

The rehabilitation of homes and return of minorities to Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Guy Hovey

In 1997, the US State Department's Bureau for Population and Refugee Migration funded two pilot projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, each providing for the rehabilitation of 40 homes (20 for Serbs and 20 for Muslims) and the return of pre-war owners and families to the town of Sipovo in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia.

These contentious projects, implemented by the American Refugee Committee and the International Relief Committee, have had far reaching implications. In an ideal world, conditions conducive to return would have been established prior to return of the displaced. Donors, however, were unable in the early stages to risk the large sums of money needed to rebuild infrastructure such as schools and hospitals or to fund programmes aimed at re-establishing civil society. This article is a field-view analysis of the programme, strategies employed and problems encountered

Sipovo Municipality is situated in south-western Republika Srpska in the area known as 'The Anvil'. The pre-war population of 15,250 consisted of 12,480 Serbs, 2,488 Muslims, 32 Croats and 250 'others'.¹ Some 1,400 Muslims and all the Bosnian Croats fled in 1993 following incidents of house burning and random killings of minorities; remaining members of minority communities fled when the area fell to Bosnian Croat forces in September 1995. Sipovo Municipality was returned to Serb control under the Dayton Peace Accords and handed over in February 1996. Before vacating the area, departing Bosnian Croat forces looted, damaged infrastructure and destroyed 65 per cent of the buildings in

the municipality. In the aftermath of these events the majority population returned to occupy their former homes and those belonging to members of minority communities which had been spared destruction. By early 1997 some rehabilitation work of Serb houses had been undertaken, most notably by the Salvation Army, and some infrastructure repaired by IFOR (NATO's Peace Implementation Force).

The political agenda

The strongly nationalist sentiments of the returned Serb population were reflected when the first post-return municipal elections gave a majority to SDS, the hard-line Serb nationalist party headed by Radovan Karadzic. However, it was soon apparent during discussions with local authorities on the issue of return that anti-minority feelings were tempered by pragmatism, general war weariness and a desire for a return to normality. While nationalist arguments were used to block minority return, the authorities did have genuine concerns. As Carl Hallegard pointed out in an earlier issue of *Forced Migration Review*,² a common complaint was that Serbs were not being allowed free return to other areas of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina such as Sarajevo and Drvar. Why, asked the Sipovo authorities,

should they then be asked to allow minorities to return to Serb controlled areas?

Broader nationalist/ethnic considerations became less important to local Serbs as they were given the opportunity to improve their well-being. Repercussions were expected in Sipovo when the internationally-driven return of Serbs to Drvar led to rioting and re-expulsion of Serb returnees but these did not materialise. Discussions revolved around such issues as the ability of limited health facilities to cope with an increased population and the ability of the police to control any attacks on minorities.

Negotiating strategy

Building on the pragmatism of nationalist politics, project implementators decided on a multi-level and conditional negotiating strategy. The need to gain the trust of the local population was imperative as was the importance of transparency of operations and accurate dissemination of information. Rumours of land swaps with the Muslim Croat Federation and large-scale evictions of Serbs from minority homes abounded, and there was genuine fear of Muslims on the part of many Serbs, following massacres of local Serb civilians at the end of the war. Governments and other donors launched an advocacy campaign and programme managers regularly participated in interviews, discussions and phone-ins on the non-partisan local radio station. It became evident that ordinary people were less concerned with the return of minorities than with their own survival. Most beneficiary questions were about reconstruction, agriculture and micro-credit assistance. It was impressed upon the general public that future aid levels were conditional

upon the peaceful sustained return of minorities and meeting UNHCR's criteria for the award of Open City status³ to those municipalities which allowed peaceful minority return. It was explained that UNHCR would give priority to an Open City when appealing to donors (and that such municipalities would, in principle, thus receive increased assistance, while non-Open cities would receive only emergency relief). Only if minorities returned in peace and safety and with dignity could Sipovo become an Open City.

The US Bureau for Population and Refugee Migration, UNHCR and major donors were invited to visit the local authorities and impress upon them the conditionalities of aid. A British battalion with NATO's Stabilization Force (SFOR) launched a pro-active 'hearts and minds' operation which combined a visible armed presence with small-scale assistance programmes. The UNHCR protection officer was instrumental in explaining human rights obligations to the local authorities, and contact meetings between the Displaced Persons group leaders and local municipal officials were facilitated. These discussions and accompanied home visits helped rebuild trust between groups. Coordination between NGOs, UN agencies, OSCE, SFOR and other stakeholders was impressive.

Selection criteria

Once authority had been secured, the next step was to agree a feasible area of return. To reinforce legal institutions, legitimize the return process and win credibility, it was important to be seen to be working in cooperation with returnees from all ethnic groups, the local authorities and the refugee ministry. Many factors had to be considered when selecting the return area. The area had to have been ethnically mixed prior to the war; houses had to be empty or repairable within budget; owners had to be willing to return; and all stakeholders had to indicate willingness to be involved in the process.

In cooperation with all interested parties, the rural area known as Volari was selected as the area for first return. Volari was a collection of seven small hamlets with a pre-war ethnic mix of 55 per cent Serb and 45 per cent Muslim. Conversations with the Serbs who had

already returned showed that they were not violently opposed to the return of former neighbours. Homes of eligible displaced Serbs and Muslims were repairable within the budget of an average \$8,000 per home. Creation of local employment opportunities helped to demonstrate the beneficial effects of minority return.

Eligibility criteria were developed, prioritizing those with insufficient resources to fund repairs, the unemployed, the lowly paid, single parent families and those with children. Homes would be rehabilitated to an agreed minimum standard: seal the structure with roof, doors and windows on one floor (other openings to be sealed with plastic) and rehabilitate one bedroom, one living

room, one kitchen (including water, sink and drainage) and one bathroom (including toilet, sink/bath and running water - hot if the budget allowed). Homes more than 65 per cent damaged were regarded as totally destroyed.

A tripartite agreement, setting out the obligations of each signatory and signed only after extensive consultations, was entered into by the NGO, municipal authorities and the returnee. It was important that returnees had sufficient information to make an informed decision. The NGO undertook to rehabilitate houses to a certain standard, the authorities to guarantee the security of repaired properties and returnees to settle in the repaired house within one month of their house being satisfactorily



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rehabilitated. A penalty clause allowed the local authorities to re-allocate a house to another displaced family if the family refused to take up residence.

Reluctance to return

Throughout the negotiation process, constant contact was maintained with the Displaced Persons group based in central Bosnia. At all meetings and visits, information exchange was encouraged and concerns addressed.

The characteristics of each family, their priorities and anxieties were identified.

Displaced people living in displaced persons homes were contacted.

Unsurprisingly, the main concern for returnees was security and safety, with employment prospects of secondary importance. What surprised programme implementers was that, despite declarations of willingness to return, there was a marked reluctance to actually do so. Burning desires to return cooled over time. When the prospect of return became a reality, many backed away from the opportunity offered them.

The reasons were more social than security-related. Many of the displaced had been forced to abandon a harsh rural lifestyle and had relocated to towns such as Zenica in central Bosnia. In towns they had greater employment and commercial opportunities, better schools, electricity and shops. It was typical to hear a family head say:

“Why do I want to return to a place where in order to get milk I have to milk a cow that I no longer have? Here in Zenica I just go downstairs and to the shop next door and buy a litre.” Exposure to the comforts of urban life had removed desire to return to the villages. The resultant acceleration of urbanization was mirrored throughout Bosnia and shared by all ethnic groups. It, and not security, has become the strongest barrier to return.

Reluctance to return was also based on worries about schooling, employment and how to get by without humanitarian aid. Although eventually better-funded programmes

provided returnees with agricultural and other inputs, the first returnees were under-funded.

IDPs had been displaced in large groups, had maintained contact through kinship networks and wished to return together or in groups. The realities of the situation meant that this was not possible.

Although ‘packages’ of five homes were contracted out together, differences in the amount of damage and repair work required together with contractors’ lack

of resources made it difficult to coordinate rehabilitation work and ensure that several houses were finished on the same day. Batches of homes were generally finished within one week. Security

concerns meant that as homes were completed they required immediate occupation before they were damaged or a different family moved in.

Security

Returnees were understandably nervous about going back to an area from which they had been forcibly evicted. To increase returnee confidence, security was reinforced with a large SFOR presence and regular International Police Task Force patrols. SFOR in particular were outstanding in their understanding of the issues at stake and their cooperation was pivotal to the project’s success. It was, nevertheless, repeatedly stressed that ultimate responsibility for returnee security rested with the local majority

population and the (totally Serb) local police force. Fear worked both ways. While the Muslim minority was anxious about returning, many Serbs were fearful of the implications of minority return and the risk of revenge attacks against those Serbs thought to have participated in ‘ethnic cleansing’.

Resistance to return

Resistance to return was encountered from the very people who should have been encouraging it – the leadership of the Displaced Persons group itself. These non-elected leaders represented the interests of those displaced from Sipovo. Their power arose from the perception of members that those in the leadership could influence the allocation of assistance. Development of direct links between implementing NGOs and their membership threatened the leadership and brokerage role to which they had become accustomed.

Misconceptions regarding building standards were another difficulty. Many returnees believed (despite briefings to the contrary) that their homes would be restored to pre-war conditions. This expectation, impossible to meet due to funding and other constraints, was to dog the programme.

Throughout Bosnia, the Displaced Persons group objected to assistance being given to refugees returning from abroad. They argued that refugees had not fought, had been working abroad and had received generous financial

Burning desires to return cooled over time.



A Muslim returning family invites their Serb and returned Muslim neighbours to dinner.

assistance to return from host countries. The fact that some visiting refugees conspicuously displayed their wealth exacerbated this tension. European Union programmes prioritizing the return of refugees caused friction with IDPs. Tensions eased once it was understood that those with funds were not eligible for the project but it was indicative however of the animosity felt towards some returnees from Western Europe.

First returns and problems

The first Muslim family returned to Sipovo Municipality in October 1997. Others followed and by the end of January 1998, the International Rescue Committee and the American Refugee Committee had facilitated the return of some 30 minority families. Families maintained kinship and commercial links with relatives living elsewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Return followed a pattern: older members returned first, followed by younger members as confidence increased. Problems occurred and are sure to continue to occur. Houses owned by minorities had windows smashed, threats were made and one house was burned. Local police were uncooperative and only made sham investigations of incidents. Excavation in nearby Jajce of a mass grave containing the bodies of 27 Serb civilians from Sipovo heightened tension. Some returnee families attempted to sell homes after they had been rebuilt and to continue to occupy homes of other minorities. Fortunately, coordinated and robust action by the international community, together with cooperation from local authorities and the general public, largely countered these incidents, and these initial returns led to many more minority families returning in 1998.

In early 1998, the socialist SPRS party defeated the nationalist SDS in the local elections and UNHCR awarded the area Open City status. Success of the pilot projects led to Sipovo receiving increased funding in 1998. An integrated multi-agency aid package, with programmes ranging from house rehabilitation to income generation, was made available to all ethnic groups and further helped create conditions conducive to return.

donor-imposed conditions have brought results

The future

Neighbouring municipalities followed the Sipovo lead and by mid 1998 a host of municipalities, from Sipovo in the south to Banja Luka in the north, were open to minority return. Only long-term evaluation will allow us to judge the sustainability of return. Ongoing donor commitment is needed. As returnee numbers increase so the supply of less damaged houses has fallen. Richard Jaquot's predictions in *Forced Migration Review* issue 1⁴ that the supply of less damaged houses would decline, and that increased funding would be required to repair more badly damaged and destroyed homes, have been borne out by events. The principle of minority return has been firmly established. However, without expanded employment opportunities and development of industry, it is doubtful if many more families will make the transition. This will have an impact on the long-term viability of all IDP returns.

Conclusion

The return of IDPs from minority communities generates many lessons and raises policy questions. Though transferability of the Sipovo experience to other regions of Former Yugoslavia is debatable, an analysis of return projects within the Sipovo Municipality does highlight key issues for consideration. Factors conducive to success have been:

- integrated cooperation of all stakeholders in transparent and community-based planning and decision processes
- clear explanation of decisions and dissemination of information
- pragmatism of local authorities
- proactive SFOR Battalion
- stakeholder involvement in identifying conditions for return
- high profile of human rights/zero tolerance of human rights abuses
- establishment of trust between the personnel of the implementing agencies, local authorities, the general public and returnees
- the fact that project implementers lived in the project area
- dedication of local staff

- effort to ensure that implementation is undertaken by the legitimate recognized authorities

It appears that in Sipovo donor-imposed conditions have brought results. The number of spontaneous, self-funded minority returns has increased and intimidation of minorities is much reduced. The question remains, however, whether it is legitimate to target aid to areas which comply with Open City criteria and deny aid to others in need because they are under the rule of a hard-line local authority. Should members of minority communities be put at risk in order to create momentum in a peace process? Is conditionality sustainable, given the need for long-term donor commitment and monitoring?

At some point the policy of return will need re-evaluating. If the number of returns continues to be low, mechanisms for mutually agreed cross-entity property exchanges could be initiated. (This is already happening informally.) The question of how to assist those who feel that they can never return needs to be addressed. Lastly, as the EU puts greater pressure on refugees to return home, there has been a corresponding decrease in funding for minority return programmes. If this continues there is a real danger that the return criteria set out in Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Accords will not be met.⁵ Should this happen, nationalist politicians would be provided with an ideal pretext for distorting and exploiting the reasons for non-return. Is the international community ready for the subsequent consequences?

Guy Hovey wrote this article in 1999 while working for the International Rescue Committee. He is now based in Sarajevo and works for the United Methodist Committee on Relief as Shelter and Return Project Director. Email: guy@bih.net.ba

1 1991 Yugoslav census
 2 *Forced Migration Review* issue 1, p22. See www.fmreview.org/fmr017.htm for full text of article.
 3 For a history of the Open City process and an analysis of progress to mid 1999 see www.unhcr.ba/opencity/9908BH1.html. An alternative source of information on Open Cities and the minority returns system in general is at <http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/bosnia/reports/bh33main.htm>
 4 *Forced Migration Review* issue 1, p26. See www.fmreview.org/fmr018.htm for full text of article.
 5 However, the other (often-neglected) two clauses of Annex 7 deal with the right to remain and the right to seek settlement in a third country.