



REINTEGRATION AND COMMUNITY STABILIZATION IN KOSOVO 2013-2014 BENEFICIARY STORIES

According to UNHCR, more than 200,000 IDPs from Kosovo are still displaced in Serbia. Some of them have found ways to build a life there, but others are waiting to return. Often families lack the means to return on their own or face difficult conditions once they come back to Kosovo; houses that were destroyed or have become uninhabitable due to years of neglect, limited income generation opportunities and lack of documentation.

Through the BPRM-funded project 'Reintegration and Community Stabilization Kosovo', 26 families returning to Kosovo from Serbia will receive assistance to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in Kosovo.

Danish Refugee Council in partnership with the LNGO Center for Peace and Tolerance, addresses returnee families' most important socio-economic reintegration needs and supports receiving communities and local authorities to create conditions conducive to sustainable return.



A young family makes a new start

The Dimic family returned to Kosovo in June 2013. When the entire family assembles in their living room today, there is barely room for Dalibor, his wife Zorica and their five children to squeeze onto the couch. Dalibor's father has to sit on a chair across the room. 'From here I can keep an eye on all my grandchildren,' he smiles.

Dalibor's father built the house himself in 1970. Atop the rolling hills of Strazhë/Straža village in Novobërdë/Novobrdó Municipality, the landscape gives view to meadows and small houses dotted around fields and green pastures.

'It is now 14 years since we had to leave our home behind, says Zorica. In 1999, the family arrived in Obrenovac, Serbia, where they rented a house. Those years in displacement were marked by uncertainty. 'We moved around a lot, changed from one house to another. It was the same with Dalibor's work. Sometimes he found a job for a few months,

sometimes there was nothing for us,' says Zorica. 'It was hard on the children too. The school we had to send them to was far away. I couldn't always go with them, many times they had to walk home alone,' she adds.

'In the end we decided to return home because we were both born here. In Serbia we lived in a house we didn't own,' says Dalibor. When the family arrived in Kosovo, they were faced with the full extent of damage to their home. 'Only one room still had a door and windows. So we all stayed in there for 2 months until we got help from BPRM,' says Zorica.

The young family was selected under the BPRM project for minor shelter repair, food/non-food assistance and furniture and an income-generation grant. The damage to the house required rehabilitation of

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electrical works, bathroom, plastering, flooring, and the replacement of doors and windows. With BPRM funds, Danish Refugee Council Kosovo was able to make the family's house fit to live in again.

Now, the family is slowly starting to rebuild their life in Kosovo. In villages like Strazhë/Straža it can be difficult to make a living and jobs are scarce. Dalibor used to work in construction in Serbia, but here not many companies look for workers. 'There were no decent jobs in Obrenovac. I used to work in construction, but I never had the opportunity to get real training,' says Dalibor. Still he adds: 'Here it is easier because we have our land and space to grow vegetables. Also the mentality of the people here is different.' 'In these times it is difficult everywhere, but at least here we have the support of our neighbors,' agrees Zorica. The family owns 3 hectares of arable land and plans to grow maize and feed for their livestock. 'For our income-generation grant we asked for a cow and a calf. When we finally put them in our stable our neighbors helped us with feed for the animals.

*The entire Dimic family in front of their stable;
Dalibor and Zorica, their 5 children and Dalibor's
father Slavko*

When we arrived it was too late to plant anything. But next year we will have planted enough to feed them ourselves,' Dalibor thinks.

'We are grateful for the support we received. But one of the best things is having the school for the children so close by,' Zorica adds. The local primary school has only fifteen pupils, and three of the Dimic family's children attend classes there. The teacher has more time than usual to devote to the children. 'In my grade we are only three girls,' says Tamara the oldest who is ten. 'Math is my favorite subject. We have school in the afternoon and I usually walk there with my little sister Biljana and brother Bogdan.' He has recently started pre-school and likes playing with friends the most. 'But these days they don't just play. They practice their letters and numbers,' Zorica adds proudly.

Before we say goodbye to the Dimic family, we decide to take a photo of everyone. However, getting everyone together for a family portrait is quite a task. During the interview the children snuck out one after the other to play in the school's playground. But Zorica is used to that. In a matter of minutes she has found all of them and lined them up neatly for the photo.



Hard work pays off

Not too far away from Strazhë/Straža is another village that is home to a recent returnee family from Serbia. Dragan, his wife Lociza, their daughter Jelena and son Ivan left Stralicë/Stralica in the Municipality of Kamenica, Kosovo for Serbia in 1999. They sought shelter in Aleksinac where Dragan's sister was able to let them stay in her house. Dragan's father never left Kosovo. 'With my father back in Stralicë/Stralica, we never really lost the connection with Kosovo,' says Dragan.

'We returned to Stralicë/Stralica because there were no jobs for us in Serbia and here we have land we can work. Every year we hoped things would get better, but they never did. Also, my father passed away two years ago and there was nobody left to look after our property,' he adds.

Dragan's family owned a small house where he was born. As his family grew and their two children were born, he decided to build another house next to his childhood home. 'Our new house was not finished when we left. There was a roof and walls, but not much

else when we first returned. We were forced to live in the old house, which is not fit to live in,' says Dragan. 'Getting help from BPRM was a blessing. Thinking back I can't imagine how we could live there. Now I'm alive that I'm in this house,' says Dragan's wife. Looking at her spotless kitchen, she recalls all the work that was done to the house.

'The house needed a new roof, doors and windows, bathroom, plastering and flooring. We also received furniture and food assistance for the first 6 months which helped us to get back on our feet.'

'I came before my family to work on getting all the documents we needed. Whatever I couldn't handle myself I had DRC help us with,' adds Dragan. One of the most important things was to get the couple's two teenage children enrolled in school in Kosovo.

Jelena, the oldest, is sixteen and goes to nursing school. 'I was very young when we left but I remember some things about the village. For me, life is better here. I know the people and I like my school. There aren't that many young people here in the village, but I made friends at school,' she says. Jelena's nursing education takes 4 years. 'I'm in my second year now, but maybe I will go to University. If I could choose, I would study Geography probably,' she says and adding with a grin, 'My mother would probably like me to get married at some point too.'

Jelena, 16, and her mother Lociza





Jelena's brother is in his room playing games. 'Our son is fifteen. He is enrolled in vocational education. He doesn't really want to go to University. But I say to him if you don't want to learn, the stable is right outside,' Dragan laughs and points to the family's stable next to the house, which houses 7 cows. 'I would prefer he finished his education, because making a living from agriculture is hard.'

'Now we were able to increase the number of cows we have, so we use what we grow on our land as feed,' explains Dragan. 'We used to make cheese and sell it locally. But now a milk collection point for a big factory opened here, so we can sell the milk. That makes things a lot easier. Dragan's wife made cheese herself. 'Now I just make it for people who order it especially,' she says.

'We have so much work to do; we have no time to worry about the future. I suppose that makes us lucky. We wake up at 4.30 am and go to bed at 10 pm most nights. In summer, when we have to tend to the fields we work even longer hours sometimes. My daughter is helping the most with the harvest. My son is being a teenager at the moment...but he also helps of course,' says Dragan. 'Although we have to work a lot,

'We have so much work to do; we have no time to worry about the future. I suppose that makes us lucky.' Dragan in front of the family's stable.

it's easier here because we are home. We grew up here and we have experience with working in agriculture,' adds his wife.

'We all work very hard to have everything that we have now,' Dragan agrees. 'We have cows and we have land and thanks to the income generation grant we got through the BPRM project we got the tools to work the land. We can plant maize and wheat to sell and support ourselves. It's best to be in the place where you were born. The people here are different. For the first time in years we feel welcome where we live.'



A House with a View

Our next stop is the Gora region in southern Kosovo. Surrounded by the Shar Mountains, the Municipality of Dragash is home to Albanians, Bosniaks and Gorani. The Gorani area Slavic people converted to Islam. Gorani means 'highlanders'. As our car climbs the winding road to Golocica village nestled between mountains and hills, the name certainly fits.

This is a remote location and unemployment is high. If people have steady employment it is with the public sector, international organizations or a handful of private companies. This is also the place where Kariman Shola and his wife Nensa have returned to after 13 years in displacement.

'I left Kosovo in 2000. I went to Borce, near Belgrade where I stayed until I returned to Kosovo. In Borce, I had odd jobs in construction mainly. I worked here

and there, sometimes I was paid sometimes I wasn't. Life was very hard. But I met my wife there. She is from a village not that far away from Globocica,' Kariman tells us.

He and his wife returned to Kosovo in 2013. Kariman owns a house and a plot of land in Globocica. 'I started to build this house, but I couldn't afford to finish it and then I had to leave because of the war. My wife and I decided to return even though we knew the house was unfinished. When we came back the roof was leaking and we had no windows, no doors. Basically nothing. Our neighbors helped us to cover the roof in one part of the house. We lived like this for about three months, before we got help through BPRM. There was no bathroom, no electrical wiring. A lot had to be done by DRC,' Kariman says. Things started to get a little better when we got selected for the project,' Kariman's wife adds. 'We got food and furniture, a fridge and a real stove. Before assistance arrived, I had to cook on a makeshift stove in the yard,' she remembers. 'The villagers also helped us with food and Kariman has a

The Shola's house in Globocica, Dragash Municipality





'Am I happy I returned to Kosovo? Here, I don't have work at the moment and life is hard, but at least I am in my own home and we have support from our neighbors. Here, I am among my people.'

sister who lives not too far away who also helped us.' The neighbors are like you would say 'humanitarians', Kariman laughs. 'They helped us a lot.'

'When we arrived, we came with nothing because we didn't own anything in Serbia either. We asked for motorized equipment to tend to the field as part of our income generation grant. We plan to work the land we own here. We will plant potatoes and sell them on the weekly market in Dragash,' Kariman explains.

Kariman has health issues, which make it impossible for him to do manual labor. 'I have problems with my lungs and I run out of breath fast. I am grateful that my wife is healthy at least and that she is here with me. She dug out a small vegetable garden all by herself,

where she grows potatoes for us.

Given Kariman's condition the family may be able to apply for social assistance until his health improves. 'We are getting help from the Municipal Office for Communities and Return to apply. We only have one issue at the moment. We don't have an official marriage license yet, which we need in order to apply. In Borce, we decided to get married and then we just were,' Kariman says. 'We will need to go to Dragash to get married...again,' he says with a smile and adds: 'It's like getting married twice, but the main wedding will be here of course.' Before making their union official, Kariman and his wife had to apply for her ID documents, which they finally received. Now, all they have to do is set a date.

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All activities under the project are coordinated with relevant institutions in Kosovo, Serbia, displaced persons and their representative bodies, BPRM and its partners, UNHCR, and other stakeholders to ensure that adequate support is available to returnees in pursuit of durable solutions and community stabilization.

To read more about the project, go to www.drc-kosovo.org

