Ethnic minorities and sustainable refugee return and reintegration in Kosovo

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Abstract

Unprecedented levels of displacement make the return of refugees and internally displaced populations a critical challenge, with post-conflict minority return especially complex. This article investigates the return process in Kosovo to identify what supports and hinders sustainability. For nearly two decades the Government of Kosovo and international partners have supported return of minorities displaced during the 1998-1999 conflict and March 2004 riots. We draw on interviews with all major stakeholder groups in return programming and on indicative survey data from 499 returnees. Using a framework adopted from Black, Koser and Munk (2004), we focus on the Kosovo return process in recent years. The survey results indicate some sustainability but high differentiation in returnees' satisfaction. This warrants concern, as differences in returnee perspectives run along already conflictual ethnic and spatial fault lines. In post-conflict settings, sustainable return and reintegration require more than the provision of services – they require nuanced understanding of how the shadow of conflict shapes returnee experiences. Finally, we question the orthodoxy of return discourse and highlight critical factors to support sustainable return elsewhere.

Introduction

The return of forcibly displaced populations after an armed conflict is a critical peace-building challenge worldwide, closely linked with other post-conflict reconstruction challenges in governance, security, economy, justice and reconciliation. Kosovo, a small contested Balkans territory recognised as a country by 110 United Nations member states, demonstrates these complexities. Some 245,300 people from minority groups fled as a result of the conflict in 1998–1999, fearing reprisals from Kosovo Albanians. Most fled to Serbia, with smaller numbers going to Montenegro or elsewhere in Kosovo.[1] Of these, 27,784 have since returned[2] and 20,000 have registered an interest to do so[3]. The majority are thought to remain in Serbia, with 94,000 estimated to still have needs related to displacement.[4]

This article focuses on displaced people who returned to Kosovo between 2010 and 2015. Numbering around 6,000, they experienced protracted displacement. The data includes all ethnic groups including Kosovo Albanians, who are the majority community in Kosovo but form minorities in areas they return to. Kosovo Albanians are also unique in that they tend to be internally displaced, rather than being displaced abroad.

The field of research on sustainable return is small[5] and empirical studies few.[6] Our paper contributes to emerging literature, evaluating sustainable return in Kosovo based on 25 in-depth interviews with major stakeholders and an indicative nationwide survey of 499 recent returnees. The main objective of this paper is not to theorise refugee return, but to extend the empirical body of knowledge on the experiences of returnees and to provide insights and recommendations for academics, policy-makers and other decision-makers.

The research, we believe, is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, it contributes to the existing knowledge base on sustainable return and reintegration, particularly for minorities and those who have experienced protracted displacement. Our primary insight that returnee perceptions correlate strongly with ethnicity is cautionary, as it demonstrates that minority return processes must engage more substantively with peace-building in order to improve relations between divided groups and reduce the salience of ethnic identifications. Secondly, our methodology operationalises a longstanding framework for sustainable return, testing its capacity to explain the dynamics of return and reintegration and highlighting areas in which the model's capacity can be strengthened. Finally, our recommendations are significant for policy and practice, as post-conflict minority return processes in countries such as Burundi, Myanmar and Syria confront similar challenges to sustainability borne of insecurity, poverty and prejudice. The findings also offer practical insights for consolidating and improving sustainability in Kosovo at a time when funding will reduce but the need for durable solutions remains acute.

Sustainable return and reintegration

Return programming is often broken down into four phases: repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction (the 4Rs), with the ultimate aim of self-reliance. At its broadest level sustainability refers to the durability of results, which must be capable of continuing once external support ceases and in the face of stresses and shocks. In the context of refugee return, sustainability refers to the re-establishment of former refugees in the country of origin in adequate conditions that reduce the likelihood of secondary involuntary movement.[7] Sustainable return is a slippery

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concept[8] but denotes a longer-term, contextual and challenging understanding of return with social and economic dimensions.[9]

Recognising the imperatives of durability and longevity, attention has increasingly shifted towards sustainable reintegration as a key aspect of return, focusing on the reinclusion of returnees into society and the reestablishment of ties. The IOM's model of sustainable reintegration highlights three factors of influence: returnees' individual characteristics, their positioning within communities, and the structural factors that shape the return environment.[10] This builds on earlier IOM work that identifies the social, cultural and economic dimensions of sustainable reintegration[11] and later adds a psychological dimension.[12] However, some have critiqued the concept of (re)integration, particularly in cases of forced return, and instead focus on the notion of 'embeddedness' as a less loaded and more realistic gauge of returnee experiences.[13]

The terms 'sustainable return' and 'sustainable reintegration' are often used interchangeably and have yet to be systematically uncoupled.[14] However, there are discernable changes in tone, which may be conceptually pertinent or may rather reflect the passage of time. In particular, reintegration frameworks helpfully emphasise variables sometimes overlooked in earlier frameworks of sustainable return, including returnees' individual characteristics and less tangible factors such as cultural integration and psychological wellbeing. This expands the terrain beyond structural factors, allowing a fuller understanding of returnee experiences.

Global experiences demonstrate the complexity of return and reintegration processes. International support plays a significant role, but varies according to geo-strategic interest and moral imperative. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international community's generous support for return was driven by its failure to prevent ethnic cleansing as well as a desire to reduce the 'burden' for third countries in hosting

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Bosnian refugees.[15] However, international assistance does not always meet the needs of returnees, hindering sustainability.[16] In Ethiopia, returnees have been settled among adversaries and away from water sources, building materials and firewood.[17] National support for return and government capacity also influences outcomes. For instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina's 'rule of law' approach facilitated property restitution, allowing displaced people to make free and informed decisions.[18]

In most post-conflict contexts, refugees return to conditions far from the voluntary, safe and dignified return established in legal principles[19] and must navigate ongoing insecurity and historic grievances. Many draw on resources and networks from their place of displacement to cope. Concepts of 'revolving returnees', 'circular migration'[20] and 'part-time returnees'[21] capture the transnational or translocational lives returnees may lead, challenging simplistic understandings of return as permanent and place-bound.

Factors influencing sustainable return and reintegration

The extent to which prospective returnees are prepared for return has been identified as an indicator of sustainability. Return can be 'reactive', in response to circumstances in the place of displacement, or 'proactive', based on informed decision-making about circumstances in the place of return.[22] Preparation may indicate voluntariness and readiness,[23] though this presumes the returnee has a range of viable options.

Circumstances in the place of displacement and the place of return also shape prospective returnees' decision-making.[24] In displacement, evidence on the effect of economic reintegration is mixed, likely because studies investigate different host and return countries and different categories of returnees.[25] For returnees displaced in

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wealthy countries, secure legal status may lessen risks of return but could reduce commitment on arrival.[26]

In the place of return, several factors influence sustainability. Politically, factors such as security and protection of civil and political rights matter. Socially, access to housing, livelihoods, welfare, healthcare and education are important. Social networks can also be key.[27] Local attitudes to return are important[28] and processes for reintegration, reconciliation and the restoration of relationship influence return dynamics.[29]

Approaches to measuring sustainable return

A simple and common approach to measuring sustainability is to monitor returnees' propensity to remigrate, but this conflates permanency with sustainability. Remigration can be an indicator of an unsustainable return, but using this as a benchmark often obscures more than it reveals. On its own, it does not tell us anything about the circumstances under which the remigration took place or the multiple dimensions of returnees' decision-making. For instance, it is not always clear whether remigration was to the original host country or elsewhere, legal or illegal, or whether it refers to returnees' aspirations, intentions or realised actions.[30] Remigration statistics do not capture instances where returnees have been unable to achieve sustainability but nevertheless remain. Nor do they recognise that sustainable return may widen livelihood options to the point where new opportunities for migration emerge, making relocation an indicator of success.

In measuring sustainable return, Black and Gent[31] delineate between individual and community level impact. At the individual level, return is sustainable if a returnee's socio-economic status and fear of violence or persecution is no worse, relative to the

population in the place of origin, one year after return. At the community level, return is sustainable if socio-economic conditions and levels of violence are not significantly worsened by return one year after the process is complete. Black and Gent[32] also recognise that return can be measured through both objective and subjective lenses, acknowledging differences between perceptions of returnees and on-the-ground realities. Strand et al[33] pick up on the importance of subjective perspectives in their later framework for measuring return, and usefully drawing a closer link between sustainable return and returnee's own reintegration aspirations and capabilities.

Here we adopt Black, Koser and Munk's[34] framework of sustainable return. This considers individual and community level impacts and objective and subjective vantage points, which is in line with later survey-based studies on refugee return.[35] It also sets out three dimensions through which sustainable return can be understood, identified as physical, socio-economic and political-security.

	Physical	Socio-economic	Political-security
Subjective perception of returnee	(Lack of) desire to re-emigrate	Perceived socio-economic status	Perception of safety, security threats
Objective conditions of returnee	Proportion of returnees who (do not) remigrate	Actual socio-economic status of returnees	Actual persecution or violence against returnees
Aggregate conditions of home country	Wider trends in levels of emigration and asylum-seeking	Trends in levels of poverty and well-being	Trends in levels of persecution, conflict and violence

Figure 1: Elements and potential measures of the sustainability of return[36]

We operationalised the political-security dimension through three survey indicators: returnees' expectations of living safely, their perceptions of acceptance and welcome and their participation in decision-making. We addressed questions related to incidents of violence through in-depth interviews, given the sensitivities. The socio-

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economic dimension was measured through three indicators: opportunities to make a living, housing provision and access to education and healthcare. Two indicators measured the physical dimension: feeling settled and planning to stay, and whether the reality of return met expectations.[37] Together with interview data, this allowed us to build a picture of the subjective conditions of returnees across all three dimensions. To consider the objective conditions of returnees and the aggregate conditions of the home country we relied on secondary data, sourced through academic literature, official statistics and reports.

Whilst there is much to commend the framework, our literature review highlights two overlooked factors. The first is psychological wellbeing, which is particularly important in post-conflict return and reintegration given the mental trauma wrought by violence. In Kosovo, high levels of traumatic stress have been recorded in returnees[38] and poor mental health has been linked to protracted displacement, poor housing and lack of family support.[39] The second factor is culture, which was recognised as important in conceptions of reintegration discussed earlier. Our view is that the framework is flexible enough to include psychological wellbeing under the socio-economic dimension, as a health issue, and this will be our approach in the paper. For culture to be substantively considered the framework would require greater adaptation, perhaps through the addition of a fourth dimension.

Methodology

This research adopted a hybrid approach, with quantitative and qualitative data collection, which took place in November and December 2016. Qualitative data was generated through 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders. This included the Ministry for Communities and Return, major donor organisations and

implementing agencies, municipal figures including political leaders and municipal returns officers, returnees and members of receiving communities.[40]

Quantitative data was generated through a 50 question survey conducted with 499 returnees arriving between 2010 and 2015. This timeframe was chosen in order to inform current programming and policy-making based on recent experience. It also recognises the realities of post-war Kosovo, where recordkeeping is poor[41] and tracing returnees before 2010 is difficult and unreliable.

Returnees comprise members of all the country's ethnic groups. Kosovo Serbs form the largest minority and mostly return to one of four Kosovo Serb majority municipalities in the north, relying on Serbian-run structures for services. Similarly, the Kosovo Albanians have also primarily returned to Serb majority municipalities. Bosnians mostly return to Prizren, where Kosovo Albanians form the majority. The Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians face acute poverty and vulnerability, compounded by discrimination and lack of documentation, hindering access to services. Their common marginalisation means they are often grouped together as 'RAE' communities, but this obscures important differences between them. Ashkalis and Egyptians speak Albanian and are mainly Muslim, whereas the Roma speak Romani and Serbo-Croatian and are mainly Christian Orthodox. The Roma, in particular, have been perceived as collaborators of the Milosevic regime and were targeted by Kosovo Albanians after their return in 1999.[42]

Table 1 shows UNHCR figures on returns during the 2010-2015 period by ethnic group. Table 2 shows the ethnic group and geographical region of survey respondents. These show the amount of Serb, Bosniak, Gorani and Turk respondents is roughly proportional, the Kosovo Albanian and Roma groups are somewhat overrepresented and the Ashkali and Egyptians are somewhat underrepresented.

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Geographically the survey was broadly representative, including respondents from 24 of

38 municipalities in all 7 of Kosovo's regions.[43]

Table 1: Voluntary minority repatriation from within and outside the region (UNHCR, 2015)

	Total	**Percentage**
Kosovo Albanian	1176	4.44
Ashkali/Egyptian	7089	26.74
Bosniak	1849	6.97
Croat	3	0.01
Gorani	1454	5.48
Montenegrin	16	0.06
Roma	3633	13.70
Kosovo Serb	11289	42.58
Turk	6	0.02
Total	**26515**	**100**

Table 2: Survey response by ethnic group and region

	Prishtinë/Priština	**Mitrovicë/Mitrovica**	**Gjakovë/Djakovica**	**Pejë/Peć**	**Ferizaj/Uroševac**	**Gjilan/Gnjilane**	**Prizren**	**Total**	**Percentage**
Kosovo Albanian		60						60	12
Ashkali	25							25	5
Bosniak				30			4	34	6.8
Egyptian		1	12	3				16	3.2
Gorani							50	50	10
Roma	78	9				28		115	23
Kosovo Serb	45		6	43	35	63	2	194	38.8

Turk							5	5	1
Total	**149**	**70**	**18**	**76**	**35**	**91**	**61**	**499**	**100**
Percentage	**29.8**	**14**	**3.6**	**15.2**	**7**	**18.2**	**12.2**		

The survey was limited to returnees arriving within the past five years. Where possible it was completed by the head of household (85.2 per cent of respondents) so as to understand the motivations and perceptions of the family's primary decision-maker. This skewed demographics towards men and those between 25 and 54 years of age.[44] Respondents were sourced through stratified sampling to ensure input from a cross-section of the returnee population and maximise chances of a proportional response. They were approached through household visits. On arrival, a small number of houses were vacant. Some were confirmed abandoned and other are occupied seasonally, for instance according to school term times and the farming year. A small number of returnees were unwilling to participate.

Overall, the survey was ethnically representative at national level of all minority groups returning to Kosovo. However, this proportionality could not be fully achieved at the sub-national level. In some cases, all respondents from a particular ethnicity were sourced from one geographical location, and on these occasions it is difficult to determine fully whether their perspective is shaped by ethnicity or location, or both.

We also recognise biases in the survey data towards those returnees who stayed in their place of return and were willing to share their experiences, and towards working age men (heads of households). Interviews with female returnees and returnees who had left their place of return counter this. We also accept that our cohort of post-2010 returnees may be more likely to still be present than those arriving immediately after the war. Finally, we recognise that for some minority groups the sample sizes, while proportionate, are too small to draw firm conclusions. For instance, the number of Turks

is prohibitively small at 5 interviewees, but this is out of a possible pool of only 6 Turks returning between 2010 and 2015. We have not aggregated the smaller minorities into larger groupings, which is a common treatment for small strata, as this risks conflating their different experiences. However, to our knowledge the survey remains the most extensive undertaking of its type in Kosovo, where a 'flagship' returns process has taken place.

Finally, the conflict-displaced returns process in Kosovo operates in parallel with a second process of repatriation of Kosovan migrants from Europe. In 2015, 16,546 persons were repatriated through this latter process.[45] These repatriated people have similar needs to returnees displaced during the 1998-1999 conflict and March 2004 riots. However, they are supported through a separate but overlapping legal and policy framework, where responsibility lies with the Ministry of Internal Affairs rather than the Ministry of Communities and Return. As our study focuses only on post-conflict returnees who fled to neighbouring countries, we do not consider the experiences of those later migrating to Europe and returning under the second repatriation process.

The returns process in Kosovo

The returns process is underpinned by Article 156 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which mandates national institutions to 'promote and facilitate safe and dignified return'. Three documents provide policy guidance: The Strategy for Communities and Returns and Action Plan (2014), the Guidelines for Implementation of Returns Support (2012), and the Revised Manual on Sustainable Return (2006). Return is also considered in the Government Strategy for Integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities 2009 – 2014.

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Major funders include the Government of Kosovo, through the Ministry for Communities and Return (MCR), and the EU. Others include the US Department of State Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration and the British Embassy. The process has been comparatively well financed – described as being in a 'luxury position'.[46] The MCR's action plan for 2014- 2018 lists four return initiatives. These have a combined total of €17,500,000 and support 536 families at an average cost of €32,649 per family.[47]

In Kosovo, assisted return has been the main response to displacement. Other durable solutions exist – namely resettlement and local integration – but they have not received the same support. Kosovo is not unique in this respect. Local integration is often termed a 'non-solution', or a 'forgotten' or 'underreported' solution.[48] Many host countries discourage integration, perceiving it as costly and destabilising. Conceptions of return conflate it with a sense of 'home', progress and order being restored.[49] Return is also seen as a positive indicator for peace processes.[50]

Our literature and document review identified several factors influencing decisions to return. Those supporting return included (re-)establishing home ownership and reclaiming assets, acquiring land and using agricultural skills, improvements in security and protection, and the draw of a sense of home, community and belonging. Factors adversely affecting return included lack of financial means and awareness of difficult conditions on arrival, houses rendered uninhabitable through damage or neglect, and the anticipated responses of receiving communities.

All returnees surveyed had experienced protracted displacement, as triggers for displacement were the 1998/1999 conflict or the March 2004 riots. The majority (69.2 per cent) had been displaced for 11–15 years. Few experienced multiple moves. For 87.8 per cent, the final place of displacement was the place they first moved to.[51] Most

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indicated that life in displacement was manageable, with basic needs for education, healthcare, income and accommodation met.[52] Overall, 65.8 per cent stated that it would have been possible for them to stay in displacement. However, respondents also reported high expectations of building a better life on return and many were incentivised by the support available.

The majority of respondents across all ethnic groups apart from the Kosovo Serbs returned to their original home. In interviews, this was established to be a key draw. Some respondents recognised that living in a home they already owned would reduce their outgoings, especially as the cost of living is lower in Kosovo. This was especially the case for those on a fixed income, such as pensioners. A minority also sought to repossess in order to sell and move on.[53] For agencies, supporting returnees to repossess and repair an existing home was also attractive, and therefore encouraged, as it was cheaper and easier than securing land and building houses anew.

> *I own this house. I returned here because I couldn't afford to pay the rent anymore in Serbia. I have children there who work but there is nothing here for them. I have no electricity because the last occupants didn't pay the bill. They took away everything, even the electric meters. This house was occupied by many people. I will stay here now because I am sick and tired of moving. I sleep better under this roof, even if I am cold and unprotected.[54]*

Sustainability of return in Kosovo

Over time sustainability has become the overarching concern within Kosovo's return programming, yet monitoring and evaluation reports present a mixed picture. MCR reporting for 2009 – 2013 showed steady improvement in the percentage of

homes inhabited, from 52 per cent in 2009 to 75 per cent in 2013.[55] In 2013, UNHCR

implementing partner the Kosovo Agency for Advocacy and Development monitored

returnees in 26 municipalities, covering 279 families and 1078 individuals. 22.6 per

cent of returnees were found to be absent during the three-month and eight-month

monitoring exercises.[56] UNHCR estimated 18 per cent of returnees have departed their

place of return.[57] In interviews, practitioners emphasised that recent programmes have

mitigated risks to sustainability, for instance by making provision for Serb medium

schooling and providing more robust support for income generation.

      To assess sustainability, we now analyse our data according to the three

dimensions set out in the theoretical framework (Figure 1). For each we provide a brief

discussion of the objective conditions of returnees and aggregate conditions of Kosovo,

before examining the subjective conditions of returnees using the survey data.

Measuring sustainability of return

The political-security dimension

      Security in Kosovo has been re-established since the end of the armed

conflict in 1999 and later unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, but

localised tensions remain and the political landscape is turbulent. The EU-

facilitated Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtinë/Priština continues,

albeit with suspensions, supporting better relations between returnees and

communities. Institutional co-operation and integration between four Kosovo Serb

majority municipalities and Kosovo's institutions has improved. However, even

the formation of an Association of Serb Majority municipalities, designed to allow

Kosovo Serbs greater autonomy, caused unease and has been indefinitely

postponed. Kosovo continues to experience violent protest and targeting of

minorities, including returnees. OSCE monitoring from July 2014 to July 2015

recorded 479 security incidents, with a spike around the 2016 World cup qualifier

between Serbia and Albania.[58]

The return of minorities is contentious and attracts significant media

coverage. Receiving communities sometimes resent support provided to returnees

and resist returns, particularly where this requires allocating land. Returnees'

religious pilgrimages and visits to graveyards can create tension, as can their

leaving properties vacant for extended periods of time. For some who still wish to

return, political tensions may prevent this for years to come (this is mostly the

case for Kosovo Albanians displaced from the north and Kosovo Serbs from

Gjakova/Dakovica).

As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents (83.7 per cent) expected

to live in safety on return and this was very important (68.5 per cent) or quite

important (28.4 per cent) in decision-making. Results were largely positive but

showed strong variations by ethnicity. The community with the least expectation

was the Kosovo Albanians (43.7 per cent). Similar patterns arose with regards to

acceptance and welcome.

This ethnic breakdown correlated strongly with place of return. The region

with the lowest perception of safety, acceptance and welcome was

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, where respondents were mostly Albanian. The region

includes four municipalities that are majority Kosovo Serb. The city of

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is ethnically and administratively divided, with separate

municipal structures for the mostly Kosovo Serb north and the mostly Kosovo

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Albanian south. Movement is restricted and the city is characterised by segregation, tension and sporadic violence.

Table 3: Returnees' perceptions of political-security dimension of return

Did you expect to live in safety if you returned?						
	Yes	No				
Kosovo Albanian	46.7	53.3				
Ashkali	69.6	30.4				
Bosnian	91.2	8.8				
Egyptian	100	0				
Gorani	63.3	36.7				
Roma	92.1	7.9				
Kosovo Serb	93.8	6.2				
Turkish	100	0				
Total percentage	83.7	16.3				
'I feel accepted and welcome in my community'						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Kosovo Albanian	8.3	1.7	0	35	55	0
Ashkali	88	4	4	0	0	4
Bosnian	61.8	23.5	11.8	2.9	0	0
Egyptian	93.7	6.3	0	0	0	0
Gorani	62	32	2	0	0	4
Roma	72.2	19.1	4.3	1.8	2.6	0
Kosovo Serb	39.2	41.2	12.4	6.2	0.5	0.5
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0
Total percentage	51.2	26	7.4	7.2	7.4	0.8

Qualitative data also supports the hypothesis that perceptions of security are reasonably high for most, but lower for a few communities living in contested areas. It also highlights that security requires working with non-formal actors, including those that pose a threat, reaffirming the need to engage more substantively in peace-building within return.

I would have returned from the first day but when I tried I was badly

beaten. I was in the hospital for three months and lucky to survive. One of

my main concerns when I tried again was security. This time, I gained the

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consent of [a vigilante group that controls the area]. For fifteen years I was

unable to visit my home but now I move freely. A few more people have

followed, all people with strong local ties. I think we have been allowed to

return partly to prove a point, so local politicians can say 'look, we have

allowed people to return'.[59]

The socio-economic dimension

The socio-economic dimension of return consists of inter-linked social, cultural, economic and legal processes that support sustainability and enable (re)integration. We divide our analysis into subsections, considering 1) employment and livelihoods, 2) housing and land, and 3) education and health. We recognise that well-rounded social and cultural integration takes longer than economic and legal integration, especially for returnees in protracted refugee situations.[60] It is also deeply subjective and based on the totality of a returnee's experiences, not just their interactions with socio-economic processes.

Employment and livelihoods

The economy remains a source of anxiety in Kosovo. During 2009 -17, real GDP increased by an average of 3.5 per cent and the Kosovo economy grew consistently above the Western Balkan average.[61] However, growth is hampered by corruption and inequality, and has not been sufficient to significantly reduce high rates of unemployment or reverse the trend of outmigration. As such, Kosovo remains the third poorest country in Europe. Donor support and remittances from abroad provide coping mechanisms. More than 57 per cent of youth between 15 and 24 years are unemployed and almost a third of the population lives below the poverty line (US $1.72 per adult equivalent per day).[62] In 2012, 86 per cent of those planning to migrate were

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doing so for economic purposes.[63] Economic opportunity underpins sustainable return, and without this, returnees may seek onward migration in similar ways to others.

Our interviews indicated a mixed picture for the development of returnee livelihoods. Some practitioners reflected that mistakes were made early on, for instance with returnees supported to set up businesses for which there is no demand. Returnee interviews showed that where sustainable livelihood opportunities were created (for instance through berry picking, wood cutting or tailoring), or where economic need was taken care of (for instance through pension income), overall satisfaction was higher.

Developing a sustainable livelihood is a perennial problem for returnees surveyed, as it is for many Kosovars. Only 36.2 per cent agreed that their opportunity to make a living is sufficient and 33 per cent believed their opportunities were similar to others. Egyptians, Bosniaks, Turks, Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians were most likely to report sufficiency. Egyptians (mostly from Gjakova/Dakovica), Bosniaks (mostly from Pejë/Peč) and Turks (all from Prizren) often agreed that opportunities were similar to others. While the Kosovo Albanians had mostly disagreed that they had similar opportunities, many did agree that these were better than before return.

Table 4: Returnees' perceptions of employment and livelihoods

'My opportunity to make a living is sufficient'						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Kosovo Albanian	8.3	43.3	25	18.4	5	0
Ashkali	0.04	0	32	44	20	0
Bosnian	44.1	26.5	17.6	8.9	2.9	0
Egyptian	87.5	6.3	0	0	6.2	0
Gorani	0	6	28	54	2	10
Roma	3.5	13.9	35.7	39.1	7.8	0
Kosovo Serb	9.8	33.5	34	9.3	3.6	9.8
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0
'My opportunity to make a living is similar to others in my community'						

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Kosovo Albanian	6.7	8.3	8.3	46.7	30	0
Ashkali	24	0	12	44	20	0
Bosnian	50	26.5	11.8	8.8	2.9	0
Egyptian	93.8	6.2	0	0	0	0
Gorani	14	24	32	20	2	8
Roma	18	7.8	26.3	40.9	7	0
Kosovo Serb	5.2	23.7	44.8	12.9	3.1	10.3
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0

'My opportunity to make a living is better than before my return'

	Strongly agree per cent	Agree per cent	Neither agree nor disagree per cent	Disagree per cent	Strongly disagree per cent	No answer per cent
Kosovo Albanian	6.7	45	28.3	13.3	6.7	0
Ashkali	20	8	24	40	8	0
Bosnian	50	23.5	8.8	11.8	5.9	0
Egyptian	93.7	6.3	0	0	0	0
Gorani	0	2	32	46	10	10
Roma	13.9	14.8	27	29.6	14.7	0
Kosovo Serb	8.2	17	48.5	12.4	3.1	10.8
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0

<u>Housing and land</u>

Housing and land are critical to return and present complex issues, ranging from enabling access, restoring tenure and ownership, resolving disputes, and providing restitution, livelihoods and shelter.[64] Resolving housing and land issues can impact on perceptions of politics, governance, justice and rule of law, and can contribute to one's sense of self and security.[65] In a post-conflict context, the approach to housing and land within return processes can re-establish multi-ethnic communities, entrench segregation, or perpetuate displacement and disenfranchisement.

In Kosovo, efforts to establish appropriate housing and property restitution mechanisms have been heavily funded. In 2000, UNMIK estimated that 120,000 houses were war damaged with 40,000 to 50,000 completely destroyed. They encouraged privately funded efforts and focused resources on 15,000 to 20,000 vulnerable families.

The provision of housing has been criticised on several fronts. Firstly, that it has not been extensive enough. The Ombudsperson in Kosovo concluded that municipalities and central authorities had not been sufficiently proactive.[66] Secondly, that it has been too extensive, in that the return process has depended on internationally-funded housing projects, eclipsing other aspects of return.[67]

Finally, housing provision has been criticised on the grounds that it does not guarantee permanent return. Returnees to Kosovo sometimes sell, exchange or lease their restituted home to finance resettlement elsewhere, and this has also been observed in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina[68] and Croatia.[69] It was clear from interviews that this is perceived negatively. Municipalities regret the time, resource and political capital spent laying the groundwork for return when returnees do not stay. Implementing agencies seek to avoid instances of returnees capitalising on newly acquired assets without settling. Yet for beneficiaries, this may be the most viable form of durable solution. In the absence of other well-functioning mechanisms, it may also be the closest they will come to restitution.

> *We have had cases before where the Ministry has built houses and these are now empty. This is unfortunate, because of the budget spent and because it gives a bad picture. But now, since 2013, we have been trying to identify the best cases, the families who are really interested.[70]*

In the survey, most returnees surveyed had stable accommodation in their final place of displacement (64 per cent) and could have stayed (65.8 per cent), though they did struggle to build a life (62 per cent). Housing was one of the main forms of assistance returnees received, with 19 per cent supported to reconstruct to repair a house and 25.9 per cent gaining access to or ownership of a house. It seems that housing was more of a pull factor than a push factor, with many encouraged by more secure or

attractive provision on return. Most returned to their original home, with the exception

of Kosovar Serbs, returning with their family members (72.8 per cent). The number of

returnees moving to a new or different community was minimal across all groups

except Roma.

Table 5: Housing provision on return

'Thinking about the place you returned to, was/is this place…'			
	Original home	Original community but not original home	A new or different community in Kosovo
Kosovo Albanian	95.6	4.4	0
Ashkali	70.8	25	4.2
Bosnian	90.9	6.1	3
Egyptian	62.5	37.5	0
Gorani	88.2	11.8	0
Roma	56.5	20.9	22.6
Kosovo Serb	38.5	58.3	3.2
Turkish	100	0	0

<u>Education and health</u>

Access to services including education and healthcare play a significant role in

returnees' reintegration. In Kosovo, different ethnic groups have faced distinct barriers.

Accessing schooling in the appropriate language is challenging in some areas. Return

programmes have addressed some of these issues, for instance by providing

transportation or schooling facilities for minority groups or by working with the Kosovo

police, municipalities and others on protection concerns.

Basic medical care is available throughout Kosovo, though some Kosovo Serbs

and RAE families with Serbian documents use free services provided by Serbia. As one

Kosovo Serb returnee to Prizren stated, 'We are insured for health in Serbia. We have

figured out a way here but everything has to be paid for privately. Check-ups and

medication are free in Serbia. This is one of the main things'.[71] In the

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica region, Kosovo Albanians often travel long distances to a hospital that is not Serb-run.[72]

As Table 6 shows, most respondents reported access to education and healthcare was sufficient. The highest satisfaction was among the RAE communities, possibly due to their low starting point, and the lowest satisfaction was among Kosovo Serb and Gorani communities. Most returnees agreed that access to education and healthcare was similar to non-returnees and better than in displacement. These are positive indicators, but there is variation between ethnic groups. Kosovo Albanians did not perceive their access to be similar to others. This is likely the result of high levels of segregation in the Kosovo Serb majority areas they have returned to and the prevalence of Serb parallel institutions in these areas, which Kosovo Albanians do not use.

Table 6: Returnees' experiences with health and education services

'My access to education and healthcare is sufficient'						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Kosovo Albanian	8.3	8.3	6.7	45	31.7	0
Ashkali	76	16	4	0	0	4
Bosnian	50	26.5	14.7	5.9	2.9	0
Egyptian	93.7	6.3	0	0	0	0
Gorani	0	28	12	44	6	10
Roma	66.1	20	8.8	1.7	1.7	1.7
Kosovo Serb	7.2	76.3	11.9	2.6	1	1
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0

The physical dimension

The physical dimension to return refers to perpetuity and whether returnees intend to stay. Taken alone this is a minimal indication of sustainability, as we have discussed. Considered alongside the socio-economic and political-security dimensions of return, it offers qualified insight. As emigration is a common livelihood strategy in Kosovo, it is important to contextualise levels of (intended) mobility among returnees

with those among the wider population. 2008 figures based on 1,367 face-to-face interviews indicated that 30 per cent of Kosovo Albanians had taken steps to move abroad, whilst Kosovo Serbs were less likely to migrate.[73] According to the Kosovo Remittance Study 2012, more than one in every third household in Kosovo has a family member abroad, and one in every fourth receives remittances.[74] Overall, Kosovo has one of the largest international migration flows worldwide.

Almost all of the returnees surveyed were still living in the place they returned to, except for small numbers of Roma, Gorani, Albanians and Serbs. Most said they felt settled in their current location and planned to stay (71.8 per cent). Intentions to remigrate were modest compared to the general population of Kosovars planning to emigrate or currently abroad. Table 7 shows that the reality of return also met with many returnees' expectations, though less so for the Gorani and Kosovo Albanians.

Table 7: Returnees' perceptions of return: expectations and realities

Overall, the reality of my return met my expectations						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Kosovo Albanian	6.7	25	28.3	21.7	18.3	0
Ashkali	64	16	0	20	0	0
Bosnian	44.1	14.7	14.7	23.5	2.9	0
Egyptian	87.5	12.5	0	0	0	0
Gorani	2	12	12	62	8	4
Roma	40.9	27.8	5.2	10.4	15.7	0
Kosovo Serb	32.5	41.8	23.2	2.1	0.5	0
Turkish	40	20	40	0	0	0

Analysis and Policy Implications

In terms of the returnees' perceptions of security, the Kosovo returns process can be considered broadly sustainable. Kosovo Albanians register some dissatisfaction, which is unsurprising as they have returned to the contested Kosovo Serb-majority Mitrovicë/Mitrovica region. Yet other communities have returned to areas in which they

form a minority, such as the Bosniaks in Pejë/Peć and the Turks in Prizren, and provide more positive responses. As such, we do not suggest that it is the fact of forming a minority that negatively impacts returnee security. Rather, it is the way in which minority return and status are experienced. This is good news for policy-makers, as it underlines that returnees' perceptions of sustainability are contingent, rather than engrained, and can be improved through measures to address sources of insecurity, including peace-building activities. It is also bad news for policy-makers, as such initiatives require political will and support from politicians, in whose hands the sustainability of return partly lies. International experience shows that political intransigence related to return can be overcome, either through positive conditionality, such as in the 'open cities' initiative in Bosnia, or through systematic rule-of-law approaches.[75] In Kosovo, gains will be incremental and require goodwill and trust-building between returnees, the state and host communities.

The Kosovo returns process can also be considered relatively sustainable socio-economically, at least for some. Perceptions of healthcare, education and housing on return were generally good. The most critical issue that remains is livelihoods, as the majority of respondents (around two thirds) are not yet economically self-sufficient. Whilst this is broadly comparable to the circumstances of non-returnees, it still throws into question the sustainably of the Kosovo returns process. This centrality of economic embeddedness has also been emphasised in other studies, which have found livelihoods to be a bellwether issue that can either enable or seriously hinder a returns process.[76] Also, there is an acute sense among some of Kosovo's ethnic groups that when it comes to making a living, all Kosovars are equal but some are more equal than others. Whether or not this is borne out in reality, the perceptions are concerning. To consolidate return and validate the enormous cost of the process, policy-makers and

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practitioners must expand livelihood options for returnees, and do so in ways that are inclusive and avoid ethnically-framed tension.

Throughout the returns process, fewer resources were committed to livelihoods than housing provision. Some investment in housing is clearly beneficial, but the extent of this in Kosovo appears to have detrimentally eclipsed other aspects of return. Whilst a house presents a tempting offer to a prospective returnee, the means to earn a living is as fundamental, if not more. While income can enable returnees to acquire housing, housing does not generally generate income. As one returnee remarked, 'We have a very good house now, but I cannot eat my walls'.[77] In the literature, there have been several analyses that recognise the complexities of housing provision during return processes, especially in the Balkans.[78] However, few, if any, critically consider the tradeoff that is implicitly made between housing provision and other forms of assistance. This is an issue worthy of further reflection.

The most impressive results come within the physical dimension of return. 71.8 per cent of respondents said that they felt settled and planned to stay. This puts rates of anticipated remigration among returnees at lower levels than across the general population. Another reason, perhaps, why measuring the propensity to remigrate remains an attractive yardstick, despite its shortcomings.

In all, the levels of sustainability for the returns process in Kosovo show some sustainability, albeit with caveats around ethnic differentiation. This contrasts with some other studies of the Kosovo returns process which report more negative findings on sustainability. However, these tend to focus on failed asylum seekers repatriated to Kosovo from Western Europe, and not those who fled to neighbouring countries as a result of the 1998-1999 conflict and 2004 riots. On balance, we consider that the levels of sustainability reported are reasonable for several reasons. Firstly, return was

voluntary. Returnees had taken steps to prepare for return and decided that, on balance, it would be the right move for them. Secondly, the return process is well-financed and has benefited from nearly 20 years of experience, through which we can assume lessons have already been learned. And finally, the returns process prioritises vulnerable people, including RAE families, landless families and the elderly. For these groups, the provision of things like a secure home and identity documents will have had a significant impact on their physical, social and emotional wellbeing – gains that cannot easily be dismissed, despite the issues still present within the returns system.

Conclusion

First of all, before presenting our conclusions, it is important to recognise difficulties in measuring subjective perceptions of returnees against objective and aggregate conditions – an essential but methodologically challenging aspect of our theoretical framework. In post-conflict contexts, it is difficult to access reliable and detailed data on the general populations' circumstances vis-à-vis specific indicators. The poorer and more fragile the context is, the greater the challenge becomes. In most cases, we were not able to compare like for like in Kosovo and instead formed a picture through a range of sources, some of which correlated more closely to the indicators than others. In practical terms, it is also often difficult to distinguish between objective conditions and aggregate conditions as described in the framework, both because of the paucity of secondary data on the general population and the potential overlap within the concepts. In future, we suggest including a control group of non-returnees within the survey, to allow for counterfactual analysis.

We also recognise a missing dimension to the framework – that of culture. In interviews, cultural concerns recurred repeatedly, with references to religion, belonging,

prejudice, norms and values, and language, yet these were not easily captured. Culture

has been highlighted as an influential aspect of refugee journeys within the migration

and belonging literature[79] but is less well explored with regard to return, particularly

minority return. We suggest the framework be adapted in future to include culture, with

indicators measuring the extent to which cultural norms and behaviors are respected,

adapted and/or transgressed in return environments. This will widen the scope beyond

structural and technocratic areas of concern, such as schooling, healthcare and

livelihoods, and reflect more fully the experiences of returnees. It may also help to

bridge the gap between return programming and peace-building in divided societies.

Second, the international community has invested heavily in sustainable return

in Kosovo. Our findings suggest that the process has been a qualified success. Like

many Kosovars, returnees face socio-economic challenges and live with the legacies

and present-day realities of ethnic division. Measuring sustainability relative to the

conditions of the home country, we do not consider this to be a shortcoming of the

returns process.

Third, much of the Kosovo returns process has pivoted on housing provision,

which has had pros and cons. Certainly it has eclipsed livelihoods and income

generation, which require greater focus. It has also functioned as a substantial means of

restitution for wartime losses, especially in the absence of other restorative processes.

Some beneficiaries will have gone through the returns process without intending to

settle, recognising it as a rare chance to re-establish themselves financially. Similar

compensatory strategies have been identified among displaced in Iraq, and no doubt

exist elsewhere.[80] We challenge the notion that this is inappropriate. Many returnees are

driven not by nostalgia or a longing for 'home', but the desire to reclaim possessions,

receive restitution or improve living standards. In these circumstances, it should not be

surprising if return is short-lived or partial, forming part of a wider livelihood strategy. Nor should it necessarily be considered a procedural failure. The Kosovo returns process has provided displaced people with options, irrespective of whether these correspond with envisaged outcomes. If failure exists, it is in the underdevelopment of other forms of restitution, which could be sought through fuller mechanisms for local integration or transitional justice.

Fourth, returnees '…need more than just a chance to return. They need equal opportunities to stay'.[81] In this respect, the divergent survey responses between ethnic groups are concerning. We are mindful that in Kosovo ethnic and spatial faultlines are conflictual and suggest further research through a conflict prevention lens to understand how these faultlines intersect with returnee experiences and how sustainable return can support post-conflict transitions.

Finally, soon the generous funding provided to the Kosovo returns process will decline and it is not clear what opportunities will remain for those awaiting return. One question will be whether to support larger numbers in less substantial ways, or smaller numbers in more substantial ways. Another will be to consider other durable solutions. Resettlement, local integration and even restorative transitional justice mechanisms all have potential as durable solutions and forms of reparation, but rarely receive due consideration alongside refugee return.

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Notes

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[4] IDMC, 'IDMC Estimates'.

[5] Fransen, 'Socio-Economic Sustainability'; Hammond, 'This Place Will Become Home'.

[6] Fransen, 'Socio-Economic Sustainability'; Lietaert et al 'Returnees' Perspectives'; Paasche, 'Why Assisted Returns Programmes Must Be Evaluated').

[7] Harild et al., 'Sustainable Refugee Return'.

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[15] Harvey, 'Return Dynamics'.

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[19] Harild et al., 'Sustainable Refugee Return'.

[20] Hansen, *Circular Migrants in Somaliland*; Hansen, 'Revolving Returnees'.

[21] Hammond et al., 'Cash and Compassion'; Ambroso, 'Pastoral Society and Transnational Refugees'.

[22] Koser, 'Information and Repatriation'.

[23] Cassarino, 'Theorising Return Migration'.

[24] Black and Gent, *Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts*; Ruben et al, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants'.

[25] Bilgili and Siegel, 'Migrants' Integration'; Fokkema and de Haas, 'Pre- and Post-Migration Determinants'; Koser and Kuschminder, 'Comparative Research on Assisted Voluntary Return'.

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[29] Ozerdem and Sofizada, 'Sustainable Reintegration to Returning Refugees'.

[30] Kuschminder, 'Interrogating the Relationship'.

[31] Black et al, 'Defining, Measuring and Influencing Sustainable Return'.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Strand et al, 'Programmes for Assisted Return'.

[34] Black et al, *Understanding Voluntary Return.*

[35] Ecke et al., 'Subjective and Objective Wellbeing'; Fransen, 'Socio-Economic Sustainability'; Mesić and Bagić, 'Serb Returnees in Croatia'.

[36] Black et al, *Understanding Voluntary Return.*

[37] We recognise that the word 'physical' connects to notions of spatiality and the built environment, but in Black et al's framework it refers to the returnee's ongoing physical presence within the place of return, and it is therefore tied specifically to remigration aspirations and intentions.

[38] Eytan et al, 'Long-term Mental health Outcomes'; Von Lersner et al, 'Mental Health of Refugees'.

[39] Arenliu and Weine, 'Reintegrating Returned Migrants'.

[40] Municipalities included in the in-depth interviews: 1) Pejë/Peć 2) Istog/Istok 3) Klinë/Klina 4) Mitrovicë/Mitrovica 5) Mitrovicë Veriore/Severna Mitrovica 6) Novobërdë/Novo Brdo 7) Obiliq/Obilić 8) Partesh/Parteš 9) Pristinë/Priština 10) PrizrenShtërpce/Štrpce 11) Vushtrri/Vučitrn

[41] Ministry of Communities and Return, 'Strategy for Communities'.

[42] Ambroso, 'The Balkans at a Crossroads'.

[43] Municipalities included in the survey: 1) Prishtinë/Priština: Fushë Kosovë/Kosovo Polje; Graçanicë/Gračanica; Lipjan/Lipljan; Obiliq/Obilić 2) Mitrovicë/Mitrovica: Mitrovicë Veriore/Severna Mitrovica; Leposaviq/Leposavić; Vushtrri/Vučitrn; Skenderaj/Srbica; Mitrovicë Jugore/Južna Mitrovica; Zubinpotok/Zubin Potok; Zveçan/Zvečan 3) Gjakovë/Đakovica: Rahovec/Orahovac 4) Pejë/Pec: Pejë/Pec; Istog/Istok; Klinë/Klina 5) Ferizaj/Uroševac: Kllokot/Klokot; Shtërpcë/Štrpce 6) Gjilan/Gnjilane: Gjilan/Gnjilane; Kamenicë/Kamenica; Novobërdë/Novo Brdo; Partesh/Parteš; Ranillug/Ranilug 7) Prizren region: Prizren; Dragash/Dragas.

[44] 66.2 per cent of respondents were 25-54 years, 22.8 per cent were 55-64, 6.8 per cent were 18-24 and 4.2 per cent were older than 64. 83.2 per cent were male, 16.8 per cent were female.

[45] Ministry of Internal Affairs, Department of Citizenship, Asylum and Migration, *Annual Statistics Report, 2015.*

[46] Author interview with representative of EU Office in Kosovo, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016.

[47] Ministry of Communities and Return, 'Strategy for Communities'.

[48] Fielden, 'Local Integration'.

[49] Petrin, 'Refugee Return'; Warner, 'Voluntary Repatriation'; Allen and Morsink,'When Refugees Go Home').

[50] Black and Gent, *Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts.*; Macrae, *Aiding Peace… And War.*

[51] This can be partly attributed to the ethnic cleavages that exist within the region. For example, ethnic Serbs generally fled to Serbia, a stable country where they spoke the language and were entitled to access basic services. As such, there would have been few push factors or incentives to further relocate.

[52] 81.4 per cent agreed that they had access to education and healthcare, 68.2 per cent could make enough income to support themselves and 64 per cent had stable accommodation.

[53] Author interview with UNHCR, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016; Author interview with UK Embassy, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016).

[54] Author interview with elderly female returnee, Prizren December 2016)

[55] Ibid.

[56] KAAD, 'Returnee Monitoring'.

[57] Author interview with UNHCR, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016.

[58] OSCE, 'Community Rights'.

[59] Author interview with elderly male returnee, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, December 2016.

[60] Fransen and Kuschminder, 'Back to the Land'.

[61] The World Bank, *The World Bank in Kosovo: Overview.*

[62] UNDP, 'Kosovo Human Development Report 2016'.

[63] Lücke et al., 'Kosovo Human Development Report 2014'.

[64] Ozerdem and Sofizada, 'Sustainable Reintegration to Returning Refugees'.

[65] Abramson and Theodossopolous, 'Land, Law and Environment'; Bunte and Monnier, 'Mediating Land Conflict'.

[66] Ombudsperson Institution in Kosovo, 'Special Report No. 12'.

[67] KAAD, 'Returnee Monitoring'; Republic of Kosovo,'Koncept Paper'; Author interview with UNHCR, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016.

[68] Williams, 'The Significance of Property Restitution'

[69] Mesić and Bagić, 'Serb Returnees in Croatia'.

[70] Author interview with representative of KAAD, Prishtinë/Priština, December 2016.

[71] Author interview with returnee, Prizren, December 2016.

[72] KAAD, 'Returnee Monitoring'.

[73] Ivlevs and King, 'Kosovo – Winning its Independence'.

[74] UNDP, *Kosovo Remittance Study 2012.*

[75] Belloni, 'Peace-building at the Local Level'.

[76] Ruben et al, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants'; Maconachie et al, 'Temporary Labour Migration'; Fransen, 'Socio-Economic Sustainability'.

[77] Author interview with returnee, Pejë/Peć, December 2016.

[78] Smit, 'Housing and Property Restitution'; Stefansson, 'Homes in the Making'; Williams, 'The Significance of Property Restitution'; Chimni, 'Refugees, Return and Reconstruction'.

[79] Wilding, 'Mediating Culture'; Murphy, *Migration, Culture and Mental Health.*

[80] Romano, 'Whose House?'

[81] UNMIK, *Revised Manual for Sustainable Return.*