

# Housing reconstruction in Bosnia: field realities

by Ana Povrzenic

*Housing reconstruction is not just a question of building houses. It is about return and restoring the right to return to all those who lose this right during conflict.*

**H**ousing destruction and forced expulsions were used as a method of ethnic cleansing during the war in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH). Thirty-seven per cent of pre-war housing stock was partially or totally destroyed. When the Dayton Peace Agreement ended conflict in 1995 over half the pre-war BiH population had been forced to leave home. More than a million people were displaced within BiH, mainly forced to reside in collective centres or in the homes of other displaced persons. Bosnian Muslims occupied the homes of Serbs in areas within the Federation (the Bosniak-Croat entity of BiH) while Serbs occupied the homes of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the other entity, Republika Srpska. Croats occupied the homes of Bosnian Muslims and Serbs in western Herzegovina. Dayton foresaw minority return as a mechanism to reverse ethnic cleansing. It enshrined the right of refugees and IDPs to return, a right now granted under BiH law to everybody whose property was confiscated during the war.

There has been a contradictory relationship between the return and reconstruction strategies of the international community and the local authorities. The international community promoted minority return but the local authorities' policy was highly politicised. Neither of the two entities into which BiH is divided promoted minority return to their territories. The Serb entity promoted local integration of displaced persons and refugees of Serb origin while the Federation pushed for, on one hand, a massive inflow of Bosnian Muslims from abroad to their territory and, on the other, the return of Bosniaks to their pre-war homes in those parts of the Serb entity where they had previously formed a majority.

## Jump-starting property rights enforcement

The Housing Verification and Monitoring Unit (HVM) was established in 1999 by key members of the international community to address growing problems related to housing reconstruction assistance and property laws. Its primary task has been to collect verified and objective data on the occupancy status of housing units built to encourage return to places of origin. HVM has worked to identify 'double occupants' (those who have received assistance while continuing to occupy the property of other displaced people), to encourage evictions and to put pressure on recalcitrant local authorities to enforce property laws.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of interviews with over 250,000 beneficiaries and their family members, HVM has collected information on more than 53,000 reconstructed housing units, over 13,000 repossessed housing units and over 68,000 temporary addresses. The large sample size – some 70% of all beneficiaries – permits valid analysis of the return process.

The actual return to reconstructed houses has become the only indicator of the effectiveness of international investment. Registered beneficiaries returned to only 43% of the reconstructed houses. Our most startling finding is that there are 11,304 uninhabited reconstructed housing units in BiH, 21% of the total. Conservatively taking the cost of a single reconstructed housing unit at €9,000, means a total of over €100m has been wasted.

There have been several impediments to the return of refugees and IDPs. In many cases their homes were damaged during the war and in need of reconstruction and rehabili-

tation. Secondly, their pre-war homes were occupied mainly by other displaced people. Thirdly, employment possibilities for the returnees were scarce. Lastly, many refugees and IDPs were unwilling to live in a community where they would become a minority, out of fear either for their lives or of being discriminated against by the local authorities.

The presence or absence of infrastructure, such as lack of electricity and water supplies, or vicinity to land mines, does not primarily determine why people do not return to their houses. Demographic indicators seem to be more important for explaining return or non-return to reconstructed housing units. This is also related to the relationship between employment status and return. A high percentage of beneficiaries who have returned are not employed. This could be directly related to the age structure of returned and non-returned beneficiaries. As many as 38% of returned beneficiaries are over the age of 50.

This reluctance of people of working age to return from urban to rural areas is, of course, a universal trend observed in countries not afflicted by conflict.

From the outset of reconstruction in Bosnia, matching available and projected funding for housing reconstruction with identified needs was not realistic. The international community's major mistake was failure to distinguish between the real needs for reconstruction assistance for those with no alternative housing and who genuinely intended to return and, on the other hand, the natural wishes of people to reclaim their pre-war property.

Donations were supposed to be allocated to the most needy who intend to return but needs and intentions are difficult to verify and therefore donations ended up with those who just wanted to get back what they had before the war.

## Mechanisms of housing reconstruction assistance

In the aftermath of Dayton, housing reconstruction was prioritised and money was plentiful. In 1996-1997 Bosnia was awash with inexperienced NGOs and local construction companies seeking to sign contracts with donors and the donors had money they were eager to spend. As a result, contracts were awarded to foreign NGOs with no previous involvement in housing and to local companies with no housing construction experience. Donors focused on the house rather than the owner and programmes were driven by engineering rather than by social or economic considerations. It was naively assumed that reconstruction of houses would automatically lead to return. Implementing agencies took photographs of themselves and beneficiaries in front of newly built houses but neither donors nor NGOs ever checked whether people really returned.

In 1997 the Office of the High Representative (OHR – the international body created to make a reality of Dayton)<sup>2</sup> set up a Return and Reconstruction Task Force (RRTF) to coordinate return and reconstruction activities. Led by OHR and UNHCR, RRTF obtained information on the needs of refugees and IDPs through its network of field offices and direct contacts with NGOs, local authorities and representatives of refugees and IDPs. In addition to advising donors on where to allocate their money, RRTF offices intervened to act against local authorities trying to block minority returns. In some cases mayors and local officials were sacked.

Some of the more successful policies that were promoted were the so-called 'return axes' which took into consideration the relationship between the area where the displaced lived and where they were returning to. Another policy was the 'three Ss' (space, security, sustainability) to integrate ideas of sustainability (employment schemes, mine clearance, infrastructure and the building of democracy) into the aims of reconstruction programming. The 'spontaneous return policy' enabled rapid disbursement of funds to assist spontaneous returns. The inter-

national community was particularly keen to promote 'secondary movement', which meant reconstructing houses for those beneficiaries occupying others' property in order to start a chain movement of vacating property. The slogan 'reconstruct two houses for the price of one' was popular with donors.

Policies to encourage cross-border return were less successful. The main legacy of self-help projects has been a large number of unfinished houses with building materials either stacked outside or sold by recipients.

## Mixed success

As part of its exit strategy OHR now focuses on training local authorities to implement housing reconstruction projects. On one level BiH has been an example of international determination to plan a reconstruction process to assist return of displaced people. By the end of 2004 nearly all outstanding claims for property restitution were resolved – a considerable achievement given the high number of outstanding claims in 2000 and the high levels of initial obstruction from local authorities. However, despite the billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance that have poured into BiH since 1996 over a million persons have yet to return, and are unlikely ever to do so. An alarmingly high number of reconstructed properties remain empty.

The housing policies of the international community were more reactive than pro-active. Much more could have been done if the international community had had a joint strategy for rebuilding before or shortly after entering BiH. Housing reconstruction projects could have been improved by greater focus on:

- **Beneficiary selection:** in order to determine whether a potential beneficiary genuinely wishes to return, it is important to have in-depth knowledge of the community to which potential beneficiaries belong, their pre-war way of life and their current livelihoods, access to health and education and concerns about security. The international community has failed to prioritise beneficiaries

properly according to their needs or to invest in resources to verify the information on ownership presented by potential beneficiaries. It has thus been easy to manipulate assistance. Houses have been reconstructed for families who have no intention of returning, as well as for those who already own one or more properties within the borders of BiH.

- **Coordination:** lack of liaison between a wide range of donors, implementing agencies and local authorities has made it impossible to properly assess actual needs of BiH citizens and to efficiently manage housing reconstruction assistance.
- **Joined-up policy making:** management of humanitarian aid in BiH has improved since the initial post-Dayton chaos but the lack of a joint strategy still diminishes the effectiveness of international assistance towards housing reconstruction. International indecisiveness on how to approach housing reconstruction assistance and whether to provide grants or loans has meant that Bosnians see housing assistance as their right, without any strings attached.

Developing synergy with non-housing projects is vital. Housing reconstruction is not just a physical project but must be a community-driven initiative linked to rehabilitation of infrastructure, support of livelihoods, de-mining and construction of health facilities, schools, mosques and churches.

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1. For further information, see FMR 21, pp15-16 [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR21/FMR2105.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR21/FMR2105.pdf)  
2. [www.ohr.int](http://www.ohr.int)