

Integration as a durable solution for refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia

- Analytical Report -

Serbian Refugee Council

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List of Acronyms

B-H – Bosnia and Herzegovina

EAR – European Agency for Reconstruction

IFRCRC - International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent

IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons

CC – Collective centre

CRRS –Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia

NSHC – Novi Sad Humanitarian Center

OCHA – Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PIKAP – Pilot In-kind Assistance Project

RAE – Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians

SCG – Serbia and Montenegro

SDF – Serbian Democratic Forum

SPC – Serbian Orthodox Church

FRY – Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

PRS – Poverty Reduction Strategy

UN HABITAT – UN Human Settlements Programme

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WFP – World Food Programme

Executive Summary

This document aims to present problems related to integration of refugees and IDPs in Serbia – from examining the meaning of the very term ‘integration’, through circumstances and problems surrounding integration and preconditions and prospects for a successful integration in the present or near future.

The 1991-2001 wars in former Yugoslavia caused hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs to seek refuge in Serbia. The major “refugee waves” hit Serbia at the onset of the wars in Croatia and B-H, in 1995 following the “Storm” operation in Croatia and in 1999 after the entry of NATO forces in Kosovo. There is a discrepancy in data between various sources with regard to the number of refugees and IDPs, their ethnicity and basic characteristics of circumstances they found themselves in. Thus one of the major tragedies in Europe since WWII became the subject of a political trade-off between different players.

According to refugee and IDP censuses, Serbia in 1996 had 537,937 refugees and IDP officially registered as such, and 79,791 war-affected persons; 2000/2001 census registered 377,731 refugees, 74,249 war-affected persons and 187,129 displaced persons from Kosovo. According to the 2005 census, the status of refugee was officially enjoyed by 106,931 with 208,391 persons registered as IDPs.

The number of refugees decreased over the years, either as a consequence of taking Serbian citizenship or repatriation to B-H and Croatia or, to a lesser extent, moving to third countries. On the other hand, threats to the security of minorities in Kosovo, especially following the wave of violence against non-Albanians in March 2004, caused the number of IDPs in Serbia to increase.

Hence, although the majority of refugees ‘disappeared’ from official statistics by becoming Serbian citizens, their psycho-social, economic and other problems remained unchanged. Precise statistics on poverty among refugees and IDPs is not available but the existing data indicates that the poverty rate among this population is higher than in general population in Serbia. Despite the streamlined procedure for acquiring citizenship, a significant number of refugees still hold the intention to retain refugee status – which largely indicates their dilemma as to whether taking citizenship is better than keeping refugee status. The dilemma is in part caused by the fact that all housing and economic self-sufficiency programs in Serbia require applicants to hold citizenship or at least to have applied for it; recognized refugee status, on the other hand, provides some sort of security and distinguishes them from other citizens by indicating their vulnerability.

The only domestic piece of legislation regulating the refugee status is the Law on Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, enacted as *lex specialis* in April 1992 and still in effect. This Law treats refugees as “persons in social need”, who enjoy all the rights as Serbian citizens, except those related to personal status; the refugees who have not applied for or acquired citizenship of SCG or Serbia, cannot access various forms of social assistance, because they do not meet the Serbian citizenship requirement. The government of Serbia adopted in 2002 the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons that envisages activities aimed both at return and integration; Implementation of this Strategy in many segments has not started yet owing to financial constraints. The Poverty Reduction Strategy of 2003 is complementary with the former document and focuses on promotion of human rights, securing accommodation, strengthening human capital and targeting social assistance to the neediest groups.

Most refugees have since the very beginning of exile opted for integration as a durable solution, partly as a result of years spent in host society during which they have gradually established ties with local

community, which tend to grow stronger as prospects for a sustainable return to their place of origin get less certain. Nonetheless, it is difficult to establish a clear line between integration and return as durable or sustainable solutions, in particular because integration is a lifelong process that begins at the moment of arrival and does not exclude other types of decisions. Research shows that refugees indicated political stability in the country, safety for families, access to health care, employment prospects and public pledge by politicians to support integration as the most important factors influencing the decision to integrate.

The only durable solution offered to IDPs from Kosovo is return, although, under the present circumstances, it tends to be very complicated and often impossible owing to safety concerns. Such position is based upon the fact that integration of these people in Serbia proper is a sensitive political issue connected with resolving the final status of Kosovo. This aside, the time spent in displacement brings about problems very similar to those facing refugees in the process of integration – the need for shelter, the need for income and the need to be accepted by local population.

Difficult access to identification documents is another problem confronting refugees and displaced persons; some of them cannot obtain identification documents because they have been destroyed or because of the high cost involved in documents issuance.

Finding lasting accommodation poses a big problem for refugees and displaced persons bringing on other difficulties as well. Most refugees and IDPs reside in private accommodation, either in rented housing or with relatives or friends. Less than 10 per cent of them live in collective centres, which are being gradually closed down under the programs for securing lasting accommodation implemented by government institutions and international agencies and donors. According to the Commissariat for Refugees, around 10,000 people have been provided with permanent housing under these programs.

Experience has shown that the most efficient and successful activities for systematic provision of accommodation for refugees proved to be those relying on cooperation between several actors – republic institutions, funding agencies, local authorities and NGOs. Such consensus is often hard to reach due to economic, technical, logistic and sometimes political reasons, but efforts should certainly be made to reach it wherever possible.

In the context of an impoverished society, economic integration of refugees and IDPs is faced with numerous difficulties, while implementation of planned national strategies is hardly possible without strengthening the economy. International organizations implement programs for encouraging individual economic initiatives in Serbia, but the assistance provided that way is usually not sufficient for starting up a sustainable business. The psycho-social impact of many of these programs is far more visible in activating the potentials of refugees and boosting their self-confidence. While the government officially encourages development of small and medium-size enterprises, in practice, however, refugees find it difficult or impossible to embark on that path, partly because of the restrictive fiscal policy and partly due to a lack of information. More than one-fourth of the refugees live below poverty line and the position of internally displaced persons is today even worse than at the time they were first displaced. The displaced Roma constitute a particularly vulnerable group. They do not even possess identification documents that are required for accessing rights they are entitled to. In addition, difficulties in accessing pension rights also tend to be insurmountable for many of the categories of displaced pension beneficiaries.

Refugees and Internally displaced persons are entitled to the same level of health care services as other citizens; however, in the impoverished Serbian health care system, the most indigent citizens cannot afford medical services beyond the basic level of health care. Where integration into the education system is concerned, the most vulnerable are the internally displaced persons and young people, in particular Roma. Lack of financial means is often the key reason preventing young refugees from continuing their schooling.

Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians are one of the most vulnerable categories. Several strategies have been designed at the state level that are expected to offer solutions for this group of people who often lack basic identification documents and are exposed to rebuff by local population and economic marginalization. In addition to RAE, especially vulnerable groups include women, the elderly, children and single parents. Typical problems faced by refugees include unresolved housing problem, unemployment, poverty, non-possession of personal documents and lack of access to the acquired rights.

Various refugee and IDP support programs sought or are still seeking to solve or alleviate many of these problems. Given the extent of the problems, activities and programs aimed at supporting integration should operate in several directions and foster synergy between different capacities of the community and opportunities available to refugees and internally displaced persons.

This requires a multifarious social process in the community that seeks to develop democratic practices: in this context, it is important to release creative potentials of both the local community and those who are being integrated into it. Therefore all options should be kept open and all the citizens should be invited to take active part in a joint effort aimed at achieving durable and sustainable solutions that will benefit everyone.

1. Introduction

Drawing on their long-standing joint engagement in addressing the social crisis caused by population displacement, Serbian Refugee Council member organizations have drafted this Analytical Report that aims to provide insight into our joint experience as well as offer recommendations with respect to integration of refugees in Serbia. Given the existence of an active network of government and non-government institutions, formal and informal groups and individuals dealing with this issue, the insight presented in this report is specific in terms of acknowledging experiential framework and drawing on lessons learned through practical engagement in dealing with the social crisis.

We therefore believe that it will be helpful and useful and that the information presented can provide a blueprint for some future plans and activities and for mobilizing as many stakeholders as possible in our shared mission to enhance and develop our community.

2. Background, basic information, main problems and context

2.1. Background

Yugoslav¹ wars – armed conflicts that had plagued Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo between 1991 and 2001, left a legacy of millions of refugees and internally displaced people.

The war in Slovenia began in June 1991 in the aftermath of Slovenia's declaration of independence and lasted 10 days to be ended with the Brioni Peace Agreement in July of the same year.

Declaration of independence of Croatia also in June 1991 gave rise to armed conflicts that escalated in summer and fall of 1991 in east and west Slavonia, Banovina, Kordun, Lika and north Dalmatia. Ceasefire was signed in January 1992. In August 1995, the Croatian Army launched the "Storm" operation leading to a mass exodus of Serbs from the sector of south Krajina to Serbia.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in April 1992 after this former Yugoslav Republic proclaimed its independence. Armed conflicts continued until the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord in December 1995.

Armed conflicts in Kosovo, after having a rather long history, culminated in March 1998. A year later NATO conducted the 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia and Montenegro (named 'Operation Merciful Angel') which ended with deployment of international and NATO forces in Kosovo. At the

¹ The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was an extremely complex federal state comprising six or eight federal units (six republics and two autonomous provinces), six constituent nations and several dozens of national minorities, of which Albanian alone counts nearly two million people (...) Except Slovenia, national homogeneity of the republics was relatively low; Croatia had a strong Serbian minority (12 percent) who enjoyed the status of the constituent nation; Macedonia had a considerable Albanian minority as well as Montenegro, in which the majority Christian orthodox population declared either as Serbs or as Montenegrins (...). Serbia had a large minority population, especially in Vojvodina (Hungarians) and Kosovo where Albanians made up over 85 percent of the population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the population comprised three ethnicities: Bosniacs (since the 1960s when they were recognized as a separate nation; until 1993 they were called Muslims) who constituted 44 percent, Serbs (31 percent) and Croats (17 percent). All three ethnicities were co-constituent and lived so inextricably intermingled that the map of geographic distribution of ethnic groups in this republic was metaphorically dubbed "leopard skin". - Ozren Žunec, Rat u Hrvatskoj 1991.-1995 (War in Croatia 1991-1995).

same time, a large number of non-Albanians, mostly Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, Gorani and members of other ethnic groups fled to Serbia.

As a consequence of armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and in the context of regional instability in South Eastern Europe, several hundreds of thousand of refugees arrived in Serbia in three major “waves”: in 1991/92 at the onset of wars in Croatia and B-H (200,000); in 1995 following the “Storm” operation (400,000, according to UNHCR 1996 census); and in 1999 after the entry of NATO forces in the territory of Kosovo (200,000).

2.2. Refugees and Internally displaced persons in Serbia

With regard to number of refugees and displaced, their ethnic affiliation, and basic characteristics of circumstances they found themselves in, there is a discrepancy in data between various official sources (Serbian Commissariat for refugees, UNHCR, SPC, refugee associations, regional and international actors). Thus one of the worst tragedies in Europe since WWII became a subject of a political trade-off between different players.

The first refugee census was organized in 1996 by the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia (CRRS) in conjunction with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The census registered a total of 537,937 refugees in Serbia and 28,338 in Montenegro, including those with refugee or expellee status as well and those without status at the time. Namely, all these persons are under international law entitled to the status of refugee; however, republic regulations of SCG divide them in three categories as follows: refugees (43 percent), expellees (35 percent) and persons without status (22 percent). All persons who arrived in Serbia before August 1995 were granted the status of refugee. Those who came to Serbia from Croatia during the largest exodus in the course of “Storm” operation in August 1995 were accorded the status of expellees, whereas the persons who arrived after August 1995 have not been registered and are counted as persons without status².

Registered were also 79,791 war-affected persons: the reasons compelling these persons to come to Serbia were the same as those of refugees but they could not be granted refugee status for they already held Serbian citizenship.

To sum up: in 1996 the total number of registered refugees and war-affected persons in Serbia was 617,728, of whom over 90 percent were Serbs.

In March 2000, a registration of population displaced from Kosovo was conducted counting 187,129 IDPs (according to CRRS and UNHCR figures). The actual number of IDPs is higher than that since a number of displaced Roma failed to register due to non-possession of identification documents. Displacement from Kosovo, however, continued in the following five years increasing the number of IDPs in Serbia (excluding Kosovo) by 20,000 by 2005. Their number today is 208,391 according to CRRS. The majority – 94 percent, settled in central Serbia and Belgrade, and the remaining 6 percent in Vojvodina.

April 2001 saw second registration of refugees, expellees and war-affected persons carried out jointly by CRRS and UNHCR. Five years after the first registration, there were 377,731 refugees/ expellees and 74,249 war-affected persons. Majority of registered refugees originated from Croatia (63 percent). Per place of residence, the majority (49 percent) settled in Vojvodina, 30 percent in Belgrade metropolitan area and the remaining 21 percent in central Serbia.

² Registration of Refugees and Other War-Affected Persons in FR Yugoslavia, UNHCR, CRRS and KICG, Belgrade, 1996.

The third and the last registration of refugees and IDPs conducted by CRRS and UNHCR between November 2004 and January 2005, counted 141,680 refugees. After refugee status review, those refugees who had already held or in the meantime acquired SCG citizenship and collected their ID cards at police departments, and those who applied for return to Croatia lost refugee status. Refugee status was also withdrawn from persons who did not turn up for the 2001 registration. After completion of review process and appeals procedure, refugee status was recognized to a total 106,931 persons.

The Table below displays the official refugee figures in Serbia:

Registered refugees and IDPs	1996 registration	2000 and 2001 registrations	2005 registration
Refugees and expellees	537,937	377,731	106,931
Other war-affected persons	79,791	74,249	0
Internally displaced persons from Kosovo	0	187,129	208,391
TOTAL	617,728	639,109	315,322

It is obvious that the number of refugees decreased year over year, which is explained by their taking of Serbian citizenship, return to their countries of origin – B-H and Croatia and, to a lesser degree, moving to third countries. Around 110,000 refugees acquired citizenship of SCG and collected their ID cards. According to data of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, approximately 120,000 refugees have returned to that country, while UNHCR set this number at 80,000. Serbian Democratic Forum estimates this number to be even lower – in the realm of 70,000, whereas CRRS data indicates as few as 58,500 returns. According to UNHCR data for of October 2004, 64,000 persons returned to B-H. It should be noted that CRRS registered the number of persons returning to their countries of origin based on the number of applications for termination of refugee status due to return³. Available data indicate that around 30,000 refugees have moved to third countries since 1993.

The refugees who lost refugee status at the latest registration without applying for Serbian citizenship to date, as well as those who lost their status prior to registration, may apply for Serbian citizenship as foreign nationals.

Although the majority of the refugees ‘disappeared’ from refugee statistics by becoming citizens of Serbia, their psycho-social, economic and other problems remain unchanged. Accurate data on poverty rate amongst refugees and internally displaced persons is not available but the existing data not surprisingly indicate that the poverty rate amongst this segment of population is higher than that in general Serbian population. According to the WFP/CES MECON Poverty Study from 2001 (based on data for 2000), 25 percent of refugees lived at or below the minimum subsistence level, while the poverty level among the general population was estimated at 12 percent. This means that the number of poor among refugees and IDPs is twice as high as in general population.

According to the Vulnerability Assessment of IDPs in SCG conducted by the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent (IFRCRC) in 2004, 88.6 percent of the IDPs lived below the poverty line, with 8.6 percent below the MSSL (amount of money necessary for basic subsistence)⁴.

³ Source: Refugee commissioner in Novi Sad Slobodan Vukašević

⁴ National Conference on Resolving the Problems of Refugees, Belgrade, October 2004.

3. Institutional and legal framework

The basic status, position and rights of refugees are governed by the United Nations Conventions, namely the 1951 Geneva Convention Related to the Status of Refugees and the New York Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees of 1967. According to the 1951 Convention, a refugee is a person who '...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'

The only Serbian piece of legislation governing the status of refugees is the Law on Refugees of the Republic of Serbia of April 4, 1992, which is still in effect and which considers '...refugees (...)Serbs and citizens of other nationalities, who were forced, on account of the pressure from the Croatian authorities, or the authorities of other republics, a threat of genocide, as well as persecution and discrimination on the grounds of their religion, ethnicity or political affiliation, to leave their places of residence in those republics and take refuge in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.'

The Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia was established pursuant to this Law, with the mandate to provide care and support to refugees and internally displaced persons.

The term 'expellee' was introduced by the Decree on the manner of care provision to expellees with a view of 'emphasizing the difference between Krajina Serbs and other refugees with regard to the manner and circumstances under which they sought refuge in FRY'⁵.

The rights of refugees to social protection and health care are set out in documents issued by the Ministry of Human Rights of SCG⁶ (which established the Office for Refugee Right within its Human Rights Department): '... When economic and social situation of refugees and displaced persons is considered, all these persons are treated as socially needy persons. For that reason, they, as well as the families providing them with accommodation and institutions of collective accommodation are offered assistance in food, clothing, footwear, medicines, toiletries, fuel and other. Also, all refugees and displaced persons are provided, under same conditions as for domestic/local population, with full health care, enrolment of pupils and students in schools and faculties, attendance of children in preschool institutions, as well as with benefits in public transportation and in payment of electrical energy costs, public utilities and other. This category of population has the same rights as all other citizens of Serbia and Montenegro to work and acquire property, and all other rights, except for the rights and obligations related to the personal status of citizenship (for those persons who have neither applied for nor been granted citizenship), such as active and passive voting right, military service and the like.' It should be added that refugees, despite being considered as 'socially needy', cannot access various forms of social welfare benefits provided by social welfare institutions in Serbia (e.g. Family Financial Support- MOP) and cannot get a job with government institutions because the eligibility criterion for both is SCG citizenship.

Such legal framework allows refugees to, while holding refugee status, get a job, receive education, and acquire property. The 1997 Law on Citizenship of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia allows refugees

⁵ Registration of refugees and other war-affected persons in FR of Yugoslavia, UNHCR, CRRS and KICG, Belgrade, 1996.

⁶ Following the separation of Serbia and Montenegro after the May 2006 referendum, this Ministry was renamed at the level of the Republic of Serbia as the Office for Human and Minority Rights, and continues to perform the tasks within its scope of responsibilities. (authors' note)

to acquire Serbian citizenship as an important formal prerequisite for sustainable integration. Over 120,000 refugees have acquired SCG citizenship since coming into force of this Law. (Refugees living in Montenegro, however, had no possibility of acquiring citizenship of this republic, owing to differences between the federal and Montenegrin legislations)

The new Law on Serbian Citizenship of March 2005 further facilitated access to citizenship for refugees, by stipulating that "... the citizenship of the Republic of Serbia can also be granted to a person born in another republic of the former SFRY who held the citizenship of that republic or is a citizen of another state established in the territory of the former SFRY, and resides in the territory of Yugoslavia as a refugee, expellee or displaced person or took refuge abroad."

The Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted in May 2002 the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and IDPs, drafted with participation of UNHCR, UNDP and OCHA. The National Strategy envisages activities in two directions: securing conditions for return through an intensified engagement on the part of Serbia and international community, and creating conditions for local integration of refugees: "... The basic objective of local integration is to assist them to achieve self-sufficiency and equality with other citizens, economically and financially."⁷ Preconditions for a successful local integration, as stated in the Strategy, include resolving of housing issues, employment, finding solutions for refugees accommodated in collective centres, improvement of property and legal status of refugees. However, due to a lack of funds, implementation of this Strategy in many segments has not started yet.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) adopted by the Serbian Government in 2003 complements the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and IDPs in terms of proposed solutions. The PRS considers refugees and IDPs to be one of the most vulnerable groups in society and proposes four key courses of action for reducing poverty among this segment of population: affirming human rights, securing housing, strengthening socio-cultural resources and human capital and targeting social assistance to the most vulnerable categories.⁸

4. Causes of problems

4.1. Problems related to integration of refugees and expellees in Serbia

Integration in the host country – Serbia – is one of the three options for achieving durable solutions to the refugee issue (besides return to the country of origin i.e. repatriation and resettlement to third countries).

The majority of refugees have since the beginning of exile opted for integration. At the first refugee registration in 1996, 60 percent of refugees said they wished to stay in the then-existing FR Yugoslavia while 20 percent were undecided about what would be the durable solution for their problem. At the second registration, that of 2001, the majority of 61 percent of refugees from Croatia and 60 percent of refugees from B-H again opted for integration as the durable solution.

⁷ National strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, Belgrade, April 2002

⁸ Group 484, Refugees staying in Serbia, Belgrade 2006.

Where the position of the Serbian authorities is concerned, repatriation was considered to be, at least during the early years of armed conflicts, the “best option for permanently resolving the refugee issue” while recognizing “the fact that a large number of refugees will establish permanent residency in the country (Serbia - authors’ note)⁹.”

The years spent in exile was a worked in favour of integration as the durable solution, for the longer the period spent in exile, the stronger became their ties with the host community. People found accommodation, jobs, developed new social connections, and to the extent they managed to survive in a new environment, that environment became vitally important to them.

It should be noted, however, that there were and still are serious obstacles impeding sustainable return, especially to Croatia, which include: poor security conditions, difficulties in finding a job, and unresolved housing status of former tenancy right holders.

In choosing between two more or less uncertain options, refugees mostly prefer to stay in Serbia. Nevertheless, conditions being gradually created for refugees to move freely and visit their countries of origin, to repossess property and obtain personal documents in the country of origin, made some of the refugees decide to return to their places of origin for good: according to UNHCR, 80,000 refugees have returned to Croatia and 64,000 to B-H.

It is difficult though to establish a clear line between integration and return as durable, long-term or sustainable solutions, in particular because integration is a dynamic lifelong process that begins at the moment of arrival and does not exclude other types of decisions, such as to return or move on to a third country. Refugees are tied to their country of origin by familial bonds and friendships, property they left behind, and the fact that it is the place they were born and raised. To the country they currently live they are tied by the feeling of safety, new social connections, jobs they hold, family, established residence, schooling... Most of them will probably remain somewhere in-between, attached to both countries by a variety of ties.

The very concept of successful integration is usually considered in the light of permanent accommodation, employment i.e. stable source of income, and acquisition of documents (citizenship and all the rights deriving from it). Most refugees have not yet resolved the first two problems, whereas the third one has been alleviated by loosening of the citizenship requirements by the state. One should bear in mind, however, that things do not substantially change for these people just by acquiring citizenship, since refugee status was sufficient for registering address, enrol in school, and receive medical care. Yet, a large number of refugees, in accordance with their definite choice, applied for and obtained SCG citizenship. Contributing to this was the possibility to hold dual citizenship, i.e. to acquire SCG citizenship without renouncing that of their country of origin (Croatia, B-H).

In a 2002 survey of 200 refugees residing in Vojvodina, when asked to say what is their understanding of the term “local integration”, the majority of respondents – nearly 40 percent said “living with domicile population and adapting to the environment”, while 30 percent viewed integration as a solution for their material needs (housing, employment etc.). Nearly 90 percent of the respondents said integration is very important to them, but nearly 30 percent think their families are not or only to a small degree integrated in the local community. As key preconditions for a successful integration they cited possession of own home, economic self-sufficiency and sustainability and acceptance by the local domicile population (making new friends and creating familial bonds).¹⁰

⁹ Official website of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, ‘Refugees in Serbia’

¹⁰ Position of refugees and expellees regarding different durable solutions, Novi Sad Humanitarian Center, Novi Sad, 2002.

In a research project¹¹ carried out in 2004 by IAN, five key factors in making the decision to integrate cited by refugees were as follows: stable political situation in the country, safety for families, provision of health care, employment prospects and public pledge by politicians to support integration. The refugees who decided to stay in Serbia assess living conditions in Serbia as being better than those in their country of origin: "...the host country is for a refugee the country where his problems will eventually be solved, where he has friends, where he can send his children to school; it is the country he indeed belongs in".

4.2. Problems related to the integration of IDPs

The only option envisaged as a durable solution for IDPs from Kosovo is return, although in the present circumstances it tends to be complicated and often not feasible owing to security situation. This can be explained by the fact that integration of these people in Serbia proper is a sensitive political issue that has to do with resolving the final status of Kosovo.

Nevertheless, no matter which place of residence these people choose, the time they spend in exile brings about problems similar to those refugees had or still have in the process of integration – securing roof over head and source of income and acceptance of newcomers by the domicile population. The position of refugees and IDPs is also affected by the factors of social crisis which affect all citizens, owing to which it is sometimes difficult to discern the specific significance and impact of poverty on this group from its impact on general population in Serbia. For that reason, this Report will examine some important issues related to the quality of life of people in displacement in the context of their needs as well as in the local community context.

5. Problem analysis

5.1. Citizenship

5.1.1. Refugees and Expellees

A large number of refugees have acquired SCG or Serbian citizenship. This is suggested by the smaller number of refugees registered in 2005 compared to figures obtained at the first registration in 1996. In view of the fact that around 150,000 refugees registered as returnees or moved to third countries, and that the current official number of refugees is 106,931, it may well be concluded that the rest of refugees stayed in Serbia, acquired citizenship and thus disappeared from the refugee statistics.

However, acquiring Serbian citizenship does not necessarily result in losing refugee ID (proving refugee status) – at least until applying for an ID card. That is why Serbia today has a number of new citizens who still hold their refugee ID cards. Those are the persons who were entered into the registry of citizens of Serbia and Montenegro upon applying for citizenship, but have not collected their IDs yet. It is only upon collecting their ID cards that refugees are stripped of their refugee IDs.

11 G. Opačić, I. Vidaković, B. Vujadinović "Living in post-war communities", IAN International Aid Network, Belgrade, 2005.

Despite the streamlined procedure for acquiring citizenship, a significant number of refugees, over 100,000-, still persist in their intention to keep the status of refugee. Their inability to decide on giving up refugee status probably suggests that they are unsure as to whether the citizenship status is more beneficial than the refugee status. Currently, there are no accurate data or research that would explain this. According to estimates by NSHC¹² field researchers in Vojvodina and interviews with local commissioners for refugees, some of the reasons are as follows:

- acquiring citizenship of Serbia and Montenegro does not solve social problems of refugees, while by retaining the refugee status refugees preserve the hope of being assisted in the future in resolving their housing and other problems,
- Internationally recognized status of refugee makes them feel “secure” and distinguishes them from other citizens by emphasizing their vulnerability,
- a small number of elderly refugees living in collective centres converted into homes or separate, add-on wings of the existing gerontology centres (total around 600 people) fear that by acquiring citizenship they will lose right to accommodation in these centres, as they were purposely built to house refugees,
- Some young refugees have had their refugee status extend in order to evade military service,
- refugees from Croatia who are eligible to receive pension from the country of origin and opted for integration, would lose medical insurance in Serbia by taking Serbian citizenship (that is, by losing refugee status); this is their motive for retaining refugee status,
- A part of refugees already hold dual citizenship (e.g. B-H and Croatian),
- Lack of motivation for applying for acquisition of citizenship since the status of refugee already guarantees them access to certain rights.

The dilemma around this issue is also caused by the fact that one of the essential requirements for refugees to participate in any housing and economic self-sufficiency program implemented in Serbia is their decision to integrate, that is, possession of acquired Serbian citizenship or at least having filed application for acquiring Serbian citizenship.

5.1.2. IDPs

Being nationals of SCG¹³ and not having crossed the state border of the country of their nationality, the displaced persons from Kosovo are accorded the status of ‘internally displaced persons’, which entitles them to assistance and support from the state and humanitarian organizations. Their status is governed by international legal standards and the responsibility for the provision of care to IDPs primarily rests upon the states on whose territory they are staying.

5.2. Identification documents

¹² Psychologists and social workers engaged in the NSHC project supporting the most socially vulnerable refugees in Vojvodina “Network of Mobile Teams for Supporting Extremely Vulnerable Refugees”

¹³ This Report was written during the process of separation of Serbia and Montenegro and thus could not provide a detailed analysis of the consequences of the new circumstances emerging from it. In this new context, the displaced persons from Kosovo became refugees in Montenegro, since they were not citizens of that republic, and their problems will from that moment on be resolved in accordance with Montenegrin legislation. In Serbia their status has not been changed. (authors' note - August 2006).

5.2.1. Refugees and Expellees

Upon registering with the Commissariat for Refugees and being granted refugee status, refugees are issued an ID - refugee (or expellee) identification card. This document allows them access to rights in Serbia. After the last status registration and revision procedure, refugees whose status was renewed have been issued new ("blue") refugee cards despite the old ("white") ones still being valid. The old refugee IDs were scheduled to expire as of June 2005 based on a decree that was to be passed by the Serbian Commissariat for refugees. Since the decree has not been passed yet, at the time of this writing (April/May 2006) there are more persons with valid refugee IDs than those whose refugee status has been confirmed. In Novi Sad, for example, there are officially 26,075 refugees holding "white" and "blue" IDs, whereas only 11,395 persons turned up for registration of whom 7,332 kept refugee status.

A number of refugees never turned up for registration with competent registration offices. During the years of armed conflicts, there was a lack of trust among refugees in registration offices because of possible misuse of data (e.g. temporary address). A certain number of refugees who came to Serbia for various reasons were denied refugee status by which they were deprived of protection guaranteed for refugees under international law. At the first census of refugees, in addition to nearly 418,000 refugees "with status", there were 120,005 refugees "without status", who probably registered in order to gain refugee status, which was not granted to them for reasons not stated in the census document. The same document states that UNHCR considers both groups to be refugees and that "Yugoslav authorities treat these two categories equally". However, those who failed to obtain refugee ID card without already possessing SCG citizenship were forced to stay in Serbia without having proper personal documents. These refugees could not access any right, including the right to humanitarian assistance.

According to some verbal statements and testimonies given during court proceedings which were initiated some time later on behalf of forcibly conscripted persons, many men were forced to go into hiding at the time of illegal mobilization, in 1995 in particular, and not go out to the street unless absolutely necessary.¹⁴

Besides, with regard to war sufferings of the Serbs, data gathered by the Committee for Compiling Data on Crimes Against Humanity and International Law (the official body of SCG responsible for gathering the relevant data) revealed the existence of 778 detention camps (536 on the territory of B-H, 221 in Croatia and 21 in Slovenia). The Committee has no data as to the total number of people who were held captive in these camps; Belgrade-based Association of former captives of the 1991-1995 wars estimates the number of former captives in Serbia and Montenegro to be 5000.¹⁵ This figure includes a significant number of Serb members of Yugoslav People's Army and territorial defence who were prisoners of war. In the absence of relevant data, the exact number of victims of

¹⁴ "During the summer of 1995, the members of Serbian police unlawfully detained around 10,000 refugees from Croatia and B-H, whom they transferred to the territory of Croatia and B-H. There, they were forced to participate in the military operations as members of the Republic of Srpska Krajina Army or the Republic of Srpska Army. A great number of them were killed in these operations and many are still suffering from physical and mental consequences." (quoted from the Humanitarian Law center press release carried by Fonet and B92; Jul 24, 2006.) Out of 750 lawsuits brought by Humanitarian Law Center and 150 by Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, more than a half had a positive outcome; the International Aid Network (IAN) received another 30-odd cases right before the statute of limitation prescribed for filing these lawsuits was to expire in 2005. For people who lived through such an experience, reparation and redress constitute an important psychological aspect of integration and starting a new life in the country of asylum. (according to the book *Posledice prinudne mobilizacije izbeglica 1995. godine* (Consequences of forcible mobilization of refugees in 1995); editors: G. Opa i , V. Jovi , B. Radovi and G. Knezevi ; IAN, Belgrade 2006.)

¹⁵According to: Radovic, B.(2004) «Jugoslovenski ratovi 1991-1999 i neke od njihovih društvenih posledica» (Yugoslav wars 1991-1992 and some of their social consequences), Špiri , Ž, Knezevi , G, Jovi , V, Opa i , G, *Tortura u ratu, posledice i rehabilitacija-Jugoslovensko iskustvo* (Torture in war, consequences and rehabilitation-Yugoslav experience), IAN International Aid Network, Belgrade 2004, p. 25-68

war camps in Croatia and Bosnia is difficult to ascertain, and in the overall number of refugees this category becomes historically, legally and socially “invisible”.¹⁶

Many refugees could not register address in larger cities like Belgrade or Novi Sad. In some cases, due to the influx of refugees to towns (mostly because of better prospects for securing income which means better chances for sustaining themselves) the requirements for registering address included the possession of a real property, having permanent employment or producing a statement signed by a relative with registered residence in that town declaring that he/she will provide subsistence for that person. Owing to such tough requirements, some refugees were compelled register address in a place other than the one they actually lived in or not to register address at all and get the necessary personal documents in some other way.

Many refugees lack personal identification number (JMBG) in their ID cards, which can limit their access to other documents and various rights. Some municipalities, for example, require JMBG to issue employment booklets, so one must present some document issued in Croatia featuring this number (JMBGs on documents issued by Krajina authorities are not recognized because the numbers were changed). If this number does not figure in any of the old documents, then a refugee needs to go to the police department (in his/her place of pre-war residence) in Croatia to get it, because since 2003 Croatian personal documents do not include JMBG. Parents of the children born and registered in the Republic of Srpska Krajina also need to go to Croatia to request, in person, subsequent registration of their children in birth registries.

5.2.2. IDPs

“Many displaced persons lack one or several of the required documents which prevent them from exercising their human rights. Producing necessary documents and navigating through administrative requirements is not a simple or easy job even for Serbian citizens. For persons who are already in a disadvantaged position because of being displaced, these obstacles may become insurmountable and further limit their access to medical and other services they used to receive and are still entitled to receive¹⁷.”

To get an IDP card making them eligible for assistance, IDPs must present ID card and a document proving temporary residence registration. The fact that many displaced persons living in unofficial collective centres or illegally built settlements cannot regularize their status due to a lack of proof of legal residence is an issue of major concern. Many IDPs do not have documents proving their status or identity or employment records. In many cases logistical and financial reasons prevent refugees from being issued or re-issued documentation from Kosovo municipal registry offices relocated from Kosovo to southern Serbia.

Until the second half of 2005, displaced persons had to travel to towns inside Serbia in order to have birth certificates or excerpts from land registries issued by civil registry offices dislocated from Kosovo. Thanks to efforts by non-governmental organizations, the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government issued an order in July 2005 enabling displaced persons to be issued birth certificates by mail.¹⁸ Many municipal clerks complain of not being able to process the large number of applications received by mail stating that they lack personal and capacities to efficiently do this job. An additional problem is that some civil registries from Kosovo were never transferred to Serbia or were destroyed. Some NGOs, through its offices in Kosovo, are working on obtaining various

¹⁶ Supporting the victims of torture, Danish Refugee Council Programme, Budva, Montenegro, 1994.

¹⁷ Walter Kalin, UN Secretary-General's Representative on IDPs, Press Statement, June 24, 2005.

¹⁸ Group 484, Poverty and Access to Rights, Advocacy for implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategy in Serbia with Focus on Refugees from Croatia and B-H and IDPs from Kosovo, November 2005.

documents, but the situation is complicated by the fact that Serbia does not recognize diplomas issued on UNMIK forms or M4 pension scheme contributions forms. Mutual recognition of official documents and exchange of copies of birth registry books and pension records would help alleviate these problems.

Some estimates¹⁹ indicate that there are approximately 1,000 displaced persons in Vojvodina alone who never possessed any identification document, i.e. who have not been registered even in Kosovo.

5.3. Accommodation

5.3.1. Refugees and Expellees

Finding long-term accommodation is the major problem faced by refugees and displaced persons which as a chain reaction gives rise to other problems such as lack of money for food, medication, hygiene, education, clothing and health care because the payment of rent takes up most of the income earned by household members.

During the first weeks and months, sometimes even years of exile, most refugees, around 90 percent, stayed with their relatives or friends. As the refugee crises continued, the proportion of families staying with relatives and in collective centres decreased, while the number of those living in private accommodation rose; this made the problem more visible. According to 1997 registration data, 19 percent of refugees lived in rented apartments, 9 percent in inadequate housing not designed for residential purposes (basements, laundry rooms etc.) and 5 percent secured own accommodation (through purchase or construction of homes or by exchanging the property in the country of origin for one in Serbia). Around 50,000 people who had no other options were housed in collective centres. The report on refugee registration in 2001 indicated that most refugees, 44 percent, lived in rented accommodation, 30 percent with relatives or friends while 18 percent had their own accommodation.

Private accommodation: Payment of rent puts a significant strain on refugee households' budget and according to some surveys takes up most of the household budget. That is the reason why a part of refugee population can only afford cheaper and sub-standard accommodation. A research carried out by the World Health Programme in 2001 showed that over 70 percent of beneficiaries of their food assistance program (that is, the more vulnerable part of refugee population) lived in inadequate housing without basic amenities, such as bathroom.

Collective accommodation: As of 2001, 21,000 refugees (6 percent of the total number) lived in collective centres; the number of displaced persons from Kosovo living in collective accommodation was 9,000. Collective centres have constantly been phased out ever since they were opened, in keeping with the plan for closure of collective centres set out in the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons and implemented by the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia. The resources used for funding collective accommodation are planned to be shifted to integration programs and provision of care to the most vulnerable categories of refugees. According to UNHCR data for May 2006, Serbia (excluding Kosovo) had 91 recognized and 39 unofficial collective centres (CRRS does not cover the costs related to accommodation in or maintenance of 'unofficial' centres). These centres accommodate 11,158 persons.

¹⁹ Praxis NGO

Seven CCs have been found not to provide even basic living conditions. Residents of these CCs thus live in inhumane, inappropriate conditions and isolated from the social environment, which makes them passive and dependent on external assistance. This leads to an increased risk of psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety and behaviour disorders (aggressive behaviour) among their residents. Refugees living in isolated CCs are also at risk of developing poor interpersonal relations which are typically manifested in animosities, frequent verbal conflict and physical conflicts. At the time of research conducted by the Network of Mobile Teams (September 2005), as few as 358 families could afford to leave CCs and move into their own habitable housing space, while more than 1,400 families were found in need of strong support to be able to create conditions for moving out of CCs and solve their housing problem on their own²⁰.

The process of closure of collective centres goes parallel with finding the best, currently available solutions for providing accommodation to the refugees leaving these centres. The solutions include:

- PIKAP (Pilot In-Kind Assistance Project) assistance extended to households who have the capacity for individual living upon moving out of CC, through provision of cash and in-kind assistance;
- Provision of housing units for use (construction of state-owned apartments to be used by refugees and domicile vulnerable population on certain terms; social housing program in a supportive environment)
- Self-help construction program: construction of single family houses is funded from donations in the first phase after which the beneficiaries are left to complete the construction themselves;
- Purchase of houses with a house lot: this program was implemented by InterSOS in 2005 through provision of grants for purchasing farmhouses and doing necessary repairs and furnishing;
- supply of building materials to refugees who have already started building their homes and have building permits;
- Accommodation in social welfare facilities, e.g. accommodation of elderly refugees in gerontology centres;
- Return to the former place of residence;
- moving to another CC, as well as provision of temporary accommodation if no other solution is available²¹.

Apartment construction

The Government of the Republic of Serbia started back in 1994 preparing the program for permanent settlement of refugees in the territory of Serbia: 'Sustainable settlement and integration of refugees, on the basis of the programmatic study conducted by the Commissariat, is taking place in depopulation areas, areas close to the state border and areas where labour is needed. It is envisaged to provide accommodation for refugees through construction of apartments and settlements, purchase of apartments in so-called unfinished investments and purchase of farmhouses or available housing space in depopulation areas.'²²

Pursuant to the aforementioned Program, the Government of Serbia launched in 1997 the program for construction of settlements with a view of providing permanently accommodation to refugees. A similar program was implemented by UNHCR. Municipalities on whose territory these settlements were constructed provided necessary infrastructure and secured employment for one member of each several member family. Accommodation was provided in this manner to high-priority categories – large families, disabled persons, single mothers.

²⁰ Amity, NSHC, Sunce, Horizonti, Život u kolektivnim izbegli kim centrima - problemi i perspektive stanara (Living in collective refugee centers – problems and residents' perspectives), Network of Mobile Teams, September 2005.

²¹ Group 484, Refugees staying in Serbia, Belgrade 2006.

²² "Refugees in Serbia", newsletter of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees, October 1997.

According to the data provided by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees, the Commissariat has thus far, in cooperation with UNHCR and international organizations as implementing partners on these projects, coordinated building of 2,650 housing units accommodating 10,000 people. Building of additional 570 apartments is in progress, thanks to the donations from the European Agency for Reconstruction and UNHCR. The Italian Government is also included through “Settlement and Integration of Refugees Programme” (SIRP), implemented through UN-Habitat, with the Ministry for capital investment as a local partner on behalf of the Serbian government. This program envisages construction of 670 apartments, of which 80 percent for refugees and 20 percent for socially needy households from the municipalities of Bačka, Kragujevac, Niš, Pančevo, Stara Pazova and Valjevo. The government of Serbia is finalizing negotiations with the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) for a € 20 million loan for financing provision of housing for refugees. Serbian government adopted in April 2005 “The Feasibility Study of the Refugee Integration in Serbia under a Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) credit line”, which was approved by the administrative council of CEB in September 2005. The construction of apartments is scheduled to start in 2006 parallel with selection of municipalities, defining eligibility criteria and publishing of invitation for submission of applications. All refugees who took or will take citizenship of the Republic of Serbia and who have lived at least two years in the municipality in which they apply will qualify for this program. The applicants’ total household income will also be taken into account²³.

Purchase of farmhouses

Experience has shown that the most efficient and successful activities for systematic provision of accommodation for refugees proved to be those relying on cooperation between several actors – republic institutions, funding agencies, local authorities, refugees and NGOs. Such consensus is often hard to reach though, due to economic, technical, logistic and sometimes political reasons.

Some municipalities in Vojvodina set aside funds in their budgets for solving housing problems of refugees residing on their territory. The municipality of Vrsac, for example, earmarked funds in its 2006 budget for funding the program of purchase of farmhouses for refugees and internally displaced persons living in their territory. Over 200 families have already expressed their interest in applying for this program although it has not been officially announced yet. Also, 100 houses have been offered for sale.

The municipalities interested in donor programs for purchase of farmhouses (implemented by InterSOS, The Swedish Organization for Individual Relief) drew up lists of houses for sale and lists of refugees interested in this program, but a problem arose because the prices of houses in these municipalities do not match the amount of money approved for this purpose. InterSOS program for purchase of farmhouses is being implemented in 18 Serbian municipalities covering all CCs slated for closure in 2006. Beneficiaries are the residents of CCs and persons living in private accommodation.

It should be mentioned that some municipalities have done nothing to assist integration of refugees or even hampered this process. This is motivated primarily by political reasons (altering of the ethnic structure of a municipality). In the municipality of Subotica, for example, no program for refugee integration has been implemented. Construction of a building intended for refugees in the village of Bajmok, Subotica municipality began in 1998 only halted shortly afterwards. The reason was supposedly administrative – ownership dispute over the building lot. This dispute has not been resolved to date.

Some municipalities no longer have refugee commissioners nor have commissioners who serve as such only on a part-time basis (Mali Iloš, Bačka Topola). In some poor, small municipalities, municipal clerks performing some other jobs serve as commissioners without any compensation for that additional duty.

²³ Serbian Commissariat for Refugees, April 2006.

5.3.2. Internally Displaced Persons

Major part of internally displaced persons live in central Serbia, mainly in Belgrade, followed by Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Niš, Smederevo, Kruševac, Leskovac, Vranje and Kuršumlija. Out of the total number of IDPs, 94.2 percent live in central Serbia and 5.8 percent in Vojvodina.

According to UN OCHA HRA no.18 of 2001, 38 percent of internally displaced persons lived in rented accommodation, 37 with relatives or friends, 7 percent in own accommodation and 7 percent in collective centres.

The 2002 National Strategy for Resolving the Problem of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in its implementation program focuses solely on refugees, while envisaging return to Kosovo as the only option for IDPs.

5.4. Property

It is difficult to estimate the size and type of property owned by refugees because of little or no data available, except those obtained at the 2001 refugee registration according to which 18 percent of refugees possessed their own house or apartment in Serbia (excluding Kosovo).

If we take into account all refugees who opted for integration, i.e. those who acquired the citizenship of Serbia and Montenegro and those who still hold refugee status, it is impossible to obtain information as to how many refugees have solved their housing problem in Serbia. The Serbian Bureau of Statistics, for example, does not keep separate statistics on refugees, and those who acquired citizenship are grouped in the same category with all other citizens. Even if we knew the official number of apartments and houses owned by refugees, this number would not reflect the actual state of affairs because statistics do not include illegally built homes.

Having their roof over head for many refugees is a precondition for a successful integration and even more important than having stable source of income. To be able to have it, refugees must be enabled to dispose of their property in the country of origin as well as to have their damaged property reconstructed and made habitable.

5.5. Employment

In the context of an economically impoverished society, economic integration of refugees and IDPs becomes a difficult task. Without strengthening of economy it is nearly impossible to implement the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, which defined employment and economic self-reliance for refugees as primary goals. Rampant unemployment leads to sharp job competition and decrease in wages, which then leads to rivalry between refugees and domicile population. Such situation contributes to further impoverishment of the most vulnerable category in society.

Unemployment rate among refugees amounted to 45 percent in 2001²⁴. A 2001 study by ICVA, revealed that unemployment rate among IDPs was 52 percent²⁵. This figure is significantly higher than

²⁴ UNHCR/Commissariat for Refugees of the RS, Registration of refugees in Serbia, March/April 2001.

²⁵ ICVA/NRC, Right to a choice, Internally displaced persons in FRY, March 2002.

the official unemployment rate in Serbia of 29 percent among persons of working age, as shown by National Bank of Serbia data for 2003. An additional problem faced by refugees is that of lost employment booklets owing to which they cannot realize their pensions rights or apply for unemployment benefits on a temporary basis. Under a special program established by a Government Degree of 2003, the displaced persons who worked in state-owned companies in Kosovo receive a merely symbolic compensation/salary although they have not been working since they fled Kosovo.

Most of the employed refugees have only irregular income because of being employed on a short-term basis (51 percent). 38 percent hold permanent jobs whereas only 8 percent are self employed, making irregular income and the resulting uncertainty the major problem troubling this segment of population.²⁶

Some international organizations in Serbia have been implementing programs aimed at encouraging individual economic activities through micro-loan schemes, income-generation grants and vocational training. Between 1997 and 2004, over 15,000 micro-loans were awarded in Serbia and 1,200 beneficiaries received vocational training²⁷. However, the small value of these grants, either in the form of cash or business assets, proved insufficient for starting up a sustainable business that could provide substance to refugee families. Based on the assessment of impact of Micro loan programs, Hi Neighbour (Zdravo da ste) came to the conclusion that the majority of beneficiaries (120 borrowers in 11 municipalities) reported only small economic impact not exceeding 20 percent of increase with respect to previous level of income. Positive impact of small loans is far more visible in terms of psycho-social support: majority of the respondents point out enhanced feeling of independence, hope and security as well as significantly lessened anxiety, anger and insecurity (statistically relevant changes). The subjective feeling of having being sacrificed in the war, however, was the only one that remained unchanged during the assessment. Integration and achieving economic independence had no impact on this profound feeling. The findings generally indicate that the effects of small income-generation programs tend to be very important at the beginning of the refugee crisis because they enable economic networking with the local community and foster the activation of refugee families. As the refugee status continues, this form of assistance becomes insufficient to be the durable solution.²⁸

An analysis of living circumstances of beneficiaries of grants in the form of business assets shows that the great majority of these households (e.g. over 70 percent in 2002) were vulnerable in several aspects. Old age, illness, often severe illness in more than one family member, disability, large families with many children and elderly persons, spatial and economic isolation are the most common sources of vulnerability among beneficiaries of small income generation programs.²⁹

Although the government formally encourages development of small and medium-sized enterprises as the most desirable way for reaching economic prosperity in the near future, in practice, however, this option cannot be easily accessed by refugees. It may well be that the population on the whole, including refugees, lack information and knowledge needed for a more active involvement in this process. Some of the main reasons why refugees tend to be undecided about starting their own business are objective and include: restrictive fiscal policy, concentration of capital in transition countries (risk of non-sustainability of small businesses), prevailing economic instability, market instability and lack of means, (unduly high interest rates on loans). There are subjective reasons as well: lack of information (about state development strategies, market, experiences of the developed countries, economic development indicators, IT, institutional support from the government); unstable and uncertain market; lack of funds; lack of favourable loans and a complicated loan application

²⁶ "National Conference on Resolving the Problems of Refugees", Belgrade, October 2004.

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Hi Neighbour: Self- Help Projects for Refugees in Yugoslavia, Conference of Psychosocial Programmes within War-Affected Social Context, 1997 – 2005.

²⁹ Hi Neighbour: Social Integration of Refugees/IDPs in Serbia, Stichting Vluchteling Programme annual reports 2002 – 2006.

procedure; bureaucracy and inefficient administration; lack of skills and education; lack of opportunities to test ideas; fear of investment and lack of self-confidence. Possible consequences of the said problems include: sinking deeper into poverty, health and family problems, anxiety, lack of motivation, apathy, stress, frustration, development of evil habits, emotional insecurity and the like, which further undermine refugees' chances of improving quality of life for their families.

Most refugees and IDPs have limited external resources of financial support and rarely apply for bank loans. Only 4 per cent of refugees get to use this opportunity; others cannot meet basic loan eligibility requirements such as pledging their real property, or finding a guarantor who is employed and has earnings above the set limit³⁰.

5.6. Social protection

Over 25 percent of refugees live below the poverty line, which is twice as high a percentage as in overall population. As mentioned earlier, acquiring Serbian citizenship will not make the problems of refugees simply go away. Large percentage of refugees who acquired citizenship still lives below the poverty line. Being Serbian citizens makes them eligible for minimum social security benefits but many of them lack information concerning opportunities available to them and rights they are entitled to. Another problem is the long list of documents required for accessing these rights. Some refugees are not able to obtain these documents without being assisted even though they can access them. They include elderly and sick people who live alone and who have not realized their pension rights or receive only small pension benefits. Those who have children abroad are often not in touch with them, and if they are, the children need to send them a document stating their income or a document proving that they are unemployed, which often delays decision on their eligibility for social welfare assistance.

The position of internally displaced persons is worse today than at the time they were first displaced.³¹ All the beneficiaries of ICRC cash assistance programs in Serbia (about 6,000 households) should have been included in social protection programs but owing to the tough criteria or lack of required documentation large number of them cannot access family financial support. Besides, family financial support program cannot meet the needs of all the poor people even among local population. The Roma represent a particularly vulnerable category among internally displaced persons because they lack identification documents. In some municipalities, persons or families applying for social welfare benefits through social welfare centres have to meet the criteria of having resided at least six months in that municipality prior to application³².

5.7. Pension

According to the Agreement on Social Insurance between Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, which entered into force on May 1, 2003, refugees – Croatian pension beneficiaries are entitled to receive their pension benefit in their current places of residence. Also, Croatian pensions may now be claimed from Serbia. However, there is a problem of inefficiency in processing claims by pension and disability funds in Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia. Claimants typically have to wait at least eight months for their years of service to be computed and retirement claims resolved. Destroyed pension records in some locations represent another obstacle to this process.³³

³⁰ NSHC, "Economic Self-sustainability of Refugees and Returnees. Participatory research", Novi Sad, 2005.

³¹ Group 484, - "Poverty and Access to Rights", advocacy for the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy in Serbia focusing on refugees from Croatia and B-H and internally displaced persons from Kosovo, Belgrade, November 2005

³² *ibid*

³³ *Ibid*

The Law on Convalidation of Years of Service of the Republic of Croatia passed in 1998 stipulates different types of “convalidation” for citizens who lived or stayed in the then-existing Republic of Srpska Krajina, referred to in this law as «the temporarily occupied area», and sets the time limit for submission of claims to be March 31, 1999. As a result of such a restricted and unrealistic time limit, many claimants were not able to go to Croatia to submit their claims in person and using a special form prescribed by law, as required by most local pension insurance offices.³⁴ Besides, the requirement for convalidation of years of service was the possession of documents for the period between 1991 and 1995, including payrolls, medical records on sick leaves, annual leave approvals. As a consequence, only a small number of people managed to submit claims for convalidation while most refugees remained excluded from accessing this right. Another problem is the slow pace of processing of even this small number of claims, which particularly affects those who already qualify for old-age retirement and have been retired without having their years of service in Croatia recognized and included when determining the base for their pension benefits. The third obstacle is that even in cases where convalidation process has started, a complicated procedure practically deters even those who submitted their claims on time from accessing this right.

20,000 pensions are being claimed from Croatia, according to Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia. There are also many overdue pension benefits for the period prior to signing of the Agreement. Since a large sum of money is involved, it is uncertain whether it can be collected through lawsuits. Furthermore, some municipalities in Croatia recognize disability pension entitlements, but some do not. Some municipalities require disability pensioners to undergo a medical check before disability assessment commissions in Croatia.

The displaced people from Kosovo can access pension on producing employment booklets which indicate their years of service and paid pension scheme contributions. Those who do not possess employment booklets are accorded provisional pensions from the Serbian Pension and Disability Fund in the amount significantly lower than the one they are entitled to. The position of internally displaced persons is further aggravated by the fact that there is no mutual recognition of forms used for pension approvals between Serbian authorities and UNMIK.

5.8. Health care

Refugees and internally displaced persons are entitled to the same level of primary health care services as all other Serbian citizens. Access to this right is exercised based on a medical insurance booklet which is issued to them on the basis of their refugee or IDP ID card. However, in the impoverished Serbian health care system both refugees and domicile population must pay for all medical services beyond the basic level of health care and as well as some medications and devices and aids. The poorest among them cannot afford to pay such expenses.

The refugees from Croatia who became eligible to receive pension from their country of origin and opted for local integration as durable solution, and collected their ID cards after acquiring the citizenship of Serbia and Montenegro, have no access to health care in the Republic of Serbia. That is the reason why some Croatian pension beneficiaries still keep their refugee ID cards even after acquiring Serbian citizenship.

IDPs from Kosovo have access to health care in Serbia on the basis of “health certificate” that can be obtained only on condition that they possess an IDP card. This certificate is issued by the office of the Republic Health Insurance Institute in the municipality where an IDP has residency and must be renewed every three months.

³⁴ SDF, Analytical Report on Repatriation, Acquired Right

Prevailing negative impact caused by impoverishment of the Serbian system of medical insurance affects refugee and displaced persons in numerous ways, primarily in terms of access to rights in practice.

5.9. Education

Inclusion into the education system is considered to be the most powerful factor for local integration of children and youth. Education is a multifaceted process with various levels of influence. It encompasses much more than (often overestimated) acquisition of knowledge – it also involves peer socialization, making friends, influences of other adults through education process, extra-curricular activities, organizing leisure time, connecting and entering into relationships with other actors in the community, opening of cultural institutions, establishing the relationship of cooperation and trust with the community. Children and young people, who found themselves in Serbia as a result of forced migrations, did not significantly differ from local children in terms of cultural and educational background and therefore adapted easily to the education process. Inclusion in education process is a precondition for participation of children and youth in local community.

There is a strong correlation between education and poverty that has not been systematically analyzed but which has a capacity to cause significant problems in the future. According to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, 73 percent of the poorest citizens of Serbia (including refugees and IDPs) completed only primary education or less than primary education. It may well be assumed that the actual picture is even bleaker, because this figure does not include the poorest Roma who do not possess identification documents. Being included in the education system is not a guarantee that a person will not be poor, but exclusion from this process increases the likelihood of poverty at a dizzying rate. Internally displaced children, especially the Roma, are considered to be particularly vulnerable groups where education is concerned.

Reforms of the education system in Serbia, started in 2000 and then selectively interrupted, lack of a long-term plan and vision with regard to education (as well as lack of public consensus about these issues) and economic instability are the factors as a result of which the education system became insufficiently flexible and permeable for the average children and to vulnerable groups of children in particular.

According to research by Belgrade-based Institute for Psychology in 2003/2004, 60 percent of the material being studied in primary schools is not age-appropriate. 60 percent of children need to do extra work at home with the assistance of adults while the classroom instruction is perceived by overwhelming majority (80 percent) of schoolchildren as dull and useless.

To be able to enrol their children in school, parents are required to produce a number of different sorts of documents (including the child's JMBG, five medical reports, birth certificate etc.) which at the very start excludes from education those children who cannot meet this requirement. If this requirement is met, a child starts studying material which is not tailored to their age. As a result, a certain number of children cannot get included in the education process or become marginalized in the course of education.

Despite all the above, the children included in Hi Neighbour programs stated going to school as one of most important moments helping them cope with the crisis on coming to Serbia.³⁵

Such conditions for development and education, call for a revision and adjustment of the education system in several aspects:³⁶

- Improved inclusiveness and flexibility of education requirements,

³⁵ Ognjenovi, V., Škorc, B. Assessment by Hi Neighbour, Hi Neighbour, Akademska Štampa, 2003

³⁶ Škorc, B. Ognjenovi, V. Regionalne razlike izme u procena grupnih karakteristika razreda (Regional differences in assessment of group characteristics of school grades), Empirijska istraživanja u psihologiji X (Empirical research in psychology X), 2002, Belgrade, p.44-45

- Greater sensitivity and readiness on the part of educators to adapt to the reality,
- «Opening» of schools to the local community in the sense of creating a network of informal relationships with local cultural, education and social institutions,
- Introducing more extra-curricular activities,
- Greater participation of children in school activities,
- Systematic support to teachers and education experts who develop alternative forms of education,
- Activation of cultural influences in the local community, development of a structured, long-term and stronger vision of education, based on the general consensus and recognition of the strategic importance of this sphere.³⁷

Average education level among refugees was, at the time of first registration, significantly higher than that of the Serbian population. With regard to education level of IDPs, members of Serbian and Montenegrin ethnicity had the highest education levels (35.9 percent completed secondary education) while the most vulnerable groups in terms of education are certainly the displaced Roma (54.3 without formal education) and Egyptians (46 percent without education). Women have lower education level than men: in the group with no education, the number of women is three times as high as the number of men.³⁸ With reference to displaced persons, Roma in particular, non-possession of required documentation prevents them from enrolling in schools. Additional challenges include poor knowledge of the language spoken in the local community and discrimination.

The children from refugee and IPD population are equal with all other children in Serbia in terms of access to mainstream primary education. Criteria for admission to high schools or universities include students' performance in previous schooling and admission exam score. There is no positive discrimination in this area.

However, there is also another important precondition for children to be able to continue education, namely the financial one. In this respect, particularly vulnerable are the children who live in secluded rural areas, far away from the towns with secondary schools, whose parents are unable to pay for their transportation, textbooks and school supplies. Activists of the project «Network of Mobile teams for assisting the most vulnerable individuals» supported by UNHCR, often urge local authorities to provide free or at least cheaper transportation to school for high-performing students. Main obstacles to enrolment of these children in universities are high fees and high cost of accommodation and subsistence of students.

In practice, one form of vulnerability often triggers a chain reaction of exposure to other vulnerability factors: for example, impossibility to obtain personal documents prevents not only the person concerned but also his/her family members from accessing not only one but a whole range of rights. Also, the reform of higher education that entered in its final phase in 2006 is connected to problems related to the long-term funding of institutions and provision of scholarships for university students.

6. Extremely vulnerable groups

³⁷ Škorc, B. Ognjenovi, V. Vital life topics of secondary school children - participatory research results, XII Scientific Conference on Empirical Research in Psychology, February 2006, Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy

³⁸ Registration of IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija, UNHCR/CRRS, Belgrade, 2002.

6.1. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians

One of the consequences caused by the armed conflicts in the territory of former Yugoslavia was the forced migration of Roma. While the Roma population in Slovenia and Croatia diminished between 1990 and 2000, Serbia and Bosnia registered increase in number of Roma, which indicates that Roma tended to migrate towards this part of the region. According to the European Roma Rights Centre, Serbia and Montenegro hosts around 400,000 Roma, the great majority of whom have not been officially registered and do not possess personal documents.³⁹

According to the Poverty reduction Strategy for Serbia, Roma, Askhali and Egyptians (RAE) constitute the most vulnerable group in the country. The experience of the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre has shown that displaced Kosovo Roma while sharing same problems faced by Roma in other countries in the region (poverty, unemployment, lack of professional qualifications, lack of education, high illiteracy rate, poor living conditions, poor health status...), are also confronted with some additional problems during displacement in Serbia and Montenegro, such as non-possession of documents, poor knowledge of the language of the host community⁴⁰. They are also exposed to some specific forms of discrimination caused by the fact that they come from Kosovo (non-acceptance by the domicile Roma and other domicile population)⁴¹.

Besides high unemployment and lack of access to various civil rights⁴², one of the basic problems concerning displaced Kosovo Roma is non-integration. Similar problems are faced by Roma deportees.⁴³ According to research carried out by European Centre for Minority Issues⁴⁴, the main factors contributing to non-integration of Roma IDPs and returnees in their current places of residence in S&M are as follows:

- Non-possession of citizenship and/or personal identification documents. Some Roma deportees who are citizens of Serbia cannot obtain personal documents they are required to produce to be able to access their civil rights (education, healthcare, social welfare) because of lack of financial means. Access to personal documents is further complicated by the fact that it often involves travelling to other towns in order to apply for them and get them. Gathering documents required for citizenship and personal documents is difficult not only to displaced and deported Roma but also to many Roma who have been living here for generations. Regardless of their place of residence, their unresolved legal status is a serious obstacle depriving them of access to education, health care and social welfare benefits.
- Resistance from the local population. Many of the displaced Roma meet with rebuff by not only non-Roma but local Roma as well who view them as competitors for already scarce resources. Children of Roma deportees are confronted with language barriers upon return to Serbia, which often results in their giving up of education started in Western Europe.
- Wish to live elsewhere. Most of the Roma deportees, especially young ones, wish to return to the EU countries they were deported from. The positions of displaced Kosovo Roma with respect to return vary: for those living in Belgrade and Vojvodina return is not a viable option while those living in southern Serbia would return only after security and safety conditions are met.

³⁹ Roma Rights, Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, November, 2004.1.

⁴⁰ According to the World Bank Research, C. Bodewig and A. Sethi, October 2005: 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Serbia and Montenegro: The Case of the Roma', nearly half of the internally displaced Roma households in 2003 did not speak Serbian.

⁴¹ According to the World Bank Research, C. Bodewig and A. Sethi, October 2005: 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Serbia and Montenegro: The Case of the Roma' almost half of the surveyed Roma IDP households did not speak Serbian in 2003.

⁴² According to the same research, almost 80 percent of Roma IDPs did not apply for the MOP, as compared to 45 percent of non-IDP Roma.

Roma who applied for asylum in some of the countries of the Western Europe and were rejected or their temporary protection was lifted, and who were then returned to Serbia and Montenegro under readmission agreements.

⁴⁴ J. Kijev anin, Toward Regional Guidelines for Integration of Roma, Serbia and Montenegro: A Comprehensive Analysis, January 2005.

- Conditions for resettlement. In most cases Roma IDPs and deportees living in S&M were pressured to leave their former places of residence in haste without being able to take any possessions. The problems is further aggravated when returnees realize that the assistance they were promised to receive upon arrival in their home country by the authorities of the country which deported them on leaving that country is not coming . The fact that many Roma IDPs and returnees share already poor living conditions with a large number of other IDPs and deportees is yet another obstacle to their local integration.
- Another major problem where Roma IDPs and deportees are concerned is the low level of education hindering their local integration.

Economic marginalization and cross-generational poverty perpetuating social exclusion are the strongest adverse factors preventing local integration of Roma.

According to the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights' Draft Strategy for Empowerment of Roma, there is a lack of clear vision as to the future place of residence of Roma IDPs: will they return to Kosovo or integrate in Serbia? In reality, over half of them do not have citizenship status, birth certificates or IDP cards.

6.2. Other most vulnerable refugees and IDPs

The most vulnerable categories identified as primary beneficiaries of the project "Network of Mobile Teams for Assisting Extremely Vulnerable Individuals"⁴⁵, are the women, children, the elderly, and single parents living in private accommodation and collective centres. The findings of this project reveal that the most vulnerable groups include:

- Children without parental care, sick, neglected, abused children and children with disability;
- Single parents with no income;
- Single and sick elderly persons, particularly those who do not receive regular pension benefits and/or family support benefits;
- Persons suffering from chronic diseases;
- Families who took Serbian citizenship but do not have stable sources of income and whose housing problem has not been resolved;
- Beneficiary groups which owing to unemployment or reduced work capacity are no longer able to support themselves (55 to 65 years of age);

Typical problems of these vulnerable categories are unresolved housing issue, unregulated right to dispose of property in the country of origin, extremely poor financial situation resulting from unemployment, non-possession of personal documents, lack of awareness about access to rights, lack of information needed for decision making, impossibility to realise pension rights and have years of service recognized, dependency of external assistance – especially among elderly households, and obstacles in accessing health care services.

According to UNHCR estimates from 2005, about 6,000 people were housed in collective centres, comprising a highly vulnerable group who in the previous period could not achieve self-reliance and leave this sort of accommodation facilities. The closure of collective centres sped up the process of vacating these facilities, but in most cases it only meant transferring people from this type of accommodation to some social institutions, mostly nursing homes.

The statement of a female grant beneficiary is illustrates the challenges of being moved to a nursing home: »This place is not good, but at least I can see children run, grow up. When I go there, I will only see people like me and just wait to die«⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The project has been implemented since May 2000 by the following NGOs: Amity from Belgrade, Novi Sad Humanitarian Center, Horizons from a ak and Sigma Plus from Niš, with support of UNHCR.

⁴⁶ Hi Neighbour - Report on Activities in Rtanj CC, Boljevac, 2000

Monitoring of a group of 248 beneficiaries of business assets grants from Hi Neighbour Social Integration of refugees and IDPs program⁴⁷, from 2002 to 2005 showed that 75 percent of grant beneficiaries were vulnerable according to several criteria which are as follows: single parenthood, old age, inadequate living space, being located in remote places and isolated, suffering from chronic and malignant diseases, having three or more children under age. This group of refugees/IDPs is not in a position to get a job, do seasonal jobs and access to the labour market, owing to which they are not able to provide minimum means of subsistence for their families. There have been cases of elderly persons living in remote villages who simply gave up struggling for assistance and stopped taking necessary medications. Also, it has been reported that owing to extreme poverty older people sometimes separate from their younger family members »not wanting to be a burden« which destabilizes them even more. Around 45 percent of sick beneficiaries suffer from serious heart condition but do physically demanding seasonal jobs nonetheless.

In the 14 years of provision of grant programs in the form of business assets, it has been noted that most of the beneficiaries are women (stable 54 percent), which may indicate that the women, managing the households and taking care of infirm family members, are more willing to take part in this type of projects, modest and easily adopted to circumstances as they are, thus opening the way for their male family members to look for steadier jobs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sixteen years after the beginning of conflicts and instability in the territory of former Yugoslavia, many vital problems of refugees still remain unresolved. Additional aggravating circumstance is that the problems and possible solutions, as well as the development and sustainability of planned interventions are interrelated on the regional and international level, as well as on the level of individual states. Until trust and cooperation between the countries in the region is improved, each project addressing the problems of refugees and IDPs will only have a limited effect.

For that reason activities and programs aimed at supporting integration will have to operate in several directions in the future and foster synergy between different capacities of the community and opportunities available to refugees and internally displaced persons. Any durable solutions must also address the issue of integration of forced migrants into the old/new community.

That requires a multifarious social process in the community that endeavours to develop democratic practices: in this context, it is important to release creative potentials of both the local community and those who are being integrated into it.

On the basis of findings presented in this report and conclusions formulated during the round table discussions on integration of refugees in Serbia (Belgrade, September 18, 2006; Novi Sad, October 3, 2006; and Belgrade, Zemun Municipality, October 16, 2006), Serbian Refugee Council proposes the following four key areas in which improvements are needed in order to foster sustainable integration of refugees in Serbia.

1. Legal framework

The existing legal framework in Serbia governing refugee issues remains inadequate considering the complexity and extent of the problems concerned. The Draft Bill on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Refugees, already in the Parliamentary procedure, has received well-founded criticism, mainly because it seeks to cover a multitude of provisions that should be dealt with in other systemic laws. On one hand, the refugee issue is a universal phenomenon and should be perceived as such by the legislators, in a pursuit of a comprehensive law that would apply to all refugees, regardless of their place of origin. On the other hand, there is a pressing need to pay special attention to the refugees

⁴⁷ Hi Neighbour,, Refugee/IDP youth and children as social potential in poverty reduction strategy, 2006.

from the territory of former Yugoslavia, and speed up the process of finding the sustainable solution to their protracted refugee status.

Recommendations:

Organize a public hearing on Draft Bill on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Refugees in order to identify the best legal solutions, without ruling out the possibility of adoption of a separate Serbian law on integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia that would help regulate this issue in a comprehensive and just manner.

In addition, the existing National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and IDPs should be re-examined, to determine its relevancy at the present time and introduce necessary changes.

2. Accomplishments so far and possible improvements

Views on what the Serbian state has really done so far to assist sustainable integration of refugees, fully respecting their interests and dignity, vary depending on the standpoint. Despite the progress made, the results can barely keep up with existing needs and there is the predominant perception among the refugee population that their problems are constantly being put on the back burner. Moreover, there are numerous obstacles for the access to services for refugees, which in practice can result in discrimination. Housing care programs are largely intended for easily accessible refugees, e.g. those living in collective centres, neglecting those who live in private accommodation and are vulnerable in numerous ways. Programs for economic integration are often deficient, sometimes poorly designed and not taking into account different opportunities and needs of intended beneficiaries, hence their impact so far has been limited. New initiatives of the National Employment Bureau, the Development Fund of the Republic of Serbia, and the Agency for the Development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, open new opportunities and foster strong cooperation between local communities, labour market and people who opted for integration.

Recommendations:

Through a joint, framework strategy, strengthen the efforts of non-governmental organizations and refugee associations to exert a strong influence on the government of Serbia, with a view of putting refugee issues on the agenda of policy-makers and speed up the process of addressing the specific problems of refugees.

Better inclusion of refugees living in private accommodation in housing programs implemented by CRRS and its partners.

Plan and implement economic integration programs in a comprehensive manner, including local communities and tailor all forms of assistance to the actual needs and potentials of refugees, in order to achieve true sustainability.

Build capacities of refugees and IDPs for accessing loans and similar funds through training, outreach programs and establishing “business incubators” in communities with sufficient number of potential beneficiaries.

3. Participation of refugees in problem-solving

Refugees typically do not have their representatives in municipal councils that make important decisions concerning local communities. Participation of refugees in such decision-making is the exception that should become a rule. This is partly due to the way the central government and local authorities treat the refugee population, and partly to the poor organization and lack of coordination between NGOs and refugee and IDP associations. Insufficient cooperation and lack of union prevents them from achieving desired goals.

Recommendations:

In all municipalities with high concentration of refugees, there should be persons representing their interests before local authorities. Gender balance should be ensured since at least half of refugees are women.

Together with refugee representatives and in cooperation with all stakeholders in local communities as well as at the level of central government, thoroughly identify main issues and needs and jointly formulate guidelines and a plan of action and provision of adequate support and protection.

Establish and support refugee interest groups (with participation of local population, depending on interests and needs concerned) to work on identification and resolving of specific problems.

Enhance cooperation between authorities, economy sector and civil sector, including associations and informal groups of refugees and IDPs, in order to find the most appropriate and economically sustainable solutions with respect to integration.

4. Information and outreach

For any decision with far-reaching impact – and refugees constantly have to make such decisions – timely and reliable information is crucial. Without access to relevant information it is not possible to be included in decision-making on equal terms or participate in the life of a community in a meaningful way. Refugees are generally poorly informed about their rights and opportunities and where they can realize their rights. This is especially true for the refugees living in desolate villages, far from major towns or municipal centres. On the other hand, the general public in Serbia is also poorly or often partially informed about the problems, needs and potentials of refugees. The situation continues to be alarming, despite the efforts by NGOs providing assistance to refugees, despite scarce publications and TV programs Pravi odgovor monthly magazine and UNHCR sponsored TV program Povratak (Return) broadcast weekly and efforts by few reporters who consistently cover all the aspects of refugee life in different media.

Recommendations:

Exchange and dissemination of all necessary information needed for a successful integration of refugees should be coordinated and improved starting from the existing and projected responsibilities with regard to durable and sustainable solutions for refugees and IDPs. IN this effort all available modern communication and technical tools should be used in order to disseminate information in a timely manner and reach out to all interested parties.

Secure methods and resources for enabling access to necessary information to the refugees in the field and those living in remote areas, either through mobile teams or establishment of information desks (with a computer, telephone and a person responsible for passing on information to end users).

Organize round table discussions, public discussion forums and similar events on a regular basis, ensuring participation of refugees, local authorities and coverage by the local media.

Design a special program that would be broadcast weekly on the national TV station (RTS) and cover issues related to integration of refugees in Serbia or incorporate segments into existing TV programs, which would place refugee issues in the mainstream news coverage

Provide financial support to specialized publications, such as "Pravi odgovor", in order to enable it to be issued on a more frequent basis, and easily distributed to end users, refugees in the first place.

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This list of recommendations is neither exhaustive nor final: we hope that it will serve to encourage fresh ideas and specific targeted action. Therefore, all the options should be considered open and all citizens should feel invited to participate in the joint effort towards finding long-term sustainable solutions for the benefit all.