

The compound effects of conflict and disaster displacement in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Some IDPs living in protracted displacement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as many Roma IDPs, were especially vulnerable to the effects of the May 2014 flooding and landslides.

Over a few days in May 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) experienced the heaviest rainfall reported in 120 years. The deluge led to the flooding of the rivers Bosna, Drina, Una, Sava and Vrbas and their tributaries, damaging 43,000 homes and triggering landslides that destroyed a further 1,952 homes in 81 municipalities.¹ The floods affected more than 1.5 million people (nearly 39% of the population) and displaced around 90,000 people.

Many of those displaced by the floods were IDP returnees, formerly displaced persons who had integrated locally, and IDPs still living in protracted displacement following the conflict, and already vulnerable groups such as victims of wartime sexual violence and landmine victims. Once again they were forced to flee their homes, having to find refuge with family or friends or in temporary accommodation facilities.

IDPs in hazard-prone areas

The prioritisation of return – by the state and the international community – between 1999 and 2005 exacerbated the vulnerability of some IDPs, especially Roma IDPs. Those who did not want to return and did not benefit from financial assistance often settled in at-risk areas near riverbanks prone to flooding or on hillsides that were susceptible to landslides, simply building on vacant land. Without ownership or other rights to their property, many such IDPs are under constant threat of eviction by authorities. In addition, the use of cheap construction materials and unskilled craftsmen has meant that it is the most vulnerable IDPs and returnees from the conflict 20 years ago who are again prone to displacement, this time by natural hazards.²

The National Action Plan on Roma Housing calls for the legalising of informal

settlements and illegally built houses and a more favourable legislative framework but has yet to be fully implemented³ and there is still no state-level regulation on the legalisation of informally built housing units. Resolution of property disputes for the land on which such houses are built remains the responsibility of the two ‘entities’ and Brčko District at the municipal/cantonal level.

At the same time, newly displaced Roma continue to face discrimination in accessing assistance. In interviews conducted with 373 displaced Roma families in 20 municipalities, 45% said their homes had been destroyed by flooding or landslides in 2014.⁴ Those who had built on public land without permission or building permits are not eligible for reconstruction assistance due to the legal requirement to provide proof of ownership of a destroyed property. It is not clear what housing assistance, if any, there will be for informal settlers and other non-owners.

Prioritise according to need, not cause of displacement

BiH received aid from bilateral donors, international organisations and the European Union (EU) to respond to the flooding-induced displacement in 2014. As part of this, facilities to house those who were unable to remain in their homes were identified. Here, in the context of another programme (CEBII⁵) funded by the Council of Europe Development Bank to close all collective centres, it became important to distinguish between shelter for IDPs displaced by the conflict and those displaced by the floods and landslides. The new shelters became known as ‘temporary accommodation facilities’ (TAFs) so as not to confuse them with the ‘collective centres’ which continue to house IDPs from the conflict.

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Photo taken by a Slovenian helicopter crew as they provide assistance to people affected by floods in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014.

Where a country experiences multiple waves of displacement, the most vulnerable should be prioritised. After the initial surge of post-flood assistance, many organisations became worried that displacement caused by the floods would undo progress made in returns and local integration of IDPs from the conflict, delay work to improve living conditions of IDPs in collective centres, and damage donor commitments to facilitate ‘conflict returns’ (if donors decided to assist those displaced in the more recent disaster rather than those who were displaced 20 years ago).

This last concern was not unfounded. In the immediate aftermath of the floods, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees and the EU approved a diversion of funds allocated to end displacement caused by the conflict towards those displaced by the floods and landslides. There was an emphasis on vulnerable populations that included ‘Roma and displaced communities’ but the requirement to show proof of ownership remained (in order to be eligible for reconstruction assistance) and there was uncertainty as to whether previous assistance provided to conflict IDPs would affect their eligibility for flood-related assistance. There was no official guidance for donors or government authorities on this matter.

Eventually, the Ministry of Displaced Persons of the Federation of BiH – one of the two entities governing BiH – shifted funding intended for conflict IDPs and used it to prioritise people who had been doubly displaced, once by conflict and

then again by the floods and landslides. The biggest question surfaced around reconstruction assistance for housing that was built informally as there is still no legislation or legal regime in place to provide reconstruction assistance to those who have built informally – primarily Roma IDPs.

Some progress has been made in that municipalities are now able to allocate public land free of charge to persons who lost their homes in the landslides. Roma who meet the eligibility requirements can request such assistance, like everyone else, but are still required to provide some proof of ownership, which many do not have. The distribution of free land by the municipality does not adequately address their housing needs or the specific challenges – such as documentation – faced by the Roma community. Innovative approaches to circumvent all of these challenges are needed.

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1. *Bosnia and Herzegovina Recovery Needs Assessment, Floods 14-19 May*, European Union, 19 May 2014
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/press_corner/floods/rna-executive-summary.pdf
2. In addition, many Roma IDPs do not have official IDP status as they did not have the identity documents required to register.
3. Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013) *Action Plan for Roma in the areas of employment, housing and healthcare*, p28
<http://tinyurl.com/BiH-Action-plan-Roma-2013> (Bosnian only)
4. IOM (June 2014) *Impact of the Floods and Landslides in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Affected Roma Population: First Assessment Results*, IOM (June 2014).
5. See article by Mayne A ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 years after Dayton’, pp8-11.