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Resolving protracted displacement through social housing

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A social housing methodology recently introduced in Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates the need for certain key components in any strategy to address the shelter and livelihoods needs of vulnerable citizens.

By 2011 – 16 years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement – the return process in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was considered successful by many standards. Of the 2.2 million citizens displaced during the war, over 91% had returned to their communities of origin or integrated into new communities. Over 320,000 housing units had been reconstructed and repaired. And yet there were still 193,000 displaced persons and refugees in need of durable housing solutions. In particular, 8,734 displaced persons were still living in poor, unhealthy conditions in the country's 160 collective centres, which for the most part were never designed for residential use.¹

These 193,000 people were unable or chose not to take advantage of earlier housing reconstruction programmes for a variety of reasons, including:

- lack of certification of land mine clearance at or near their property
- lack of utilities and basic community infrastructure
- insufficient employment opportunities
- ineligibility of tenants who had never owned property
- inability to prove legal title to property
- unwillingness to return to a place of trauma.

Given this, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) decided in 2007 to refocus its strategy away from individual house reconstruction and towards the introduction of a new social housing methodology. This would help to build the capacity of local government authorities to provide durable housing solutions for collective centre residents and other vulnerable displaced groups including

Roma, readmitted asylum seekers,² persons with disabilities, and the elderly.³

Social housing principles

Through social housing, a community can help provide affordable housing for those of its citizens who are unable to meet their housing needs independently. It can take the form of new multi-unit, multi-storey structures or of individual units constructed on top of or rehabilitated within existing housing stock. Whatever the type of social housing, three principles are essential. Firstly, ownership needs to be clearly defined and registered with local government. Secondly, management and maintenance responsibilities must be clearly articulated and organised. And, thirdly, eligibility criteria and apartment allocation procedures need to be clearly defined and communicated from the outset.

CRS' social housing strategy includes the following components:

Formal working group: This needs to be established from the outset to facilitate collaborative partnerships with local government officials, while also building municipal capacity to assume management and maintenance responsibilities after tenants move in.

'Book of Rules': This articulates the key principles of social housing and defines the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder. Official registration of this document in the local courts guarantees that future politicians will be unable to misuse or sell the units for at least 25 years.

Affordable rents: Rents need to be below market rates. Although this can be a challenge



Fuad Fico

This social housing in Potočari near Srebrenica was built in the last six years (with funding from the Governments of BiH and the Netherlands) and provides 58 apartments. Most tenants are returnees. (Potočari was the location of the Srebrenica massacre and it is here that the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide is located.)

for some chronically displaced persons used to receiving free housing, it can promote dignity and reduce dependency, and generates the resources needed to manage and maintain the buildings.

Family ‘socio-economic card’: This card documents the eligibility criteria of each family and then serves as a baseline against which future improvements in household income and standard of living can be compared. Those families whose incomes subsequently rise above the official poverty line will have their rents readjusted closer to the market rate.

Sustainable livelihood component: Each family receives a form of assistance to help cover monthly rent/utility payments and to rebuild household assets lost during the war. Livelihood options are tailored for each family and may include agricultural equipment, training/support for selling produce, or subsidies to local companies to encourage the hiring of minority returnees.

Social linkages and networks: The involvement of local government authorities, NGOs and other stakeholders in the

communities of return is important for providing appropriate support to returning families.

Mixed-use developments: Promoting mixed use of buildings allows minority returnees, Roma, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups to integrate physically, economically and socially with members of the majority community. In some circumstances, special provision can be made to attract professional and technical cadres for which there is a demand in the community; in other situations, part or all of the ground floor of a housing development can be made available for commercial purposes to provide employment and marketing opportunities.

A management system: CRS provides a specially designed management information computer software programme (and training in its use) for the relevant municipal departments to enable them to: compile key information and data on all social housing buildings; track rent payment and arrears; organise maintenance schedules; and generate reports for municipal, entity and state-level purposes.

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Alignment with international standards: This is in order to help BiH comply with any new requirements associated with possible future accession to the European Union.

The BiH government has learned the risks of omitting one or more of these key components from its own social housing projects, and of focusing only on the building construction aspect. An assessment of the social housing constructed by the government between 2009 and 2012 concluded that failure to clearly define from the outset issues of ownership, management, maintenance and tenancies had resulted in no-one fulfilling those responsibilities; furthermore, the lack of legislation and policy framework governing social housing was preventing both government and tenants from fully realising its benefits.

Key results to date

By the end of 2014, 762 displaced persons and returnees in nine municipalities around the country had secured safe, dignified living conditions in 273 social housing units constructed by CRS. Six years after signing tenancy contracts, 93% of families were still living in the social housing units.⁴ Of the 7% no longer present, over half of them had had a positive reason for leaving, e.g. marriage, voluntary emigration or securing employment in another town. Only 3% of social housing units were vacant. This stability is an important factor contributing to the social and economic growth of their communities. Furthermore, 22% of family members living in the social housing units were under 18 years of age, demonstrating the methodology's effectiveness in attracting the type of young, working-age families needed to revitalise war-affected communities.

Promising early results led the BiH government in 2010 to include social housing as a preferred element in its Revised Strategy for the Implementation of Annex 7. In the years that followed, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR) incorporated social housing as a key strategy in two nationwide programmes through which more than 2,900 social housing units

will be constructed.⁵ In 2015, the MHRR adopted CRS' Social Housing Manual⁶ as the official guidance for all municipalities participating in these two programmes.

After initial efforts to establish legislation at the state level stalled as a result of a broader political stalemate, CRS decided to engage key officials at the municipal, canton and entity level, where there is the political will to develop and pass social housing strategies and legislation. In 2013, CRS succeeded in helping two cantons (BPK Goražde and Zeničko-dobojski) develop and pass the country's first ever social housing legislation. Another five municipalities (Srebrenica, Prijedor, Goražde, Mostar and Banja Luka) have developed social housing strategies that provide a common framework for all current and new initiatives. And in 2013, the MHRR incorporated social housing into the second phase of its initiative to support the return and integration of asylum seekers in ten targeted municipalities and Brčko District, demonstrating that the Government of BiH now understands the value of social housing in helping municipalities to address the shelter and livelihoods needs of their most vulnerable citizens.

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1. Data taken from BiH Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (2011) *Joint Regional Programme on Durable Solutions for Refugees and Displaced Persons, Framework Programme*. <http://tinyurl.com/MHRR-framework-prog-2011>

2. Persons from BiH who had sought asylum in other (mostly EU) countries in Europe and have been returned via one of the formal agreements signed between the governments. About 70% of these readmitted asylum seekers are Roma whose lack of birth or registration documents makes it difficult to prove that they previously lived in BiH.

3. CRS' social housing initiative was cited as one of two best practices for integration of Roma in the Western Balkans. See Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2014) *Best Practices for Roma Integration: Regional Report on Housing Legalization, Settlement Upgrading and Social Housing for Roma in the Western Balkans*. www.osce.org/odihr/115737

4. Monitoring data from CRS/BiH staff, May 2015.

5. See article by Mayne A 'Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 years on from Dayton', pp8-11.

6. www.crs-programquality.org/publications/2015/8/25/manual-for-non-profit-social-housing.html