

Refugee Return – Success Story or Bad Dream?

A Review from Eastern Bosnia

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1. Introduction

Around 2.2 million people were forcibly displaced during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). When the war ended in December 1995, 1.2 million Bosnian refugees were living abroad, including 350,000 in Germany alone. Between 1997 and 1999, the German authorities pursued a rigorous policy of repatriation, regardless of whether the refugees were able to return to their home areas. For many, return was out of the question, especially for refugees who had been expelled from areas which now form part of Republika Srpska (RS). In 1996 and 1997, just 1,125 persons returned to the RS; the total figure for 1998 was 8,586 (UNHCR 2004d).

It was not until the summer of 1999 that the first groups of displaced persons were granted access to their villages in the RS. However, people were still very unwilling to return to areas where their ethnic group now constituted a minority. In Eastern Bosnia, for example, displaced persons began to establish tentative contacts with towns such as Srebrenica or Zvornik in 1999. Nonetheless, Bosnian families in particular have been immensely reluctant to settle in localities in which they form a minority community within the majority Serb population.

A large-scale return process did not commence until 2001, six years after the Dayton Peace Agreement. Yet even now, there is still a striking imbalance between the RS and the Federation in terms of minority returns. So far, three-quarters of the total have returned to the Federation, with only a quarter returning to Republika Srpska. Yet despite this state of affairs, the United Nations describes the return process as a success. In a press release issued on 21 September 2004, the UN refugee agency UNHCR announced that in all, 1,000,473 people had

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returned to their home areas; of these, 440,147 were refugees who had fled to other countries and 560,326 were displaced within Bosnia-Herzegovina itself (UNHCR 2004c).

In absolute figures, this means that nine years after Dayton, less than half the total number of forcibly displaced persons have returned to their pre-war home areas. However, compared with statistics from other countries where armed conflicts and expulsions have occurred, this can be considered a relatively high percentage of returnees. As a rule, it is assumed that around 70% of persons displaced by war will not return.

But statistical comparisons are inadequate to determine whether the return process in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be viewed as a success. To draw any meaningful conclusions, it is essential to explore other factors: the circumstances motivating people to return, the mechanisms steering the return process, and the living conditions on the ground. This article examines these issues in detail and highlights the difficulties and problems facing returnees. Particular reference is made to the north-east region of Bosnia and the return of refugees and displaced persons from Tuzla (Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina) to the towns of Zvornik, Bratunac and Srebrenica (RS), the scenes of especially severe war-related destruction and gross human rights violations.


2. Motives and Mechanisms of Refugee Return

“All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them.” (Dayton Peace Agreement, Annex 7, Article I, 1; OHR 1995)

“The Parties shall ensure that refugees and displaced persons are permitted to return in safety, without risk of harassment, intimidation, persecution, or discrimination, particularly on account of their ethnic origin, religious belief, or political opinion.” (Dayton Peace Agreement, Annex 7, Article I, 2; OHR 1995)

“The Parties shall not interfere with the returnees’ choice of destination, nor shall they compel them to remain in or move to situations of serious danger or insecurity, or to areas lacking in the basic infrastructure necessary to resume a normal life. ...” (Dayton Peace Agreement, Annex 7, Article I, 4; OHR 1995)

The Dayton Peace Agreement describes the theoretical option of return and the international community’s obligation to ensure that returnees do not move



to situations of insecurity. Similarly, the human rights organisation Amnesty International states that return should be guided by the criteria of “safety” (legal safety, physical security, material security) and “dignity” (that refugees are treated with respect and full acceptance; that they can return unconditionally, and that they are not arbitrarily separated from family members) (Amnesty International 2000).

The *option* of return guaranteed in the Dayton Peace Agreement very quickly turned into an *obligation*, however. Return was certainly not voluntary in every case, nor did it always comply with the principle of safety, to say nothing of the dignity, of the persons concerned. This is evident from the experiences of displaced persons from Eastern Bosnia (now RS) who had been living in Tuzla (now the Federation) since the war.

The return process was organised in various phases, with the pressure on displaced persons to return to the places from which they had been expelled being steadily intensified. For many, this meant either returning to their pre-war homes or ultimately running the risk of having to vacate their present (temporary) accommodation and becoming homeless.

Phase 1:

From 1997, refugees and displaced persons registered with the Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees (CRPC), which was responsible for the processing of property claims. In many cases, applications for the return of property were motivated by fear: applicants were concerned that unless they filed an application for the return of their property, they would forfeit their right to reconstruction aid. As a result, many of them filed claims simply to secure their entitlement to this financial assistance, or to declare their right to their land and (destroyed) dwellings. The number of property claims lodged therefore reveals little about the applicants’ willingness to return; it reveals rather more about property rights. At this point in time, the housing situation for many displaced persons in Tuzla was extremely precarious. During the war, they had been accommodated in vacant houses and apartments, but now the lawful owners of these properties had the right to repossess them. However, lodging an application for the return of their property protected displaced persons, at least initially, from being evicted from their temporary accommodation. Many displaced persons who had no access to their pre-war homes or who had lost their houses through war-related destruction opted in favour of this route.

Phase 2:

From 1998, forcible evictions were carried out in Tuzla, intensifying many displaced families’ fear that they might be next. For many, the imminent threat of

becoming homeless and being uprooted from their familiar environment, and the renewed fear of expulsion, this time by their “own people”, were ever-present. At the same time, it became apparent that the processing of property claims and restitution of property were proceeding at very different rates in the two entities. In the Federation, the authorities and courts were pressing ahead with the process, whereas in the RS, they were obviously taking their time. By the end of February 2000, 4,882 evictions had been carried out in the Federation, compared with just 424 in the RS. By the end of 2000, 23.2% of property claims had been processed and implemented in Tuzla, whereas the total figure for Zvornik was just 3.15%, and in Srebrenica, it was even lower, i.e. 2.18% (UNHCR 2004a). As a consequence of this imbalance in the progress of property restitution and evictions in the different areas, numerous housing emergencies and injustices occurred.

Phase 3:

Would-be returnees were unable to visit their former villages in Eastern Bosnia until 1999. By now, many displaced persons – convinced that they would never be able to return to their pre-war homes – had built new lives for themselves in Tuzla. Suddenly, return seemed to be an option after all. Some people were euphoric at first, but their delight soon gave way to disillusionment. In many cases, people had to shift the rubble of their ruined houses with their bare hands. The foundations had to be exposed for them to be entitled to reconstruction aid. Travel to their pre-war homes also proved very costly. There was no option but to leave school-age children behind in Tuzla to fend for themselves. In the Eastern Bosnian villages, there was no adequate infrastructure, and no schools or medical service. Not everyone was genuinely interested in moving back. Nonetheless, fearing eviction and homelessness in Tuzla, most displaced persons joined the return process. Having arrived in the Eastern Bosnian villages, they were then confronted with the paradoxes inherent in a reconstruction process that was being managed by external aid organisations.

Phase 4:

Aid organisations came into the villages and selected a few houses to be reconstructed. Most of these organisations supplied the families with building materials so they could rebuild their homes themselves. In some cases, however, the organisations took over the entire task of rebuilding homes, handing the finished house back to the family at the end of the process. This aroused feelings of envy and ill-will among people who were rebuilding their homes themselves under difficult conditions. Anyone rejecting the offer of building materials forfeited their right to their accommodation in Tuzla. As a result, the building

materials were accepted and the building work began. As tradesmen (electricians, roofers, plumbers, etc.) had to be paid for their work, many families ended up in debt. Elderly persons living alone faced particular hardships; because families took priority, many older persons without relatives received no building materials at all. There was usually nobody to lobby on their behalf and they were generally unable to defend their own interests.

Phase 5:

As soon as a house had a roof and a door, it was considered to be habitable, even if it had no bathroom or kitchen, the walls had not yet been plastered and there was no electricity. At this point, families came under pressure to vacate their current accommodation in Tuzla as quickly as possible. They often had no option but to move into the semi-finished houses in the villages.

The hardships and intolerable conditions faced by returnees to Eastern Bosnia are revealed in my survey of 70 women returnees in 2004.¹ 30% said that on returning to their pre-war homes, they had no running water; 20% reported that there were no schools for their children, and in only 10% of cases was any schooling available up to the eighth grade. 40% said that their village was still mined. 72% of respondents were confronted with mass graves in the immediate vicinity and 64% faced memories of camps which had been set up in their villages during the war. Many of them also felt physically unsafe: 66% of respondents said they had been physically threatened during the return process.

In view of these conditions, some families decided not to return, preferring to seek other options in Tuzla. Some managed to arrange house exchanges, purchase building plots or rent accommodation. In most cases, this entailed taking on loans. However, loans and debt were preferable to the uncertainties facing them in their home areas. It is not surprising, then, that in 2004, 40% of the women whom I surveyed were still describing themselves as “displaced persons in Tuzla”, and 30% stated that they were “displaced persons and returnees” (in other words, they had rebuilt their houses but still lived in Tuzla). Only 10% described themselves as “returnees” and lived in their home villages in Eastern Bosnia.

Although these figures relate to Eastern Bosnia and cannot necessarily be projected to Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole, it is safe to assume that the housing units which have been rebuilt for one million people across the country are not being fully utilised by the owners themselves. The number of people who have

¹ The figures refer to a survey undertaken as part of the preparatory work for a doctorate in psychology; working title: “Social influences on the mental health of war-traumatised displaced women in Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

genuinely returned and are using this housing themselves is probably far lower. It would therefore be inaccurate to refer to “sustainable return”.


One reason for this situation is that return has often not been voluntary, and in many areas, living conditions have proved to be unsafe and undignified. This applies especially to the rural regions. Many returnees who had made a life for themselves, albeit temporarily, in the towns and cities during and after the war now found themselves in inhospitable surroundings with no proper infrastructure, where they felt abandoned with the painful memories of the brutality and abuse they had endured. Anyone with other options tried to escape from this situation, either by migrating back to the cities or moving abroad if they had relatives there.

Sustainable return was also impeded by a lack of systematic organisation and the poor coordination of the reconstruction process. This was beset by major flaws and bad planning on the part of both the Bosnian authorities and the international organisations operating in the country.

3. The Organisation of the Reconstruction Process and Property Reinstatement

In order to facilitate sustainable return, the reconstruction process should have been coordinated and managed appropriately. In practice, however, reconstruction was completely haphazard. Eastern Bosnia is a prime example: instead of starting with the existing infrastructure and rebuilding each village unit in succession, the international aid organisations initially visited the villages quite unsystematically and identified a specific number of housing units to be reconstructed. The aid organisations rarely had enough resources to provide support for all the would-be returnees. But when the next organisation arrived and saw that someone was already working in the village, it did not decide to invest in the same village and support those who had so far gone away empty-handed; instead, it looked for another village to work in.

As a result, reconstruction took place in many villages simultaneously, but viable village communities rarely developed. Ruined houses stood next to houses that had been rebuilt, with a few new dwellings further along. Infrastructural development was also subject to major delays. The reinstatement of the electricity grid and road-building were organised fairly swiftly, but many villages had to wait a long time for a water supply. Even today, almost ten years after the war ended, families in some areas of Eastern Bosnia still have to fetch water from wells 4 kilometres away or wash their clothes in drains.



School-building also took a long time and was completely haphazard. At the start of the return process, village communities were often too small and did not have enough children for school-building to be a priority. This meant that return was not an option for families with school-age children, or children stopped attending school. By summer 2004, there was just one returnees' village in the Zvornik region with a school which children could attend to the eighth grade, i.e. where they could complete their primary education.

A further problem was caused by the injustices and lack of transparency which marked the reconstruction phase: many of the foreign organisations relied on recommendations from "village leaders" to decide who should receive help rebuilding their houses. These "leaders" were either self-appointed or were nominated by the political parties, although in some cases they were local representatives from the pre-war period. As a rule, they were not elected by the community and therefore lacked any democratic legitimacy. The village leaders compiled lists of names but rarely revealed their selection criteria. The lists were often not based on need or families' genuine wish to return but on who could pay for a list place. As a result, the reconstruction aid was not prioritised towards those in greatest need but towards those who could afford the largest bribe. One outcome is that in many villages, new houses have been built which belong to people living and working abroad, who have no plans to return. In effect, international funds have been used to subsidise the construction of holiday homes. This is not to deny the right of refugees living abroad to rebuild their houses, but in terms of supporting a sustainable return process, it would have been more sensible to give priority to building homes for displaced persons living in emergency accommodation or people who were genuinely keen to return, in order to strengthen the village community.


Some aid organisations drafted specific criteria for the allocation of list places. These criteria stipulated, for example, that several persons must live in a housing unit. This discriminated against older single persons who had lost their families during the war. In many Eastern Bosnian villages, large numbers of elderly persons have been forced to live in temporary wooden shacks for years at a time. A further problem is that the criteria governing the allocation and level of support have varied from organisation to organisation.

Women also suffered discrimination in the reconstruction process. They were not involved in the planning and organisation process, nor were they asked to identify their needs, and they had major problems obtaining materials. This is apparent from numerous discussions and interviews with women in Eastern Bosnia between 2002 and 2005. Reconstruction is a male domain – it is mainly men who make the decisions in the aid organisations, or as village leaders or

loan providers, and who participate in the reconstruction process. This situation was highlighted and criticised by the United Nations: “Men are usually better placed to be involved in, and benefit from, reconstruction initiatives, often because of their greater participation in public life before conflict. Men also tend to have greater control over economic resources and more education than women” (United Nations 2000:111). This was borne out in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well. Here, the same mistakes were repeated that had occurred when organising reconstruction and return in other countries. For example, too little priority was given to ensuring that during the reconstruction process, women became co-owners of the homes being built. One recommendation for action by the UN Secretary-General in his Report on Women, Peace and Security is to “ensure that, in efforts to secure local ownership for reconstruction processes, women’s groups and networks are actively involved, particularly at decision-making levels” (United Nations 2000:127). Unfortunately, the reality is very different.

The lack of coordination between the various organisations working in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which all offered different services, further exacerbated inequalities in living conditions. For example, some offered a “turnkey” service, taking responsibility for the complete reconstruction of the property and handing the owners the keys to the finished house. Other organisations provided building materials and fittings for the kitchen and bathroom. Others only supplied building materials. Some organisations also offered income-generation measures at a later stage, or helped to restore local infrastructure, whereas others opted not to do so. This led to structural inequality which exacerbated feelings of mistrust and rivalry. In a country which has just come out of a war, where trust has fallen to an all-time low, also as a result of traumatisation, this can heighten the potential for conflict.

The lack of coordination of return and reconstruction measures also led to poorly targeted provision and delivery of aid. The following type of scenario could also be observed: “The returnees to North-East Bosnia experienced the first snow in 296 tent settlements, as well as in hundreds of ruins, containers, and sheds. About 10,000 people were believed to be lacking food, clothes, medication and firewood. In many locations, donated building material went to ruins since the majority of returnees were neither in good health (mostly elderly persons) nor professionally or materially in the position to use it. All this showed that neither the authorities nor international organisation in charge systematically followed up the issue of return and returnees” (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 2002).



To sum up, the reconstruction process was uncoordinated, chaotic and unjust. It was supposed to help re-establish the pre-war communities. Instead, in many places, it created inequalities, envy and ill-will. It encouraged corruption and discrimination in the distribution of reconstruction aid. Where small functioning returnee communities did emerge in some rural areas after 2-3 years, they were often blighted by internal discord.

Injustices which caused ill-will also resulted from the way in which property was reinstated to its rightful owners and housing in the urban centres was privatised. In the destroyed villages of post-war Bosnia, the return process mainly focuses on rebuilding houses and infrastructure. In the cities, however, the key issue is the restitution of houses and apartments to their former owners. Where housing units are privately financed, the issue of ownership is generally clear. However, apartments from the public housing stock were funded by all workers (i.e. almost 100% of the working population) via deductions from their pay packets before the war, and were therefore socially owned. After the war, these housing units were assigned to the persons living in them in 1991 (i.e. before the outbreak of war). These persons were entitled to reclaim these housing units and purchase them from the state at very low cost. Most people seized this opportunity. The apartments were generally purchased at low prices, but many of them were sold on – at a far higher price – on the free market by the new owners, who had no further interest in living in them. This meant that on account of the laws established by the international community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, public property was privatised on a profit-making basis. The people who had lived in the property in the interim and who had also invested in housing before the war via rent deductions from their wages went away empty-handed.

Furthermore, key issues relating to property restitution and material compensation for destruction caused in the war are still unresolved. Under the Dayton Agreement, all injured parties are entitled to be compensated for any property that was destroyed. Yet the issue of how this is to occur is still taboo; in other words, it is not discussed publicly. Instead, the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in the case brought by Bosnia-Herzegovina against Yugoslavia is awaited. If the ICJ decides that Yugoslavia attacked BiH militarily, demands for reparations from Yugoslavia's successor state can be made.

4. The Living Conditions of Returnees

4.1. Psychosocial Effects: (Re-)Traumatisation

For many people returning to rural regions devastated by the war, the difficult conditions of daily life and lack of economic prospects which they encounter there have serious impacts on psychological health. These stresses are further exacerbated by painful memories and threats to their personal safety.

In an interview, a woman returnee described how she has to pass the grave of her son, who died in the war, every day near a main road. Each time, she comes close to breaking down. But an even more stressful issue is how she and her family can earn a living in the locality they have returned to. Her husband and adult son are unemployed. The family manages to survive by doing a little farming, but there is no money to buy school books for the younger son or toiletries. The stress is taking its toll on her health and is manifesting as various physical problems, but she cannot seek medical treatment as the family has no money. It would help enormously, the woman says, if they no longer had to fetch water from 4 km away. If they had jobs and water, they would regard the return to their pre-war home as a success, despite the psychological stress.

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Many families have returned to localities where they experienced human rights abuses. They are now confronted with the memory of camps where they were detained or newly discovered mass graves. This has led to retraumatisation in many cases. 80% of the women returnees whom I surveyed in Eastern Bosnia in 2004 showed all the clinical symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They all stated that their sleep was disrupted, they felt more nervous, and would like to return to Tuzla. There are no psychosocial programmes to treat or alleviate these symptoms. (The problem of traumatisation caused by war, expulsion and return is examined in more detail in the article *“Working with Traumatised Women”* in this book).

They are also plagued by the fear that they might meet their former abusers who are still at large.

4.2. Lack of Security and Confrontation with War Criminals

The issue of safety has the highest priority for returnees and is still unresolved. Mines still pose a threat in some parts of the country which have not yet been cleared of matériel. A further danger is presented by newly laid mines which specifically target returnees. This type of attack on returnees has repeatedly occurred in returnee enclaves in Eastern Bosnia, and returnees have also been the victims of physical assault. The International Crisis Group summed

up the situation at the end of 2002: “It shows, for instance, that a Bosnian returnee to Bijeljina or Prijedor is ten times more likely to become a victim of violent crime (defined as bombing, rape, stoning, assault or murder) than a local Serb. Moreover, out of six returnee deaths in the eastern RS since 2000, police investigations have yet to result in a single prosecution” (International Crisis Group 2002). The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) was also forced to acknowledge in 2004 that: “The number of security incidents affecting returnees continued to increase in 2003” (UNHCR 2004b:2).

Returnees certainly do not regard the police as guarantors of their safety and security. On the contrary, for many of them, the police are an additional source of insecurity. Admittedly, the situation has now improved following the integration of Bosnian officers into the RS’s police force. Nonetheless, there are still instances of returnees recognising war criminals or the organisers of ethnically motivated expulsions in the local police.

In an interview, a woman returnee told me: “Some of the building materials that had been donated to us were stolen. We reported this to the police. We were visited at home by a police officer who had been in the force before the war. He was the one who expelled me from our home. I recognised him straight away.” The woman does not intend to report the police officer as she fears for her family’s safety if she does so.

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The police officer mentioned in this report is not the only war criminal still at large. Many women talk about chance encounters with former war criminals. By 2004, the RS had still not handed over a single indicted war criminal to the International Tribunal in The Hague. The most notorious – former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his military commander General Ratko Mladic – are just the tip of the iceberg. In some smaller localities, the war criminals have transformed their structures into mafia-type organisations, with corruption extending into government circles. Returnees, especially in ethnically mixed areas, face immense psychological stress as a result of this situation. Many fear for their safety or even for their lives.

4.3. Harassment by the Authorities, Ethnic Discrimination and a Lack of Economic Prospects

Despite the adverse conditions described above, relations among neighbours appear to be functioning relatively well in many returnee enclaves (even in ethnically mixed communities). A far greater problem than neighbourhood conflicts – besides the fear of encountering war criminals – is the arbitrary

treatment and harassment meted out to returnees by the authorities. For example, if a returnee wants to register as a resident in the RS, he is required to pay taxes on his property even if it is destroyed. If he wants to take out health insurance at his new place of residence, he has to show proof of employment or obtain a certificate from the employment office. However, the employment office will require him to produce his registration of address, and to obtain this, he must first pay the taxes on his house. This completes the vicious circle. In addition, returnees often experience routine harassment and discrimination, especially as a result of language policy and the use of religious symbols.

After several schools were reopened in some reconstructed communities in the Zvornik region, the administration decided that all schools should take the name of the central school in Zvornik, i.e. "Sveti Sava" (St. Sava). Even schools in returnee enclaves whose pupils were all Bosniaks were thus renamed after an Orthodox saint, a situation which families belonging to the Muslim community find humiliating. Other examples of structures which entrench ethnic discrimination and which offend Bosniak returnees in the RS is the presence of Serb flags and stamps showing Serb national symbols on official documents (especially the symbol consisting of four intertwined Cs – the Serbian letter "s" – which was misused for hostile nationalist purposes during the war). In addition, only Orthodox religious holidays are officially celebrated, whereas Muslim festivals are not recognised. This issue needs to be addressed.

The development of closer links between Serbs and Bosniaks is still beset by prejudices and fears on both sides, so that it is more accurate to describe the situation as co-existence rather than community relations. There is still a long way to go before people can talk about the past. Instead, the issue is cloaked in silence, creating an oppressive atmosphere without trust or confidence. There is no prospect of a reconciliation process at present. Indeed, in a country which is becoming increasingly ethnicised and where reconciliation can therefore only be discussed in separate ethnic groups, it is likely to be wishful thinking for a very long time to come.

If the aim is to achieve a sustainable process of return, conditions must be created which enable returnee families to earn a living on a viable long-term basis. Before the war, many men from Eastern Bosnia worked in firms outside the villages, either in nearby Zvornik or in Belgrade. These jobs no longer exist, and with unemployment now topping 50%, there is no prospect of new jobs being created. There is clear ethnic discrimination in the allocation of jobs in the region. According to studies by the World Bank, returning to a pre-war home – especially to rural regions in the RS – poses a significant poverty risk. People who return to the RS are more likely to slide into poverty compared with those

returning to the Federation, where the risk is lower (World Bank 2003:38).

Some of the problems with coordination and harassment by the authorities have now been resolved, but they have nonetheless impeded the return process.

5. Summary and Outlook


The above examples make it clear that the way in which reconstruction and return have been organised in Bosnia-Herzegovina is diametrically opposed, in many key respects, to the criteria defined in the Dayton Agreement and the standards set by the United Nations and international human rights organisations.

In many cases, return has not been voluntary and no guarantees of security have been provided. Many people who were displaced during the Bosnian war have been forced, implicitly or explicitly, into returning. The prospects of a sustainable return have also been undermined by the lack of systematic organisation and failures on the part of the Bosnian authorities and the international relief organisations. The return process started too late (five years after the war), and the reconstruction process – undertaken with substantial amounts of international assistance – has entrenched numerous forms of discrimination. The criteria governing the allocation of reconstruction aid lacked transparency and, in many cases, were unjust. Poor infrastructure in the returnee communities has further worsened conditions for many people. Many of those who had suffered during the war experienced further indignities during the return process. The supposed success story – based on the figure of a million returnees – loses its lustre when the truly appalling living conditions, lack of safety and security, and limited prospects for people returning to rural regions are included in the equation. For many, the dream of returning has literally turned into a nightmare.

Various *lessons for the future* can be learned from these experiences. The key issue is how to shape policies which safeguard sustainable refugee return in post-war regions. The following factors are significant in this context:

- 1) A key prerequisite is the systematic organisation and coordination of the reconstruction process. It is essential to reconstruct complete units of local communities; in other words, a village should genuinely be rebuilt in its entirety with all its housing units and infrastructure. Psychosocial services, income-generation initiatives and security sector reform measures must be developed in parallel. The stakeholders themselves must take a pro-active role and be involved on an ongoing basis in the planning and reconstruction process. Priority must be given to women's participation.

- 2) Women must be involved in the organisational structures from the outset, and to this end, participatory planning techniques must be applied. Women must be given support in formulating their priorities, and their specific security interests must be taken into account. This means that the reconstruction of the local infrastructure must also be geared towards these needs (e.g. by providing easily accessible wells/water taps, meeting places and employment opportunities close to homes).
- 3) Physical safety and security at local level must be guaranteed and returnees must be protected more effectively from assault. This means that the authorities must investigate assaults promptly and rigorously and the perpetrators must be brought to justice. This process may be facilitated through the establishment of a multiethnic police force and courts which take swift action to prosecute these crimes. The vigorous prosecution of war criminals – e.g. by international organisations operating in BiH, if the authorities at local level fail to cooperate – is important in meeting the security needs of returnees and safeguarding the sustainability of return. Human rights monitoring, scrutiny of the practices of the authorities, and the provision of legal advice may be effective in this context.
- 4) Psychological and physical healing processes must be supported and initiated by qualified personnel. The returnees must receive no-cost access to psychological services and should be provided with expert support to prepare them to confront the past. They also need psychological support on returning to their pre-war homes. Overall, more consideration must be given to the needs of traumatised displaced persons in order to avoid or ameliorate retraumatisation. However, protection from retraumatisation is only guaranteed if retraumatising situations are avoided and the material conditions of life are shaped appropriately.
- 5) Would-be returnees must be guaranteed safe accommodation of an acceptable standard until their own homes have been rebuilt. This is the only way to ensure that they do not spend years living in fear of eviction and homelessness.
- 6) In the reconstruction process, high priority must be given to school-building besides the construction of housing. It is essential to set up education programmes which are tailored to the needs of returnees. Training measures and income-generation opportunities must be provided for returnee communities.

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- 7) Targeted community work and peace training units to foster individual conflict management skills should also be an integral part of programmes supporting reconstruction and return.
 - 8) Returnee communities must have democratic structures. Monitoring by external international organisations may be helpful in this context. They should check that village leaders have democratic legitimacy and are subject to proper and effective control. Local autonomy should be guaranteed and people should be encouraged to assert their interests vis-à-vis the local administration and central government. Here too, it is important to ensure the appropriate participation of women.

External relief organisations must give these aspects the same high priority, in their planning processes, as they currently give to rebuilding housing units and compiling statistics on returnee numbers. This is the only way to ensure that their interventions contribute to a successful return process in war-torn regions.

In addition, a key task for international organisations is to work to ensure that the ethnicisation of politics is halted and reversed. Nationalist politicians must be removed from office by the international organisations, and nationalist statements and procedures should be penalised. Close scrutiny of the media is especially important in this context. Discrimination by the authorities or in schools and universities must be reported and investigated more thoroughly.

Creating the conditions for reconciliation and supporting it over the long term are further challenges in organising the return process. In this context, joint initiatives involving the different communities should be supported, forums for encounter and exchange should be created, and workshops and long-term encounter projects should be funded. The media should also be encouraged to explore ways of coming to terms with the war and its aftermath (on this issue, *see the approach being pursued by the Centre for Nonviolent Action, described by Martina Fischer in another article of this book*). Reconciliation must be based on justice. That is why it is also important to consider the payment of material compensation to survivors of the war. The issue of compensation payments – explicitly mentioned in the Dayton Agreement – should be addressed and resolved at last.

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