



# They are doing it for themselves!

## Partner up with competent returnees and CSOs in returnee communities if you aim to achieve the sustainability of return in BiH

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### Sustainable Return as a Contested Process

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) in 1995, international and national efforts enabled around one million persons to return to their pre-war homes. However, when compared to the pre-war demographics, it becomes clear that the return process in BiH failed to satisfy the ambitions of *yet another million* of war displaced persons, who may have once wanted to return home<sup>2</sup>. In addition, studies and field reports by variety of actors<sup>3</sup> suggest that **sustainability of return is questionable** as the significant percentage of returnees still face various challenges in accessing their basic human rights and/or have migrated to other areas of the country or re-emigrated, permanently leaving the country. To date, **500 Million Euros**<sup>4</sup> has been spent on the internationally assisted long-lasting process of return in BiH, involving three succeeding stages: 1) creation of safe conditions, 2) return of property and 3) reconstruction of property and reintegration. Reintegration of returnees being a last stage systematically addressed is today the key effort<sup>5</sup> of the national authorities and International Community in implementing the Revised Strategy for the Implementation of Annex VII of DPA<sup>6</sup> - the principal state document for resolving the question of massive war-displacement and return in BiH.

<sup>4</sup> Speech by Ambassador Sorensen at the presentation of the EU and UNHCR project "Support to durable solutions of Revised Annex VII Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) Implementation Strategy" available at: <http://europa.ba/News.aspx?newsid=6854&lang=EN> (5/13/2014)

<sup>5</sup> There are currently three prioritized projects related to the Revised Strategy's implementation: RHP, *Regional housing program (RHP) for remaining refugees in the region (Croatia, BiH, Montenegro, Serbia)*; CEB I/II *country-wide project addressing the closure of collective centers and social housing projects for internally displaced persons (IDPs)*; and IPA I (2012, 2013, 2014) *sustainability project of collaborative partnership*. For detailed info see [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)

While majority of current efforts are focused on resolving the housing issue, IPA I, lead and coordinated by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ministry for Human Rights and refugees (MHRR), is the only existent project that aims to provide assistance for the sustainable livelihoods, social protection and inclusion and free legal aid for returnees/IDPs. However, with the total budget of 8.1 Mio EUR, this project will only address the needs of 2.400 returnee and IDP families, particularly *focusing the most vulnerable ones* in the 10 selected municipalities<sup>7</sup>.

Apart from IPA I targeting the vulnerable categories, there exist *no country-wide systematic programme(s)* for implementation of the Revised Strategy i.e., ensuring socio-economic rights to all social groups of returnees nor the identification/evaluation tool that draws from the bottom-up approach ('returnee voices' communicating real life needs, experiences and coping strategies) for the implementation of IPA I. **If these factors are not validated in the realization of current and future sustainability programmes, there is a risk of delivering unviable results, leaving far too many without sustainable livelihoods and future in BiH.**

<sup>6</sup> It gives priority to the provision of sustainability of return in four segments regarding recommendations for the betterment of access to and practice of returnees' rights: **health, education, labor and employment, and social and pension/disability insurance**, more information in Revised Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Implementation of Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees BiH, Sarajevo, 2010

<sup>7</sup> IPA I is being lead, coordinated and implemented by UNHCR in close cooperating with MHRR, all authority levels, partnering UN organisations (UNICEF, UNDP), IOM, Bosnian Humanitarian Logistics Service, Foundation of Local Democracy, Hilfswerk Austria International, Association 'Vaša prava')

### Summary

While there is an impressive statistical data indicating the success of return of approximately 2.2 million forcibly displaced Bosnian and Herzegovinian citizens, often demonstrating the high rates of reclaimed pre-war property (around 99%), critiqued by the extensive body of qualitative research on the real life obstacles to sustainable return, little attention has been given to positive practices and actual facilitators of return. Drawing from comparative evidence-based data and intensive field-based research, we argue that these facilitators are found in social relations and bonds between returnees and others within the local communities.<sup>1</sup> In order to successfully implement the sustainability programmes and secure viable investment of funds, policy makers, donors and key stakeholders need to take this valuable yet overlooked resource into account.

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief is based on authors' policy study: *An Overlooked Potential of Social Capital in Returnee Communities: A Way Forward to Sustainability of Return in BiH*, available at: [www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org)

<sup>2</sup> MHRR official estimates are that around 38,5% of the total pre-war BiH population, commonly referred to as *diaspora*, has permanently settled in the recipient countries. Further to that there exist(ed) no strategic programmes on behalf of IC and national authorities to target this large refugee population to return despite the fact that DPA Annex VII address the rights to return of **all BiH citizens** forced to leave the country during the war period of 1992/1995. See statistical indicators and reports of emigration sector at MHRR at [mhrr.gov.ba](http://mhrr.gov.ba)

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. CESI (2013): *Proceedings of the International Round Table* at: [www.cesi.unsa.ba](http://www.cesi.unsa.ba); Peter Lippman's filed reports on return to BiH at <http://balkanwitness.glypx.com/journal.htm>, Jansen, Lofving (2008), Black, R., Gent, S. (2006) Stefansson, A.H. (2006), (Valenta and Ramet 2012).

## THEY KNOW HOW – THE SOCIAL RESOURCEFULNESS OF RETRUNEES

*... we are self-organized (...) leaning on each other and that is the only way to make progress, and that's the only way we make progress here.*

Tarik, a local activist in returnee *mjesna zajednica* Hambarine (Prijedor)

Findings from our study based on field work in Prijedor, Zvornik and Goražde (December 2013 to March 2014), clearly demonstrate that the sustainability of return is local and significantly connected to the **strong inter-personal ties** and **benefits of social relations** in the returnee communities. Informed by focus group discussions with local authority, UNHCR and local community representatives, and diverse returnee civil society organisations (CSOs), in combination with individual follow-up interviews with local activists, successful entrepreneurs and key stakeholders in these communities, we argue that **the principal of social relations among returnees and others within their local communities plays a crucial role in the long-term (re)integration process.**

The fundamental achievements of returnee communities' to date would not have been in place if the principles of relationships and social competencies were not utilized. For example, without social competencies in identifying skilled fellow returnees for (re)building the networks and creating cooperative plans for collective action, the reconstruction of housing units would not have been possible. According to Mr. Edin, former head of Local Council for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Goražde: "To implement any project we had to come together and then donors or the UNHCR carried out the selections. I already knew everyone well, and could distinguish between those who were reliable to cooperate with and those who were unreliable". Further to this, the returnee associations in all three communities became the crucial facilitators of social action:

*All of the associations in Eastern Bosnia are local and cooperate very well. If it weren't for these, none of the return would have been possible. It is a well-known fact that the returnees undertook the return projects on their*

*own and by self-initiative, deciding to fight for their municipality by the best means ... Returnees are the strongest actors here and the associations were self-financed or voluntary as no one supported them.*

Mustafa, Regional Council for Return in Eastern Bosnia/Regionalni odbor za povratak u istočnu BiH (Goražde)

Moreover, it is evident that organization of public events and civil activities initiated and headed by returnees, are the key facilitators of reintegration on a micro level, in *mjesne zajednice*<sup>8</sup> (MZ), where real problems of sustainable return are tackled on a daily basis.

*"People in MZs are left to themselves, helping each other. No one is asking how many university students are living on the left coast<sup>9</sup> nor how many excellent pupils are finishing the school this year without financial means to continue the education. Those are the issues unaddressed by municipal assembly on higher levels of authority; no one there tackles the real life problems that we have".*

(Tarik, returnee from MZ Hambarine – Prijedor)

The movement forward through the property restitution and rebuilding in all three municipalities was achieved when the multiethnic coalitions were formed. Today, this trans-ethnic cooperation is still vivid and efficiently utilized on the level of MZs, where for example two neighboring ones (e.g. Bosniak and Serb) are jointly addressing communal issues, like the maintenance of local roads being neglected by the municipality authorities in Zvornik. The inter-ethnic cooperation was also crucial to reconstruction of social and cultural life of MZ Raškovac in Prijedor as explained by Selvira, a Bosniak returnee woman, community leader and representative at municipality council:

*"By my own wisdom and prudence I've managed to bring them to their senses, both Serbs and Bosniaks. I accomplished that by lobbying, knocking on every door. That's how I managed to wake up the Serbs and prove that I am a representative of all citizens equally".*

<sup>8</sup> *Mjesna zajednica* (Eng. Local Community), formally the lowest level of (self) governance in BiH.

<sup>9</sup> Jargon for geographical area of the MZ



Similarly, there are positive initiatives of the NGO sector, like the project of the Returnee Association in Kozarac on promoting the youth activism and reconciliation in cooperation with an NGO led by young Serb population in Prijedor:

*"We have gathered children from nine schools in one place. By riding a bike together, by exchanging their Facebook accounts, by realizing that they cheer for the same football club, children learn about their similarities"*

Mahir, NGO "Optimisti 2004" Kozarac (Prijedor)

Informants in Kozarac, pointed out the frustration with the corrupted municipality authorities and lack of control over funds earmarked for return. As a step forward in pursuing their community-oriented struggle for sustainable return, the civil society associations and representatives of MZs in Kozarac, recently applied for the status of the municipality:

*"We are all involved in the process of establishing the municipality: citizens, individuals, lobbyists, NGOs, religious communities, both Islamic and Catholic. It's a joint effort ... We have the working groups; tasks are assigned, and are almost completed. (...) We will submit the request to legislative organs in the next two weeks, and then we wait for the official response".*

Sead, middle-aged activist in Kozarac (Prijedor)

As evidenced from our findings, the sustainability programmes for the implementation of the Revised Strategy, like IPA I, should target the multifaceted needs of the socially diverse and highly resourceful returnee population. They should be of all-inclusive and country-wide character that responds to plethora of needs of both resourceful and vulnerable but above all draw from social competencies and resources for re-integration that returnees poses themselves in their local (returnee) communities.

**More Power to Returnees** is the policy option that we find most desirable as our findings point to the crucial role of resourceful returnees and/or returnee communities in addressing the shortage of social and economic services at local community level thus substituting the shortage of service delivery on behalf of formal authorities at municipality level.

Official and direct partnering with proactive returnee CSOs and MZs would enhance the implementation of IPA in all its segments. Efficient tool is to use the principle of relationships that these already possess in identifying the targeted IPA beneficiaries.

### Policy options

POLICY OPTIONS	RESULTS
<p><b>NO NEED TO ACT</b></p> <p><b>1. Keeping the status quo and holding the national and international stakeholders off</b></p>	<p>Continuation of spontaneous grass root processes through active civil society and resourceful returnees in the MZs.</p> <p>The policy option is not desired as it is random, lengthy, unreliable in terms of country-wide outcomes and inappropriate when it comes to municipalities with low rates of returnees i.e., lack of human resources.</p>
<p><b>NEW REVISION OF THE REVISED STRATEGY</b></p> <p><b>2. Implementation of the Revised Strategy by means of new sub annex added</b></p>	<p>Gap analysis focusing the existent good practices that requires the systematic evaluations based on regular field observations and in-depth assessments of sustainability progress country wide</p> <p>Amendment of the Revised Strategy is too demanding due to political constraints and undesirable in the context of the current socio-politic and economic position of returnees.</p>
<p><b>MORE POWER TO RETURNEES!</b></p> <p><b>3. Shift in ownership of sustainability projects by direct partnering with beneficiaries/returnees</b></p>	<p>Formal recognition of the resources that returnees withhold on the local community level by UNHCR and MHRR's initiative of direct partnership for the implementation of current IPA programme and future ones.</p> <p>Viable policy option involving the institutionalization, authorization and formalization of existent capacities and know-how of returnees at level of MZ and civil returnee society.</p>



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### Recommendations

#### For the UNHCR and MHRR, including UN and other partner organizations implementing the IPA program:

- Use social competencies of resourceful returnees and returnee CSOs in creating an effective and field-based system of beneficiary selection, monitoring and evaluation 10 targeted municipalities as to prevent further misuse of the funds.
- Consult the resources and 'lessons learned' by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in implementation of the IPA 2012 and upcoming IPA programmes especially concerning the social inclusion and delivery of social services pertaining to socio/economic rights and needs of the returnee population and local community.

#### For Local Governments/Municipalities:

- Legally and financially empower and support MZs as to further promote spontaneous grass root social and economic development.
- In line with European Charter of Local Self-Government and UNDP local development programmes, embrace the ambitions and efforts of strong local communities and further support and invest in work of CSOs in returnee communities.
- Outsource the delivery of social services to efficient CSOs in returnee communities.

#### For returnee associations and CSOs:

- Make regular exchange between returnee associations and other civil society organizations to facilitate access to international donors and sustainability programs.
- Systematically and regularly disseminate positive results and outcomes of civil engagement acting as role model to other CSOs in returnee environments.

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A "Policy Development Fellowship Program" has been launched by the Open Society Fund BiH in early 2004 with the aim to improve BiH policy research and dialogue and to contribute to the development of a sound policy-making culture based on informative and empirically grounded policy options. The program provides an opportunity for selected fellows to collaborate with the Open Society Fund in conducting policy research and writing a policy study with the support of mentors and trainers during the whole process. Over hundred fellowship have been granted since the starting of the Program. All policy studies are available at [www.osfbih.org.ba](http://www.osfbih.org.ba)