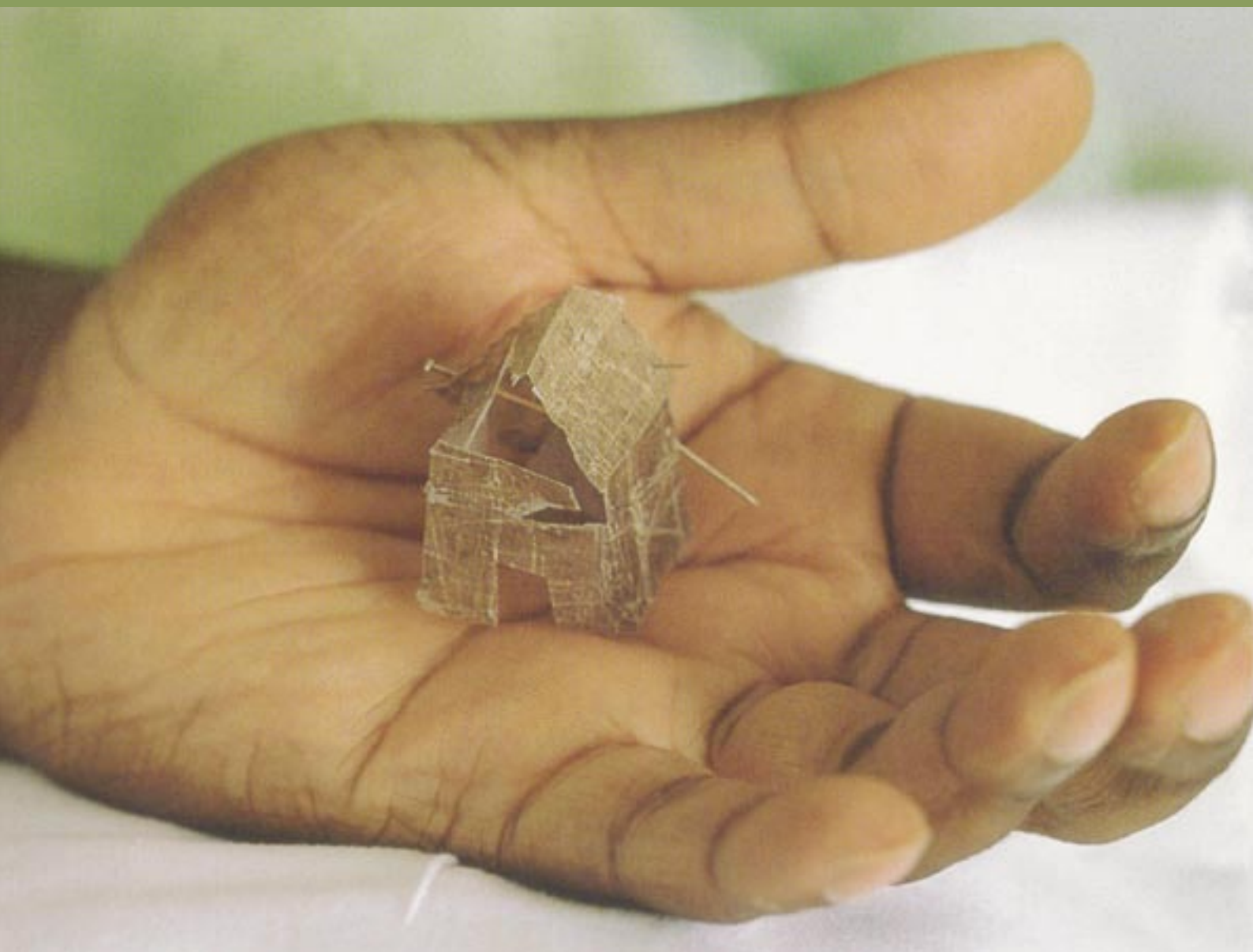# House: loss, refuge and belonging

Conference Report
16-18 September 2004
Trondheim, Norway

Introduction and summaries of conference presentations on:

- Conceptual confusion re house & home
- Sustainable settlement rehabilitation for IDPs
- Housing reconstruction in Bosnia
- Palestinians in Lebanon
- Eritrean returnees from Sudan

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Introduction

This report summarises some of the papers presented at the international conference *House: refuge, loss and belonging* convened by the Research Group on Forced Migration at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in September 2004.

Most forced migration researchers encounter refugees and IDPs who express their experience of acute loss. By exploring forced migration through the issue of house, the conference highlighted the fact that loss can be conceptualised in several ways. Loss of house for forced migrants represents not only actual material loss but also loss of status and standing and economic deprivation. Furthermore, loss of house is deeply connected with issues of home and identity, human security and protection. The conference explored these different aspects of housing for forced migrants through case studies from Palestine, the Caucasus, Indonesia, India, Eritrea, Rwanda and the Balkans.

Heated and inspiring discussions showed how housing has different meanings in different contexts. House for forced migrants signifies both material and symbolic dimensions and is located between memory, identity, survival and everyday life. How houses are constructed in a particular context is of crucial importance and implies a need for specific local knowledge in (re)building. The costs of building vary greatly from region to region as does donor commitment. Whereas the international community has invested substantially in Balkan housing projects, only very limited funding is provided for rebuilding in Africa. The fact that there was little discussion on housing for forced migrants in Africa during the conference highlights the extent to which Africa is neglected.

Housing reconstruction is never politically neutral but is intertwined with questions of identify, family, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. It is important to probe how nation states may use housing for forced migrants to control them and often to fuel and prolong conflicts. Many of the conference presenters explored how politics are played out with the house as a tool. During a war, house is often linked to identity politics as protagonists systematically burn the houses of the 'other' – of the enemy. New political boundaries are delineated by the way housing is rebuilt after conflict. When assistance is imposed, or is not based on people's own understandings or appreciation of the house as a social building block, it is common to find empty reconstructed houses.

The tsunami which hit the coasts of the Indian Ocean affected states already experiencing conflict-related displacement. Rebuilding has complex political, social and cultural dimensions. Many refugees, IDPs and returnees have yet again lost their houses and belongings and find themselves forced back into camps. While camps may be the only solution in many emergencies, far too many forced migrants live in camps for far too long. As protracted displacement creates a perception of permanent impermanence, the standard of shelter becomes crucially important. Inappropriate planning can unnecessarily prolong relief stages of humanitarian operations and affect subsequent recovery. Deeper understanding is needed of how war, disasters and displacement lead to social, political and economic changes that affect people's preferences as to where and how they live. A home becomes a home when people have a choice. After a war or disaster people must be given the space to express their wishes for the future and to build their homes.

More knowledge is needed on the role of housing in processes of forced migration. During the conference, we learnt that there is only limited information about shelter and housing in the database of the Norwegian Refugee Council's Global IDP Project. We hope this brief report will put housing on humanitarian and research agendas and contribute to discussion of which dimensions and principles need to be taken into account when discussing the meaning and rebuilding of houses for forced migrants.

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Tents in concrete? Housing the internally displaced

by Hans Skotte

Homes are in houses (of various shapes and forms). This was pointedly illustrated by a displaced Serbian professor as he showed a TV reporter his most cherished belongings, a row of worn books: "I have a home", he lamented, "but no house to put it in!"

My title is ambiguous, unexplained, contradictory, even absurd – much like what is experienced in the quest of providing shelter for IDPs.

Take the term 'house' and such related words as 'housing', 'dwelling', 'home', 'residence' and 'shelter'. They all hold different meanings but in the world of emergency relief planning they are bandied about as if they were synonyms. To define them is not an academic game. It is a necessity because the consequences of conceptual confusion may create unwelcome results, to say the least.

I am an architect, researcher and planner. The researcher's main question is "What has – or might have – happened and why?" whereas the planner asks "What will – or ought to – happen and how?" These invariably present two different perspectives. But they do overlap. There is always future application and retrospective data present in both these approaches. The tension – because these approaches cannot be reconciled – is what makes cross-disciplinary research and planning both intellectually stimulating and effective.

Implementation taken for granted

Implementation is not an abstract process fulfilling what has otherwise been planned or decided. This needs to be stressed for, in the 'just-do-it' world of international aid and relief, implementation is thought of in almost abstract terms. But implementation is a process that in itself holds reflexive powers, powers that might change the way we understand what we do – and what we ought to do.

This leads to IDP housing or shelter interventions being handled as if they were no different from distributing blankets, medicine, food or clothing. Shelter provision is primarily acknowledged as a logistical challenge. Doctors manage the building of hospitals, teachers the building of schools and whoever is left does housing – in most cases, the IDPs themselves.

I have found strikingly inappropriate technical solutions as well as sloppy workmanship to be common in war-time building. It is as if there is a license to bypass the laws of physics just because there is a conflict. International agencies remain unaccountable and there are no sanctions to bring against contractors who cut corners. By the time the embedded problems arise, the organisations are likely to be gone and the beneficiaries have no contractual relationship with the contractors. They rarely complain to donors or NGOs for fear of being seen to be ungrateful.

When locating IDP settlements, be it emergency settlements or more permanent structures, the contest for suitable sites is loaded with prejudice and political bias. Due to the perceived urgency of the mission, NGO's lack of professional planning capacity and their need to respect local power-brokers, decisions on location are usually left to local authorities who generally do not welcome displaced people. This most often leads to sites being located 'out of sight, out of mind'. Building in isolated locations further stigmatises and marginalises displaced people, makes communication difficult, infrastructure expensive and adds little long-term value to the environment or the local communities.

Camp planners prescribe a planning approach that takes the single shelter unit as the point of departure. Invariably this leads to highly inappropriate aggregate results. This was apparent during the height of the Rwandan refugee influx when the Ngara settlement became Tanzania's second largest population centre after Dar es Salaam. Everything from plot size to the dimensions of walkways was standardised. The social strength of the camp residents was totally disregarded as shelter was designed with little reference to the dynamics of people living together. Ngara bore the imprint of a prisoner of war camp.

Humanitarians love plastic sheeting, both as a skin and structure. The microclimate that these sheets create – no ventilation, unbearably hot during the day, without insulating properties, unable to diffuse vapour created by people inside – significantly affects the quality of life for the people in these settlements.

People displaced by war or natural disasters retain only what they are able to bring when they flee. These are indeed 'items of home' and will

the contest for suitable sites is loaded with prejudice and political bias

forever carry profound meaning – way beyond the items' functional qualities. But they need space, secure space. So too does all the other 'stuff' displaced people acquire, now that 'stuff' is all they have and now that they live among people whom they have no reason to trust. As minimum living space standards are being applied (typically 4.5 metres^2 per person) little space is left for 'stuff' – which by now makes up the very symbol of home. Under such circumstances people as well as 'stuff' are itemised, deprived of social and symbolic powers.

Houses become homes when they are chosen

Housing as homes are personalised objects, symbols of identity. That is what makes houses legitimate targets in identity wars. Houses are 'killed' in order to expel their inhabitants. When your dwelling is destroyed and you – for reasons incomprehensible to you – have been banished from against your will, at gunpoint, your home is lost. The loss seriously erodes the very meaning of life and its continuity. Having had

Homes are best rebuilt by processes which are the outcome of personal choices.

that continuity severed, the most obvious way of reestablishing it, and thus bring some sense back into your life, is to renew your choice of home: the very place from which you were forced to leave. It is the lack of chance, or choice, of 'going back' that often leave IDPs focused on a home-laden return. When the option of going back is actually available, the very choice of staying put is the founding stone of your new home, as some stay, and some go back.

Houses can be reborn. Returnees in Bosnia expend most of their resources in reestablishing the former glory of their houses. Reconstructed houses stand as a signal to the 'others', the neighbours who stayed behind: "We're back! You did not succeed!" Reconstruction is the latest move in the continued conflict – now transformed into a material 'contest' between neighbouring identity groups. Thus housing is unlikely to foster reconciliation. That houses are too identity-laden and personal to carry reconciliatory powers is hardly surprising considering that these very attributes were the cause of their destruction in the first place.

Towards recovery

For local recovery to take place, for the IDPs to shift the focus towards the future and make choices accordingly, the reflexive properties of the recovery process must be acknowledged. Recovery will be directed, guided or influenced by pre-war/pre-disaster perceptions, either to recreate or make new. All post-war or post-disaster records show this tension. Some may want to go back to the 'old ways' while others will try to realise what were mere dreams during the 'old days'. The political implications are obvious. International assistance, however, tends, also for political reasons, to be biased in favour of restoring the past, perceived (or intentionally interpreted) through material means as what 'used to be'.

Housing reconstruction may make a significant contribution towards economic recovery. Traditional housing construction creates more economic dynamics, i.e. more jobs, than does for instance, manufacturing. Housing investments generate employment in construction, in production of materials, tools and transport. These basic economic lessons, so crucial in getting Europe back on it feet after WWII, are not available to the war-damaged countries of today. In a globalised economy no consideration is given to sourcing the building materials which typically comprise 60-80% of the cost of a house. Importing cheaper materials from abroad may save money in the short term but will have overall negative effects on recovering economies.

Engaging local agency

Homes are best rebuilt by processes which are the outcome of personal choices. Doing it in an organised way, as is the case in aided self-help reconstruction, holds additional potential benefits for the recovery process. By transferring decisions to local agency, to local organisations or legitimate leaders, legitimacy and trust are strengthened. The self-confidence of success is a necessary stepping stone for further ventures along the road to recovery.

This is how the Bosniak village of Grapska in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina was reconstructed. At the end of their seven years of displacement, the community association was given the mandate by SRSA, a Swedish NGO, to formulate the criteria by which house owners were selected to receive free building materials. In hindsight, these criteria look astonishingly similar to those set by the US Housing Agency regarding housing credit for returning soldiers after WWII but different from those set by welfare-oriented international NGOs. The house owners in Grapska were furthermore obliged to obtain all legal papers and permissions at the local (and obstructive) Serb-controlled municipality without the facilitatory presence and hand-holding of a foreign NGO.

SRSA did provide returning families with technical advice, necessary tools and transport support but it was the families who organised and executed all the work, hired artisans and made alternative designs. Almost all the owners added more materials, paid for by themselves, in order to rebuild houses similar to those destroyed. In addition to the materials for about 300 houses provided by the Swedes, an additional 100 houses have been reconstructed purely out of private funds, mostly through remittances. People believe in the place – and have trust in the people who make up its leadership and in future opportunities.

Although the houses of Grapska look like most new houses in Bosnia, what their housing has done is create a human and social platform for recovery. It is the outcome of the professional intuition on the part of the SRSA's head of office in Tuzla and the agency of the returnees. The prospects look good. What housing has done in Grapska could, and should, be replicated elsewhere.

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Sustainable settlement rehabilitation for IDPs

by Chantal Laurent

Settlement Rehabilitation Programmes (SRPs) are found in a wide variety of field settings but require the same basic criteria and methodology of approach to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. Our case studies of SRPs cover three countries. In Azerbaijan, with 800,000 to 1 million IDPs out of a total population of 7.5 million, ECHO rehabilitated in the Fizuli region 550 houses, 12 schools and 3 health centres. In Rwanda, with some 1.5 million returnees and 750,000 IDPs (total population 8 million), UNHCR resettlement programme created 200 villages, with 96,000 shelters built. Finally, in northern Iraq, with some 750,000 IDPs and returnees (total population 3.5 million), UN-HABITAT built over 25,000 houses and a number of social and physical infrastructure buildings.

In all three cases a number of houses built remain empty. Major reasons include erroneous selection of beneficiaries, lack of services and infrastructure, lack of security, unclear land and housing ownership, insufficient farming land, lack of other income-generating activities, absence of community participation in decision making and lack of funds for operation and maintenance. In all three countries, the authorities' hidden agendas in their resettlement policies contributed to the unsustainability of SRPs.

Substantial humanitarian assistance had been provided by the international community to cope with the immediate needs of refugees and nationals in the various emergency situations – but these programmes were established on an emergency basis with insufficient thought for sustainability. Those implementing such programmes were under pressure to deliver the highest number of shelters in the shortest time possible. Yet the more unsettled the institutional environment and the more uncertain the prospects that project benefits will be sustainable, the more flexibility needs to be built into project design. The following

are some of the key conditions for sustainable interventions:

■ **Fair selection of beneficiaries:** Survey criteria need to take into account both vulnerability and willingness to return. In all three countries, the surveys and identification of beneficiaries were partially manipulated by the local authorities – and the needs of the most vulnerable were not necessarily addressed. Corrective measures were taken during programme implementation, either by further surveys as in Iraq, or in Azerbaijan through constant monitoring in the field, and – in both countries – by cross-checking with data from other aid agencies. Selection of beneficiaries should also focus on social cohesion and diversity to create viable communities. Both in Rwanda and Iraq, widow-headed families were targeted for specific resettlement projects, concentrating vulnerability in unviable communities. Social problems and tension can be created by providing good quality housing to resettlers while local poor families continue to live in sub-standard houses in the same settlement areas.

■ **Integrated multisectoral approach:** In all three countries, programmes essentially addressed rural and semi-urban populations in isolation. There was no consideration of the rural-urban linkage critical for sustainability of any settlement. SRPs with a vision and strategy can make effective contributions toward linking urban and rural communities to create opportunities and strengthen communities and regions.

■ **Minimum standards and appropriate interventions:** There needs to be adherence to adequate minimum standards for housing, basic services and infrastructure, transportation, employment/income opportunities, and sufficient security and justice to ensure the long-term well-being of the community as a whole. All

interventions should be appropriate. Reconstructing better quality housing with techniques and materials that are beyond local skill levels will discourage improvements or replication as families expand a core unit and construct new units. In Rwanda, UNHCR had issued a construction manual but the implementing partners paid little heed to it – because of time constraints and delivery demands.

■ **Community participation:** This promotes beneficiaries' sense of ownership and ensures project sustainability. In Iraq, consultation of the communities and their participation were initially weak as time constraints forced implementers to focus on technical aspects to the detriment of community involvement. In Azerbaijan, by contrast, the community was involved in correcting beneficiary lists and assessing needs not previously considered in the original project.

■ **Gender equality:** Gender perspectives in human settlement should be automatically integrated into legislation, policies, programmes and projects. Post-conflict female-headed households should be a priority. Regular monitoring is necessary to ensure that women are effectively involved in decision making and in receiving assistance – and aid agencies should set an example by hiring both local and international female staff.

■ **Capacity building:** International experts will not stay forever. Any SRP must therefore include institutional capacity building of local authorities, training of local staff, university-level courses, vocational training of beneficiaries and school education.

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Housing reconstruction in Bosnia: field realities

by Ana Povrzenic

Housing reconstruction is not just a question of building houses. It is about return and restoring the right to return to all those who lose this right during conflict.

Housing destruction and forced expulsions were used as a method of ethnic cleansing during the war in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH). Thirty-seven per cent of pre-war housing stock was partially or totally destroyed. When the Dayton Peace Agreement ended conflict in 1995 over half the pre-war BiH population had been forced to leave home. More than a million people were displaced within BiH, mainly forced to reside in collective centres or in the homes of other displaced persons. Bosnian Muslims occupied the homes of Serbs in areas within the Federation (the Bosniak-Croat entity of BiH) while Serbs occupied the homes of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the other entity, Republika Srpska. Croats occupied the homes of Bosnian Muslims and Serbs in western Herzegovina. Dayton foresaw minority return as a mechanism to reverse ethnic cleansing. It enshrined the right of refugees and IDPs to return, a right now granted under BiH law to everybody whose property was confiscated during the war.

There has been a contradictory relationship between the return and reconstruction strategies of the international community and the local authorities. The international community promoted minority return but the local authorities' policy was highly politicised. Neither of the two entities into which BiH is divided promoted minority return to their territories. The Serb entity promoted local integration of displaced persons and refugees of Serb origin while the Federation pushed for, on one hand, a massive inflow of Bosnian Muslims from abroad to their territory and, on the other, the return of Bosniaks to their pre-war homes in those parts of the Serb entity where they had previously formed a majority.

Jump-starting property rights enforcement

The Housing Verification and Monitoring Unit (HVM) was established in 1999 by key members of the international community to address growing problems related to housing reconstruction assistance and property laws. Its primary task has been to collect verified and objective data on the occupancy status of housing units built to encourage return to places of origin. HVM has worked to identify 'double occupants' (those who have received assistance while continuing to occupy the property of other displaced people), to encourage evictions and to put pressure on recalcitrant local authorities to enforce property laws.[1]

As a result of interviews with over 250,000 beneficiaries and their family members, HVM has collected information on more than 53,000 reconstructed housing units, over 13,000 repossessed housing units and over 68,000 temporary addresses. The large sample size – some 70% of all beneficiaries – permits valid analysis of the return process.

The actual return to reconstructed houses has become the only indicator of the effectiveness of international investment. Registered beneficiaries returned to only 43% of the reconstructed houses. Our most startling finding is that there are 11,304 uninhabited reconstructed housing units in BiH, 21% of the total. Conservatively taking the cost of a single reconstructed housing unit at €9,000, means a total of over €100m has been wasted.

There have been several impediments to the return of refugees and IDPs. In many cases their homes were damaged during the war and in need of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Secondly, their pre-war homes were occupied mainly by other displaced people. Thirdly, employment possibilities for the returnees were scarce. Lastly, many refugees and IDPs were unwilling to live in a community where they would become a minority, out of fear either for their lives or of being discriminated against by the local authorities.

The presence or absence of infrastructure, such as lack of electricity and water supplies, or vicinity to land mines, does not primarily determine why people do not return to their houses. Demographic indicators seem to be more important for explaining return or non-return to reconstructed housing units. This is also related to the relationship between employment status and return. A high percentage of beneficiaries who have returned are not employed. This could be directly related to the age structure of returned and non-returned beneficiaries. As many as 38% of returned beneficiaries are over the age of 50.

This reluctance of people of working age to return from urban to rural areas is, of course, a universal trend observed in countries not afflicted by conflict.

From the outset of reconstruction in Bosnia, matching available and projected funding for housing reconstruction with identified needs was not realistic. The international community's major mistake was failure to distinguish between the real needs for reconstruction assistance for those with no alternative housing and who genuinely intended to return and, on the other hand, the natural wishes of people to reclaim their pre-war property.

Donations were supposed to be allocated to the most needy who intend to return but needs and intentions are difficult to verify and therefore donations ended up with those who just wanted to get back what they had before the war.

Mechanisms of housing reconstruction assistance

In the aftermath of Dayton, housing reconstruction was prioritised and money was plentiful. In 1996-1997 Bosnia was awash with inexperienced NGOs and local construction companies seeking to sign contracts with donors and the donors had money they were eager to spend. As a result, contracts were awarded to foreign NGOs with no previous involvement in housing and to local companies with no housing construction experience. Donors focused on the house rather than the owner and programmes were driven by engineering rather than by social or economic considerations. It was naively assumed that reconstruction of houses would automatically lead to return. Implementing agencies took photographs of themselves and beneficiaries in front of newly built houses but neither donors nor NGOs ever checked whether people really returned.

In 1997 the Office of the High Representative (OHR – the international body created to make a reality of Dayton)[2] set up a Return and Reconstruction Task Force (RRTF) to coordinate return and reconstruction activities. Led by OHR and UNHCR, RRTF obtained information on the needs of refugees and IDPs through its network of field offices and direct contacts with NGOs, local authorities and representatives of refugees and IDPs. In addition to advising donors on where to allocate their money, RRTF offices intervened to act against local authorities trying to block minority returns. In some cases mayors and local officials were sacked.

Some of the more successful policies that were promoted were the so-called 'return axes' which took into consideration the relationship between the area where the displaced lived and where they were returning to. Another policy was the 'three Ss' (space, security, sustainability) to integrate ideas of sustainability (employment schemes, mine clearance, infrastructure and the building of democracy) into the aims of reconstruction programming. The 'spontaneous return policy' enabled rapid disbursement of funds to assist spontaneous returns. The inter-national community was particularly keen to promote 'secondary movement', which meant reconstructing houses for those beneficiaries occupying others' property in order to start a chain movement of vacating property. The slogan 'reconstruct two houses for the price of one' was popular with donors.

Policies to encourage cross-border return were less successful. The main legacy of self-help projects has been a large number of unfinished houses with building materials either stacked outside or sold by recipients.

Mixed success

As part of its exit strategy OHR now focuses on training local authorities to implement housing reconstruction projects. On one level BiH has been an example of international determination to plan a reconstruction process to assist return of displaced people. By the end of 2004 nearly all outstanding claims for property restitution were resolved – a considerable achievement given the high number of outstanding claims in 2000 and the high levels of initial obstruction from local authorities. However, despite the billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance that have poured into BiH since 1996 over a million persons have yet to return, and are unlikely ever to do so. An alarmingly high number of reconstructed properties remain empty.

The housing policies of the international community were more reactive than pro-active. Much more could have been done if the international community had had a joint strategy for rebuilding before or shortly after entering BiH. Housing reconstruction projects could have been improved by greater focus on:

■ **Beneficiary selection:** in order to determine whether a potential beneficiary genuinely wishes to return, it is important to have in-depth knowledge of the community to which potential beneficiaries belong, their pre-war way of life and their current livelihoods, access to health and education and concerns about security. The international community has failed to prioritise beneficiaries properly according to their needs or to invest in resources to verify the information on ownership presented by potential beneficiaries. It has thus been easy to manipulate assistance. Houses have been reconstructed for families who have no intention of returning, as well as for those who already own one or more properties within the borders of BiH.

■ **Coordination:** lack of liaison between a wide range of donors, implementing agencies and local authorities has made it impossible to properly assess actual needs of BiH citizens and to efficiently manage housing reconstruction assistance.

■ **Joined-up policy making:** management of humanitarian aid in BiH has improved since the initial post-Dayton chaos but the lack of a joint strategy still diminishes the effectiveness of international assistance towards housing reconstruction. International indecisiveness on how to approach housing reconstruction assistance and whether to provide grants or loans has meant that Bosnians see housing assistance as their right, without any strings attached.

Developing synergy with non-housing projects is vital. Housing reconstruction is not just a physical project but must be a community-driven initiative linked to rehabilitation of infrastructure, support of livelihoods, de-mining and construction of health facilities, schools, mosques and churches.

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1. For further information, see FMR 21, pp15-16
www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR21/FMR2105.pdf
2. www.ohr.int

Insecurity of habitat for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

by Rosemary Sayigh

As Israel refuses to accept responsibility for their exodus from their Palestinian homeland – and Lebanon refuses to allow them to resettle – displaced Palestinians have to deal with the knowledge that their homes in Lebanon are not really homes, while their real homes are not about to be restored to them.

Studies of Palestinian refugees have tended to by-pass the domestic domain, ignoring the many ways in which 'home' is articulated in the national struggle, as a symbol of loss, as the ultimate goal of struggle and also as the basis of daily life needs and ambitions. Palestinian studies have focused on an idealised world in which the concepts of homeland and home are usually collapsed, precluding the possibility of examining one as related to but not necessarily reducible to the other.

We cannot simply transpose the concept of 'home' into an Arab milieu without noting the problem of cultural translation. In English there is an etymological distinction between 'house' and 'home'. 'House' comes from roots that mean 'cover' or 'shelter', and refers to a physical structure, whereas 'home' derives from words that mean a group of dwellings, a neighbourhood or village. The closest equivalents of 'home' in Arabic – *beit* and *dar* – mean both more and less than 'home'. They refer both to a 'house' but also to the family that lives in it, as 'home' does not. From their reference to a 'family', conceived in Arabic as a lineage that continues over time, *beit* and *dar* have a connotation of permanence, security and projection into the future. Unlike 'home', *beit* and *dar* do not imply enclosure and privacy – whether for the family or the individual –but rather a sense of sharing a common space with others. Furthermore, they do not carry the

sense of 'origin' that enables 'home' to be stretched to mean 'homeland'; Arabic has another word for this – *watan*.

Beit has implications of security and permanence that have been violated in Lebanon more than in the other countries which 'host' Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian villager's *beit* in Palestine was built to last forever. It might frequently be extended, it might be abandoned, but it was rarely an object of commercial exchange. Whereas in European autobiography the 'home' is often positioned as the womb-like beginning of a life, a place that the individual leaves but cannot ever fully return to, the word *beit* refers both to a structure and to a lineage that continues to exist somewhere, whether or not its original physical shell still stands.

The strength of this sense of *al-beit* as inalienable property is suggested by several aspects of refugee behaviour during the expulsions of 1948. They stayed in their villages after the fall of the cities until they were directly attacked. They remained in the neighbourhood of their villages until expelled across borders and then made attempts to return. Once having crossed into the 'host' countries, many remained near the border until chased away by the Lebanese army and installed in camps, as the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) registered refugees, and residence rights became fixed in specific localities.

Palestinian *hijra*

Little research has been done on the Palestinian *hijra*[1] but accounts I have recorded myself, or heard others tell of, bear all the signs of an absence from home expected to be temporary, because permanent separation was as unimaginable to rural Palestinian Arabs as the sale of a house. From this unimaginable separation grew the symbolism of the key, kept by most refugee families as evidence of possession, passed on to heirs,

since childhood she had been forced to move nine times and had lost four residences as a result of war.

displayed in Palestinian exhibitions, and increasingly used as motif in posters and children's art work. Attachment to original homes continued to be manifested long after it became evident that Israel's refusal to repatriate the refugees was endorsed by the 'international community', and even after the fading of the hope that Palestinian armed struggle would lead to repatriation.

Refugees in Lebanon have been subjected to serial displacement, violence and insecurity. Camps such as Shateela have been destroyed more than once. One informant told me that since childhood she had been forced to move nine times and had lost four residences as a result of war. The size of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon today tells its own story. In 1948-49, the number of Palestinians who entered this country was around 100,000. Had the population grown at the expected rate there should have been some 540,000 by 2001 but the official number of registered refugees in 2001 – according to UNRWA – was only 384,000. The real number of those residing in Lebanon in 2001

was estimated to be not more than 200,000. Such a low growth rate is unparalleled in any other of the host countries and contradicts the arguments of those Lebanese politicians who exaggerate the Palestinian population and Lebanon's 'burden'. For Palestinians, Lebanon has been a site of population loss. Though some of this loss is accounted for by naturalisation, the major cause is emigration induced by displacement and insecurity.

The initial displacement of the exiled Palestinians became in Lebanon a continuous insecurity of shelter, a rightlessness in regard to present and future residence that denies them a basic attribute of *al-beit*.

This historic insecurity is currently exacerbated by rumours of plans to cut roads through certain camps, by government restrictions on building and repair, by new laws forbidding property ownership, and by repeated official statements negating the possibility of *towteen* (re-settlement). As Edward Said delineated so well, the multiply-displaced person looks at his/her home with different eyes from those of 'normal' people. Painfully suspended between two rejections, Palestinians in Lebanon struggle to lead 'normal' lives, to give their children at least the hope

village identities have persisted just below the surface, even among third and fourth generation exiles

of a 'some day' normality. But normality cannot even be imagined with its core element, the right to a secure and stable *beit*. This is a dimension of the question of refugee habitat that surveys reporting on space ratios or building materials do not approach.

Memorialisation of villages

Blocked from playing a part in the Palestinian national struggle since the Oslo Accords and excluded from Lebanese political life, Palestinian exiles in Lebanon have tentatively re-opened memories of original localities that were overlaid by Palestinian nationalism in the days of the PLO. The void left by the PLO's

engagement on the Oslo 'road', with its implicit abandonment of diaspora refugee rights, has been only partially filled by the movement for Return.[2] Emigration and despair are other reactions to the long stagnation. But memorialisation of original villages has also re-emerged to fill the political vacuum, as in the re-establishment of village-based funds and cultural clubs, the publishing of village histories and, whenever possible, visits to original homes in 'Israel'/'Palestine'.

For Palestinians, especially those of rural origin, a *beit* is necessarily set among familiar neighbours. They are more essential to its description than its 'look' or structural features. This sociality of settlement is continually reconstructed out of new social and material elements, and can be viewed as a historically produced form of resistance to insecurity, displacement and coercive exile.

Drawing on an already existing cultural repertoire, the settlement of Palestinian rural refugees in Lebanon has shown strong patterns of pre-existing village-based familiarity. The mindset of village solidarity and self-defence continued long after 1948 into the period of exile and, in camps like Bourj al-Barajneh or Nahr al-Bared, the layout preserved inter-village demarcation lines. The slightness of boundaries of 'home' in refugee camps has been underwritten by relations of affinity and consanguinity which laced the homes of a single village into 'one family' (a phrase often used with positive connotations to describe relations within a single village or camp quarter, sometimes rhetorically enlarged to include the Palestinian nation).

As UNRWA camps were established, people tended to settle close to co-villagers, so that most camps were divided into village quarters, a feature that was still strongly marked in the 1970s, though less so today after three decades of conflict and displacement. Men who reached positions of importance, whether in UNRWA or the Resistance movement, were identified less by their

family name than the village they came from. This is a pattern that has persisted in spite of war destruction, and population change through emigration and immigration, transmitted in the names of areas and through intense social interaction. Suppressed in periods of national mobilisation, village identities have persisted just below the surface, even among third and fourth generation exiles. Even children aged three and four can mostly tell what Palestinian villages they belong to.

Separated from their sites of collective memory – since camps do not count as places that bestow identity – social relationships become invested for Palestinian exiles with even greater value and necessity, as anchors of history and identity. Families scattered by national frontiers manage to meet to mourn deaths, exchange news and wedding videos. Common belonging to a village or urban quarter links third and fourth generation exiles in countries of work, study or migration. Visits to homes of origin, and the stories they generate, need to be set within this larger framework of destruction and reconstruction of social relations. They are not visits to 'homes' in the unitary sense but a reconnecting with a territory, a landscape and a social body that form the proper context of *al-beit*.

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1. '*Hijra*' means migration, and was used by refugees of peasant origin for the expulsions of 1948, perhaps from a desire to euphemise a humiliating experience, or in echo of the Prophet Muhammad's '*hijra*' from Mecca to Medina, and imbued with a Muslim sense of Palestine as a Holy Land.

2. www.al-awda.org

House, home and livelihoods for Eritrean returnees from Sudan

by Gaim Kibreab

Despite deep ties to their houses and land, Eritrean refugees repatriating from Sudan have defied most observers' expectations by deciding not to settle in their villages of origin.

In view of the critical role played by house, land and spatially grounded community in Eritrean culture and social history, researchers and international agencies assumed that returnees from Sudan would settle in their villages of origin in order to recoup their houses, land and membership of communities. However, the large majority of the returnees, instead of going back to their homes of origin, have found new homes outside the places where they lived prior to their displacement.

This is not the only way in which the experience of Eritrean refugees and returnees from Sudan defies conventional expectations. Contrary to received wisdom that refugees 'vote with their feet' and go home once the factors which triggered their flight are removed, a large proportion of the Eritrean refugees in Sudan have stayed put in spite of the fundamental political changes that took place in their country of origin in May 1991. The thirty-year war for national independence which had triggered the refugee flow ended with the defeat of the Ethiopian army and the subsequent recognition of Eritrea as an independent state. The decision of the considerable proportion of the refugees to stay put is surprising in view of the fact that the factors that prompted their displacement were indisputably eliminated with the country's independence and the government of Sudan treats the refugees as temporary guests with no prospects for naturalisation or enjoyment of citizenship rights regardless of the number of years of residence in Sudan.

In the 1990s, only a few had political reasons for not returning. However, after the turn of the new century, the Eritrean government's poor human rights records became a major a factor in decisions concerning repatriation and in prompting displacement of new refugees.

Eritreans – regardless of their mode of existence – tend to be powerfully attached to particular places or homes established on the basis of the principle of original appropriation. In a country where territory and community of origin still remain the most important means of access to rights and opportunities of well-being and security, social identity is formed by and is inextricably linked to territory and a community anchored in a particular place. Throughout Eritrea, as elsewhere in Africa, place or home still remains a major repository of rights and membership.

Ownership as source if identity

In Eritrean society, though land has always been the single most important source of livelihood, its importance is not solely measured in economic terms. The ownership of houses and land in particular places commonly known as *adi* (Tigrinya) or *ad* (Tigre) is a source of identity and the foundation of Eritrean society's social organisation. House and land ownership and belonging to particular places (*adi/ad)* ground Eritreans, including those who do not derive their livelihoods from such a re-

source, not only to particular places but also to particular communities. It is common for the overwhelming majority of diasporic Eritreans to build houses in their villages of origin and to buried in such place. A person without such grounding was and still is considered rootless, with a stigma attached to being without roots. This strong attachment to particular places is manifested in the fact that the remains of most Eritreans who belong to the Christian faith are transported to their places of origin for burial at exorbitant costs from all over the world.[1]

Though every certified member of a spatially anchored community is entitled to cultivable land, this right is exercised subject to ownership of

a house situated in a particular place, the ownership of which was once established by a founding lineage, is life itself.

a house known among the Eritrean highlanders as *titsha*. House ownership is *sine qua non* for land ownership. Thus, since land is the single most important source of livelihood and no land can be obtained without house ownership in most Eritrean communities, a house situated in a particular place, the ownership of which was once established by a founding lineage, is life itself.

More than 250,000 refugees returned from Sudan to Eritrea between 1991 and 2002, the majority of them without receiving international assistance. It was widely expected that the returnees would settle in their villages of origin in order to recoup the houses, the land and membership in their former spatially grounded communities. However, the large majority have instead found new homes outside the places where they lived prior to their displacement.[2] For example, among the 6,386 families (about 25,000 individuals) who

returned under the Programme for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement areas (PROFERI) pilot repatriation scheme, 81% were settled in Gash-Setit outside their homes of origin. The majority of the self-repatriates have also settled in the Gash Setit area. The results of a survey conducted by the author in 1998 show that among a sample of 166 self-repatriates from Sudan in Barentu, Guluj and Tessenei, 90% of the heads of respondent households lived elsewhere in Eritrea prior to their displacement to Sudan. Nevertheless, it is not only people who were displaced from other parts of Eritrea to Sudan who have settled in Gash Setit. A large proportion of those who fled to Sudan from Gash Setit have now settled outside their places of origin, mainly in urban and peri-urban areas.

Why have returnees not gone 'home'?

The single most important reason why the overwhelming majority have chosen different destinations rather than their places of origin is because of the profound social change they have undergone in exile in Sudan. As a result, the meaning and value they attach to particular places are no longer based on an abstract attachment to an ancestral village but are primarily shaped by considerations of livelihoods.

When I asked a group of returnees in Tessenei in an informal discussion to explain why they did not return to their villages of origin most asked why they should return to places where there is no future for them or their children. I probed them further as to whether it made any difference that their forefathers and foremothers, as well as the umbilical chords of some of the persons in the discussion group, were buried in those places. Some of the older participants said that this was important and they expected their remains to be buried in the same place. However, their decision concerning the choice of their destination was not influenced by such considerations. For the younger ones, it did not matter where their remains ended up. Regardless of age most of the participants said that the times and the

conditions have changed so much that the things that were important to their forefathers are either irrelevant or meaningless to them. In short, the meaning of home has changed profoundly. For the large majority of young returnees under the age of 40 a home means a house. This is significant because unlike a home a house can be built anywhere provided there is unoccupied space and the appropriation or the turning of such a space into a place is legally possible and is physically safe.

Scholarly opinions are divided on whether belonging has an intrinsic value or if it is rather a means to an end and on the question of whether a group which has become 'deterritorialised' can establish viable 'homes' elsewhere. Research findings in Eritrea suggest that once refugees are in their country of origin, their choice of destination is mainly influenced by livelihood concerns regardless of their location within their country of origin. There are well thought out rationales underlying the returnees' choices of destination. The most important factors determining their choices are:

- opportunities for employment and self-employment

- proximity to the country of asylum

- continuity of the trans-ethnic and trans-religious social networks established in exile

- disdain for rural life due to cultural, social and occupational changes experienced in exile

- access to schools, health care and water for human and livestock consumption as well as for rain-fed cultivation and irrigation.

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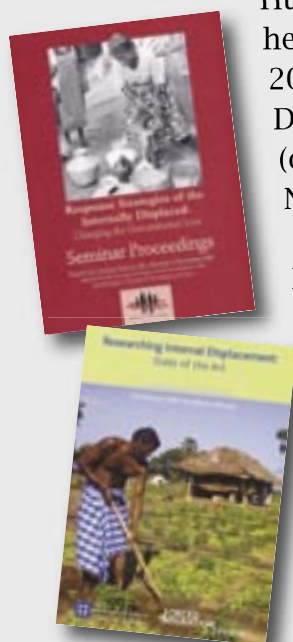
1. Not the case among Muslim Eritreans as Islam requires prompt burial.

2. See: G Kibreab (2002) 'When Refugees Come Home: the Relationship between Stayees and Returnees in Post-Conflict Eritrea', J*ournal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20 (1): 53–80.
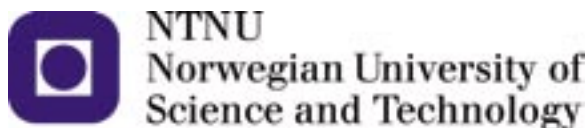
FMR has published two previous conference reports in collaboration with NTNU: 'Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced: Changing the Humanitarian Lens' (conference held in Oslo, Norway, 9 November 2001) and 'Researching Internal Displacement: State of the Art' (conference held in Trondheim, Norway, 7-8 February 2003).

Both reports are available at www.fmreview.org/mags1.htm

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Responding to wars and disasters: researchers and practitioners have much to share

FORUT
OLIDARITETSAKSJON FOR UTVIKLING
AMPAIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SOLIDARITY

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Large areas of Sri Lanka affected by two decades of war are now suffering the effects of the tsunami. Before the waves hit the coast of Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004, the NTNU Research Group on Forced Migration had started discussing a researcher-practitioner collaboration on recovery after war in Sri Lanka. Our partner, FORUT – Campaign for Development and Solidarity – has been involved in development assistance and relief work in Africa and Asia since 1981 and is the largest Norwegian NGO in Sri Lanka.

The aim of the collaboration, beginning in May 2005, is to work with and through FORUT to further improve civil society capacity to design and implement efficient and appropriate post-crisis recovery programmes. The objective is also to influence a wider range of actors on the post-tsunami recovery scene, such as local and central authorities, donors, and national and international NGOs. The partnership will also enable

the Research Group on Forced Migration and its university partners in Sri Lanka to develop practice-based insights. We aim to adopt a holistic approach to recovery focused around housing.

NTNU's Research Group and FORUT will collaborate to learn from best practices elsewhere in the world. This will entail challenging and dialoguing with FORUT and other NGOs

in ways that aim to substantially raise over-all capability and sophistication of development thinking and skills in programming, monitoring, evaluation, reflection and administration.

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