the needs of a family, such as livelihood opportunities, kitchen gardens, scholarships, agricultural machinery, housing and psychological support. Meanwhile, a positive example of providing an opportunity for self-employment is BH Crafts. However, more skills training projects are needed.

**Participation and consultation**

Many IDPs feel hopeless in the face of a government that gives the impression that it has turned its back on them. The lack of tangible success in assisting IDPs to find a solution over the past two decades has left them disillusioned and resentful, feeling ignored and forgotten:

“This people are as if lost in time and space.”

“Social workers never come here.”

“Whenever someone comes, they visit the manager. We don’t know who came, for what reason; we are never informed about anything, and we are not really asked.”

Yet giving displaced people a chance to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting them is crucial for building effective support programmes and finding a sustainable solution for them. In addition, it would do more than just give them a voice. It would strengthen their sense of personal worth, and their sense of community and of belonging in their own country.

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1. In 2014, while studying for an MA in Intercultural Conflict Management I undertook qualitative research into the current challenges facing IDPs in BiH (in cooperation with CESI, the Centre for Refugee and IDP Studies in Sarajevo) and conducted 20 in-depth interviews with IDPs and local and international actors. All quotes in this article come from these interviews.

2. BH Crafts provides women with tools and material for knitting clothes, which the company then sells. The programme is now open to all women seeking additional income but was started as a project for residents of the Mihatovici Collective Centre and many of the beneficiaries are displaced women.
Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees (CRPC). With restitution of the 200,000 occupied housing units increasing from 21% in the first year to 92% in the fourth, PLIP constitutes one of the biggest successes of the implementation of Annex 7 and restitution of rights.

However, it is frequently overlooked that reconstruction was an even more critical issue than property restitution. UNHCR estimated the number of housing units that were partially or completely destroyed to be 459,000 (more than double the number of repossession claims filed by CRPC). 60% of the housing stock was partially destroyed and 18% was completely destroyed, not only during the fighting but also after the signing of Dayton by those trying to prevent people from returning.

By 2008 only approximately half of these units (some 260,000 houses) had been rebuilt, mainly because of a lack of funding. The stark contrast between the robust and decisive role of the international community in the implementation of property rights and its much more deficient role in the reconstruction process had to do mostly with the costs of the latter. It is significant that while PLIP was obviously anchored in the language of rights, reconstruction assistance was largely specified as humanitarian assistance.

**Rural versus urban**

PLIP is considered a success not only in terms of rights restitution but also because it facilitated a breakthrough in the minority returns process by the year 2000 when properties were finally made available to their owners. It is less frequently emphasised, however, that this involved evicting the people occupying these properties, a large proportion of whom were people of rural origin for whom the main housing problem upon return was reconstruction, not repossession.

The tension between the rights-based approach implied in the Dayton Peace Agreement and the moral (and political) imperative of reversing ethnic cleansing becomes clearer when considering the position in which (mostly) rural returnees were put. In many cases, following implementation of PLIP, families were evicted before their houses were reconstructed, because of the shortage of reconstruction funds. Whereas in the initial years after the end of the war there were plenty of funds available, donor fatigue and a serious reconstruction funding gap were evident by 1999, and in 2002 the funding gap between demand for reconstruction and available funds amounted to €600 million.

People holding IDP status and under a certain income threshold were entitled to temporary alternative accommodation. But with time, they risked losing their IDP status (and access to alternative accommodation) if they did not commit themselves to reconstruction. And once reconstruction assistance was granted, the right to alternative accommodation was lost. In short, PLIP effectively pushed people, mostly of rural origin, to return.

This is not to say that there were not genuine cases of voluntary return among rural returnees; on the contrary, many of these returns had been greatly longed for. Some of the local people I interviewed, however, characterised the process of return in three main stages. First came...
the ‘pioneers’ – or “the crazy ones” – who returned spontaneously, without any external support or backup. Then there was a wave of returns once reconstruction assistance started being available. Those returning after that point were, in their own words, mostly “people who were left with no other choice”.4

Wealthier households who did not (as yet) wish to return were able to rent or buy property where they lived now. But this was not the case for poorer families for whom the only available assistance, besides the support they received as registered IDPs, was reconstruction assistance. Since a condition for receiving reconstruction assistance was being present in the area of return, many did opt to return even if they had to live in tents, partially reconstructed houses or improvised shacks. This situation lasted for months and even years in some cases.

Sidelining the right to choose
There is no doubt that the international community faced a fundamental dilemma regarding minority returns in BiH but, in pursuit of the goal of reversing ethnic cleansing, people’s right to choose was, to a large extent, sidelined. This requires a profound re-thinking within the international community, particularly so considering the relatively poor results achieved in terms of reversing ethnic cleansing. A policy which took into account individual motivations and constraints, and adjusted its time-frame accordingly, might have been more effective in enabling return, as well as more in line with the recognition of people’s right to choose enshrined in Annex 7. Minority returns have in fact taken place largely to rural areas, with towns registering much lower numbers. But the reasons for this asymmetry also have to do with security considerations, given the larger ethnic segregation in the countryside, as well as with economic factors, since agriculture and cattle-breeding provide a means of subsistence in an environment of widespread discrimination and a depressed economy. In addition, repossessed houses in urban areas were in demand by members of the majority ethnic group that had been displaced mostly to towns and cities. This made it possible for urban dwellers to sell these properties or to exchange them. This option was not available in rural areas where the only benefit that displaced people could derive from their reconstructed properties was actually making use of them.

The international community went to great lengths to provide the necessary security conditions, as well as the harmonisation of health-care systems and pension funds and the reconstruction of infrastructure to provide the basic conditions for return. But the main issue was – and remains – the lack of employment opportunities and widespread discrimination in accessing the very limited opportunities that do exist. In this regard the international community also failed to meet the promise made in Article I of Annex 7 about the right to restitution of, or compensation for, any property of which individuals were deprived during the conflict. In practice, properties other than houses – such as business premises and usurped land – did not receive similar attention in the repossession or compensation process. All of this undoubtedly inhibited people from returning, and contributed to the fragile nature of the minority return process overall.

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