Sustainable Return in Post-conflict Contexts

Richard Black and Saskia Gent *

ABSTRACT

Post-conflict return is a highly politically charged process in a number of contexts, both for returnees and those who did not migrate or flee, leading many observers to question the notion of an unproblematic return “home”. Specifically, doubts remain both about the conditions and voluntariness of return, the ability of individual returnees to reintegrate in their home countries and regions, and the wider sustainability of the return process. This paper seeks to provide an overview of recent policy interest in returns, before setting out a tentative definition of what might be considered a “sustainable” return. It is argued that it is possible to draw a distinction between narrow indicators of the “sustainability” of return, such as whether returnees subsequently reemigrate, and wider definitions, which see “sustainability” as involving both the reintegration of individual returnees in their home societies, and the wider impact of return on macroeconomic and political indicators. Based on either definition, the development of robust indicators of the sustainability of return could assist in monitoring the impact of return programmes, providing valuable insight on return policies. The broader definition suggested also draws attention to the idea that continued mobility after an initial return – including circulation and the development of a “transnational” lifestyle – may be more “sustainable” than a single and definitive return to the refugee’s place of origin.
THE RETURN OF REFUGEES: THE PREFERRED DURABLE SOLUTION

The return of refugees and other migrants represents an issue of growing concern for governments and international organizations working in the refugee and migration fields. In post-conflict contexts in particular, large-scale international return of refugees to places such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (Republic of Serbia) have occurred alongside intense efforts to promote so-called “minority return” of displaced people within conflict-affected territories. This wide-ranging interest in return comes from a number of directions, including domestic political concerns in countries and regions of origin, as well as a desire to promote “durable solutions” for forced migrants.

Despite its categorization as one of three “durable solutions” by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the return of refugees has not always been a high priority internationally. Indeed, between the end of World War II and the late 1980s, the main proponents of the international refugee regime rarely saw the return of refugees as an important consideration (Chimni, 1999: 2). During this time, most refugees of concern to the West were from communist countries. In this context, the ideological interests of the West meant that local integration in host countries in Europe, or resettlement to North America, were generally more attractive options. Labour shortages also influenced the attitudes of the receiving states (Chimni, 1999), with the result that public policy tended to focus on integration or assimilation rather than promoting return.

Since the end of the Cold War, international attention has been drawn more substantially to the return of refugees. As flows of refugees have come from a wider array of countries, and numbers appear to have increased, the West has become increasingly impatient with what it sees as its refugee burden. Changing attitudes toward asylum seekers have also accompanied an increasingly restrictive attitude toward migration in general that developed from the 1970s (Black and Koser, 1999: 4), and which had already led to some return programmes for economic migrants. Tough measures have been introduced across a number of northern countries to stop asylum seekers from reaching their borders, as well as to limit welfare benefits, remove rights of appeal against refusal of refugee status, and tackle “illegal migration” and “people trafficking”. One element of this changing policy has been to emphasize the importance of return, both as a deterrent to those who wish to come without documentation, and to affirm the control of receiving states over their borders.

However, although an emphasis on return can be seen as part of a restrictive attitude toward refugees and asylum seekers in the north, this is far from being a complete explanation. For example, at the same time as attitudes toward refugees...
were hardening, the end of the Cold War also created a “peace dividend” which opened up new opportunities for return. In the three years from 1989 to 1992, the United Nations (UN) launched more peacekeeping operations than in its previous 43 years. This led the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs. Ogata, to predict that from 1992 there would be a “decade of repatriation” (Ogata, 1992). In turn, as Oxfield and Long (2005) note, “a quiet steady stream of refugees (have been) returning of their own accord”, reflecting the desire of many individuals to live again in their country of origin. Return was not only a solution for individual refugees, but also came to be seen as a central pillar of peace processes as they evolved during this time.

In the decade since 1992, substantial return movements of refugees have indeed occurred (Table 1). The majority of these have been within and to Africa, with only Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia (Republic of Serbia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina as non-African countries featuring in this list of the largest movements. As a result of these return movements, protracted refugee situations in other parts of Africa, and the prospect of still more returns, UNHCR has developed a *Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa* and has run a number of pilot “4Rs” programmes (UNHCR, 2004b). However, an overview of Africa’s refugee situation in the 1990s has pointed out that many returnees go back in conditions far from the voluntary, safe, and dignified return established in legal principles (Crisp, 2000).

One important facet of increasingly high-profile return programmes is their use by the international community to help to validate post-conflict regimes, which have been brought to power by international coalitions or international actors. Return of refugees and other displaced people thus aims to inspire public and donor confidence in the reconstruction and peace-building programme (UNHCR, 1997: 162) as well as indicating the confidence of the returning population (Petrin, 2002: 5). The success or otherwise of return can also be an indicator of a range of other post-conflict issues, including progress toward development goals, and the “extent to which civil-state relations will be repaired in the post-conflict period” (Petrin, 2002: 5). In contrast, the continuing existence of a substantial displaced population represents a barrier to the legitimacy of post-conflict states (Black and Koser, 1999: 5).

PROBLEMS OF RETURN

Support for the return of refugees has gained ground as an area of public policy intervention, with the number of voluntary assisted return schemes across 18 European countries increasing more than five-fold in ten years, from four to more than 20 (IOM, 2004: 7).
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<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:  *Total obtained by adding figures for each year from 1992-2003. However, it is likely that renewed flight has led to "double counting" of returns in a number of countries. "+" = no data available

Source: UNHCR statistical yearbook, 2002; UNHCR population statistics (provisional); 2003 Global Refugee Trends.
Yet this advance has not prevented return from remaining fiercely controversial within public policy. One reason for this is the practical difficulty of establishing the voluntariness of return. For example, it is often difficult to disentangle the voluntary return of refugees to promote post-conflict reconstruction, and the usually less-than-voluntary return of failed asylum seekers and irregular migrants by Western governments under political pressure to demonstrate the “integrity” of their migration systems (Black, 2004b). A blurring of boundaries is reinforced by the fact that the experience of returning refugees in the interests of state-building in the Balkans has indeed influenced return programmes for other categories of migrants. For example, Koser comments that lessons learned from the Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo return programmes in European countries have been applied to other categories of migrants, including rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants (Koser, 2001: 12). Confusion can also be expected when, for example, the UK government seeks to promote voluntary return from the United Kingdom to Somaliland, but is simultaneously seeking to compulsorily repatriate failed asylum seekers, with little or no support to their reintegration, and some ending up in camps on their return (International Development Committee, 2004).

Meanwhile, even within voluntary programmes, different degrees of “voluntariness” can be identified: return may be a clear and open choice on the part of the refugee either to return or to stay permanently in the host country, but it can also be a choice between returning voluntarily when asked to do so, perhaps gaining financial or other incentives as a result, or staying and risking forcible return at some time in the future (Morrison, 2000). Worse, in some cases, “voluntary” can be taken simply to mean an absence of force in removal, but where the refugee is effectively given no choice at all. In turn, governments’ interest in voluntary return is not always motivated by lofty goals, and may simply reflect a lack of political will to enforce removal, and/or a preference for voluntary return prompted by an understanding that voluntary returns require “less administrative effort than forced return” (European Commission, 2002: 8). Yet despite acknowledgements of the preference for voluntary return (IOM, 2004: 7), only 23 per cent of returns from European Union (EU) countries in 2000 were facilitated by assisted voluntary return programmes, or 87,628 individuals, compared to 367,552 people who were removed during the same period (European Commission, 2002: 19).

Doubts about the value of return also centre on its ideological significance. For example, Malkki (1992: 37) has challenged a number of assumptions that underpin the discourse of return, such as that it allows the re-establishment of a natural or “national order” that is presumed to have existed prior to displacement. She critiques the notion that refugees, when displaced, are out of place or...
“uprooted” (Malkki, 1992: 25) and have to be put back in their right place. Similarly, Warner (1994: 160) notes how “concepts of community and home… assume a world of order and stability” which is not necessarily accurate or achievable. The pervasiveness of this view can be seen in a World Bank discussion paper that asserts “there can be no hope of normalcy until the majority of those displaced are able to reintegrate themselves into their societies” (UNHCR, 1997: 162). Yet for Malkki, the key issue is that the resulting focus on the importance of a delineated “home” leads to an intrinsic rejection of refugees, making their status “pathological” (1992: 31). Meanwhile, Warner identifies that the asymmetry and “complexity” of experience make return, as encapsulated in the dominant discourse, impossible; as he says, the “durable solution of voluntary repatriation denies the temporal reality of our lives and the changes that take place over time” (1994: 171).

In a critical overview, Hammond argues that the concern to “re-root” refugees assumes that the cycle will then be ended and that refugees will be morally, spiritually, culturally, and economically better off. But this may not be the case – return may not be a “re-” anything but the beginning of a new cycle (Black and Koser, 1999). In this context, the discourse of return may be damaging in practical terms as well as theoretically questionable. Hammond reviews criticisms from a range of commentators to draw attention to one particularly problematic result of the dominant underlying conceptualization of return: because return is assumed to be a good thing, and people are assumed to belong in a certain place, known in shorthand as “home”, attention to refugees may be abruptly and artificially ended at the point of repatriation. As a result too little assistance is given to those who return and we know too little about the diverse experiences of returnees (Hammond, 1999: 227). As Rogge (1994: 34) points out, migrants may take ten to 15 years to establish themselves, whereas refugees who return are expected to establish or “re-establish” themselves much more quickly. Yet in practice, the experience of return may be more, rather than less, problematic than the experience of exile (UNHCR, 1997: 153).

The notion of a fixed and clear “home” is particularly problematic in this sense. For example, Allen and Morsink (1994: 7) have sought to unpick the concept of “home” and an undifferentiated “returnee”, calling into question “conceptions of a homeland and shared values within a population which may or may not exist”, even though they accept that return may be the most favourable outcome for refugees. Other commentators have also critiqued the notion of “home” (Black, 2002), with questions raised on highly pragmatic issues such as: (1) Should refugees return to their home or their homeland? (2) Who should decide where they should return – the refugees themselves, governments, or international organizations? (3) What are the motivations behind the decision? (4) What is the deeper meaning of “home”? On the last point, for example, Black and Koser
(1999: 9) suggest that refugees can be more at “home” in the country of asylum, especially if they have lived there for a long time, or if economic or social opportunities are likely to be denied to them in their country of origin.

Related to the problematized notion of home is the issue of links maintained by returnees with their country or place of destination. These links vary from correspondence with friends made in the place of origin to lives lived half in one place and half in another. The emphasis on return of refugees as a “durable solution” implies that return is, or should be, a permanent event, closing the door to further transnational links. However, a number of studies have shown the wide range of transnational activities that returnees can be involved with, linking their country of origin and destination. Stepputat (2004) outlines the benefits of “mobile livelihoods” in making return sustainable, whether as a result of returnees taking advantage of existing links, or creating new ones through further migration. Meanwhile, Hansen (2005) outlines the role of “circular migration” in conceptualizing the relationship between migrants from Somaliland and their countries of destination. These approaches make return itself more of a grey area. If migrants spend only half of each year in their original country can they be said to have “returned” in the way policymakers may have envisaged?

There are a number of different typologies of links between returned migrants and their places of destination; Nyborg Sorensen (2004) outlines two: “staggered repatriation” and “revolving returnees”. Staggered repatriation involves splitting families, with one or two members, usually male, returning, leaving the women and children. This is partly a result of the life stage of some migrants, especially those with school-age children, but it also allows them to reduce the economic and security risks of return. Revolving returnees intend to return permanently but end up re-migrating for economic or security reasons, or after failing to get their family to join them. In cases where displacement is over a long distance, or involves crossing an international border that is policed, these physical links require documentation to allow ease of movement, as reliance on undocumented movement would be too risky. Stepputat (2004: 5) points out that free mobility is a more efficient incentive to return than economic return packages. As a result, these links are unlikely to be applicable to failed asylum seekers in Western states, although as an extension of “look and see” options, the ability to move more freely between countries of origin and destination could be applied to migrants with a range of different statuses.

THE RIGHT TO RETURN

Notwithstanding the obstacles highlighted in the previous section, one reason why return is a popular “durable solution” is that it is often a migrant’s wish to
return home. As Allen and Morsink observed a decade ago, “(i)t is generally assumed that most refugees will eventually want to go home” (1994: 1). Even if maintaining a longing for a land to return to can create unrealistic expectations (Markowitz, 1995), the desire to return to an idealized “home” can develop almost mythical status for a place that may no longer exist (Zetter, 1999), or may never have existed (King, 2000: 21). Yet as well as often being an individual’s wish, return is also asserted as a right by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 13(2), which states: “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country”.

The right to leave and return to one’s country is founded on “natural law” (Rosand, 1998: 1091). However, historically the right to leave has been focused on more than the right to return. For example, Rosand contrasts the international sanctioning of, and involvement with, mass population movements up to and including the end of World War II (including the Treaty of Neuilly between Bulgaria and Greece, and the Treaty of Lausanne between Greece and Turkey) with the more recent belief that this sort of orchestrated population movement violates human rights and that international bodies must work to re-create multi-ethnic communities, not to part them.

Since the end of World War II, the focus on the right to leave rather than the right to return was partly due to the nature of the Cold War, which meant that refugees were practically unable to return. As noted above, host countries often considered the presence of refugees to be a sign of the failure of communist states, a sign they were happy to encourage and support. Recent interest in return as a right, however, is not only due to the end of the Cold War and the role of return in internationally led peace efforts. The emergence of a discourse on the right to return in the Balkans has resulted from a context in which warring parties have been seen as directly pursuing displacement of particular groups of people as a principal war aim. Thus, although the existence of a right to return for displaced people was not new, it was new that the international community determined that they should be able to exercise the right, reflecting what were seen as new circumstances that led to displacement in the first place (Rosand, 1998: 1104).

Return has emerged as a political “righting of wrongs” in the Balkan wars (Black, 2001), as the return of refugees and IDPs and post-conflict reconstruction have become almost inseparable. In part, this reflects the nature of the conflict, in which there was widespread “ethnic cleansing”, and the desire of Western diplomats who negotiated the Dayton Peace Accords to enshrine a right of return in the peace settlement. However, in attempting to make this right concrete, international organizations working in the Balkans since Dayton have specified the
nature of this right much more closely than had been the case before, asserting that returnees have the right to return to their “homes”, not just to their country of origin (Phuong, 2000: 166). Thus, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, “righting the wrong” of ethnic cleansing by promoting minority return – the re-mixing of ethnic minorities – has become a major aim of public policy (Bantekas, 1998; Phuong, 2000). In turn, Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Accord defines this right in the following way:

All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them. The early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IFOR, 1995).

In support of the basic right of individuals to return to their “homes”, parties to the treaty were expected to “ensure” that returnees do not face “harassment, intimidation, persecution, or discrimination, particularly on account of their ethnic origin, religious belief, or political opinion”. In general they were asked to support “human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons within their jurisdiction”. In turn, return was made a central element in resolving the conflict (Prettitore, 2004: 4), with Annex 7 stating that the “early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict” (IFOR, 1995). If judged by numbers alone, the return process has been reasonably impressive (Table 2).

### TABLE 2
STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF RETURNS TO/WITHIN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AT 31 DECEMBER 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of return</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returns from abroad</td>
<td>442,130</td>
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<tr>
<td>Returns of displaced persons</td>
<td>569,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total returnees</td>
<td>1,011,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of minority returns</td>
<td>454,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remaining displaced persons</td>
<td>182,747</td>
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In Kosovo, UNMIK has also stressed the right to return home and the rights of property that are associated with this return. However UNMIK has also gone further, by describing the right to return as a “right to sustainable return”. This is defined specifically in a Manual on Sustainable Return as encompassing four areas: security and freedom of movement, access to public services (public utilities, social services, education, and healthcare), access to shelter (i.e. through effective property repossession or housing reconstruction assistance) and economic options, through fair and equal access to employment opportunities. Evolving public policies that promote a right to return are beginning to require attention to much more than the logistics of moving across borders.

MAKING RETURN “SUSTAINABLE”

There has been strong and growing engagement with the concept of return by governments and refugee and migration policymakers over the 1990s, with return increasingly seen as having implications not just for individuals, but also for communities of origin and the wider process of development. Macrae (1999) and others have outlined a pattern constructed by the international community for the implementation of peace, consisting of peace accords, peace keeping and interim administration, then elections carried out in peaceful conditions. She cites a report to UNHCR’s Executive Committee in 1992 which claimed that “successful reintegration is critical to any national reconciliation and reconstruction process”, noting that “international security is at stake” (Macrae, 1999: 11). This concern with refugees’ role in peace building has been retained, from the complexities of the wars and reconstruction efforts in the Balkans, to recent projects trialled by UNHCR in Africa (UNHCR, 2004b). International organizations dealing with post-conflict countries increasingly argue that return itself is not enough to promote peace; rather, this return needs to be “successful”. Thus, UNHCR states in its Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa that: “experience shows that if the issue of sustainability or reintegration of refugee and displaced populations is not addressed properly, the countries concerned will almost inevitably slide back into conflict” (2004b: 1).

A range of assisted voluntary return programmes, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), and other programmes have attempted to influence the success of returns (UNHCR, 1997) and so to promote peace. Yet such benefits of return remain an elusive outcome in most situations, and critical voices continue to be heard. Reflecting these criticisms, Noll (2000: 101) has argued that “to strive for efficiency of return means also to strive for its acceptability”, suggesting that protection of the individual must be at the heart of deliberations on the issue.
Clearly, return itself may not be enough; return needs to be “successful” and “sustainable”. Yet a key question remains as to the best benchmark of success and sustainability – and specifically whether what is important is the outcome for individual returnees, or collective outcomes for people in the regions or countries of origin. For example, the unsustainable return of refugees could contribute to renewed conflict and/or further displacement. This is true not only in terms of returnees finding a lack of jobs, housing, or other social infrastructure, which leads to competition for resources and/or secondary migration, but also in terms of changing the balance of political power in a way that might re-ignite conflict. Such concerns are shared by donor governments. For example, governments who are returning irregular migrants are aware that if return is not sustainable, the same migrants might once more attempt to travel to these same destinations (Koser, 2001: 5). Meanwhile, a report by a House of Commons select committee in the United Kingdom noted that if conditions for return are not right, return can put pressures on developing countries that could raise “the potential for instability, conflict and renewed out-migration” (International Development Committee, 2004: 47). What emerges is a shared interest in examining how to “assist” return in order to make it more sustainable, yet some potential divergence over how that sustainability might be measured.

MEASURING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN

In thinking about how sustainability might best be defined, we are confronted with an immediate problem, in that “sustainability” has become so much used in so many different contexts that is has almost become meaningless. For example, in a review of the use of sustainability criteria in impact assessment, Gibson argues that “of all the buzzwords and catchphrases circulating in the academic and political worlds, sustainability may be the most slippery” (Gibson, 2005: 39), while definitions of sustainability range from as broad as Bell and Morse’s observation that it is “all about an improvement of the human condition” (Bell and Morse, 2003: 3), or Diesendorf’s statement that sustainability means having “respect for nature” and “respect for people” (Diesendorf, 2001: 112), to as specific as the presence of wild salmon in local streams, or the percentage of streets that are “pedestrian friendly” (Lawrence, 1998: 79).

In navigating this substantial field, several consistent features of sustainability definitions can be identified that are relevant to the issue of return of refugees (as well as some consistent features, such as a concern with conserving the natural environment, that are perhaps less relevant). For example, Kaptein and Wempe (2001: 94) note that in thinking about the sustainability of corporate strategies, there is a “triple bottom line” that requires companies to behave in a
way that makes economic, social, and environmental sense in the longer term; while Gibson (2005: 62) identifies nine key elements of sustainability indicators that include their stress in the long and short term, their recognition of interdependencies, and that they challenge conventional thinking. The notion of “sustainable return” being a longer-term, contextual, and challenging understanding of return that encompasses social and economic dimensions is what we will focus on here.

Turning to the measurement of sustainability, this can also be done both in relation to the position of an individual, but also in relation to a wider context. Thus, for example, Carvalho et al. (2002) note that measuring sustainability in project analysis involves calculating both whether benefits are sustained for the lifetime of a project, and whether there are broader effects on institutional development. There are both advantages and disadvantages to conceptualizing the sustainability of return at an individual level, in terms of outcomes for individual returnees. A definition at the individual level has the benefit of simplicity; most obviously, if a returnee subsequently re-emigrates, is displaced a second time, or remains at home only because they are forced to do so against their will, that return could quite easily be viewed as unsustainable. In principle, it should also be relatively simple to monitor whether returns are sustainable in this sense, tracking a sample of returnees and measuring actual levels of re-emigration, onward displacement, and/or desire to leave. Alternatively, the sustainability of individual returns could be conceptualized more broadly to encompass factors relevant to long-term economic and social well-being, such as income, employment, shelter or access to healthcare, education or other services.

In a pilot study for the UK Home Office on voluntary return to the Balkans, we have defined the individual sustainability of return in the following terms: “Return migration is sustainable for individuals if returnees’ socio-economic status and fear of violence or persecution is no worse, relative to the population in the place of origin, one year after their return” (Black et al., 2004: 39).

Such a definition emphasizes the outcomes of return in terms of its broader impact on individuals, rather than their physical location. However, the value of monitoring the sustainability of return at an individual level in either of these two ways remains open to debate. Although straightforward in principle, the cost of ongoing monitoring of returnees—even to determine whether they have remained in their place of origin – may be prohibitive. This is especially so where a return flow is made up of refugees or migrants who did not all originate from the same area, or where onward movement is relatively easy. There are also benchmarks to be set, even when the definition of sustainability chosen is the narrow one of whether people remain “home” after return. For example, most countries in the
world – and almost all to which voluntary return is likely to be promoted – allow their citizens to leave their home village or town for another village, town, or indeed country. Given this, there is likely to be a residual level of out-migration among the general population in any place refugees or migrants return, which should in principle be used as a benchmark against which to measure levels of re-migration among returnees.

Similarly, questions arise as to whether the provision of shelter, access to basic services, or levels of employment or income should be measured against some absolute standard, or relative to the general population in the place of origin (or indeed in the migrant’s place of destination – a comparison that might more readily be made by returnees themselves). In practice, attempts to monitor the experience of returnees in this way are limited, as are benchmark surveys that would allow comparison between returnees and general populations in the country of origin. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Swiss government was able to monitor the experience of returnees by making return assistance payments in two instalments, one at the time of return, and one six months later, although this might be considered quite a short period over which to monitor reintegration and sustainability. Yet there are no benchmark surveys against which returnee experience could be measured; indeed, plans to hold a census in Bosnia and Herzegovina have arguably been stalled precisely because it is believed by some that it would reveal the extent to which return policy has failed, and/or been unsustainable. Meanwhile, in Kosovo, a benchmark survey of a kind does exist – a Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) conducted in 2000 with World Bank funding. Yet here, there have been no systematic attempts by those organizing return to monitor the experience of returnees.

One advantage of defining and measuring the sustainability of individual return is that there is the potential to use such a study to explore factors that influence return outcomes. Thus, the Sussex study for the Home Office explored the different factors that influenced the sustainability of return, looking separately at its physical aspect (whether or not returnees expressed a firm intention to re-emigrate), as well as its socio-economic and political aspect, for which relevant indicators included, respectively, whether returnees had found a job and whether they expressed fears over security (Black et al., 2004: 38).

In addition to the cost of measuring the sustainability of the return of individuals in this way, and definitional difficulties, there is also a more fundamental problem to this approach because it effectively prioritizes outcomes for returnees, rather than for the countries and regions to which they return. For example, where returnees go or are sent to a desperately poor country or region with return assistance, whether this is cash, support to rebuild their house, or a job, their relative wealth could – at least in principle – contribute to a process of
further impoverishment of the population already living in the home country. UNHCR (2004a) has drawn attention to this risk in a paper reviewing return in South-eastern Europe, pointing out that returnees are competing for (often scarce) resources with local populations. The organization argues that return of those who enjoyed temporary protection in Western Europe, whether failed asylum seekers or irregular migrants, could put “additional pressure on [countries] already facing the difficult challenge of integrating refugees in a context of very limited absorption capacities” (UNHCR, 2004a: 7). At the very least, the tensions that arise when returnees come back to an area with accumulated wealth and/or public assistance are tangible enough, and may do little to reduce tension and promote reconciliation. Yet, monitoring the aggregate impact of return on home societies and economies, let alone defining whether this process is “sustainable”, is far from straightforward.

The definition of aggregate sustainability provided by the Sussex Home Office study is: “Return migration is sustainable for the home country or region if socio-economic conditions and levels of violence and persecution are not significantly worsened by return, as measured one year after the return process is complete” (Black et al., 2004: 39). However, this definition begs the question of which baseline to take, against which an improvement or worsening of socio-economic conditions or levels of violence might be measured: should this be the point at which conflict “officially” ends, or the point at which return starts, and if the latter, what volume of returns is required before return can be considered to have “started”.

Another way to think about the aggregate sustainability of return is to adapt an understanding of sustainability from DFID’s “sustainable livelihoods” framework, in which livelihoods are considered “sustainable” if they can be maintained without external inputs, and are sufficiently robust to withstand external shocks. Applying this understanding to contexts of refugee or migrant return, we could reasonably ask whether at either an aggregate or individual level, return increases or decreases reliance on external inputs, principally humanitarian and development aid, in the medium term, and whether it makes economic, social, and political systems more or less vulnerable to shocks. Such an approach appears more relevant to an aggregate understanding of the sustainability of return, reflecting the fact that the sustainable livelihoods framework itself is primarily concerned with delimiting an aggregate picture of sustainability.

If such a framework is adopted, a number of new questions arise, several of which are quite pertinent in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. First, large-scale return of refugees may bring with it additional external inputs, in the form of reconstruction aid, risking an increase in dependency on such inputs. However, it may also cut off financial inputs from other sources, notably the
remittances sent by refugees to their families from overseas. Here, there is a
difficult definitional point because such remittances could be considered an “ex-
ternal input”, and hence something which is inherently “unsustainable”, although
increasingly migration, and the remittances sent by migrants, are coming to be
regarded as a fairly “normal” livelihood strategy for many poorer households in
the developing world. For example, in countries of emigration, remittances can
provide substantial contributions to GDP – more than one and a half times the
value of exports in Albania, for example, or 2.5 times the sum of the average
wages of all members of a family (King and Vullnetari, 2003: 47-48). Twelve
countries in the World Bank’s top 20 recipients of worker’s remittances receive
remittances worth more than 10 per cent of GDP (Ratha, 2003a). In addition,
we might usefully consider the extent to which the return of refugees either
diversifies livelihood options for the population as a whole, or makes them more
narrow and vulnerable to shocks. For example, refugee return could be particu-
larly valuable in terms of promoting sustainability by opening up economic,
social, or cultural linkages with former countries of asylum that could help the
home country to withstand shocks. However, for such linkages to be effective,
a measure of “re-migration” of returnees is necessary, which is something con-
spicuously absent in most voluntary return programmes.

INFLUENCING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN

A team at the University of Sussex has sought to explore some of these issues
through a study on voluntary return in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo,
although it was based on an extremely small sample of around 30 returnees to
each country, and included Bosnians, in particular, who had returned up to five
years previously. However, some interesting associations emerged (Table 3),
although these do not show what causes sustainability, they do point to areas
worth pursuing with further research.

For example, voluntary return, employment, training, or education in the coun-
try of destination, and the receipt of return and reintegration assistance, were all
found to contribute to sustainability. Voluntary return was found to be more
sustainable than involuntary, in that those who returned voluntarily were less
likely to express a desire to leave again, and had higher income levels. Similarly
those who had received training or education had higher income levels, while
those who had been employed abroad were less likely to wish to re-emigrate.
Among those who had received assistance, reported feelings of security were
higher. In contrast, those with weaker language skills (i.e. English, German)
were more likely to wish to re-emigrate, while those who had gained a secure
status abroad were less likely to wish to re-emigrate, but more likely to express
fears about their security (Black et al., 2004: 38). The lifestage of returnees will
also have implications for the sustainability of communities with a risk posed by the return only of the older generation (D’Onofrio, 2004: 24). There is also an ongoing debate about the importance of psychosocial factors in integration and therefore also in return. This will also be relevant to the sustainability of return (Adjukovic, 2004).

### TABLE 3
**VARIABLES THAT MAY INFLUENCE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors that influence sustainability</th>
<th>Key variables from survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of returnees/Experiences before exile</td>
<td>Age&lt;br&gt;Gender&lt;br&gt;Pre-war accommodation&lt;br&gt;Pre-war education&lt;br&gt;Pre-war employment status&lt;br&gt;Pre-war job&lt;br&gt;Previous migration history&lt;br&gt;Received remittances pre-war&lt;br&gt;Whether exile was alone or with family&lt;br&gt;Whether language learned in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Whether educated in country asylum&lt;br&gt;Whether children at school in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Income in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Employment in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Discrimination in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Feelings in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Perceived value of experience abroad&lt;br&gt;Legal status in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Accommodation in asylum country&lt;br&gt;Whether return was to pre-war place of residence&lt;br&gt;Whether return was alone or with family&lt;br&gt;Ability to bring back assets and belongings&lt;br&gt;Receipt of return assistance&lt;br&gt;Receipt of reconstruction assistance&lt;br&gt;Follow-up from return organisation&lt;br&gt;Whether assets (i.e. house, land) regained on return&lt;br&gt;Willingness to return&lt;br&gt;Reasons for return&lt;br&gt;Sources of information about return</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Black et al., 2004; field data.
The University of Sussex research found that returnees also take the sustainability of their return into consideration when assessing whether to return. The provision of information about the country of origin in decision making about return is complex and “should not be overstated” (Koser, 1998) but the University of Sussex research found that respondents had a “staged” approach to decision making with one or more issues (usually security) being of prime importance followed by other issues such as the economic situation or incentives to return only where the initial concern was resolved. Koser’s earlier research has also identified concerns by returnees for sustainability, with a distinction being drawn between “reactive” and “proactive” return. The former is seen as being in response to a crisis or problem with conditions in the country of destination and does not rely on information about the country of origin. In contrast, the gathering of information is seen as facilitating “proactive” return, and aids sustainability as it “underpins maintenance of household strategy” (Koser, 1998).

Among key conditions for sustainability, returning migrants arguably need employment, housing, access to public and social services, education, public utilities and security (UNMIK and UNHCR, 2003: 3). If access to basic necessities is not available, the failings of reintegration can have ramifications for the wider society. A further risk to already vulnerable communities is that emphasizing return can put at risk livelihoods that have come to depend on migrant remittances. UNHCR emphasizes its concern with the permanence of return in its review of return to South-eastern Europe. It states that “greater efforts will have to be made to successfully anchor returnees in their original places of residence, if they are to regain productive livelihoods again” (UNHCR, 2004a: 9). This emphasis on “anchoring” returnees ignores the possibility of further transnational links. Yet in reality, it appears that returnees are interested in maintaining links with countries that hosted them during conflict. Such links may be critical in maintaining the livelihoods of returnees and their families, while return may also provide new opportunities for the establishment of transnational ties in countries that were isolated during conflict.

**CONCLUSION: SUSTAINABLE RETURN, MOBILITY, AND TRANSNATIONALISM**

As return has ascended the international policy agenda, academics and policy observers have reacted with a mixture of enthusiasm, caution, and alarm. While the motives for enthusiasm about return might be questioned in many instances, it remains a powerful symbol of the end of conflict and a return to normalcy. Yet what happens to returnees, whether return is sustainable, and what contributes to the sustainability of return remain underexplored areas. Although this paper
has argued that monitoring sustainability is fraught with difficulties, there remains a case for some effort to be made to follow up on returnees to understand more clearly what influences patterns of reintegration and the broader sustainability of the return process. This might be more feasible in the context of specific and especially small-scale return schemes that are well resourced, and where such follow-up can fulfil additional functions.

However, it is also important to look beyond the effect of return on the individual returnees, to the effects on the wider community and to the longer-term experience of returnees. Not only is it difficult for refugees and other migrants as individuals to simply go “home”, but return to countries of origin can contribute to a spiral of decline, whether through re-igniting conflict, through perpetuating inequality or abuses of rights or through economic hardship, which could stimulate greater levels of forced displacement in the future. In this sense, it is not only a question of how to make return sustainable, but how to make it sustainable on a community-wide basis and not just for individuals.

While it is generally acknowledged that the return of migrants can be beneficial for the development of countries of origins (International Development Committee, 2004: 45), it is likely to be so only under specific circumstances. Often return can cause problems for countries of origin, problems which may not be helped by the attitudes and policies of returning countries. Noll identifies that while “returning States tend to frame return as an isolated problem, the solution of which is to be found in international law, countries of origin tend to put it in a wider perspective, involving elements of internal stability, development policies, access to foreign work markets and distributive justice” (1998: 3). In addition to the potential problems of mass return, it can also be difficult to identify the positive benefits individual migrants can take home (Ghosh, 2000). Many programmes designed to encourage return of skilled migrants have had little impact.

One response to the problems of return programmes has been the emergence more recently of flexible programmes, which seek to access the positive contributions that can be made by diasporas, without promoting definitive return. Programmes such as UNDP’s TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals) initiative and the International Organization for Migration’s MIDA (Migration for Development in Africa) programme share the conception that return may be more sustainable in an aggregate sense if it is time-limited, at least initially from the point of view of the returnee. The aim is to use the skills and financial capacity of the diaspora, not to require the systematic and permanent return of migrants. By facilitating temporary return, such programmes can help “reconnect” post-conflict countries to wider professional labour markets and trade circuits in a way that permanent return would not achieve.
The notion that a sustainable return of refugees might involve the development of transnational linkages by returnees – rather than being an alternative to transnationalism – is arguably a contentious one, but is consistent with developing literature on “mobile livelihoods” and more generally on the “migration-asylum nexus”. Nonetheless, there remains something of a Catch 22 situation, as one of the most likely ways to encourage return is to ensure that a range of factors in the home country are positive, including economic factors. Yet returning migrants may have a role to play in creating those positive conditions, and this might require a certain level of permanence by returnees to help establish those conditions. It remains open for debate whether the notion of the “sustainability” of return represents the best way of conceptualizing the success of a return process for individuals or communities. However, this represents an important starting point for dialogue between donors and migrants’ countries of origin, and between interior and cooperation/development ministries, each with different perspectives on how “success” can best be judged.

NOTES

1. Hereinafter referred to as Kosovo.
2. “Minority return” is the term commonly used to refer to people returning to areas not controlled by their own ethnic group (Phuong, 2000: 167).
3. Ratha (2003b) describes workers’ remittances as a “stable form of development finance”.

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Sustainable return in post-conflict contexts

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RETOURS DURABLES AU LENDEMAIN D’UN CONFLIT

Les retours dans une situation d’après-conflit sont un processus politiquement signifiant dans certains contextes, à la fois pour les rapatriés et pour ceux qui n’ont ni émigré ni fui, ce qui conduit de nombreux observateurs à s’interroger sur le concept d’un retour sans problème “dans les foyers”. Plus précisément, des doutes subsistent à la fois quant aux conditions et au caractère volontaire du retour, à la capacité des rapatriés à se réinsérer dans leur pays et leur région d’origine, et à la durabilité, au sens plus large, du processus de retour. L’auteur s’efforce de donner un aperçu de l’intérêt politique récent pour les retours avant de tenter une définition de ce qui pourrait être considéré comme retour “durable”. Selon lui, il est possible de faire une distinction entre les indicateurs au sens étroit de la “durabilité” du retour, à savoir par exemple si les rapatriés émigrent à nouveau, et des définitions plus larges, considérant la “durabilité” comme intégrant à la fois la réintégration des rapatriés dans leur société d’origine et l’impact plus large des retours sur les indicateurs macroéconomiques et politiques. Selon l’une ou l’autre définition, l’élaboration d’indicateurs solides de la durabilité des retours pourrait faciliter l’observation de l’impact des programmes de retour, en apportant un éclairage précieux sur les politiques de retour. La définition plus large appelle également l’attention sur l’idée selon laquelle la mobilité continue après un retour initial – y compris la circulation et l’adoption d’un style de vie “transnational” – pourrait être plus “durable” qu’un retour unique et définitif vers le lieu d’origine du réfugié.

RETORNO SOSTENIBLE EN CONTEXTOS POSCONFLICTOS

El retorno consecutivo a conflictos es un proceso con una alta connotación política en varios contextos, tanto para los retornantes como para quienes no emigraron ni huyeron, lo que da lugar a que muchos observadores cuestionen la noción de un retorno al “hogar” sin problemas. Concretamente, subsisten dudas sobre las condiciones y el carácter voluntario del retorno; la capacidad de los retornantes a título individual de reintegrarse en sus países y regiones de origen; y la sostenibilidad amplia del proceso de retorno. Este estudio trata de ofrecer un panorama del reciente interés político que suscitan los retornos, antes de establecer tentativamente una definición de lo que puede considerarse como un retorno “sostenible”. En este artículo se arguye que es posible establecer una distinción entre estrechos indicadores del “sostenimiento” del retorno, a saber, si las personas que retornan vuelven a emigrar ulteriormente, y definiciones más amplias que consideran el “sostenimiento” como la reintegración de quienes retornan a título individual a sus sociedades de origen conjuntamente con las repercusiones
más amplias del retorno en los indicadores macroeconómicos y políticos. Sobre la base de cualquiera de estas definiciones, el desarrollo de sólidos indicadores del sostenimiento del retorno podría servir para supervisar el impacto de los programas de retorno, al ofrecer una visión valiosa sobre las políticas de retorno. La definición más amplia propuesta señala a la atención la idea de que la continua movilidad tras el retorno inicial –incluida la circulación y el desarrollo de un estilo de vida transnacional– podría ser más “sostenible” que un retorno único y definitivo al lugar de origen del refugiado.