH has successfully institutionalized civic education as part of the national curriculum, though its impact is tempered by limited lesson frequency, requiring ongoing engagement with teachers and informal education efforts. EuroClio HIP BiH takes a more indirect approach, utilizing its membership network to influence local governments and pedagogical institutions through teacher participation in training programs. The Peace Education Hub integrates peace pedagogies into teacher training, aiming for systemic transformation to address issues like segregation and inequity in education.

Government and Political Engagement: In their efforts to institutionalize peace education, the initiatives also engage with government and political institutions in different ways. Sezam and CRS prioritize partnership with government bodies, viewing ministries and pedagogical institutes as essential collaborators in scaling their work. Sezam's stepwise engagement ensures local institutional buy-in before expanding into schools, while CRS aligns its programs with governmental priorities to integrate peace education into existing educational frameworks.

CIVITAS BiH, with its long history of collaboration, has embedded civic education into the national curriculum, maintaining strong relationships with ministries and educators at multiple levels. In contrast, EuroClio HIP BiH avoids direct reliance on governmental institutions, choosing to work through professional networks established by its members. This strategy allows the initiative to remain neutral and navigate politically sensitive environments without formal governmental involvement. The Peace Education Hub takes a more critical stance by using peace education as a tool to address systemic inequalities and empower educators to challenge divisive political practices and policies.

ANALYSIS

Peace education initiatives in BiH operate in a politically challenging environment, and face several interrelated obstacles:

- **Fragmented governance and limited reach.** Most initiatives operate at a small scale, directly affecting certain schools, teachers, or students. Even effective programs at this scale cannot alone transform the segmented educational system.
- **Navigating political resistance.** Initiatives must balance collaboration with government institutions against the risk of co-optation or politicization. Some organizations circumvent formal structures to maintain credibility.
- **Political versus technical framing.** International actors often approach education reform as a technical task, which avoids the political dimensions of peace education such as addressing nationalist agendas and institutionalized segregation.

Despite these challenges, the initiatives illustrate several pathways for indirectly embedding peace education, primarily via building trust with teachers; integrating peace values into pedagogy; and promoting dialogue. Small scale initiatives, when aligned with local contexts, can be the seeds for longer-term changes by encouraging experimentation and sustaining hope within the education sector.

KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- **Peace education cannot be separated from politics.** Treating education reform solely as a technical matter limits its potential to address the underlying causes of division.
- **Small-scale initiatives provide starting points.** Though localized and small scale, they demonstrate feasible models for integrating peace values into formal systems that can be expanded once conditions are more favourable.
- **Systemic impact requires multi-level engagement.** Bridging the gap between grassroots practice and policy frameworks is essential for long-term transformation.

Recommendations by practitioners, for practitioners and policymakers:

As in any country, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to integrating peace into the formal system in BiH. The challenges posed by the country's fragmented educational system and the political divisions within its society require a concerted effort from all stakeholders—government officials, educators, NGOs, and international organizations. The following recommendations are focused on improving the institutionalization of peace education in post-war contexts, moving from program design through systemic integration.

1. Localization and Contextualization

- Understand local political, social, and cultural contexts before program design (CRS, NDC Mostar).
- Engage stakeholders at all levels—students, teachers, local communities, and government entities—to ensure relevance and ownership.
- Promote civic engagement even in challenging political or social climates (EuroClio).

2. Personal and Professional Development

- Encourage practitioners to engage in continuous self-reflection, learning, and trust-building (Sezam, Peace Hub).
- Cultivate courage and persistence, recognizing that social change is gradual (Sezam, NDC Mostar).
- Support lifelong learning to adapt strategies and pedagogical approaches over time (Peace Hub, Sezam).

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3. Building Relationships and Trust

- Cooperate across formal and informal networks to strengthen reach and credibility (EuroClio, CRS).
- Develop diplomatic communication skills to navigate diverse stakeholders' perspectives (CRS).
- Foster trust across ideological, ethnic, and religious divides (Sezam).

4. Systemic and Holistic Approaches

- Engage the whole government and society, rather than relying on single champions, to ensure sustainable impact (CRS).
- Institutionalize peace pedagogies into teacher training and all subjects to embed values across the system (Peace Hub, CIVITAS).
- Document and communicate evidence of impact, such as student projects or teacher reflections, to sustain and inspire engagement (CRS).

5. Pedagogical Strategies

- Teachers should model peace through behaviour and teaching methods, not only content (EuroClio).
- Facilitate respectful dialogue on controversial topics in politically polarized contexts (Peace Hub).
- Focus on teaching approaches that cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and reconciliation, in addition to subject matter (EuroClio, CIVITAS).

6. Inclusivity and Outreach

- Target students and teachers who are less likely to participate in NGO trainings to expand reach (CIVITAS).
- Extend efforts beyond formal schooling to engage communities through informal education programs (CIVITAS, EuroClio).

7. Patience and Long-Term Vision

- Recognize that results may take years to materialize; adapt to evolving contexts (NDC Mostar, CRS).
- Maintain commitment and resilience, even when progress appears slow (NDC Mostar).

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