Preparing the homecoming of West Balkan minorities

Minorities return to Zvornik, Milici and Vlasenica

Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced some of the heaviest fighting during the 1990s Balkan war, which led to enormous destruction and displacement of peoples throughout the region. Almost a decade after the war, many refugees, especially from minority groups, have still not returned to their homes.

The aim of this 21-month project was to help rebuild homes, and strengthen the political and economic foundations of several municipalities to pave the way for 191 families to return.

Between September 2001 and June 2003, the European Union – through its CARDS 2001 programme, supported by Italy's Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli – provided €2.2 million to the communities of Zvornik, Milici and Vlasenica. With this money, they financed housing reconstruction, legal work (property rights) and the reintegration of 865 refugees (660 from minority groups) back into society.

The project had three main objectives:
1. Reconstruction and reinstallation of utilities, such as electricity and water;
2. Capacity building for local institutions and activities, with a focus on smoothing tensions between ethnic groups during the return process;
3. Economic development, supporting job-creation schemes and grants to families to start up small businesses and holdings.

Not all smooth sailing

Everyone involved worked hard to ease tensions and promote actions favouring the entire community. However, resistance to change was experienced in some areas, making return more difficult.

Older people tend to be the first to go back. This may be because basic community facilities, such as schools and sewerage, are not always available, and there are still shortages of jobs – making the return of families with children difficult.

In the Zvornik area, the situation is much less politically sensitive because the process of return started earlier. The project helped 36 families, expelled in 1992, to return to the villages of Krizevici and Grbavci. Living conditions, especially in Krizevici, have improved dramatically in the past three years. What was a devastated and violent town in 1999, is today – thanks to the EU and other donors – a thriving community, with about 1,000 inhabitants, a school, health centre, community building and two mosques.

Economically, this municipality is on the move. The project supported farming ventures, which are thriving, as well as small enterprises, such as a PVC door and window-frame maker, which should also provide work for returnees.

Tensions diffused

Municipal authorities were co-operative and supportive. Some discrimination still exists, but there is general acceptance that the process of return is inevitable.

Nova Kasaba, in the Milići municipality, is a classic example. After the war, it was mainly populated by displaced Serb families, who did not want to move. Bosnian Muslims – who legally owned the houses and wanted to return – could not. The project helped 15 families return to Kasaba, but also helped 15 Serb families move back to their pre-war villages.

Sustainable solutions

The project was limited to areas where returning people made more sense logistically, economically and politically. Returning has political implications as it often disrupts the balance of a village or a community.

Establishing relationships with the local communities in this line of work is important, especially in areas where the social texture, founded on artificial ideology, is in disarray. Yet it is important to work together with those communities that have internal conflicts and no consensus on priorities.