

Discontent with assistance to the Bosnian return process

by Guy Hovey

*How sustainable are minority returns?
What do the displaced themselves think of the return process and the programmes designed to facilitate return?*

The international community has massively assisted efforts to enable the return of minority populations to their homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet a survey from the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) suggests that external assistance has often been misguided.

In order to understand better the predicament of minority returnees and to identify improvements in the system, UMCOR, with funding from the Dutch government, has since the beginning of 2000 been conducting an ongoing review of the return process. 2,500 returnee families from all areas of Bosnia have been included in the survey sample. All the families have received assistance from the Netherlands government via a variety of NGOs, local and national authorities. The survey identified many positive aspects of the return process as well as some negative.

The main finding was that of the houses surveyed in the review 17% were found not to be occupied by families once they had been rebuilt. 35% of families illegally occupy, without fear of eviction, both their rebuilt original home and the home of a displaced minority in a different area (the so called 'dual occupants'). When a returnee does vacate an illegally occupied property, the original owner often puts the house up for sale rather than return.

Researchers found that minority displaced people face a myriad of problems when returning to their

original home. While security is the greatest concern in such areas of continuing tension as Srebrenica, in general returnees cite fear of unemployment as their gravest worry. Minority unemployment far exceeds the national average of 45-60%. Poverty among returnees is so great that in some cases it has led to a 're-migration' of families to areas where they can find some work. The majority of families report that since they returned jobs, equitable policing, economic opportunities, accessible health care and acceptable education have been denied to them. These minorities often now live on the fringes of their new society.

The current approach to assisting returns includes 'sustainability assistance' via provision of small income-generating grants or agricultural assistance. UMCOR found that although returnees fully utilise this assistance, these inputs are often only sufficient for recipient returnee families to survive at an extremely low subsistence level. Those returnee families who have been back home for more than six months often identify the kind of assistance which would make their livelihoods sustainable but are unable to access further assistance from aid sources and do not qualify for micro credit. Many long-term minority returnees are disillusioned, trapped in poverty and feel abandoned by organisations who have ceased to have contact with them once they have signed off completed projects.

The survey has highlighted important lessons to be learned. Although there

is an increasing rate of return to original homes, there is also a disregard of property laws and an inability or unwillingness on the part of the authorities to evict dual occupants. This requires urgent and robust action. The quantity of empty vacated housing in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates that many people do not wish to return to their original homes and have put down new roots elsewhere where they are in an ethnic majority.

The international community and the Bosnian government need to address the growing problem of poverty and disillusionment which is spreading throughout returnee communities. There is a danger that if disillusionment grows it could be harnessed by nationalists with tragic results.

The term 'sustainability assistance' requires definition, understanding and application. UMCOR defines the term as 'provision of the opportunity for a returnee family to reach their own vision and goals in order that that family can develop within indigenously accepted norms'. In order to provide these opportunities donors should be encouraged to fund 'second tranche' sustainability inputs. There is a need for all agencies to work more closely with returnees, maintain links and work to empower them to take community action on community issues. This would strengthen communities and ease the feeling of 'abandonment' felt by some returnees.

In short, if Bosnia is to move from non-conflict to a state of peace, property laws need to be enforced and the views of minority returnees listened to. Both donors and implementers need to reflect and take a hard look at what they are doing to assist the displaced.

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