



# Transnational Communities

An ESRC Research Programme

**“How are refugee communities contributing to reconstruction ‘back home’?”**

## **THE MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION OF TRANSNATIONAL EXILE COMMUNITIES IN POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION: A COMPARISON OF BOSNIA AND ERITREA**

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### **Aims and objectives**

Even after Independence in Eritrea and Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia, it seems unlikely that the majority of their substantial refugee populations in Europe will wish to return permanently. Yet there are clear indications that many are keen to participate in the reconstruction of their countries of origin without returning.

In this context, this research project is exploring the contribution that these exile communities are making to reconstruction ‘back home’. It focused on three main areas:

- First, existing activities of exile communities in reconstruction - such as political lobbying, economic investment, or promotion of human rights;
- Second, their capabilities to participate in reconstruction. These may depend on the resources available to the community, or on its internal organisation. They also depend upon the extent to which individuals still identify with their country of origin.
- Thirdly, how the policies of governments at ‘home’ and in Europe influence the participation of the communities in reconstruction.

### **Duration of research**

October 1998 – September 2000



### **Methodology/study design**

The research focuses on Bosnian refugees and labour migrants in the UK and the Netherlands, and on Eritrean refugees in the UK and Germany. It also incorporates fieldwork in both Bosnia and Eritrea. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are being used, including household surveys, depth interviews with a range of respondents, household studies and network analysis.

### **Academic and Policy implications**

The research provides original data of relevance to governments and NGOs in promoting 'self-help' of exile communities, and in harnessing the potential of these communities for constructive engagement with their countries of origin. Dissemination will continue via reports and policy-orientated workshops.

### **SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

- For the 1993 referendum on Independence from Ethiopia, enormous efforts were made to establish ballot stations within access of Eritreans dispersed around the world, and it is estimated that 98% of Eritreans eligible to vote did so.
- The government has requested regular payments from the diaspora for reconstruction costs and introduced measures to encourage remittances and investment by the diaspora, including favourable interest rates and an Eritrean Investment Centre.
- Initiatives have been taken by the Eritrean Government to attempt to maintain some sense of solidarity among the diaspora by (1) trying to control development of an opposition within the diaspora, (2) trying to control the development of critical autonomous linkages between the diaspora and Eritreans at home, and (3) trying to channel the energies of the diaspora into supporting the state. For example, the Government has funded community organisations, an Eritrean NGO in all major host countries and annual festivals around the world.
- Refugees have had a generally low participation in Bosnian elections and in political parties. There are low levels of registration and turnout amongst Bosnians living in the UK, US and Netherlands, but much higher levels of both in countries such as Germany and Switzerland. Nonetheless, some exiles are attempting to promote a democratic and multi-ethnic Bosnia through social and cultural activities. A number of Bosnian intellectuals are trying to influence political culture and attitudes through their work.
- Bosnians maintain regular contacts with family and friends, and many are now visiting Bosnia. Those who return regularly tend to consider permanent return more seriously. However, some found that their initial wish to return changed due to the continuing unstable political situation, the economic crisis, problems

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in the education system and poor health care.

- Unlike Eritrea, there has been no attempt to involve refugees in the constitutional settlement in Bosnia, nor have Bosnian political parties sought to mobilize out of country voters to any great extent. Some government, and increasingly opposition politicians have travelled abroad for political rallies, but levels of electoral registration and participation remain highly variable.
- Restrictive legislative frameworks for NGOs make it difficult for refugees to set up a legal NGO in some countries. The range of fundraising possibilities for refugee NGOs is often limited to those focused on host countries. There are also constraints that made transfers of funds to Bosnia highly problematic unless done through larger NGOs.
- In host countries, there is often a perception that diasporas fuel conflict. Thus, there is a need to carefully document groups' activities and to specifically demonstrate the potential for positive connections between diasporas and home countries. In Bosnia, there has been lack of response from the Bosnian government to refugee initiatives, and there is a general feeling that the government does not want to, or cannot make use of this resource. Therefore efforts are small and fragmented.
- Many exile communities continually engage with the society, culture, politics and economy of their home countries. Refugees participate in reconstruction and development at home through transfers of money, goods and medicine to family members, charitable donations, participation in intellectual and cultural exchanges, political campaigning, voting in elections, and direct contributions to the home government. Strong social networks keep refugees connected with their home society and make these activities

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possible.

- Refugees' desire to participate in reconstruction is shaped by their attitudes toward their home government, the circumstances of their flight, and their social connections with other community members and those left behind in the home country. Their ability to contribute is influenced by legal and economic status abroad, host and home government attitudes, and the availability of information about opportunities to participate.
- Involving refugees in development can bring numerous benefits. For example, refugees can enrich visions of development beyond eliminating poverty; provide skills and expertise to development projects; address “brain drain” in home countries by balancing desires to leave with longer term development through capacity-building, the formation of knowledge networks, and knowledge transfer; create links between home and host cities to promote urban renewal; and promote access to new skills and technologies in home countries.
- Despite these benefits, policy related to this area has been dominated by assumptions that refugees should either be repatriated or focus their energies on integration in their host societies, ignoring the potential for refugees to contribute to post conflict reconstruction from abroad.

## **SOME USERS ENGAGED IN THE PROJECT**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; International Council for Voluntary Agencies; European Council for Refugees and Exiles; Africa Foundation for Development, UK; LIZE-Foundation, NL; Bosnia-Herzegovina Refugee Network, UK; numerous community organizations in the UK, Netherlands, Germany, Eritrea and Bosnia.

## **PROJECT EVENTS**

Policy Workshop – ‘The mobilisation and participation of transnational exile communities in post-conflict reconstruction’, University College London, 24 September 1999

Policy Workshop – ‘Refugees and Reconstruction,’ Hotel Saraj, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 14 September 2000

## **SOME CONFERENCE/SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS**

Al-Ali, N., 1999, Trans-national or A-national? Bosnian refugees in the UK and the Netherlands. Paper presented to University of Sussex conference on ‘New Approaches to Migration’

Black, R., 1999, Return and reconstruction: missing link or mistaken priority in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina? Paper presented to University of Jyväskylä and International Organisation for Migration workshop, on ‘Return migration, reintegration and reconstruction’

Black, R., 2000, Geographies of transnationalism: negotiating nation and nationalism at a distance. Paper presented at Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers Conference, session on ‘Geographies of Transnationalism’

Koser, K., 1999, From refugees to transnational? Eritrean refugees in the UK and Germany. Paper presented to University of Sussex conference on ‘New Approaches to Migration’

Koser, K., 2000, Transnational exile communities and the role of social networks: the case of Eritrea. Paper presented at Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers Conference, session on ‘Geographies of Transnationalism’

## **Transnational Communities Programme**

On the programme’s website (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>) you will find contact details for all the project teams, guidance notes for would-be authors in the book series’, information about past and forthcoming events, downloadable working papers, a searchable bibliography of world diasporas and links to related sites. An on-line news digest, TRACES aims to make sense of the human dimensions of globalisation by monitoring news items from around the world and presenting them in summary form. You can register on-line to receive hard copies of newsletters, reminders of website updates and information about related events.

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