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Bosnian 'Returnee Voices' Communicating Experiences of Successful Reintegration. The Social Capital and Sustainable Return Nexus in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract. Large scale war-displacement during the 1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina greatly altered the demography of that country and caused severe damage to its social fabric. However, until now few studies have addressed the nexus of social capital and reintegration there in areas with high rates of return. This study is focused on relational practices relevant to the social environment and people in Prijedor, Zvornik, and Novo Goražde, three well-known returnee municipalities. This author's findings suggest that reintegration is critically linked to mobilisation of various forms of social capital during all phases of the return process, and point to overlooked grass-roots activism which goes on despite the unfavourable political and socio-economic situation in the country. Positive development takes place when there is little political interference at local community level in a strong civil society. It requires strong leaders and social initiative takers among formal and informal returnee associations as well as resourceful individual returnees, all of which working together shape and lead reintegration activities.

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Introduction.

Social Capital and the Reintegration of War-Displaced Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Refugees, internally displaced persons and those aiding them are faced with myriad problems upon return to their homes. Voluntary return is inevitably connected with the notion of sustainability, often defined in terms of access to basic human rights and dignified living standards that, in turn, minimise the risk of further displacement. For that reason, scholars recommend the use of a 'sustainable livelihoods' framework in which livelihoods are considered 'sustainable' if they can be maintained without external aid. Three further guaran-

tees of safety and dignity are considered essential: 1) the guarantee of physical safety, which is held to include the right to freedom of movement, protection from physical attack or harassment, and access to areas free of anti-personnel mines; 2) the guarantee of legal safety, to include non-discriminatory access and exercise of civil, economic, social, political, and cultural rights; 3) the guarantee of material safety, which includes access to food, clean drinking water, shelter, health services, and education.¹

In practice, however, sustainable return is difficult to achieve and return programmes tend to fall short of these theoretical ideals.² The cross-case analysis of return programmes implemented by national authorities with international support for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Afghanistan, Iraq, and Burundi, has shown that far too many have been left without a viable future. That has been the result of measures rendered inadequate mainly because of 'a widely shared but flawed assumption that the need to create a future for returnees is satisfied by restoring them to their prior lives; a lack of long-term engagement by implementing authorities; and a focus on rural reintegration when many refugees and IDPs are returning to urban areas'.³ The settlement of returnees in all four of the countries mentioned was conditioned by the possibility of recreating sustainable livelihoods, finding peaceful living conditions, and ensuring access to health care, education, and employment opportunities and the ability to enjoy full rights of citizenship.

There have been few empirical studies of generally positive indicators and mechanisms of reintegration upon return of refugees to post-conflict societies, although plenty of research has been done on what factors contribute to integration of refugees into the countries they go to to seek asylum. For instance, a comprehensive study on the indicators of the integration of refugees in the United Kingdom clearly shows that relationships within communities were perceived by refugees as being of the most significant relevance not only in securing livelihoods but for their overall integration.⁴ Furthermore, in the

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¹ Richard Black / Saskia Gent, Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts, *International Migration* 4, No. 3 (2006), 15-38; Walpurga Englbrecht, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo. Voluntary Return in Safety and Dignity?, *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 23, No. 23 (2004), 100-148.

² Jeff Crisp, Mind the Gap! UNHCR, Humanitarian Assistance and the Development Process, New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper No. 43 (May 2001), <http://www.unhcr.org/3b309dd07.pdf>; Foreword by the High Commissioner to the Global Appeal 2009 Update, <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4922d43c0.pdf>. All internet references were accessed on 26 January 2016.

³ Patricia Weiss Fagan, Refugees and IDPs after Conflict. Why They Do not Go Home, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 268 (April 2011), 1, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR268Fagen.pdf>.

⁴ Alanstair Ager / Alison Strang, Indicators of Integration. Final Report, Home Office Development and Practice Report 28 (2004), <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov>.

UNHCR's 2009 desk review comparing the returnee contexts of Afghanistan, Liberia, and Sudan, it was acknowledged that the social network in rural areas facilitates different forms of relief for returnees even if only temporarily. Difficulties of reintegration into urban areas, on the other hand, were related also to absence of social networks, which in the Afghan context particularly affected women returning alone or as heads of households.⁵

Social networks and community support mechanisms are deemed to be important factors for the process of return and reintegration, even more so in the context of intra-state conflicts which damage a nation's social capital, which is to say the norms, values, and social relations that bind communities.⁶ In turn, such developments affect the bridges between communal groups (civil society) and the state, as well as their ability to recover after the cessation of hostilities. It is therefore argued that 'even if other forms of capital are replenished, economic and social development will be hindered unless social capital stocks are restored'.⁷ Likewise, in its Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa the UNHCR declares that 'experience shows that if the issue of sustainability or reintegration for refugees and displaced populations is not addressed properly, the countries concerned will almost inevitably slide back into conflict'.⁸

As a result of the war-induced displacement of the 1990s in BiH, the demography of the country has been radically altered, severely affecting the overall social fabric at the individual, household, and societal level.⁹ Moreover, The General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) in the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) in 1995 divided the formerly multi-ethnic republic into two entities and one independent district separated along ethnic lines. GFAP also brought about a political and administrative division that directly impacted on war-

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uk/20110218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/dpr28.pdf; Ross Deuchar, 'People Look at Us, the Way We Dress, and They Think We're Gangsters': Bonds, Bridges, Gangs and Refugees. A Qualitative Study of Inter-Cultural Social Capital in Glasgow, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, No. 4 (2011), 672-689.

⁵ UNHCR, Desk Review on Urban Reintegration, OST/S/DOS, UNHCR, August 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/4b0d502c9.pdf>.

⁶ Nat J. Colleta / Michelle L. Cullen, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital. Lessons from Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala, and Somalia*, Washington D.C. 2004, The World Bank, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2000/05/437072/violent-conflict-transformation-social-capital-lessons-cambodia-rwanda-guatemala-somalia>.

⁷ Colleta / Cullen, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital*, 4.

⁸ Black / Gent, *Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts*, 24.

⁹ The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was especially devastating at the demographic level with over 100,000 dead, approximately 20,000 missing and 2.2 million (more than half the country's total population) expelled or forced to flee their homes. The official return figures indicate that over one million persons have returned since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. Cf. statistics available at Ministarstvo za ljudska prava i izbjeglice, <http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/>; UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <http://unhcr.ba/>.

displaceds' prospects for return by having them face an ethnic minority position upon return to their home places.¹⁰ Moreover, it also undermined interpersonal and communal trust and made a difference to the norms and values that underlie cooperation and collective action for the common good.¹¹

To date, in the long-lasting process of return, led by international and national actors the most challenging task, has been the reintegration of returnees as regulated by the state document Revised Strategy for the Implementation of Annex VII of DPA (the Revised Strategy).¹² When compared to BiH's prewar demographics, it becomes clear that overall, return efforts have produced rather mixed results.¹³ Research and field reports by different actors suggest that a significant percentage of registered returnees have not remained in their places of return i.e. their prewar homes, but rather have moved to areas where their ethnic group is the majority, where they find better life opportunities.¹⁴ Others

¹⁰ Howard Adelman / Elazar Barkan, *No Return, No Refuge. Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation*, New York 2011, 74-97.

¹¹ Cf. Peter Håkansson / Sarah Hargreaves, *Trust in Transition. Generalised Trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Balkans Analysis Group, Sarajevo 2004; Brad K. Blitz, *New Beginnings? Refugee Returns and Post Conflict Integration in the Former Yugoslavia*, in: Brad K. Blitz, ed, *War and Change in the Balkans. Nationalism, Conflict and Cooperation*, Cambridge 2006, 239-266.

¹² The process consisted of these three succeeding stages: i) creation of safe conditions, ii) return of property, and iii) reconstruction of property and reintegration. The Revised Strategy gives priority to the provision of sustainability of return in four segments of access to and practice of returnees' rights: health, education, labour and employment, and social and pension/disability insurance. Actors involved in this process are above all government authorities on the state level (BiH Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees as a coordinating body), ministries on refugees and displaced persons on entity and cantonal levels, and municipality authorities. Alongside the European Union and the OSCE overseeing the commitments made by governments of BiH, Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia in the 2005 Sarajevo Declaration and the 2011 Joint Declaration, the international community together with the UNHCR is advocating full implementation of the Revised Strategy. Cf. Declaration, Regional Ministerial Conference on Refugee Returns, Sarajevo, January 2005, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/d_hr_20050914_03/d_hr_20050914_03_en.pdf; On Ending Displacement and Ensuring Durable Solutions for Vulnerable Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, Joint Declaration 7 November 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/4ec22a979.pdf>.

¹³ Adelman / Barkan, *No Return, No Refuge. Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation*; Blitz, *War and Change in the Balkans*; Gearóid Ó. Tuathail / Carl Dahlman, *Post-Domicide Bosnia and Herzegovina. Homes, Homelands and One Million Returns*, *International Peacekeeping* 13, No. 2 (2006), 242-260; Fagan, *Refugees and IDPs after Conflict*; Marko Valenta / Zan Strabac, *The Dynamics of Bosnian Refugee Migrations in the 1990s. Current Migration Trends and Future Prospects*, *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32, No. 3 (2013), 1-22.

¹⁴ Cf. Annual Reports by NGOs and international organisations such as Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group and UNHCR; CESI, *Proceedings of the International Round Table*, <http://www.cesi.unsa.ba>; Balkan Witness. Peter Lippman - *Reports from Kosovo and Bosnia*, <http://balkanwitness.glypx.com/journal.htm>; Stef Jansen / Staffan Löfving, eds, *Struggles for Home Violence, Hope and the Movement of People*, New York, Oxford 2008; Black / Gent, *Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts*, 15-38; Blitz, *War and Change in*

have re-emigrated, permanently leaving the country. Moreover, a substantial number of returnees remain in delicate situations, lacking dignified living conditions and in need of multifaceted support if they are to achieve sustainable return.¹⁵ Minority returnees—that is, returnees who live in areas where their ethnic group are the minority—are of particular concern because many of them face structural discrimination in exercising their social and economic rights.¹⁶ On that point indeed, there is an extensive body of literature covering the return of Bosnian refugees and IDPs that points to macro- and micropolitical as well as socio-economic realities, posing structural obstacles for returnees to their home communities.¹⁷

Apart from the Revised Strategy with its recommendations for the improvement of returnee rights, there exist no country-wide policies nor government programmes for ensuring full access to and enjoyment of those rights. There is no tool to evaluate access to them (nor any sanctioning mechanism when they are denied) based on the bottom-up approach that naturally also involves returnees' own voices.¹⁸ Such an approach to sustainable return programmes and policies

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the Balkans; Anders H. Stefansson, Homes in the Making. Property Restitution, Refugee Return, and Senses of Belonging in a Post-War Bosnian Town, *International Migration* 44, No. 3 (2006), 115-139; Huma Haider, The Politicisation of Humanitarian Assistance. Refugee and IDP Policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 2010, <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/700>.

¹⁵ Cf. reports of UNHCR BiH at <http://unhcr.ba/>.

¹⁶ A recent example of discrimination related to access to primary school curricula for the Bosniak minority returnees in the village Konjević Polje, in Republic Srpska, when parents and children undertook 3-month-long protests in front of the Office of High Representative's building in Sarajevo. The matter is still unresolved; Rodolfo Toé, Bosnia, the Konjević Polje Protest, *Osservatorio balcani e caucaso*, 7 November 2013, <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Bosnia-the-Konjevic-Polje-protest-143741>.

¹⁷ Cf. José H. Fischel de Andrade / Nicole Barbara Delaney, Minority Return to South-Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. A Review of the 2000 Return Season, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, No. 3 (2001), 315-330; Charles Philpott, Though the Dog Is Dead, the Pig Must Be Killed. Finishing With Property Restitution to Bosnia-Herzegovina's IDPs and Refugees, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, No. 1 (2005), 1-24; Anders H. Stefansson, Homes in the Making. Property Restitution, Refugee Return, and Senses of Belonging in a Post-War Bosnian Town, *International Migration* 44, No. 3 (August 2006), 115-139, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2435.2006.00374.x; Laura Huttunen, Sedentary Policies and Transnational Relations. A 'Non-Sustainable' Case of Return to Bosnia, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, No. 1 (2010), 41-61; Erin K. Jenne, Barriers to Reintegration After Ethnic Civil Wars. Lessons from Minority Returns and Restitution in the Balkans, *Civil Wars* 12, No. 4 (2010), 370-394; Stef Jansen, Refuchess. Locating Bosniac Repatriates After the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Population, Space and Place* 17, No. 1 (2011), 140-152.

¹⁸ A UNDP study from 2007, conducted by Oxford Research International, accentuates that most of the policies and programmes regarding the reintegration of returnees do not take into account the bottom-up approach but rather are based on top-down concepts that do not correspond with real life problems faced by returnees. United Nations Development Programme & Oxford Research International (UNDP&ORI), *The Silent Majority Speaks*,

normally rests on evidence-based research that considers social capital stocks in returnee communities as being relevant to their reintegration.¹⁹ However, since the cessation of hostilities in BiH, only a few studies have addressed the state of social capital there.²⁰ The common insights from those studies are that the level of generalised trust in society is low.²¹ On the other hand, they also demonstrate that BiH is a society of strong, locally-based ties among family members, friends, and neighbours. Three out of four studies address to some extent the state of social capital within the returnee communities, but there is no data available on social networks in areas with high rates of return—apart from one local study based on a social action method in Janja, a Bosniak returnee community near Bijeljina. That study affirms the recovery of prewar social ties and trust within the neighbourhood as being crucial to the sustainable return of the three thousand war-displaced persons there.²²

In addition, research on early return in Eastern Bosnia shows that despite many different postwar impediments, relations among neighbours appear to be functioning well in many returnee enclaves, including in ethnically mixed communities.²³ Likewise, a number of ethnographic studies of displaced persons, individual returnees, or returnee communities in BiH, all indicate a similarly important role for social networks during the processes of re-establishment of livelihoods at various levels of society.²⁴

Sarajevo 2007, http://www.ba.undp.org/content/dam/bosnia_and_herzegovina/docs/Research&Publications/Democratic%20Governance/The%20Silent%20Majority%20Speaks/The%20Silent%20Majority%20Speaks%20FULL%20Report.pdf.

¹⁹ Refers to Robert Putnam's definitions of social capital in which he argues that social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Cf. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000, 18-25.

²⁰ Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Local Level Institutions and Social Capital Study*, 2002, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/08/08/000094946_03072904021947/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf; UNDP & ORI 2007; Berto Šalaj, *Socijalno povjerenje u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sarajevo 2009, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/06159.pdf>; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *National Human Development Report 2009. Ties that Bind, Social Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo 2009.

²¹ Håkansson / Hargreaves, *Trust in Transition*, 2004; UNDP 2009, 43; Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Local Level Institutions and Social Capital Study*, 2002.

²² Jagoda Petrović, *Integracija raseljenih lica u lokalnoj zajednici*, *Socijalna misao* 55 (2007), 39-59.

²³ Monika Kleck, *Refugee Return—Success Story or Bad Dream? A Review from Eastern Bosnia*, in: Martina Fischer, ed, *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ten Years after Dayton*, Münster 2006, 107-122.

²⁴ Cf. Sebina Sivac-Bryant, *An Ethnography of Contested Return. Re-Making Kozarac*, Unpublished Phd Dissertation, University College London 2011; Djordje Stefanovic / Neophytos Loizides, *The Way Home. Peaceful Return for Victims of Ethnic Cleansing*, *Human Rights Quarterly* 33, No. 3 (2010), 408-43.

In line with the earlier work mentioned above, this present study was based on the research assumption that sustainable return to post-Dayton BiH is not exclusively related to ensuring a foundation for reconstruction and reintegration based on returnees' rights, but rather depends on sociocultural home-making or -remaking practices relevant to people's relationships with each other and with their space. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to investigate the state and potential role of social capital in the reintegration of returnees at local level, which has been a missing link in the implementation of sustainability projects so far.

The following research question figured prominently: 'What types of social capital are present among the returnees, and how does the use of available social networks and social ties affect reintegration in their returnee communities?'

In order to test those propositions we used a range of social capital indicators, drawing on Putnam's and Woolcock's types of social connections.²⁵ Accordingly, *social bonding* refers to horizontal relations between persons who share similarities (ethnic, religious, family connections and neighbours), *social bridging* refers to ties between different social groups and *social linking* refers to vertical connections between individuals or groups (e.g. state authority–citizens). A detailed list of indicators used is available at Annex 1.

Micro Case Studies of Successful Reintegration Practices

This research rests on cross-case analysis of micro case studies of successful reintegration practices in three purposely selected municipalities, all well-known for high percentages of registered active return and deemed to be positive cases of returnee reintegration, as agreed by returnees, competent authorities, NGOs, and international actors involved in different initiatives among and between returnees and other community members.

Secondary Data Collection (Selection of Case Studies)

We collected the following data: First, a desk-based analysis was done of the current reintegration programmes and instruments employed on behalf of the key stakeholders in BiH for the implementation of the Revised Strategy. That analysis was then paralleled with research in other countries affected by war-displacement. The review helped discern how far previous programmes had addressed the importance of social capital for returnees' reintegration, and following on from it we initiated regular communication with actors involved in the implementation of the Revised Strategy at different levels (state, returnee

²⁵ Alastair Ager/ Alison Strang, Understanding Integration. A Conceptual Framework, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, No. 2 (2008), 166-191.

associations, UNHCR, NGOs), which better guided our selection of the relevant empirical case studies for this research. Empirical data were collected during intensive four-month fieldwork in Prijedor, Zvornik, and Novo Goražde. Prijedor and Zvornik are two municipalities in Republika Srpska. They have seen the highest rates of return in BiH, but are well-known too for the pro-active social engagement of their returnees. Novo Goražde²⁶ with *Mjesna zajednica* (MZ)²⁷ Kopači, and other local returnee communities between Novo Goražde and the town of Foča have a long history of receiving aid from the UNHCR and partnering organisations to build their capacities for sustainable return. They were therefore good examples, able to provide longitudinal insights into sustainability efforts during different phases of return from 1998 until today.

Primary Data Collection

In each selected returnee area the research team conducted one focus group discussion and a number of in-depth, semi-structured, follow-up interviews with returnees who have organised, formally or informally, social networks to benefit their reintegration interests. Besides those activities, we held a number of informal conversations with a range of actors, including municipal authorities, MZ representatives, school staff, UNHCR staff, and various representatives from returnee associations and local NGO organisations. The original data collected from the fieldwork was transcribed in Bosnian and then translated into English. Details of the informants are qualitatively presented in the empirical section of this paper, and more informatively at Annex 2.

Focus Groups

During the first part of data collection three mixed-focus groups were conducted in Prijedor (including Kozarac), Zvornik, and Novo Goražde. The groups included members and representatives of formal and informal returnee associations, local authorities and MZs, UNHCR and partnering NGOs, local school

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²⁶ Novo Goražde, also known as Ustiprača, is a municipality split from the pre-existing municipality of Goražde and given to Republika Srpska by the Dayton treaty.

²⁷ *Mjesna zajednica* – MZ (local community) represents the lowest rank in local self-governance in BiH. It is usually composed of several settlements, one single settlement or parts of it. It provides legal instruments for citizens to arrange/coordinate activities in their immediate surroundings through initiation and participation in a local debate forum, construction of infrastructure, cooperation with social services to provide support for socially vulnerable members of the community, promotion of the development of sport and culture in the community, and represents the interests of all citizens living there. According to legislation in the Federation of BiH, *mjesna zajednica* is a legal entity, while in the Republic of Srpska it has no such authority, so that a municipality/city is the lowest rank of local self-governance.

representatives, and members and representatives of various social, cultural, religious, and other local associations headed by or composed of returnees.

One dual-moderator focus group was conducted in each of the returnee communities, with one moderator ensuring that sessions progressed well, while another made sure that all topics were covered during each session. A pre-arranged set of questions was devised and used as an enquiry manual during each session.

In Prijedor the focus group discussion was held in the premises of the 'Srcem do Mira' Women's Association in MZ Kozarac. To recruit our informants, contact was initiated with representatives of associations and returnees who were familiar to the research team from earlier research projects and activities conducted in the area. Those individuals then passed on invitations to participate to those returnee associations operating in Prijedor municipality. In the case of Goražde, UNHCR representatives with experience in the area were contacted to obtain information about returnee associations and returnees, and the returnees then suggested other participants. That focus group was hosted in the premises of the local office of the NGO 'Vaša Prava', the UNCHR's non-governmental implementing partner. In Zvornik, we asked the municipal representative of returnees to recommend other informants, who in turn contacted their colleagues from the returnee associations and MZs and invited them along.

The duration of the sessions was between one and three hours, with the one held in MZ Kozarac taking longest because it involved the most participants. That discussion lasted three and a half hours. Audio recordings were made of all the sessions and transcribed into the local languages, and the quotations presented in the following text are English translations from those transcriptions made by the research team. Real names of the participants are omitted as we guaranteed anonymity to allow for more fruitful discussion and comments. If names are given they are pseudonyms.

Interviews

In order to obtain properly deep insights and achieve the objectives of this research the second phase of the field work, from January to March 2014, involved the follow-up, semi-structured interviews with individuals who demonstrated the best practice and emerged as the most positive examples during the focus group discussions. Interviews provided deeper understanding of social capital's role in local communities, often the multi-ethnic MZs. Accordingly, five additional comprehensive interviews were conducted with returnee activists and persons directly involved in the work of MZs and local NGOs promoting and implementing the variety of socio-economic, cultural and human rights projects to facilitate sustainable return.

In Kozarac and Prijedor we interviewed three women, Selvira, Maja, and Zekira, all active in driving forward civil society activities and reintegration in their own MZs. We also interviewed Sead, a prominent activist in Kozarac and considered by all locals to be a key individual in leading the return to Kozarac. In Zvornik we interviewed a private entrepreneur, the head of a successful agriculture cooperative employing both returnees and locals in MZ Križevci. In addition, at Novo Goražde, MZ Čajniče, we spent a day with Mr Edin, observing daily life with him on his farm. Mr Edin is a returnee and a successful local entrepreneur, who previously also was a representative of the Local Council for Refugees and Displaced Persons.

Novo Goražde

Novo Goražde municipality represents one of the first known municipalities with early return, especially in MZ Kopači, where the first returnee tents were erected next to war-destroyed property and occupied homes. Today, Kopači has a Bosniak returnee population of 2,215 persons, and our focus group discussion involved three representatives from formal regional and local returnee associations. One representative was from the municipality council for the rights of refugees and displaced persons in Čajniče, one was from UNHCR and had long experience of socio-legal work with returnees in Novo Goražde. All the participants referred to the story of one man and his family, the same Mr Edin. Everyone said that he was an outstanding example of sustainable return in the municipality, so during the follow-up phase of our field work there it was his farm we decided to visit, and we spent the entire day talking to him and his wife at home. Our focus was their personal story of successful return and the factors that had contributed to it, so this was a rare opportunity for us to make participatory field observations. Of course we were able to take photographs and record what was said *verbatim* (via semi-structured interview) to document thoroughly Mr and Mrs Edin's real experience as returnees. During our first encounter, in the course of the focus group discussion, Mr Edin had pointed out the following: 'We came back to bare ground; we did not have a nail to start with. [...] an important factor was people's desire and the will to come back to their homes.'

Different international humanitarian organisations like the Swedish SIDA, World Vision, and partner organisations of the UNHCR Refugee Agency channelled and distributed donations. Funds were made available for rebuilding destroyed property and to provide start-up grants to help returnees reconstitute their war-shattered lives and re-establish their livelihoods. However, such organisations were criticised by returnees in our discussion group for lacking strict selection criteria and follow-up evaluations in the field. They said that

neither coordination between different donors nor assessment of the real needs of returnees were in place, and returnees were left to their own devices to make the best use they could of the pool of donations.

According to earlier research, the lack of coordination and criteria for selection has often undermined the process of re-establishing prewar communities in Eastern Bosnia, since in many places it created inequality and envy and encouraged corruption and discrimination in the distribution of reconstruction aid.²⁸ In the process many humanitarian organisations relied on *village leaders*, who were self-appointed or politically nominated. Although sometimes effective, without proper follow up evaluation there was often misuse of the system.

Social Bonding

According to Mr Edin from MZ Čajniče, acting as a representative for the Local Council for Refugees and Displaced Persons, social skills were crucial to the reconstruction work because they were essential in determining with whom to cooperate. He explained: 'To implement any project we had to come together and then donors or the UNHCR carried out the selections.'

Within the obstructive economic and political return context that prevails in BiH, focus group participants underlined the importance of the role of the returnee associations in facilitating any action. This is how Mustafa (returnee and head of the Regional Commission for Return to Eastern BiH) justified it:

'It is a well-known fact that the returnees undertook the return projects on their own and on their own initiative, deciding to fight for their municipality by the best means possible in order to return to their pre-war homes. All of the associations in Eastern Bosnia are local and cooperate very well. If it weren't for them, none of the returns would have been possible.'

The returnee associations had already been formed in exile, via informal contacts among prewar neighbours which were later transformed into formal networks. Individuals who had had official positions in the MZs prewar took responsibility for the political organisation of the community in exile. Associations became the main organisers of the distribution of food and humanitarian aid, and as a result of their engagement while in exile and upon their return, they were able to communicate closely with the international community and with other organisations helping them return.²⁹

However, the lack of formal economic support for such organisations has had a clear impact on the effects of their work, their outreach, and overall achievements. Meho, one of the interviewees, affirmed that it is the resourcefulness of

²⁸ Kleck, *Refugee Return*, 115.

²⁹ Cf. Lisa D'Onofrio, *Welcome Home? Minority Return in South-Eastern Republika Srpska*, Brighton 2004.

the people, returnees themselves, and their commitment that shows the way forward:

‘Even today we don’t have the state doing anything to support these associations in any way. We sit down amongst ourselves, we decide on our priorities and we see how we can help each other by our own efforts and resources, with volunteer capacities. Then we have meetings with UNHCR, Catholic Relief Service, and other organisations.’

Social Bridging

The greatest progress in returning for this municipality was achieved when the multi-ethnic board of the returnee committee was formed and the return was stressed as a movement in two directions. First the occupiers of Bosniak houses, who were Serbs evicted from other parts of Bosnia, began reclaiming their own houses. They then vacated the Bosniak homes, enabling Bosniak returnees to reclaim *their* own homes in turn.

Social Linking

The Federation BiH and the Bosnia-Podrinje Canton are only a stone’s throw apart, but according to representatives of the focus group local politicians show scant interest in supporting return to Kopači and Novo Goražde. The main problem is the presence of divisive ethnic politics that prevents and obstructs return in different ways. Another problem frequently mentioned is the non-transparent financial support to returnees through the municipalities and authorities in charge of donations and distribution. Lack of formal authority for the returnee associations is problematic in this regard but also in many other regards as explained by Meho:

‘When the official returnee association has no formal power to work for return in the municipality, then how can we expect anything positive to occur in a climate where only politically approved persons are put in positions to lead the return projects and when the municipality politicians often install their own candidates? Their representatives do not even live in our municipality.’

Aid from the UNHCR accounts for its important role in leading, supporting, and promoting sustainable return, particularly in this municipality. However, it serves only to ‘fight fires’, while the main responsibility lies at the level of local authorities. According to the UNHCR local office, the local authorities worked in an unstructured *ad hoc* manner when the implementation of the funded projects took place:

‘The main problem was the absence of a strategy. The cluster approach should have been taken in every municipality from the start [...] but the UNHCR cannot do everything, we must mobilise the authorities to do more [...] the UNHCR only puts out the fire by helping the most vulnerable.’

Mr Edin, in his role as local entrepreneur, sums things up with the following statement:

‘We now need to hold on to and keep those who have returned in each MZ and municipality. We need to find means of forcing authorities to create a strategy on the ground, not in the offices up there, and let it take three years if that’s what’s needed.’

Zvornik

Zvornik is one of the largest returnee municipalities in Eastern Bosnia. Although no official statistics are available,³⁰ unofficial estimates show that today Zvornik municipality has approximately 22,000 returnees.³¹ During field work and data collection for this research, six informants were recruited for a focus group discussion: three representatives of MZs with the largest numbers of registered returnees (persons who also shared their personal stories as returnees); the representative of the Commission for Return, Development, and Integration; the adviser for sustainable return and restoration at the municipal office; and the president of the Returnee Association in Zvornik (NGO). Additionally, two informants were consulted by telephone as a follow-up interview in the second phase of field work.

Social Bonding

The lack of coordination or strategic planning of the return in this municipality meant that the returnees were forced to organise themselves. As one of the participants pointed out: ‘People returned to empty fields [...] we were hungry, lacking even bread, and at the same time, there were some [international] organisations donating construction material for ruined houses.’

Reliant on each other, the returnees initiated many joint activities in order to get hold of the funds available for the reconstruction of their own houses as well as the local schools and cultural institutions. A high level of social cohesion is

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³⁰ The final results of the latest census conducted in October 2013 are currently in the phase of data processing.

³¹ Around 50,000 persons and more have fled Zvornik due to ethnic cleansing and massive expulsions. Cf. Carl Dahlman / Gearóid Ó. Tuathail, Broken Bosnia. The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Two Bosnian Places, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, No. 3 (2005), 644-662.

present in this returnee municipality and was of key importance to achieving the sustainable return seen there:

'When there was a delivery of construction material, no one cared if it's for Huso's or Dževad's house, everyone just put their gloves on, men, women, children; and we all carried the bricks together. That was the spirit!'

Their efforts have in fact significantly improved the overall infrastructure of the municipality even when compared to prewar conditions.³² The bonding and support among the inhabitants of this municipality was described as the result of self-organised compensation in the context of unemployment and low service delivery. Cooperation between returnees was particularly poignant in cases of official discrimination against and mistreatment of returnee children in schools and elsewhere. In MZ Sultanovići, returnees' joint efforts in pledging the funding for sustainable return resulted in the construction of an outdoor leisure facility where all the locals regularly come together to socialise.

Social Bridging

Although social bonding is clearly more noticeable than social bridging in this returnee municipality, there are a number of examples of positive practices in Zvornik. That is particularly true when it comes to cooperation and exchange with people of different ethnic backgrounds and experience.³³ All participants in our discussions explicitly insisted that there are no tensions between them and the Bosnian Serbs who are the locally dominant ethnic group. That is significant, especially bearing in mind the numerous physical attacks and demolition of their property that returnees faced in the early phases of their return.³⁴

Cooperation is most clearly apparent at the level of MZs, where in one instance, neighbouring places, each with either a Bosniak or Serb majority, are nevertheless managing to address communal issues jointly, for example dealing with the maintenance of local roads neglected by the municipality. A representative of another MZ has confirmed that he had distributed funds for construction of the local road for a non-returnee, Serb MZ, for the sake of future cooperation. There are similarly positive initiatives in the NGO sector, where the Returnee Association of Zvornik is promoting youth activism in cooperation with an NGO led by the local young Serb population.

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³² It is estimated by the participants that infrastructure (roads, water system, sewerage, street lights, even health centres) has improved by 85% compared to the prewar conditions.

³³ Experience in this context refers to non-refugee/displacement and returnee experience.

³⁴ Cf. Dahlman / Tuathail, Broken Bosnia.

Social Linking

All participants have expressed their disappointment in all levels of political authority, stating that ‘politicians have their fingers in all the spheres of life’. As a result, election turnout is poor and there is little faith in the possibility of change by means of formal political engagement, with consequent lack of commitment to it. Some positive examples were mentioned of investment by cantonal, federal, and state ministries, but such remarks were usually accompanied by criticism of the low transparency. For instance, people disliked the lack of fair and transparent selection criteria, and other irregularities in the distribution of public funds. Some informants stated that current legal regulation of the return process is comprehensive in theory, but they emphasised that sanctions were lacking in cases when implementation fails in practice.

Prijedor

Prijedor municipality in general and MZ Kozarac in particular are by far the best-known returnee sites in BiH. Kozarac is often referred to as an exceptional example of return in BiH, both by researchers and the wider community. This was immediately reflected in a large turnout of informants willing to participate in our focus group discussions. The group was conducted in Kozarac and assembled seventeen informants each with a prominent role in the return process in the Prijedor municipality. Participants in the focus group came from a variety of backgrounds and represented a wide spectrum of social, cultural, economic, political, educational, human-rights, and gender-focused organisations in the municipality. They included: members of NGOs active in Prijedor municipality, representatives of MZs, and representatives of the local Kozarac Elementary School. Additionally, to acquire a better understanding of the positive development of sustainable return we conducted four more follow-up interviews in the municipality with individual returnees of different demographic backgrounds.

Social Bonding

The main impression gained from the focus group was that the returnee community in Prijedor is indeed an example of a rebuilt community—or perhaps a newly built one—resting on strong interpersonal ties that have secured the sound foundations necessary for the re-establishment of postwar life in this municipality. The means for it have been the initiation and then the development of a huge variety of social activities. The former was emphasised by all informants, and illustrated by one in particular: ‘People are organised to a great

extent, which is to say we are self-organised [...] we are relying on each other and that is the only way to make progress here.'

The first associations had already been organised during the displacement period, when local people were still refugees in neighbouring countries, mainly Croatia; or were internally displaced persons, mainly in Sanski Most.³⁵ Upon return to Prijedor returnee associations took over the role of community constructors. Primarily they were engaged in the revival of educational and religious institutions in the community, and afterwards focused on tackling specific returnee problems through their civil associations. Many informants had been at some point simultaneously leading and participating in multiple associations, and a spirit of volunteerism is strongly present in the community. As one informant stated: 'I am volunteering in all associations. I have no salary, on the contrary, I've only given donations.'

In 1998 during the early stages of return, the association 'Srcem do Mira' had a critical influence in amassing and encouraging returnees by initiating social gatherings and debates. The debates encouraged people not only to face their own concerns, but also to find common solutions.³⁶ One of its greatest accomplishments was the reopening of elementary schools in this returnee community, in which civil society associations in cooperation with the other members of the MZ played the crucial role. Here is a good example illustrating the synergy in the community:

'The parents and pupils were organised into sections. The council of parents and council of pupils were organised to lead the action of reopening schools in Kozarac. Associations were behind them, keeping an eye on them, protecting their rights, informing them about legislation and their scope for action accordingly. Associations functioned as a bridge to important persons from the international community, to OHR, OSCE, etc.'

Other associations assisted in the process of re-establishing the local economy by creating employment opportunities or by building capacity and education. One member of a women's association said: 'We had a project to educate women in sewing, hairdressing, cooking, and similar activities. We even registered the enterprise, with six women employed full-time.'

An important incentive for return and subsequent development of the MZ in Kozarac was the establishment of networks and various kinds of contacts with war-displaced relatives and neighbours who had settled abroad. By creating an internet platform and news portals the returnees managed to re-establish

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³⁵ Cf. Dahlman / Tuathail, *Broken Bosnia*.

³⁶ Cf. Sivic-Briyant, *An Ethnography of Contested Return*.

contact with relatives and friends across the world, thereby re-making links with the community destroyed by the war.³⁷

With respect to social bonding, all informants consider that the Local Islamic Community Centre had a very important if not vital role in the process of return. Because of the lack of institutional support provided by the state, the Local Islamic Community Centre came to be seen as the glue that could hold the returnee community together. Indeed, we were told that the first returnees to the Prijedor municipality, who paved the way for the others, were the imams, and they conducted burial services and other religious ceremonies for the displaced persons.

Social Bridging

There are a number of positive examples of social bridging between Bosniak returnees and the Bosnian Serbs of Prijedor. The most prominent is a project implemented through the joint activities of a youth returnee association in Kozarac and two Serb NGOs in Prijedor. However, the first contact was made by the women's association 'Srcem do Mira' in 1998, when they organised a conference to which they invited Serb NGOs, with the intention of opening discussion about return. In addition, and again through 'Srcem do Mira', youth camps have been organised for each of the last four years. The camps have seen gatherings of young people from the whole country, and the aim has been to promote reconciliation and highlight the importance of remembrance. There are sporting competitions, eco-friendly events, and educational workshops on traffic safety for young people of different ethnic backgrounds. All very important and constructive activities, as one informant recognised:

'Children from Omarska, Trnopolje, were all in one place socialising with each other. By riding bikes together, by exchanging their Facebook accounts, by realising that they cheer for the same football club, the children learn about their similarities.'

One informant also indicated that there is wide cooperation among associations based on similar activities and regardless of different ethnic backgrounds: 'When one football coach is talking to another, they are not a Serb and a Bosniak, they are two football coaches!'

One of the most vibrant examples of social bridging is related to the multi-ethnic MZ Raškovac. The first Bosniaks were returning as early as 1999 to this urban area of Prijedor, well-known for its football club, and vivid cultural life of social clubs and societies before the war. It was a woman called Selvira,

³⁷ According to Sivac-Briyant, *An Ethnography of Contested Return*, 85, launching of the web page and online forum *kozarac.ba* enabled reunion for 'all those who are scattered around the world in their need to transcend physical distance and play an active role in the reconstruction of their community'.

a Bosniak returnee to Raškovac, who managed to achieve the reconstruction of the social life of the community. She pointed out that at times, establishing cooperation in the MZ had been extremely challenging, while cooperation with authorities had been if anything even more difficult. Yet she had managed to secure funds for the reconstruction of local roads, street lighting, cultural facilities, and playgrounds. Selvira explained:

‘I’ve managed to bring them to their senses, both Serbs and Bosniaks. The Mayor needed 300 votes, and he got 380 votes. I did 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.’

Furthermore, at Selvira’s request, the mayor supported the organisation of a communal funeral for war victims, one of the most important religious gatherings for the returnees in Prijedor. She declares: ‘That’s politics, you’ve got to give to get!’ The association that she later established for the women in her MZ was an important facilitator of economic reintegration for returnees and the wider women’s community in Prijedor. Local entrepreneurs offered employment to the seamstresses she trained.

Social Linking

Although the majority of them were receiving some funding from authorities at different levels, all the associations represented in the Prijedor focus group emphasised that they lacked proper funding, legal and legislative support, general advice, and a systemic approach to the problems of sustainable return that they tackle every day. However, despite that all of them successfully implement a wide range of activities without any firm support from the government, which led to the following comment:

‘Politics affects our lives constantly; the time has come for *us* to influence politics! If you’re not a member of some political party, there is no assistance for anything [...]. No one focuses on MZ and development needs.’

A number of informants were indeed politically engaged, but they saw no possibility of achieving prosperity in the existing political context since electoral turnout by Bosniaks is generally low. One of our informants pointed out that the city of Prijedor receives funds in the name of return, but the actual returnees obtain minimal benefit from those funds: ‘We are not included in those processes, and don’t have political mechanisms to control them.’

To maintain the positive effects of their struggle for sustainable return, returnee NGOs and representatives of local communities in Kozarac have recently taken a step forward in claiming authority by launching an initiative for the recognition of MZ Kozarac as a municipality. Sead, another informant, explained:

'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 they're almost completed.'

When asked their expectations of the outcomes of this legal goal, he replied: 'We expect to go all the way to the court in Strasbourg.'

Conclusions

This research shows how over the long term sustainable return to BiH is inextricably bound up with the possibilities of full reintegration into a home society. It is inevitable that it will be greatly affected by the state of social capital, and how that capital is used and developed at the local municipality (community) level by the returnees themselves.

The returnee associations and NGOs stood out in the statements of all the focus groups as the key generators of return, expediting the implementation of DPA's Annex VII. Evidently, the most prevalent means of social bonding among returnees from the same backgrounds had already occurred while they were still in exile or IDPs and that was further developed during the early return phases from 1997-2000. After that, action was needed for reconstruction of property and to rebuild war-shattered livelihoods but also the social life in the communities and its overall social fabric.

In all three municipalities, joint activities and social cohesion were crucial to returnees in their quests to reclaim and rebuild their destroyed property, and simultaneously they provided a forum for exchange of information about donations available to do so. It is evident that organisation of public events and civil activities initiated, led, and composed by returnees or pro-returnee associations, were the key promoters and facilitators of return in all its segments. First, there had been sharing of primary pre-return information and even simply taking the initiative to return. Then, places had to be secured to return to, and the rights of returnees had to be promoted and fought for. Finally, there is the general necessity to push for reintegration projects at the micro level in local communities, which are where the real problems of sustainable return are recognised and tackled daily.

Within the unfavourable economic and political return context it is often underlined that returnee associations have the most important role in facilitating postwar normalisation. However, deprived of formal and systematic financial support, organisations have been able to play only a limited formal role in reintegration programmes and in sustaining them. Clearly, what we have today in these returnee communities, referred to as positive practices (be it economic or social), would not have been in place had it not been for the greatest possible efforts of the returnees themselves and of voluntary work through the

associations. Individuals too have been crucial in making common cause for the reconstruction of life in local communities.

In each municipality there has been positive social bridging. Transethnic ties have focused on generational exchange through youth initiatives, promoting improvements in people's lives and helping sustain development in the municipality. Socialisation and cooperation have been most visible and effective at micro levels in local communities, where neighbouring groups address maintenance and development matters working together. Generally, everyday life brings returnees and non-returnees and all different social groups together. In all three communities there seems to be a great deal of interest in socialising, and people seem to want to contribute to social life and sociocultural development in their communities. However, official politics, still based on divisive ethnic rhetoric, promotes few such beneficial activities, and even obstructs them.

The findings of this research clearly suggest that sustainable return requires field-based strategic planning and comprehensive evaluations. The positive examples we found in all three returnee areas are obviously dependent on resourceful individual returnees and the ability of returnee communities to exploit their own capacity to address the shortage or even complete absence of social service delivery at municipality level. Such returnee groups have done this through their engagement in civil society. The most vivid examples of social bridging and bonding have been developed through ties in local communities precisely when they have had to address such shortages.

It is clear that returnee associations and returnee activism need to become formally and methodically supported, empowered by the international actors in this field and incorporated into current and future sustainability programmes. Recognition of returnees' informal capacities and skills, hitherto withheld by those international actors at local community level, is therefore the next step in a process the government and its partnering international organisations are strongly advised to support. An efficient tool to identify targeted beneficiaries is available in the social competencies and the principle of relationships that the returnee associations and NGOs already embody.

It is a high time that systematic and methodological support programmes were installed for the highly diverse returnee population across BiH. Programmes should draw on the multitude of social resources belonging to displaced persons and returnees, for those resources evidently play a crucial role in the reintegration process.

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