

## **Listen to the Sound of Change: Interethnic Cooperation for Children With Disabilities**

Bosnia and Herzegovina

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**Peace Rationale:** In my university studies of psychology and political science, I realized how the lack of unifying national identity (and inter-ethnic communication) in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), facilitates not only political oppression but discrimination of neurodevelopmentally compromised members of BiH society, that are at the same time, its future. While nationality biased literature curricula facilitates the vision of division and otherness among neurotypical youth, there is also general silence (financial or verbal) on difficulties and needs of children with disabilities (CWD) across the country. CWD in BiH can be divided into diagnosed and attending special schools and undiagnosed and attending public schools. Teachers in public school have no training or awareness of intellectual and learning disabilities and CWD in special schools do not even have nationally prescribed educational curriculum, (not to mention providing tools that are neurodevelopmentally appropriate for their diverse needs). Both seem to partially explain 40% youth unemployment in BiH. Inspired by my little nephew Ante who is 4 and has been diagnosed with level 100 of disability (prenatal brain injury), I decided to make sure that in 3 years when he starts school, a place for his growth will be a little bit more ready for his learning needs. My community partners and I will try to develop an empirically sound technological solution addressing some educational needs of diagnosed and undiagnosed CWD in BiH, developed to function and sustain itself on interethnic cooperation. For me, peace in BiH is a matter of: **(1) Cooperating for a common goal**, through which the three ethnicities can realize they can together do most good for those that need them the most; **(2) Facilitating the non-intrusive inter-ethnic communication, perspective shifting and empathy.**

**Project Rationale:** **(1) Common goal** → Create and Implement neurodevelopmentally appropriate literature curriculum for CWD. Common inequality experienced by CWD across three ethnicities is a great point to start cross-ethnic cooperation and creation of common narrative. CWD in BiH do not have access to literature nor a nationally prescribed literature curriculum for their schools. They have special neurodevelopmental needs to effectively process, organize and store information. Empirically, audiobooks have shown to be more effective at addressing those than physical books. For some physical disabilities (e.g. visual impairment, dyspraxia, cerebral palsy) audiobooks provide first accessible literature, and for others (e.g. dyslexia) have shown to improve their reading accuracy, reading attitude, academic performance, vocabulary and retention. For some intellectual disabilities, audiobooks effectively address the processing and storing needs (with impairments in executive functioning and working memory). For instance in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), audiobooks improve concentration and maximize visuo-spatial resources; and for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) they improve socialization, understanding, emotional expressiveness, also while lowering stress and anxiety. While audiobooks are by no means the best solution for all disabilities, by providing captioning of our recordings we will try to be as inclusive as possible, providing literature experience even for those individuals who best process combined input (visual and auditory).

**(2) Non intrusive inter-ethnic communication** → Provide free access to cross-ethnic literature to everyone. BiH is an ethnically diverse country where everything is divided into three: Bosniak, Serb and Croatian. While their languages are astoundingly similar (they understand each other completely without any education) because of historical complexity and war, their languages are considered and taught as three separate languages with three separate national literature curricula despite living shared experience

for centuries. This lack of inclusion of literature also written from other ethnicities in public schools, facilitates lack of acknowledging commonly shared life, and creates a vicious cycle for new generations seeing ethnic diversity and division through the lens of war and past, and not humanity and future. Reading fiction, empirically has shown to improve empathy and that partially through mechanism of self projection (perspective-shifting). Furthermore, reading literature promotes understanding of social processes, moral development, changed norms, values and self-concepts. I hope that when narrated in different but understandable language while describing humane experience, free access to expensive and unavailable cross ethnic literature will facilitate organic inter-ethnic communication in BiH.

**Community Partners.** Two primary schools for CWD in Mostar (Center for Youth and Children with Special Needs “Los Rosales” and Primary School for CWD Mostar) will support the project with their resources (space and volunteers), creation of mentioned literature curriculum (professional staff) and formal implementation of the curriculum in their classrooms. Their professional staff (medical staff, psychiatrist, pedagogist, logopedicians) will be the main force behind the informed development of 2 instructive manuals on ways to incorporate audiobooks formally in schools for CWD and public schools. These two schools are the main educational source for CWD coming from the whole HN Canton (covering 9 different municipalities); and their ethnic, religious and geographic diversity is representative of ethnic composition of the country (useful to test generalizability of the project; one school is ethnically mixed and one homogenous). These schools provide education, socialization and rehabilitation to children of different developmental and physical disabilities (ASD, ADHD, visually impaired, mild-severe mental retardation, cerebral palsy) we can assess how useful this implemented curriculum is.

**Project Outline: 1) Record 29 audiobooks, 2) Develop 2 instructive manuals, 3) Make both available on a free website and streaming platform.**

**Material recorded -** Booklist for recording will be decided by specific requests from two community partners. As these are primary schools, the total expected book count for the literature curriculum is 20. Additional 9 books read in public high schools will be recorded to facilitate introduction of this technology as an assistive tool in public high schools (informed by an interview with a Bosniak, Croat and Serb high school to determine the most appropriate 3 book representatives per ethnicity). **Narrators-** will be financially compensated based on length of material. The books will be narrated in Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language depending on the nationality of the author. **Technology:** Audiobooks and manuals will be available in two ways: on a free newly developed website and uploaded in a podcast form on a streaming platform (Google Podcasts). The upload of audiobooks on such an app will allow wider access and necessary technical disability services (pause function, speed regulation and caption availability). **Instructive manuals:** Community partners’ medical professionals, pedagogists, *logopedicians and I will develop a literature curriculum based on their requests for their needs.*

**4) Expansion and Sustainability Plan:** To involve the wider public we will create a sustainable system for our 2 partner schools: (1) gift professional recording equipment to two community partners where they can host further audiobook recording activities (e.g. develop an audiobook NGO with regular voluntary support from active Franciscan Youth groups, starting a radio and recording music to spread awareness etc.) (2) Introduce and distribute the 2nd manual (developed for incorporation of audiobooks as an assistive tool) to 3 public high schools, (3) Ensure city wide publicity for people to engage with cross-ethnic literature. Based on a diverse booklist recorded in native languages, this project should allow transferability to other regions of BiH while promoting organic inter-ethnic exchange. I also hope to listen well to the “sound of change” of my project skeleton, especially in its response to unpredictable circumstances, and to accordingly adjust to make this a meaningful experience for its participants.