

Report from CEE Bankwatch Network follow-up fact-finding mission regarding resettlement of the Gazela informal settlement, Belgrade, 6-8 October 2009

Background

On 31st August 2009 the inhabitants of the informal Gazela settlement under the Gazela Bridge in Belgrade were physically resettled as part of an EIB and EBRD-financed project to rehabilitate the bridge and its approach roads. 114 families who were considered to be from Belgrade were moved to temporary container accommodation in four locations at the outer edges of Belgrade while 64 families were transported to their towns of origin in southern Serbia. Two families were resettled only in October, as they had not agreed to the locations initially proposed to them and only later accepted other locations. The resettlement happened before any Resettlement Action Plan had been consulted with the affected people or been approved by the EIB or EBRD.

On 14-17 September 2009 representatives from CEE Bankwatch Network and its Serbian partner group Centre for Ecology and Sustainable Development visited the new settlements and found a number of outstanding concerns. Firstly the conditions in the current temporary accommodation were unsatisfactory, second, it was not known by the inhabitants what the long term plans would be for permanent accommodation, and third, it was unclear by what means the people living in the new settlements would be able to make a living.

On 6-8 October 2009 a follow-up visit was carried out, which included the following meetings:

- Ms Vesna Nikolic, Secretary for Social Affairs, from Cukarica municipal council and Ms Metija Kadijevic, Co-ordinator for National Minorities and Inclusion (Cukarica is the district where the Makis settlement is situated)
- Visit to the new Makis, Barajevo and Mladenovac settlements (we were unable to visit Rakovica due to time constraints) as well as visiting the Kalanjos family at an informal settlement in Novi Beograd before they took up residence in temporary accommodation in Makis.
- Ms Hildegard Gacek, Head of the EBRD's Belgrade Office.

The aim was to see which problems had been addressed since the previous month's visit and which issues remained outstanding. The aim was not to conduct a full inspection of each site but rather to note improvements and investigate outstanding issues. Our discussions with residents of the settlements were carried out on the basis of who was available and showed interest in speaking with us at the time of our visits and should not therefore be regarded as comprehensive.

This report looks at:

- progress with ensuring that all project affected persons are resettled
- conditions in the new temporary settlements
- education and employment
- long-term plans for housing the project-affected people
- consultation and information issues

Where we felt able to give recommendations, these are underlined in the text.

Progress with ensuring that all project-affected people are resettled

After the last visit CEKOR reported that two families still had not been resettled, as they did not consent to the locations originally offered. Both families have now been provided with temporary accommodation at the new settlements - one in Makis and one in Rakovica-Kijevo.

During the visit to Mladenovac we were informed that someone by the name of Bedrija Racipovic has not been provided with new accommodation, and during the meeting with the EBRD we asked that this be checked, however it is unclear whether this person was on the list of those eligible for new accommodation.

Conditions in the new temporary settlements

Since the last visit there have been several improvements in the physical conditions at the settlements, and we would like to acknowledge the efforts of all involved in these efforts.

Among the improvements are the provision of some extra sanitary containers, though more are still needed. In Makis, with around 150 people, there are 4 sanitary containers, with 3 still awaited. In Mladenovac, with 17 families there are two functioning sanitary containers and one more which still awaits connection. In Barajevo there are 2 sanitary containers for 17 families, which was cited as an important problem by residents.

In addition, extra living containers have been provided to most families with at least 6 members, although for example Mr Memetovic from Barajevo stated that his family with 6 members has not received a second container. It should be carefully checked that all equipment is provided according to clear and transparent criteria and to rectify any mistakes as soon as possible.

The most urgent need now in terms of equipment in all settlements is radiators and cookers. In Makis a second electricity substation is needed before radiators and cookers can be used, and according to the Cukarica municipal council this is underway, however with the weather becoming rapidly colder it is crucial that this is given top priority. The Cukarica representatives also mentioned that they are not sure who is paying for this, which needs to be clarified in order to ensure that there are no delays. No one mentioned the availability of food directly as a problem during this visit. The water at the Mladenovac settlement is still unsuitable for drinking, however it has been confirmed that the water which is provided is tested regularly and that the problem must be with the pipes. The pipes therefore need to be replaced as soon as practicable, not only for the new settlement but also for anyone else who is receiving non-potable water in Mladenovac.

In at least one container in Barajevo (that of Mr Mica Talipovic) and one in Mladenovac (of Ms Milica, Memisevic, the representative), the roof leaks when it rains. This may also be the case with other containers, however we were not able to ask all inhabitants about this. We recommend that the city authorities carry out modifications to prevent this. The inhabitants are reluctant to carry out ad-hoc solutions as the contracts for use of the containers expressly forbid customising the containers. We recommend that the city authorities work with the inhabitants and the representatives to define which kinds of modifications are acceptable and which not.

We found that efforts are underway to resolve the provision of identification documents which allow access to work, social benefits and health care. We are not able to offer an overview of the scale of the remaining issues with these, however the representative of the Mladenovac settlement stated that all the inhabitants there have the document necessary for accessing the local health clinic. However **we heard several comments from people that they have difficulty in finding enough money for medicines** (we heard this from two people with epilepsy (one in Makis, one in Mladenovac), and one with asthma in Mladenovac). This is important as although we have no data on this, our impression is that there is a relatively high incidence of health problems in the settlements. Without knowing the details of whether the individuals involved have the appropriate documentation, it is difficult to know where the problem lies and whether it is likely to be resolved along with the issues with identity documents. However we urge the local authorities to check this issue, possibly through asking the community representatives to list the people affected in their settlement.

The issue of transport is still outstanding, as none of those we spoke to has received any public transport pass or reductions, so the people we spoke to either go to Belgrade for several days at a time or travel without a ticket, risking a fine. The residents need to receive transport benefits equivalent to those of other vulnerable segments of the population in Belgrade in order to assist with developing their economic activities.

Education and employment

To ensure the sustainability of the resettlement there must be clear plans for both the ways in which affected people will now be able to make a living in the new locations and the inclusion of children in local schools.

As mentioned in the previous report from CEKOR, education appears to be an area where significant efforts are being made, with transport being provided to schools and some monitoring to ensure that the children attend school.

Concerning employment, the situation varies by settlement. Some from Makis who have the necessary documents work in the local cemetery (the number is not known). In Barajevo the lack of work opportunities was cited as a problem by inhabitants, particularly as the settlement is rather remote, and in Mladenovac out of 16-17 families the representative was aware only of one man employed at the cemetery and one woman working as a cleaner (additional to the representative herself, who receives a fee for the position).

Employment is one of the main areas that still needs additional efforts, along with addressing the issue of transportation to carry out the work. The sustainability of the resettlement and inclusion of the inhabitants into the wider society depends on this.

Concerns also remain regarding the sustainability of the arrangements for those people who were not considered to be Belgrade residents and were transported to the south of Serbia to their towns of origin. At the informal settlement in Novi Beograd we met one man from Turekovac near Leskovac in the south of Serbia who had previously lived in the Gazela settlement. He and his family had been taken back to Turekovac during the resettlement, however he had returned to Belgrade due to the lack of possibilities for economic activity in his hometown, and at the time we met him, had been sleeping in his car and was about to move into the informal shelter being vacated by the Kalanjós family. He estimated that around 20 out of the 64 families which had been taken back to southern Serbia during the resettlement had returned to Belgrade, casting serious doubt on the sustainability of the resettlement of those people who were not considered to be from Belgrade.

He mentioned that some payments have been made to those returning to Vranje and Bojnik but not in Leskovac. **Any social assistance must be given within a clear and transparent framework that should be laid out within the Resettlement Action Plan.**

The issue of those Gazela residents who originally came from southern Serbia is a difficult one as unemployment in that region is extremely high and there is little likelihood of finding employment there for all people displaced by the Gazela project.

However, whatever solution is proposed in the part of the Resettlement Action Plan relating to Gazela inhabitants who are eligible for assistance but are not originally from Belgrade (which we understand has not yet been submitted to the EBRD), it must be sustainable and must not lead to former Gazela residents returning to Belgrade to live in other informal settlements. Either assistance for employment or social benefits must be provided in southern Serbia at a sufficient level to prevent re-migration to Belgrade or the categorisation of who is included as being 'from Belgrade' may need to be re-thought through. It is understandable that the Belgrade authorities do not want to take responsibility for people who have moved to Belgrade only in recent years, but ultimately people have the freedom to move and for as long as the conditions in southern Serbia are difficult people may choose Belgrade as their home and ensure the continuation of the informal settlements there.

Long-term plans for housing the project-affected people

One of the major outstanding issues is the need for clarity on the long-term plans for the project-affected people. Nearly all the people we spoke to mentioned that they had been told that from March 2010 onwards they would be able to apply for a limited amount of social flats in Belgrade. However some also recounted their previous experiences of applying, in which they felt they had been unfairly penalised. The selection system involves being awarded points on the basis of various categories of merit, and some residents claimed that they had had points deducted because they were from the Gazela settlement and were in line to be re-housed in containers. Whatever system is used to assess eligibility for social housing in Belgrade, certain conditions apply:

- **The Resettlement Action Plan must contain a time-bound plan for the permanent resettlement of all the eligible Gazela inhabitants (ie. those who did not move to the settlement after the cut-off date), and must not leave their fate open after the contracts for the containers run out.**
- **The plans for long-term settlement must be properly consulted with the affected people (see below).**

Consultation and information issues

Some of the weaknesses of the consultation and negotiation process were discussed in CEKOR's previous report. **Since the permanent resettlement is still to be undertaken, and since this may set the pattern for future resettlements in Belgrade, it is important that additional training of Belgrade City Council staff takes place in this area.**

Although Belgrade City Council has submitted its part of the Resettlement Action Plan to the EBRD and considers it to be the final version, we have not yet spoken to any former Gazela inhabitant who has seen the document or been consulted about what is inside. In addition, the representatives from the Cukarica municipal council stated that they have not seen the document. Instead, they learned about their role in the resettlement in February or March this year when the President of the municipality was called to a presentation and asked to provide certain infrastructure for the Makis settlement. **Before the EBRD approves any Resettlement Action Plan, it must be consulted with the project-affected people and host communities (municipalities as well as the people who directly live in the relevant areas). Given the low literacy levels of the former Gazela inhabitants, this will need to include organised consultation meetings as well as access to the Plan itself.**

We have only spoken to one resident (in Mladenovac) who had obtained a copy of the contract she signed for the use of the container. We have not met anyone who has received a copy of the document they signed before the resettlement consenting to be resettled to specific locations. Additionally it is not clear that all residents are aware of the conditions in the documents, as many are illiterate or were given insufficient time to read through the documents. One person alleged that s/he had not signed the document consenting to the location as s/he did not consent, and that the presiding official signed it instead. This person has now been resettled and signed a contract for the use of a container, so the case is no longer outstanding. However:

- **it must be made clear to all employees dealing with such cases that genuine and informed consent needs to be given in order to move forward with resettlement.** It is of the utmost importance that staff are properly trained to act professionally in dealing with the people to be resettled.
- **all residents must be provided with copies of the contracts for the containers, as well as the documents signed consenting to the resettlement locations.**
- **although this should have happened before signing, all residents should be informed through workshops including a representative of each family about the contents of the documents they have signed and additional relevant information,** for example the conditions under which they would lose the use of the containers. **In future this must happen before signing.**

An issue which is emerging at the settlements is the question of freedom of speech. While we were at Makis we witnessed a representative of the city council telling residents not to speak to the media or NGOs, and we have previously heard from residents that they are afraid that they may lose their right to use the containers if they speak critically about the conditions in the settlements. The same has been experienced by other NGOs visiting the settlement such as the Democratic Roma Association. We understand that the city council feels under pressure to carry out this resettlement in a satisfactory way, however it is not acceptable to try to limit the inhabitants' freedom of speech. Improvement of the material conditions, satisfactory plans for the future, and integration into society will only occur with the free exchange of information between all stakeholders. **The city council must make it clear to all inhabitants that they are at liberty to speak with whoever they want to, and that contracts for the use of the containers will not be endangered by this.**

Finally we would like to point out that many of the issues brought up here should theoretically be able to be resolved through the system of having representatives in the settlements. However our impression is that there are serious asymmetries and deficiencies in information flows between the city council and the settlement representatives. Further it appears that the role of the representatives has either not been properly communicated from the city council to the communities or defined clearly, either to the representatives themselves or to the other people in the settlements. In Makis, for example, the representative gives the impression more of being there to keep order and give a favourable impression to outsiders than to raise the concerns of the people who live in the settlement. The representative in Barajevo was recently involved in an incident and left the settlement. At the time of the visit no new representative had been chosen and it is not clear whether the people there knew they should do this. **It is recommended that additional training for the representatives is provided, and that information sessions are held for the other inhabitants on the role of the representatives.**