

Managing the return of

In the early stage of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a difficult debate took place between the European governments, UNHCR, ICRC and other organisations regarding the fate of those displaced by the war. Finally, the European nations reluctantly agreed to provide refuge but they warned that the refugees would have to return to Bosnia as soon as the war ended.¹

During 1996, the international community implemented numerous housing programmes in an attempt to facilitate the return of both refugee and internally displaced populations. In the 22 municipalities identified by UNHCR as priority return areas, about 23,800 housing units were repaired. After this commendable effort, however, there were still 66,000 units to be repaired in these 22 target areas alone. It cost about \$270 million to achieve this result while the cost of rehabilitating the housing stock to its pre-war level would reach between \$3 and \$4 billion. At the level of today's commitment by all contributing countries, only one fifth of the damaged housing stock would be rehabilitated by the end of the three-year plan (1996-98) adopted by the donor community.² Yet it is in the context of this housing shortage that several European countries are planning to encourage their Bosnian and Herzegovinan refugees to return home. A rapid and massive return of refugees in the immediate future would create social and political conditions likely to weaken the peace process.

The return of refugees planned for coming years will be difficult for several reasons:

The first obvious reason will be logistical. The planned return will attempt, in a relatively short period of time, to reverse the population exodus that took four years of war to complete. The administration of such a large movement of population - which includes provision of support and projection of needs for schools, health services, jobs, property rights, identification papers and so on - would be daunting for any society and will be particularly challenging for one coming out of a devastating four-year war.

A second reason will be psychological. When repatriated, refugees will leave their relatively comfortable asylum environments to return to a war-torn country with a fragile civil society and economy. Although enormous progress has been made, the BiH state is not yet able to provide all the services its citizens expect, such as education, health and public utilities.

The third problem will result from the sheer number of internally displaced and refugee individuals in comparison with the number of dwellings

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which are physically and politically available. Of the one million internally displaced Bosnians who fled their destroyed or captured homes, some occupied the dwellings abandoned by other similarly displaced families and by over a million refugees, others moved in with families and friends, while the rest found accommodation in public buildings transformed into IDP centres. For tens

refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Richard Jacquot



photograph: Howard Davies

of thousands of 'minority'³ families, going back is not an option, either now or in the near future, regardless of the fact that their houses are habitable. Nearly half the total population of BiH cannot return home because their dwellings are occupied, damaged, destroyed or not accessible for political reasons.

The fourth reason for complexity in returning the refugees relates to the process that must be followed in order to return the displaced populations in an orderly manner in the complex environment of BiH. To reverse the population transfer caused by the war, the housing effort would need to concentrate on the rehabilitation of the vacant and damaged houses of the displaced families. As the displaced families returned to their rehabilitated homes, they would

vacate housing spaces. These housing spaces would then be reoccupied by the original inhabitants or by families who cannot return to their homes for political reasons. This housing effort will have to contend with ownership and minority rights, freedom of movement and expression, and other complex issues.

The fifth problem will be to facilitate returns while accounting for the differences in war experience and in the level of assistance provided to the refugee, internally displaced and remaining populations. Those who remained or who were internally displaced have experienced four years of atrocities and privations caused by a brutal war that specifically targeted civilians. In many cases, they have lost key family members and have been left without the financial

resources necessary to rebuild their houses and lives. These people will resent the fact that refugee families, who were at least partially spared the war experience, could make many of them homeless yet again. They will also resent the fact that, while many refugee families will be returning from overseas with assets, savings, and grants from their host countries, they themselves have received little or no assistance. It is quite clear that a return policy which ignores the internally displaced and remaining populations' experience would create or exacerbate animosities among the beneficiaries. This in turn would have a direct bearing on BiH's future social and political stability.

With these problems in mind, it is possible to outline a broad strategy for the return of refugee families. As

the housing space of refugee families is occupied by internally displaced families, the return effort should concentrate on helping those internally displaced families to rehabilitate their houses. Once they move into their rehabilitated houses, they will vacate housing space for returning refugee families. This would be easier to accomplish than attempting to match refugee families currently living in countries of asylum with the housing spaces in need of rehabilitation.

In addition to shifting the rehabilitation focus from refugee to internally displaced families, European nations should link refugee returns to the housing programme's achievements. If the first step of the return process is to move internally displaced families back to their original dwellings, European countries should time the return of refugee families to match the return of the internally displaced families. Ideally, this would be toward the end of the Bosnian summer or in early autumn, in order to make best use of the spring and early summer to repair and build housing spaces. In addition, the construction period should be used by the implementors, the government and the municipalities to organise and manage the population influx.

The distribution of grants to refugee families should be discontinued or seriously reduced. The issuing of grants to returning refugee families exacerbates economic inequalities and is socially and politically risky. It is also an inefficient use of financial resources. To rehabilitate an abandoned or damaged dwelling costs on average an estimated 15,000 DM.⁴ Host country grants to returning refugee families reach up to 15,000 DM per family. As a result, the donor community has spent 30,000 DM to create one housing space and return one internally displaced family and one refugee family to their original or new homes. If, instead of giving a grant, the European country were to earmark the same amount for housing reconstruction, then, for that 30,000 DM, two housing spaces would be created and up to two internally displaced and two refugee families would be returned to their original or new homes. Of course, each of these solutions offers several possible combinations, but the second solution which does

not include any grant is fairer and more efficient.

This strategy does not address the numerous issues related to ownership and minority rights, freedom of movement and expression, the level of destruction, and other problems, all of which will have a direct bearing on the return process. Reconstruction programmes in difficult environments such as BiH should start with limited goals and incorporate the lessons learned in follow-up programmes as they become increasingly complex and expensive. In BiH, physical destruction, political instability, economic collapse and social tension all contribute to the complexity of the reconstruction programme. Returning a Serb family to a Muslim controlled area or a Muslim family to a Croat controlled area is more complex than building or repairing a house. The programme would start with 'majority returns' and move to include more and more 'minority returns', learning valuable lessons along the way. As well as developing in complexity, the follow-up programmes will also become increasingly expensive - because the first dwellings being repaired are the least damaged. As reconstruction proceeds, the dwellings being repaired in year two will be more seriously damaged than those of year one; eventually, only totally destroyed dwellings will be left to be replaced, and that will be the most expensive part of the programme.

Nevertheless, this strategy reflects important realities that must be taken into account to ensure the long-term success of the return process. Ultimately, cooperation and coordination among government agencies, beneficiaries, donor and implementing partners are crucial to ensure the success of the return of refugees. Such an approach has demonstrated its effectiveness and efficiency during the USAID/OFDA 1996 housing programme. It should be continued and perfected in the future.

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References

- ¹. 'Finding place to live top priority for Bosnians', Alan Freeman, *Globe & Mail*, Canada, May 1997.
- ². 'The priority reconstruction program: from emergency to sustainability', *Reconstruction sector report*, vol 3, November 1996, p1, European Commission, EBRD and the CED.
- ³. Minority and majority are relative terms. A Muslim in Zenica is part of the majority and members of the other two groups - Serb and Croat - are minorities. But a Muslim or Croat living in Banja Luka is a member of a minority as Banja Luka became a Serb controlled town as a result of the war.
- ⁴. Based on USAID/OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) 1996 housing project that rehabilitated over 2,500 houses. This figure is currently used by other donors such as UNHCR to plan housing projects.

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