

Local integration for refugees in Serbia

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By paying particular attention to the promotion of livelihoods and self-reliance, UNHCR hopes to be able to phase out the long-standing assistance programme.

The situation of Bosnian and Croatian refugees in Serbia was one of five identified for support when UNHCR launched a Special Initiative on Protracted Refugee Situations in 2008. In December 2008 a high-level meeting took place in Geneva between the High Commissioner and a Serbian delegation, where both parties agreed to make a last effort towards ensuring that the remaining refugees in Serbia would find a durable solution, through either return or local integration, so that within a two-year period this particular situation would finally be resolved.

Thirteen years have passed since the end of hostilities in the western Balkans but there are still some 361,000 IDPs and around 100,000 refugees in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, of whom around 96,000 are in Serbia alone. Some 140,000 refugees have returned from Serbia to their countries of origin over the past decade, while around 50,000 people were resettled to third countries. The majority of refugees in Serbia, however, decided to integrate locally.

Local integration of refugees in Serbia is a process that has lasted for more than a decade. Serbia allowed naturalisation of refugees in 1997. Citizenship legislation was amended several times after that and the current

legal framework is very liberal. However, naturalisation is only one component. Local integration is also an economic process in which refugees should grow less dependent on state assistance and become self-reliant. Finally, it is a social and cultural process, enabling refugees to contribute to the social life of the country of asylum.



"This is not the same as normal life. Everything is very difficult. You lose your house, you lose your property, the children grow up and leave you – it's awful." Vinka Kolundzija, a Croatian Serb who became a refugee in Serbia 13 years ago.

Serbia's National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (2002) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2003) set out clear guidelines and provide a solid foundation for progress in the integration of refugees in Serbia. The National Strategy focuses on promoting repatriation to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as return of IDPs to Kosovo, and promoting local integration by addressing the issues of housing (including the closure of collective centres), facilitating opportunities for

employment and dealing with the legal and property aspects of both local integration and repatriation.

Housing

UNHCR in Serbia has developed a number of programmes for local integration of refugees, mainly in the sectors of housing and employment. More than US\$100 million has been invested in integration projects, of which \$30 million is for housing projects alone. During the nineties, the public housing system established during socialist times

was intentionally destroyed by the regime. UNHCR, as the only international organisation operating in Serbia at the time, therefore aimed its first housing projects at meeting the needs of both the most vulnerable among the population of its concern (people in collective centres) and those in private accommodation, who would be able to manage their own housing if they had some support.

In Serbia, over 90% of the housing stock is now privately owned. Unfortunately, private ownership of housing continues to be elusive for the majority of refugees. A December 2008 survey by the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees indicated that only 29.5% of refugees in the Republic of Serbia owned their own housing. The largest percentage live in rented apartments and houses (41.75%), paying a large proportion of their monthly income in rent. Another 19.75% live with family or friends. The remaining collective centres accommodate 1.5%, social welfare institutions and other forms

of social housing 6%, and 1.5% live in other forms of accommodation.

Mass construction of individual houses and apartment buildings for refugees was undertaken in the period 1996-2004. Several new housing concepts were introduced in accordance with the strategic documents published by the government which increased the interest of the international community in providing assistance. Building on UNHCR's experience and models, the European Commission implemented a series of projects through its CARDS programme¹ between 2004 and 2007. During the same period, UN-HABITAT implemented an innovative housing programme funded by the Italian government, supporting the capacity of several municipal housing agencies at the local level.

At the same time, in the absence of a national housing policy, UNHCR continued exploring possibilities for new housing models. The result has been the Social Housing in Supportive Environment model, which relies heavily on local resources and includes the purchase of village houses for the rural caseload and micro-loans for housing. This experience has shown what can be achieved with the cooperation and coordination of all international stakeholders (humanitarian or development), both local and central government, and civil society – and, most importantly, with the involvement of refugees in the process of design and decision-making.

These programmes and initiatives have generated slow but steady improvement in this sector. Compared with the time of the refugee registration carried out in 2004-05, there is an increase in property ownership and a reduction in the numbers of those staying with family or friends. Interestingly, the number of vulnerable refugees in social welfare institutions and social housing has grown, mostly due to large housing projects by the European Agency for Reconstruction, UN-HABITAT, UNHCR and others which also

brought down the percentage of refugees in collective centres.

Employment

However, local integration of refugees and their socio-economic cohesion within society are a very long and



"I don't think about our future anymore. Anything I planned in life is impossible. I feel trapped – there is no way out in this situation." Miljo Miljic, a Bosnian refugee living in Ripanj, Serbia.

complex process. Changing refugees into Serbian citizens and providing housing solutions are not enough. Employment and a steady source of income are key prerequisites for a dignified life. One of the main constraints that the Government of Serbia is facing in its search for local integration solutions for refugees is the vulnerability of the economy, which is still in transition, aggravated by the current global economic crisis. The key indicator of refugee vulnerability is the high unemployment rate. Compared to the host population's unemployment rate of some 20%, the unemployment rate among the refugee population is nearly 33%. Almost 66% of refugees accommodated in collective centres are not employed.

Due to the high unemployment rate in Serbia many refugees face difficulties in finding jobs locally or in starting their own income-generating activities because they do not have appropriate skills. UNHCR has organised a Vocational Training programme directly targeting the

poorest and socially most vulnerable refugees. For those with a greater entrepreneurial spirit UNHCR has established a Micro Loan Revolving fund, managed by two independent local micro-finance institutions, which are running successful micro-credit activities for refugees and IDPs from Kosovo from a portfolio of approximately \$5 million.

Human rights

The search for durable solutions for refugees must be undertaken within the human rights context. UNHCR follows a rights-based approach, believing that refugees can more easily become self-reliant if they have full access to their human rights. Therefore, re-acquisition of rights in the countries of origin is essential not only for repatriation but also for local integration. This process was successful in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the legal framework allowed for the full restitution of property rights. It is reflected in the number of remaining refugees in Serbia, where only some 10% of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina registered in 1996 still hold that status. In the same time, the situation in Croatia is much less

favourable for refugees, and that is one of the main reasons why there are still some 70,000 registered Croatian refugees in Serbia.

Conclusion

The success of housing and employment programmes, as well as the access to rights in their countries of origin, is vital to the integration that is, in turn, the best hope for resolving the fate of the long-standing refugee population in Serbia. Now that protracted refugee situations have found a prominent place on the international humanitarian agenda we hope that this opportunity will not be missed and that the refugee saga in Serbia will finally have its happy ending, serving as a good example for similar protracted refugee situations elsewhere in the world.

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1. http://tiny.cc/EC_CARDS