



INTEGRATION IN DENMARK OR BACK TO THE HOMETLAND

- a clarification project for severely traumatised refugees
from Bosnia-Herzegovina

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THE WAITING ROOM

It has now been 14 years since the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed. The agreement divided Bosnia into two largely self-governing entities, the Federation Bosnia-Herzegovina and the republic Republika Srpska. Since 1995 the number of returnees to the country has risen – especially after 2002 where a new procedure for reacquisition of property and reconstruction was established.

For many of the traumatised Bosnian refugees in Denmark, those 14 years have been like sitting in a waiting room. Many have not actively decided whether to build a life in Denmark or return to a country devastated by war – but even so regarded as ‘home’.



PRESENTATION AND BACKGROUND

Dreams of the homeland and the life lived there is a central element in any refugee's history and construction of a 'new' identity once the war has loosened its grip. For many, the homeland retains its role as an almost mythic past in the present. But for some, the dream of the homeland becomes the reality shaping their future.

The Danish Refugee Council has worked professionally with repatriation, i.e. voluntary return of refugees to the homeland, for more than 20 years. Since 1994 the task has involved counselling and case work for over 1700 Bosnian refugees who have chosen to continue their life in Bosnia after years in exile.



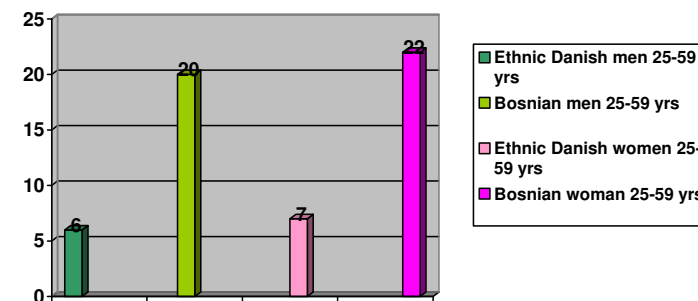
In recent years, it has become evident that a substantial part of Bosnian refugees in Denmark struggle with severe social and psychological problems in the everyday life; problems resulting from lack of improvement in the mental condition (PTSD and similar) as well as the lack of stability and substance in the exiled life.

Many of the traumatised Bosnian refugees feel that these conditions have impacted their lives and made their personal development come to a halt.

WHEN REFUGEES' WELL-BEING IS JEOPARDISED AFTER EARLY RETIREMENT

It is often seen that refugees with chronic traumas or PTSD withdraws themselves from social life and takes up an isolated existence where they idolise the past. They relay for example how the experience a growing ill-will towards "the foreigners" in the Danish media and in their sparse interaction with the ethnic Danish population. They feel forgotten by the surrounding society and have been 'parked' on early retirement – because no one knows what to do with them.

Statistics Denmark's numbers from 2008 underline the situation as they show that the share of Bosnian refugees who are eligible for early retirement due to traumas and PTSD is the highest among refugee groups in Denmark.



The diagram shows the percentage of each group receiving early retirement funds.

Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistisk Årbog 2008

Since these issues were raised in 2008 public institutions, organisations and health care professionals all over the country have reported about groups and Bosnian refugees living an isolated and solitary life as early pensioners.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The target group of the project was severely traumatised Bosnian refugees between 40-60 years of age. A life with traumas and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often entail a complicated family situation, serious social issues such as unemployment and isolation as well as psychiatric diseases such as depression and psychotic tendencies. Many of these refugees whose life has become empty in the post-war period dream of returning to the hometown.

The project wanted to give them an opportunity to try this dream in practice with support and help from professionals. The aim of the project was to help the participants through the clarification process about where to build their future. The process was thought to mobilise the participants' personal resources so as to engage more in life around them – whether in Denmark or Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The primary objective of the project was

“through individually planned clarification processes in Denmark and Bosnia, to support severely traumatised refugees and their families in a personal clarification of the wish to return to their hometown”

The secondary objectives of the project were

- To contribute in providing the traumatised refugees with the tools necessary to realise their decision
- To develop a method which meets the wish of traumatised refugees to find clarity about the future with regards to the homeland
- To develop a method by which to organise such clarification processes for other refugee groups
- To communicate experiences and knowledge to any relevant agent in the field of rehabilitation and integration in Denmark

CHALLENGES

From the beginning, the main part of the participants had a black-and-white image of the reality of the Bosnian society – and interestingly, this image had contradictory elements.

The homeland is attractive because it is linked to an almost mythical past where life was easier and made more sense

The homeland is repulsive because the image of life there is frozen in the time of war

Thus, a future life in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be described both as a dream and a nightmare for the main part of the project's participants.

The common trait of these two images is that they do not capture the actual situation of Bosnia today.

Concrete goals

- That the participants gain a realistic image and sense of the Bosnian society today
- That the participants take an active role in the clarification of the practical circumstances regarding their return such as property cases, the right to social pensions etc.
- That the participants with the support of the project and associated partners visit their hometowns and thus try the dream in relation to reality

THE PRACTICAL SET-UP OF THE PROJECT

The aim of the Danish Repatriation Act is to “provide foreigners with the best possible basis for making a decision about repatriation”.

Within the framework of this legislation – and on the basis of experiences from rehabilitation and integrations work – the Danish Refugee Council developed a method for a clarification process which would be thought to attain the mentioned goals.

The tripartite model of the process

1. The preparation phase – duration: 2 months

In the preparation of the project, ‘contracts’ were made with associated partners and participants. The project executive organised plans of action with each participant on the basis of extensive interviews.

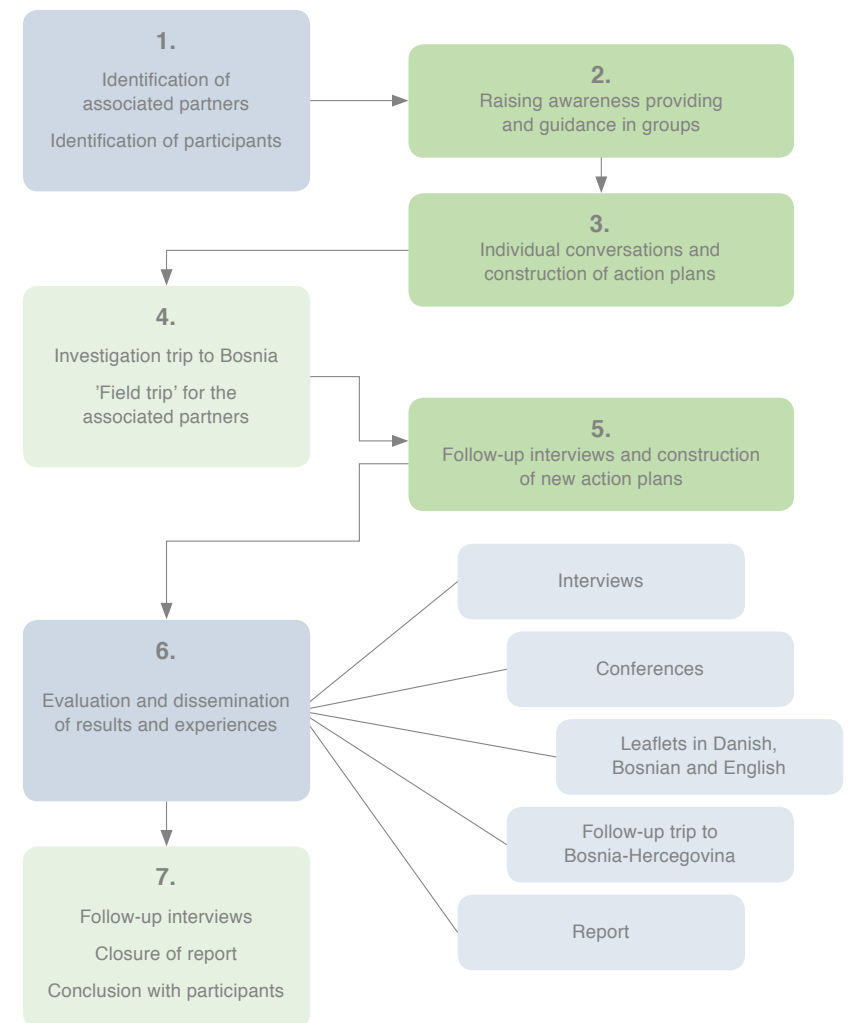
2. The investigation phase – duration: 2 + 2 months

In this phase, meetings and visits with institutions and organisations in Bosnia were arranged. Following the planning, the participants travelled to their respective hometowns to clarify the material, social and political conditions they found necessary in order to make an informed decision about the possibility of return.

3. The evaluation and communication phase – duration 4 months

In this closing phase of the project, follow-up interviews were carried out with all the participants – the ones who had chosen to return to Bosnia as well as the ones who had chosen to stay in Denmark. The objective of the interviews was to establish whether the project had helped them in their individual process of clarification.

As part of the communication strategy an evaluation report was produced as well as an information leaflet in Danish, English and Bosnian. Two seminars were held for professionals working with refugees.



- = Project management
- = Management + participants
- = Management + associated partners

ASSOCIATED PARTNERS



The duties of the associated partners were to establish contact with potential participants and assist in the selection of the final participants. The representatives from the associated partners followed the participants they were familiar with, through the process by motivating conversations as well as a visit to their hometown and assistance in meeting the authorities in Bosnia.

Contracts were made with

- The Municipality of Nyborg, Department of Social Affairs
- Centre for Trauma and Torture Survivors (CETT), Vejle
- Association for retired Bosnians, Odense
- Association of pensioners, Brøndby
- The Danish Refugee Council's Centre for Clarification and Rehabilitation, Herlev

PARTICIPANTS

The project received a total of 65 applications from potential participants in the project. Of these 28 were selected, 14 men and 14 women.

	Age 40-50 yrs	Age 51-60 yrs	Age > 60 yrs	Receives early retirement	Receives social welfare
	4	8	2	11	3
	5	7	2	11	3
Total	9	15	4	22	6

The participants were selected on the basis of an assessment of their situation as a whole, conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and their motivation to actively do something about the problems which persist in their lives.

POSSIBILITIES FOR SUPPORT IN REPATRIATION CASES

After the selection of the relevant participants, a meeting was held for participants in different parts of Denmark. These meetings provided the group with information about the Danish Repatriation Act and the options enshrined in this law. The concrete procedures were communicated and further elaborated in the individual interviews with the participants.

According to the Repatriation Act, any applicant fulfilling the specified criteria will receive financial support and counselling upon submission of an application for voluntary return to the homeland. The financial support covers travel expenses, a specified fee for establishing a new life in the home country, social security insurance and possibly a reintegration subsidy if the applicant is retired in Denmark.

FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT

The project management had chosen to focus on the individual participant's progress in clarifying the relevant conditions and face the emotional 'leftovers' from the war. The doubt related to these issues, constitute the main barrier to the decision-making process for many.

Individual sessions with each participant (or couple) were conducted. During these expectations and worries were investigated in depth.

CHALLENGES FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

From the conversations we know what worries the refugees most about permanent return.

1) The economic condition upon resettlement in the home country

There is a general concern about the economical conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina due to the high level of unemployment and the relatively small pension to collect as former victim of war. The participants have great concerns for the economic sustainability of return.

2) Housing and possibility of support and health insurance

The participants are very aware of the high level of social services they are entitled to in Denmark. Thus, it is important to them to gain knowledge about the social system in Bosnia because many of them will depend on social security upon return. Many also have a wish to continue treatment for traumas and PTSD and the options to do so need clarification.

3) Physical and psychological security

The participants express an ill-defined fear of violations of their rights by public institutions and/or other ethnic groups in society. The participants are in general very concerned about their mental health. The meeting with their hometown and the origin of their trauma can cause re-traumatisation and complicate everyday life further.

A TESTAMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

The investigation trip presented many emotional challenges for the participants and also the representatives of the associated partners involved in part of the journey.

The reconnection with the homeland evoked many ambivalent and contradictory feelings; to be home but at the same time be completely alienated from that which they have dreamt of as home.

The participants were interviewed as follow-up and evaluation of the project upon their return to Denmark after the investigation trip. During these conversations they were given the opportunity to clarify any doubts after the trip as well as present their criticisms and comments to the project management.

The participants express

- *Gratitude* for the support and guidance offered by the project in the decision-making process
- *Satisfaction* with the project's facilitation of access to the authorities
- *Recognition* of the necessity of a 'push' in the direction of the clarification process
- *Greater insight* into the conditions of Bosnian society because they have been there in a longer period than they usually – and with the distinct purpose to clarify their doubts

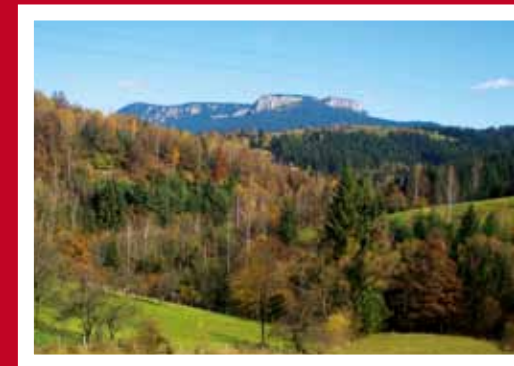
RESULTS

All the participants have expressed that the project has moved something in them and helped them get started or through the process of making a decision about repatriation. After the closure of the project, the following results were registered

- 3 participants had decided to repatriate to Bosnia-Hercegovina
- 8 participants wish to return but await clarification of certain conditions before the process can continue
- 9 participants wish to stay in Denmark at this point but consider returning at a later time
- 8 participants have chosen to abandon the dream about repatriation and have clarified that their future is in Denmark

EXPERIENCES

- It is of paramount importance to traumatised refugees that their dreams and thoughts of returning to the homeland are heard and respected
- Concrete investigations into the situation in the home country should be carried out prior to the final decision is made – and traumatised refugees should be assisted in this process
- It may be necessary to help refugees who consider returning to the home country in establishing a reliable contact with the relevant authorities – often they are influenced by ‘old divisions’
- The uncertainty of where the future lies is the primary obstacle experienced by most participants in integration efforts in Denmark and also in planning a sustainable return



RECOMMENDATIONS

The project Integration in Denmark or back to the homeland has provided us with many experiences concerning traumatised refugees. These are useful not just in the context of repatriation efforts but also in integration and rehabilitation work.

Thus, the Danish Refugee Council recommends

- That we talk about the dreams of the homeland and make scientific enquiries as to the impact it has on the refugee's ability to integrate and be part of the work force
- That the social problems faced by many refugees who receive early retirement funds are uncovered and documented
- That the homeland perspective is actively employed in rehabilitation courses for refugees with traumas and PTSD



PROTECTION & REPATRIATION

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Information about traumatised
refugees is available at

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November 2009