

# THE INSTITUTION AS INNOVATOR: LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR PEACEFUL CHANGE

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## INTRODUCTION

Many in the field of international development maintain that democracy is, in the words of former United Nations Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, “one of the pillars on which a more peaceful, more equitable and more secure world can be built.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, violent conflict can accompany the transition to a democratic form of governance because the upheavals associated with political transitions are also associated with increased levels of internal conflict. Conflict that was suppressed or actively fostered under a previous government can re-emerge during a transition.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the basic competitive nature of democracy and a market economy encourages a certain degree of conflict.<sup>3</sup> Successfully preventing a descent into violence during a transition hinges, in part, on the existence of strong domestic institutions that can provide a framework to channel competing demands, conflicts, and other sources of instability into peaceful change.

A key challenge to international interveners, including regional security organizations and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is how best to assist in integrating democratic practices into the governance and social systems of transitioning states. Since 1989, Partners for Democratic Change

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<sup>1</sup> Boutros-Ghali, Boutros, “Democracy: A Newly Recognized Imperative,” *Global Governance*, Vol.1, No. 1 (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Shonholtz, Raymond. “Conflict Management Training: A Transformative Vehicle for Transitional Democracies,” *International Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1997); 437–450. See also Avruch, K., and Black, P. “The Culture Question and Conflict Resolution,” *Peace and Change*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1991); 22–45.

<sup>3</sup> Paris, Roland, “Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1997).

(Partners) has pursued the strategy of building locally managed, independent, NGOs to foster a culture of peaceful conflict resolution in transitioning democracies.<sup>4</sup> This strategy has been highly successful; Partners' locally run Centers have played critical roles in enabling processes of peaceful change in their respective countries. Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS), one of the first NGOs established by Partners in 1991, pioneered and disseminated cooperative conflict management in Slovakia, facilitating the country's successful navigation through the tumultuous democratic transition period following the demise of Communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. In this article, the authors examine the successful development of PDCS to highlight the advantages and challenges of institution building as a conflict prevention methodology during a profound societal transition.

“Institution” as a concept encompasses many different social mechanisms and organizations, from formal institutions such as a parliament or the World Bank, to informal sets of rules, customs, and habits such as marriage. Institutions transcend individual human lives and actions and are characterized by continuity over time, and a particular social purpose. This article will focus on formal institutions such as government agencies, academic organizations, business associations, and nonprofit organizations. W. Richard Scott, in his book *Institutions and Organizations*, defines institutions by their distinct characteristics of resiliency, longevity, versatility, and innovation.<sup>5</sup> In Partners' experience, these characteristics are some of the key reasons why institution building offers the most effective long-term strategy for building a culture of conflict resolution in transitioning societies. In particular, local institutions offer two main advantages over foreign-led, short-term projects: stability and the cultivation of trust over time, and the capacity to innovate by adapting new models to their cultural and social context, thereby sparking long-term, societal transformations.

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<sup>4</sup> *Democracy* in this article refers to both a democratic system of governance, pursued by a system of voting such that the majority of people rule (either directly or indirectly through elected representatives), and to the implications of this system, whereby public participation in decision-making and public debate is encouraged. The article's definition also includes *democracy* in its common usage (also known as liberal democracy): a form of representative democracy where the political power of the government is moderated by a constitution that protects the rights and freedoms of individuals and minorities. Wikipedia, *Democracy*, available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>; Internet; Accessed 1 December 2005.

<sup>5</sup> W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, (London: Sage Tree Press, 2001). 48.

## **THE PARTNERS MODEL OF INSTITUTION BUILDING**

In established democracies, an institutional framework provides trusted structures through which diverse groups can meet and negotiate peacefully. Institutions that play this vital conflict management role include governmental agencies, such as legislatures and courts, civil society organizations such as advocacy groups and social service providers, and organizations in the media and private sectors. In formerly authoritarian states, particularly those with a legacy of civil war, the governmental sector may lack the capacity, willingness, or legitimacy to bring people together and promote peaceful resolution of disputes.<sup>6</sup> Faced with this gap in the public sector, national and international NGOs often play an important conflict resolution role and, as Maria Dakolias argues, can “be a source of stability and sustainability, particularly where governments are weak or prone to change.”<sup>7</sup>

Partners for Democratic Change is a global NGO that develops local capacity to manage change, build consensus, and resolve disputes worldwide. This work has primarily been accomplished through the incorporation of independent non-governmental organizations (Partners’ Centers). Since 1989 Partners has established and supported the development of 14 locally staffed and managed Centers in Albania, Argentina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Jordan, Kosovo, Lithuania, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Each Center shares Partners’ mission and some common program elements, including the following:

- Training leaders from the NGO, local government, and private sectors in effective communication, negotiation, facilitation, mediation, and advanced change management skills;

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<sup>6</sup> Ni Aolain, Fionnuala and Colm Campbell, “The Paradox of Transition in Conflicted Democracies,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (February 2005); 186.

<sup>7</sup> Dakolias, Maria, “The Rule of Law in Latin America: The International Promotion of Judicial Reform.” eds. Pilar Domingo and Rachel Sieder, *Legal and Judicial Reform: The Role of Civil Society in the Reform Process* (London: Institute of International Studies Press, 2001), 80–98, p. 92.

- Training trainers in a broad range of conflict and change management skills, allowing for a multiplier effect of skills dissemination;
- Applying conflict and change management processes, such as mediation, facilitation, and cooperative planning, to help diverse groups and sectors achieve consensus on real issues; and
- Promoting public policies that recognize and legitimize the use of mediation processes.

The global Partners network is an important support structure for each of the Centers; as new Centers are opened, the established organizations (like PDCS) provide a “jump start” towards organizational independence and sustainability by sharing their experience and expertise. Over time the network has grown, deepened, and diversified so that it is no longer just American or western European trainers offering their standardized approaches and methodologies, but a truly global pool of peers, case studies, and best practices that new Centers can draw on to build their own unique approach to change and conflict management.

Partners’ institution-building approach offers two key advantages not seen in expatriate-managed programs or time-limited projects. Firstly, the Center provides a stable institutional “home” around which a cadre of local conflict resolution professionals can thrive and evolve over time. Over time, each Center builds the trusting relationships, organizational reputation, and expertise necessary to engage with other key institutions, such as government and police, to strengthen the society’s capacity to cope with conflicts in peaceful and democratic ways. The longevity of a local institution maximizes the chances of truly rooting peaceful change management into the structures and culture of a country, rather than seeing skills and knowledge evaporate with the departure of international donors or project managers.

The second key aspect of Partners’ model is that each Center, as an independent local NGO entirely staffed by in-country professionals, is encouraged to develop its own specialized programs and client

groups within the framework of the shared mission. As a result, Partners' Centers reflect the diverse needs of their societies and uniqueness of their countries. Partners in the United States is not a headquarters in the traditional sense. Rather than exporting short-term experts to parachute into a country, deliver training or materials, and then leave, Partners acts as the hub of a global network, catalyzing and facilitating the development of local expertise and resources. By building local institutions, Partners supports a societal shift to a widespread culture of cooperative conflict management. By working with its Centers from their founding moments to develop products and services that local groups need and are willing to support, Partners supports the development of a diverse, adaptable, and sustainable funding base for each Center, which greatly increases prospects for in-country legitimacy and long-term sustainability.<sup>8</sup>

### **CASE STUDY: PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE-SLOVAKIA**<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, Partners argues that building institutions is a successful long-term strategy for responding to a transforming society's conflict management needs. Using the case example of one of the first Centers, Partners for Democratic Change-Slovakia (PDCS), we will show how a specific local institution has clearly exemplified the two unique advantages of institution building as an approach to conflict prevention and resolution:

- the ability to innovate by adapting new methods to the local cultural context, and
- the trust engendered by the organization's inherent longevity and stability.

Since its establishment in Bratislava in 1991, Partners for Democratic Change-Slovakia (PDCS) has become the leading national conflict transformation NGO in Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> PDCS provides conflict

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<sup>8</sup> International assistance has received much criticism for creating a local NGO sector that is almost entirely dependent on and accountable to international donors rather than local constituencies. Belloni, R., "Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2001); 163–180. Llamazares, M., and Levy, L. R. "NGOs and Peacebuilding in Kosovo," Centre for Conflict Resolution Working Papers No. 13, *Bradford: Department of Peace Studies*, (2003). Stubbs, "Partnership or Colonisation?: The Relationship Between International Agencies and Local Non Governmental Organisations in Bosnia-Herzegovina." ed. B. Deacon, *Civil Society, NGOs and Global Governance (Sheffield, UK: Globalisation and Social Policy Programme, 2000)*.

<sup>9</sup> For additional information, consult [www.pdcs.sk](http://www.pdcs.sk).

management training and consultation services to the country's NGO, local government, business, academic, and ethnic minority communities. PDCS' mission is to create and promote democratic approaches for preventing and resolving conflict. In addition to the main office in Bratislava, PDCS maintains long-term project coordinators in Rimavska Sobopta, Kezmarok, and Presov, and has established two now-independent "daughter" institutions in Levice and Presov. PDCS specializes in citizen participation initiatives; the facilitation of consensus building between local government, NGOs, businesses, and other community stakeholders; and the development of Slovakia's third sector. In 1994, PDCS began to be invited to other countries to share experiences, lessons learned, and best practices in pioneering Slovakia's peaceful, democratic transition. PDCS has now conducted trainings in more than 36 countries undergoing political transitions, on topics such as organizational development, citizen participation, conflict management, community development, coalition-building, cooperative advocacy, and strategic planning. The success of PDCS in pioneering conflict transformation programs in Slovakia illustrates how a locally run and managed institution can provide critical leadership in times of political and social transition. This case can also offer vital lessons to organizations and governments as they consider how best to support countries undergoing similar transitions.

### **Innovation through Acculturation**

As democracy is a social rather than mechanical process, simply importing experts and models is not effective. Most scholars and practitioners in the field of conflict transformation recognize that local solutions are not only cheaper, but also ultimately more effective and sustainable.<sup>11</sup> Local institutions will inherently evolve and change over time, in tune with the changes taking place in their society. This evolution positions them to creatively adapt foreign methods and create their own models to respond quickly to changing situations, and to foresee impending needs. PDCS has exhibited the capacity to

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<sup>10</sup> Prior to the 1993 break up of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and the Republic of Slovakia, the independent Partners Centers in Bratislava and Prague worked very closely together to implement many initiatives and projects.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, M. B., and Olson, L. *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, (Cambridge, MA: Collaborative for Development Action, 2003). Barakat, S., & Chard, M., "Theories, Rhetoric and Practice: Recovering the Capacities of War-torn Societies," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (2002); 817-835.

construct innovative and culturally appropriate approaches to conflict resolution in Slovakia, and has, over time, proved to be more versatile than externally led initiatives.

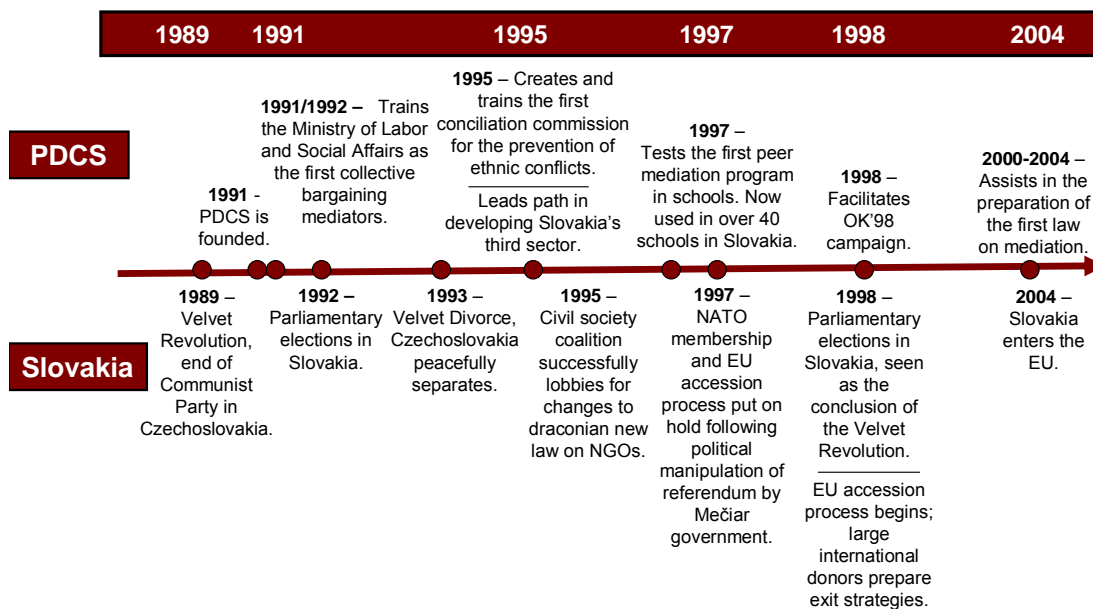
After the fall of Communism, international experts arrived in Slovakia in droves; these outsiders were received with open arms and unrealistically high expectations that they would solve all of Slovakia's problems. After a couple of years, when these expectations were predictably unfulfilled, feelings of disillusionment and rejection of foreign expertise became pervasive. PDCS' early years were characterized by many collaborative efforts with Partners and other international trainers to introduce new methodologies, provide inspiration to advance democratic governance practices in Slovakia, and develop PDCS' in-house expertise. Partners' approach of having a domestic institution host foreign trainers, immediately followed by co-training opportunities with domestic and foreign trainers working together, was seen as an innovative and culturally respectful way to balance the need for new ideas from outsiders with the local understanding of insiders. After 1994, as the domestic trainers started to receive comparable or better feedback than foreign experts, PDCS began to rely on local resources and only invite foreign experts to introduce new methodologies or address specific issues. They saw that local practitioners were more versatile, able to respond to the many different contexts and complexities that Slovak clients required.

For example, at one point PDCS had the unprecedented opportunity to provide negotiation training for a group of parliamentarians. For the occasion, they brought in a well-known and distinguished foreign trainer. The trainer began the session with a familiar exercise to demonstrate values and assumptions about cooperation and competition: Prisoner's Dilemma. He painted the scene: "A colleague of yours has been imprisoned for the same crime as you in the adjacent cell. You have two options . . ." Each prisoner is told that if s/he does not confess and the other prisoner does confess, s/he will go free, and the other will receive a twenty-year prison term. If they both refuse to confess, they will each receive a ten-year

prison term. A few uncomfortable moments pass. A parliamentary deputy stood up, irritated, and declaimed to the trainer, “We know he is guilty, we know he collaborated with the secret police.” What the foreign trainer did not understand was that the training came at a time when the issue of limiting the participation of former Communists and secret police informants in the successor government was highly contentious, and that many of the new parliamentary members had been incarcerated during the Communist years. The normally benign exercise backfired into hours and hours of argument, pointing blame, and arousing clashes about history and justice. The exercise—intended to extol the virtues of cooperation—unearthed hostility and factionalism.

This example demonstrates how critical an understanding of the social and political context is, particularly in the tenuous and conflict-prone times that characterize political transitions. Based on this and other similar experiences, PDCS began to rely more and more on local practitioners, as it recognized how critical the understanding of long-standing political, cultural, or social nuances was to its work. This responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs of its clients has proved vital to PDCS’ long-term success. Today, PDCS is apt to fuse “international” techniques with Slovak-specific illustrations and methodologies in its trainings. For example, a typical training could entail a short video depicting community conflicts in Slovak villages, engaging participants in familiar contexts, challenging them to step out of a recognizable situation and utilize their newly assimilated conflict resolution skills in the situation. Another of their favorite training techniques is adapted from Augusto Boal’s “forum theater” methodology, and depicts Roma–majority conflicts in Slovakia to demonstrate alternatives to oppressive models of engagement and interaction. Through the years, PDCS has developed a panoply of Slovak-specific models to use with various audiences, and has been able to devise its own distinctive training methodologies to engage participants in ways that speak to their specific cultural, social, and historical context.

The timeline below illustrates some of the major accomplishments of PDCS at key moments of transformation in Slovakia. The timeline shows how PDCS has initiated or introduced new ideas into Slovakia, which, over time, have become accepted into the mainstream of Slovakian political culture. Of course, there have been a variety of individuals, groups, and contextual factors that have facilitated Slovakia's relatively peaceful democratic transition. PDCS' director, Dr. Dusan Ondrusek, maintains that the organization was only "one of many factors influencing democratic changes in Slovakia." At the same time, he sees PDCS as "a nest for individuals and organizations spreading democratic principles, a home for the constructive representation and capacity building of citizen's voices and ideas in Slovakia."



PDCS has been able to introduce new conflict management and democratic approaches into Slovakia by adapting its initiatives to the changing political and cultural context. For example, in 1995, PDCS introduced the first Conciliation Commission into Slovakia.<sup>12</sup> Conciliation Commissions are community-based structures recognized by local statutes and composed of mediators representing the ethnic diversity

<sup>12</sup> The Conciliation Commission model was designed by Partners, and first piloted in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in 1993.

of the community. The Commissions serve to manage and prevent disputes by monitoring majority–minority relations, conducting educational outreach to local groups, mediating disputes relating to ethnic and minority issues, organizing forums on issues of minority concern, and facilitating inter-group dialogue. Slovakia’s Roma minority is one of the largest in Europe; while the numbers are disputed, the population may comprise hundreds of thousands of people. PDCS recognized that the Roma had been disproportionately impacted by the collapse of the Communist system, and as economic conditions in the country deteriorated, tensions between Roma and non-Roma communities were concurrently rising. They also saw that local governments lacked the skill, knowledge, or political will to intervene with effective inter-ethnic conflict mitigation or prevention strategies, but rather applied makeshift solutions such as concentrating Roma in remote parts of cities or towns, thus worsening segregation and exacerbating ethnic conflicts.

In 1995 in Slovakia, few people—particularly municipal, state, and national governments—would accept that an informal citizen group could serve in such an authoritative capacity. After so many years under an authoritarian government, the political culture was such that people expected top-down directives and the involvement of government authorities. Knowing this, PDCS worked with local governments until they agreed to officially sponsor the newly formed Conciliation Commissions. While PDCS understood that this could potentially undermine the neutrality of the Commissions, it also recognized that government legitimization was the only way that the work of the Conciliation Commissions would be accepted on either the local or national level. Over time, the need for official government sponsorship has lessened as Slovak political culture has become less dependent on authority figures and more accepting of community self-help initiatives. Informal citizen groups are trusted much more readily, and the Commissions no longer need a stamp of official legitimization. They are now recognized by local statutes but are not tied to the local government as they once were. Today, PDCS continues to pioneer the creation of Conciliation Commissions and other citizen groups that address conflict throughout Slovakia; these

Commissions continue to gain more and more recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of Slovak civil society and government.

### **Building Trust: Staying Power and Smart Decisions**

Scott argues that the inherent longevity of an institution allows it to develop a diverse toolkit, which gives the institution the ability to respond creatively to the changing needs of the society.<sup>13</sup> Institutions build capacity over time, packaging knowledge within organizational memory so that it builds on itself even when individual staff or participants transition to other endeavors. PDCS epitomizes this argument. Over the past fourteen years, PDCS has grown from one part-time staff person based at Comenius University to an independent NGO with 12 full-time and seven part-time employees, and two dozen regularly collaborating consultants and trainers. In its first year, PDCS offered four trainings; presently the organization offers more than 650 consulting and training opportunities each year. As the numbers of practitioners and program participants associated with the organization have grown, the net effects of PDCS' work have grown exponentially as a result, providing multiple sectors with deeper breadth and impact than any singular, finite program. Changes in a country's political culture do not happen according to international organizations' two-, three-, or five-year project timelines; PDCS' organizational stability and longevity afforded it the necessary long-term perspective to impact Slovakia's democratic landscape.

During the delicate 1992 parliamentary elections, which were the second parliamentary elections after the overthrow of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, PDCS was approached by several political parties to provide training in how to effectively communicate their messages and integrate public opinion into their campaigns. PDCS supported the idea of such trainings, believing that political professionalism and collaboration with civil society were crucial for a healthy democracy. However, in order to preserve the organization's neutrality, PDCS adopted the stance that they would provide these trainings only for *all*

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<sup>13</sup> W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*, (London: Sage Tree Press, 2001). 188.

of the political parties. The political party that had initially approached them responded negatively, wishing to maintain exclusive access to the information. As a result, PDCS refused to conduct the trainings. In the following elections, the same scenario happened; the request of the political parties and PDCS' response remained identical. Three elections after the first training request, the parties finally agreed to make the training available for all; as a result, PDCS gained recognition as an organization committed to neutrality and to a fair and professional electoral process.

In times of instability, when trust was a limited resource, PDCS situated itself as a neutral institutional venue where conflicting parties or representatives of different sectors could learn new ways of communicating and could access facilitative or capacity-building resources. The expectation that the organization would continue to exist allowed initially suspicious groups to develop trust in new approaches and processes that the Center advocated. PDCS' commitment to neutrality has served to generate respect for its work, which has led to diversification and increase in its client-base, projects, and funders over time. Its steadfastness in upholding its neutrality has been a key factor in PDCS' success, and has both enabled and been supported by its organizational longevity.

Another example of the success of this strategy is the 1998 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, which, in the eyes of many, successfully concluded Slovakia's Velvet Revolution. In this hallmark election, NGOs and donors felt strongly that strengthening citizen participation in the process would ensure legitimate and fair elections. Committed to this outcome and realizing that its reputation positioned it to pioneer this effort, PDCS joined a coalition of 11 NGOs in a large-scale, nationwide civic campaign for free and fair elections. The Obcianska Kampan (Civic Campaign)—or OK'98, as it was called—coalesced in January 1998 with three broad goals: to inform voters, increase voter turnout, and monitor the election. This successful campaign turned out to be one of the critical factors enabling the peaceful and democratic elections in Slovakia in 1998. PDCS was called in to facilitate this process by both the coalition of Slovak

NGOs and donors who perceived PDCS as the only party capable of working with all sectors to execute this process.

In the context of OK'98, PDCS provided training courses and consultations to more than 70 moderators and organizers of pre-election discussion forums. More than 50 such forums took place across Slovakia, and voters, in turn, were better informed. PDCS also implemented a project facilitating a series of meetings between nonpartisan entities in the campaign. It also provided consultation and mediation during tense moments in the campaign that could have escalated into conflict. One of the campaign participants said, "PDCS played a very positive role in the OK'98 Campaign. It served as the glue among fighting opinion groups not understanding one another. It made possible a dialogue among groups speaking different languages . . . "

The effects of OK'98 transcended the 1998 parliamentary election. Because of PDCS and its collaborating partners' work, the discussion forums became institutionalized as part of the ensuing democratic process in Slovakian elections. This effort resulted in a culture shift that permeated all segments of the society and, in the long-term, transformed the democratic landscape in Slovakia.

### **Lasting Change: Political and Cultural Shifts**

PDCS' work has effectively promoted democratic practices and the advancement of peaceful change in Slovakia, and has inspired lasting societal transformations of both attitude and practice. It has achieved this by creatively approaching challenging issues through a variety of techniques (mediation, citizen participation, organizational development) and audiences (civil society, government, corporate stakeholders), and a broad spectrum of activities that have interacted synergistically to impact the democratic landscape in Slovakia.

NGOs have played a significant role in the democratization and revitalization of post-communist countries, spearheading grassroots development initiatives, educating the public about their rights under new leadership, and serving as a constructive outlet for citizen activism. Since the early nineties, PDCS has pioneered the building of Slovakia's third sector through training and consulting to different NGOs in vital organizational development skills, including networking, self-funding, project development, and strategic planning. It was the first organization in Slovakia to publish a manual specifically for nonprofit organizations on philanthropy, cross-sector relations, citizen decision-making, and organizational development.

More recently, foreign development assistance to Slovak NGOs decreased dramatically as the country prepared for EU accession, and the majority of foreign donors moved to other regions. Civil society was harshly affected by this evacuation, as domestic sources of funding did not develop sufficiently to fill the gap. Many mid-sized Slovak NGOs were not able survive this transition due to their complete dependence on a few international donors. PDCS, on the other hand, had been a self-sustaining organization since 1996, following a strategic plan formulated with Partners to gradually taper off the core support received from Partners. The organization diversified its programs and sources of income to include private sector contracts, work with the government, publishing and project funding from international development donors. At the time, Partners' insistence on self-financing was perceived as "cruel and hard" by the Director, but now he appreciates that it was "a very wise strategy that increased the probability of PDCS' financial sustainability." Building on its own experience, PDCS developed a cutting-edge training and consulting program for Slovak NGOs to assist them in generating income to reinvest into mission-related activities. Countless organizations have benefited as a result, strengthening their financial, management, strategic planning, and fundraising capacities; this growth has profoundly affected the adaptability and resilience of Slovakia's third sector. PDCS now offers consulting in "Self-

Financing for NGOs” to organizations around the world that are struggling with the transition from single-donor dependence to a diverse and sustainable funding mix.

In PDCS’ beginnings, inter-sectoral collaboration between civil society, government and private industry was virtually unheard of. PDCS has played a vital role in bridging this gulf, and the landscape in Slovakia has been transformed. PDCS built credibility in the eyes of each sector based on the reputation of previous initiatives, including training civil society in the skills to collaborate with the government, and working with the government to integrate citizen contributions into political deliberations and decision-making. The organization’s ability to be a neutral convener and facilitator of cooperative processes has given it the legitimacy to facilitate discussions between sectors, which has contributed to a changed political environment in Slovakia. PDCS is now regularly invited to facilitate and mediate high-stakes issues by ministries, state institutions, public agencies, and civil society coalitions.

PDCS’ work over the last fourteen years has instigated change not just on community levels, but also through transformation of the institutionalized legal framework. This is exemplified by the organization’s work to establish mediation as a legitimate and respected form of dispute management. PDCS has been one of the foremost advocates of mediation in Slovakia. In 1991–2, PDCS trained the first group of 20 mediators working for the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in collective bargaining. This training was groundbreaking; out of these first 20, hundreds more mediators were trained and monitored as they utilized these skills, laying the foundation for institutionalized mediation in collective bargaining in labor conflicts in Slovakia. In 1996, PDCS tested the first cases of mediation for various social and commercial conflicts. In 1997, it introduced peer mediation in schools, a process that is now utilized in more than 40 schools throughout Slovakia. In 2000, PDCS was asked to be a member of the commission that prepared a national policy supporting mediation in Slovakia. The development of this law integrated PDCS’ work

not only in piloting mediation throughout Slovakia, but also in systematizing its implementation in a variety of societal contexts. The draft law was approved and enacted in 2004.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the early 1990s, PDCS was founded in an environment fearful and mistrustful of democratic practices. The concepts of cooperative dialogue, consensus-building, and citizen participation were considered strange and revolutionary in Slovakia. Civil society was nascent at best, lacking the skills and legitimacy to have an authoritative say in Slovakia's political deliberations. Groups were mistrustful of each other, and the chasm between citizens, civil society organizations, and governmental bodies was vast. Cooperative conflict resolution methodologies and systems were virtually unknown, let alone holistically integrated into Slovak society.

Unimaginable 15 years ago, PDCS is now regularly invited to facilitate and mediate between sectors. PDCS' contribution to institutionalizing political and cultural shifts in Slovakia can be seen in the examples detailed above—from the transformation of the electoral process through the OK'98 campaign, to the role of Conciliation Commissions in community conflict resolution, to the development of a vibrant third sector trained and capable of advancing democratic practices throughout Slovakia. More than anything, as a local institution, PDCS was able to fully understand the cultural shifts as they were happening, and thus to pinpoint emerging opportunities on the horizon. It could recognize the societal appropriateness of newly introduced methodologies and make educated and culturally specific guesses about what efforts would create real, sustainable change in Slovakia. Through a long process of working with thousands of stakeholders, PDCS has managed to institutionalize these processes into key Slovak government, non-governmental, and even private-sector organizations.

PDCS' success in advancing democratic practices in Slovakia demonstrates how a local institution is uniquely capable of accruing lessons over time and translating them into creative responses to the rapidly shifting external environment. In this case, and in the cases of other Partners' Centers, the stability that only comes from an institutional "home" has enabled local practitioners to acculturate external models, and experiment with innovative and creative responses to the emerging needs of the society. Certainly, Partners' Centers are not able to address all crises that emerge in times of political transitions, nor are they the only effective venues for conflict resolution in transitional democracies. However, as institutions, these Centers have proven to be successful models of leadership in times of instability and conflict. With perseverance, they have been able to capitalize on the legitimacy bequeathed to an insider in order to carve a niche for themselves in which they can help to bridge social and political divisions and prevent these rifts from widening into violent conflict. Guided by leaders who are committed to organizational cultures of innovation, education, and nonpartisanship, these institutions have the ability to adjust themselves to rapidly transforming political environments and to pioneer the next steps toward peaceful, vibrant democratic societies.

While Partners' strategy has proven effective on the ground, the model itself faces challenges as the funding environment has shifted from core funding dedicated to sustaining and strengthening organizations to project-based, short-term grants.<sup>14</sup> Historically, Partners built one Center at a time, an expensive and labor-intensive process that typically took at least 15 months per Center. Over the last eight years, Partners has found it increasingly difficult to find donors willing to offer the "general support" funding necessary to launch new organizations. Private foundations increasingly prefer funding small, short-term projects by in-country NGOs over funding capacity-building organizations based in the United States, while bilateral development agencies such as USAID have shifted their priorities away from civil society institution-building. In the early 1990's, the PDCS Director had the freedom to

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<sup>14</sup> Center for Effective Philanthropy, "In Search of Impact: Practices and Perceptions in Foundations' Provision of Program and Operating Grants to Non-profits." December 2006, p. 4.

develop an organizational reputation and human resource base without the pressure of delivering immediate programmatic returns. In the new millennium, the Directors of younger Centers (Mexico from 2004, Jordan from 2005, Peru from 2006), have faced the cyclical dilemma of needing to demonstrate a successful track record in order to raise funds to build organizational capacity in order to demonstrate a successful track record. The shift on the part of most donors towards funding specific projects lasting from one to three years, and providing very little - if any - funding for overhead costs like rent (for example, a recent EU call for proposals allowed a maximum of 7% of the budget for office-related costs) has made it increasingly difficult to build sustainable organizations. Many of Partners' Centers have begun experimenting with creative responses to these challenges, including a variety of income-generating activities like training in communication skills and customer service for private-sector institutions like banks. However, Partners would recommend to donors that the long-term sustainability of social change and conflict resolution efforts rests squarely on the sustainability of the organizations that create and nurture these changes over time. Thus, supporting local institution building is a philanthropic strategy that delivers truly sustainable results.

Over time, Partners and Partners' Centers have learned through many hard lessons that it takes a sustained commitment over many years to successfully root cooperative conflict resolution processes deeply into a country's governance culture, such that disputes are routinely dealt with in peaceful ways, and violence becomes unimaginable. As this case study illustrates, outsiders can provide good role models and bring in inspiring or useful new ideas, but short-term project-based interventions or one-off trainings can never match the ability of a local institution to persistently and patiently build local capacity to manage change and conflict. The success of Partners' model of institution-building is based on respect for the unique and complementary advantages of local institutions and their international supporters, leveraging the diverse experience and global perspective of Partners for Democratic Change to facilitate the development of vibrant, creative, influential, and sustainable Centers.