

Advocating for Return and Reintegration

Under this project, local partners Sfida, Jug and Humana with CRS assistance will organize 18 focus groups, multiple community leader meetings and a cross-boundary workshop to identify and address the major barriers to the return of displaced people and their communities of return. The purpose of these meetings is to prepare and present a joint action plan between internally displaced persons and residents from their former communities at the Prizren Municipal Working Group. The goal is to increase the participation by these target populations and to decrease barriers to return, which the aforementioned participants seek to define. Finally, this project focuses on three communities in Prizren Municipality – Prizren town, Gornja Srbica/Sërbica e Epërme and Smaç/Smaç and is a continuation of a last years project that was focused on villages Musnikovo/Mushnikova and Gornje Selo/Selo e Epërme.

Focus Groups

During the month of January, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) local partners conducted four separate focus groups held in Serbia and Kosovo. This project calls for a total of 18 focus groups over a 3-month period. Currently, project activities are taking place in Serbia and Kosovo regarding returns to Prizren, Gornje Srbica/Sërbica e Epërme and Smaç/Smaç. They are working in Kosovo communities where returnees plan to return and in Serbia where internally displaced persons (IDPs) expressed an interest to return to their respective local community in Kosovo.

Topics such as IDP and communities of return concerns and barriers to return as well as the standards set forth by the international community regarding return were discussed:

- Right to own property and right to return to Kosovo,
- Establish conditions for safe return and reintegration of IDPs,
- Right of IDPs to receive all necessary information on return and to start the return process.

In addition, prior to the focus groups, local partners in Serbia and Kosovo developed and agreed upon a set of guiding focus group questions on the following topics:

- Ethnic composition in their community before and after the war,
- Improving living standards in the Prizren area,
- Living together with other ethnicities and reestablishing trust,
- Identifying barriers to return and solutions,
- Cooperation between

IDPs and communities of return,

- Criteria and types of community leaders,
- Familiarity with the Prizren Municipal Working Group (PMWG), and,
- Awareness of former community members who live outside Kosovo.

In general focus group participants expressed their readiness to work together and to synchronize actions for developing mutual trust and establishing conditions for the return of IDPs. Good cooperation with Kosovo institutions, UNMIK and NGOs was also emphasized.

More specifically, CRS Kosovo's local partner, Sfida, conducted one focus group in Prizren, Kosovo in which thirteen community members participated, of which two were women and three were youths. This included two Bosniaks, two Turks, two Roma and seven Albanians. Community members stressed that employment was the major concern for them and that UNMIK and the Government should undertake more efforts towards privatization before full attention by community members can be focused on multi-ethnic issues.



Photograph: "Musnikovo/Mushikove"-Unknown author

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Focus Groups

However, participants also stated that they are open to return and that Prizren has long history of a multi-ethnic society. One participant emphasized this by stating that **“now many things have changed, but we hope that Prizren someday will reframe its multiethnic picture”**.

CRS Serbia local partner, Jug also held focus groups - two in Kragujevac, and one in Krusevac, Serbia. In this focus group leaders were elected by the participants to represent them in the PMWG; IDPs in Kragujevac elected two representatives for the Prizren Municipal Working Group (PMWG) with the complete trust that these persons will represent their interests to their best of their knowledge.

The focus groups held in Kragujevac consisted of nine participants displaced from Prizren city and four from the villages Gornje Srbica/Sërbica e Epërme and Smac/Smaç. According to the data Jug has collected, approximately ninety IDP families displaced from the Prizren area currently live in Kragujevac. The IDPs

participating in this focus group expressed interest for return, but emphasized a number of barriers including the difficult social stigma of living as IDPs, high rental, security, occupied houses and destroyed property and pessimism towards employment opportunities. Despite these concerns, they pointed out the possibilities that Prizren offers especially in trade and services, which could motivate even youth to return.

The focus group held in Krusevac included the participation of twelve IDPs from Prizren of which three were youth. Approximately one thousand IDPs from Prizren area live in Krusevac city and its surroundings. This group shared similar views as the group from Kragujevac regarding the returns. However, they added that they are very aware that Albanian as well as other communities are being prepared for the return of IDPs. Finally one participant stated the importance of cooperation: **“My return depends on my neighbors, if they do not want me there, my return is not going to happen”**.

Municipal Working Groups: Function and Role

One of the main findings in the focus groups this year as well as the preceding year was the overwhelming lack of PMWG familiarity expressed by both IDPs and members living in communities of return. They stated that they either have never heard of the PMWG or have heard the name, but do not know its function. The following information is provided for IDPs and communities of return, those who conduct returns' projects and for their constituents:

Municipal Working Groups (MWGs) represent a local coordination forum for Kosovo return projects. They provide a voice and dialogue to those interested in the return process and allows face-to-face contact with local and international organizations as well as government structures and donors. Moreover, MWGs are represented by a variety of stakeholders including UNMIK, local officials, UNHCR, KFOR, KPS, OSCE, IDP representatives and NGOs.

They have three main functions:

- To act as a forum for different communities and engage them in dialogues related to the return process
- To work as the main mechanism, which IDPs can access concerning involvement in the return process and ask

also assistance

- To be the central coordination body for return projects and their sustainability

The Municipal Representative usually chairs the monthly/bi-monthly MWG. In addition, s/he is responsible for the official presence of municipal authorities and other relevant officials. The representative ensures that MWGs are conducted in English, Albanian and Serbian. Decisions at the MWGs are agreed upon through consensus. If no consensus is reached, than the municipal representative can decide on behalf of the group, taking into consideration, participants' advice and opinions. MWGs can also appoint a project team for return projects, which are responsible for supervising all project implementation as well as for providing support to the implementing partners. Finally, MWG minutes are available in English, Albanian and Serbian upon request.



Photograph: "Focus Group in Krusevac"

Author: Project participant