3. Social housing

Description

Social housing is intended to help people who are unable to secure adequate accommodation for themselves. It serves as a counterbalance to the market driven allocation of housing and may be needed if people on low incomes are unable to afford private rents. There is no single definition of social housing, and it varies in form from one country to another. It is generally built by government agencies or non-profit organisations and may include both privately and publicly-owned dwellings. The authorities define rules that govern the type of housing built and its allocation. Social housing units may be partially or fully subsidised, and tenants may or may not pay for utilities, services, maintenance and repairs. Where social housing stock or land for construction is available, it improves disadvantaged IDPs' access to decent and affordable accommodation.
Case study: Social housing in supportive environments (Armenia, Georgia, Serbia)

**Overview**

The fall of the Soviet Union and the break-up of Yugoslavia led to numerous conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus that caused significant displacement. In Armenia, around 775,000 people were internally displaced as a result of its 1988-1994 conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh and an earthquake in the north in 1988. More than 350,000 refugees also arrived from Azerbaijan as a result of the conflict.

In Georgia, the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia that began in 1991 forced several hundred thousand people to flee their homes. NATO air strikes that forced the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops from Kosovo in 1999 and the subsequent conflict displaced people both within Kosovo and to Serbia proper. Serbia also received around 600,000 refugees from conflicts in other countries of the former Yugoslavia.

Return remains impossible for most refugees and IDPs in these countries, which in addition to the conflict and displacement they experienced were also undergoing a transition from a socialist political system and planned economy to democracy and market-based economy. Displacement was one problem among many, and funds to address it were extremely scarce.

Temporary shelter offered in Armenia, Georgia and Serbia gradually became long-term accommodation for IDPs unable to find decent housing on their own or return to their places of origin. In Armenia, they lived in various types of temporary shelter including converted shipping containers or domiks, while in Georgia and Serbia collective centres were set up in public buildings such as schools and hospitals.

Such accommodation served its original purpose but was never intended as a long-term solution, and over time living conditions deteriorated significantly. Residents did not invest in improvements because they hoped to return or did not feel ownership of their space, and the government increasingly neglected them.

In addition to its principle aim, the model’s other objectives were to contribute to the implementation of state policies on IDPs; contribute to the closure of IDPs’ temporary shelter; and promote the social, psychological and technical skills they can bring to providing a supportive environment for the other groups in society through non-institutional protection in an assisted living environment.

Beneficiaries receive social support from a “foster family”, which is at the centre of the supportive environment. Foster families are allocated an apartment in the same building based not only on need but also on the social, psychological and technical skills they can bring to their roles. The SHSE model has been replicated in Armenia and Georgia. In all three countries the buildings are owned and maintained by the municipal authorities, and families are accommodated rent-free as long as they meet the criteria for such assistance, which are reviewed each year.

**Practice**

Social housing in supportive environments (SHSE) (Serbia, 2002; Armenia, 2004 to 2008 and 2010 to 2012; Georgia, 2007 to 2012)

**Main actors**

- Government agency for IDPs, other ministries and municipal authorities
- Social work centres
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
- Housing Centre (Serbia)

**Context**

The most vulnerable IDPs in protracted displacement live in inadequate temporary shelter and private accommodation. Return is not possible for IDPs in Georgia in the absence of a solution to the conflict, and not desired by some IDPs in Serbia because of insecurity. Government policy in Georgia and Serbia has shifted towards accepting local integration as a settlement option.

There is a complete lack of public housing stock as a result of privatisation following the transition from the socialist system

**Target group**

Vulnerable IDPs and refugees who wish to integrate locally rather than return and are in need of housing assistance, plus vulnerable members of the local population

**Summary**

- SDC developed the SHSE model as part of its humanitarian programme in Serbia. It aims to improve housing conditions and social inclusion for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society through non-institutional protection in an assisted living environment.
- Beneficiaries receive support from municipal social workers and from a “foster family”, which is at the centre of the supportive environment. Foster families are allocated an apartment in the same building based not only on need but also on the social, psychological and technical skills they can bring to their roles.
- The SHSE model has been replicated in Armenia and Georgia. In all three countries the buildings are owned and maintained by the municipal authorities, and families are accommodated rent-free as long as they meet the criteria for such assistance, which are reviewed each year.

**Strengths**

- The practice provides tenure security in habitable housing and social protection for IDPs and vulnerable members of the local population
- It fosters social integration by facilitating interaction between IDPs, foster families, social workers, neighbours and the wider community.

**Key challenge(s)**

- IDPs in Georgia were the most critical of SHSE and would have preferred to own their own homes. They felt the potentially limited tenure in social housing was culturally inappropriate. Other housing programmes for IDPs in Georgia offered housing ownership, which left some SHSE beneficiaries feeling they were being offered a less attractive option and treated unfairly. Foster family inputs varied because their role was not always clear. There is evidence that such arrangements do not negate the need for professional social workers.
- Considering the high level of vulnerability of this group, it is unlikely that they will move on from the SHSE. The implication is that this programme will require long-term and continuous investment from authorities.
- In areas where housing stock had been recently privatised, it was difficult to generate political interest in social housing programmes and policies.
- Stable and sustainable financing from the municipal budget to maintain SHSE has been an issue, including for social workers’ salaries.

**Factors for potential replicability**

- Highly vulnerable IDPs in need of improved access to adequate housing
- Social housing is accepted as a culturally appropriate housing option
- Municipality ability and willingness to allocate land, provide infrastructure and manage social housing buildings

- No new national policies to provide affordable housing were put in place. The region has since experienced a construction boom and a rapid rise in property prices.
- New property is rarely affordable for low- or middle-income families, and even less so for vulnerable social groups, such as IDPs, who have few options to secure decent housing.

- The social systems of all three countries have also been heavily burdened by their economic transition, and increasing numbers of vulnerable people have largely been left to fend for themselves in the changing environment. They include IDPs, single elderly people, single parents, disaster victims, families without breadwinners, orphans and people with disabilities.

A policy shift in Serbia and Georgia towards acceptance of IDPs’ local integration - and that of refugees in the case of Serbia - opened the way for housing projects to be set up in the areas where they were living. Serbia adopted a national strategy on refugees and IDPs in 2002, which included the closure of collective centres. Five years later, Georgia adopted its state strategy on IDPs, which reflected a commitment to provide durable solutions through return, local integration and settlement elsewhere in the country.

The subsequent action plan for the strategy’s implementation included measures to close some collective centres and relocate IDPs to improved housing, and to renovate and privatise others. Further housing solutions have been implemented since then.

**Programme design**

The “social housing in a supportive environment” (SHSE) model was developed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) as part of its humanitarian programme in Serbia. Its aim was to improve housing conditions and social inclusion for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society, including IDPs, through non-institutional protection in an assisted living environment.

Beneficiaries receive social support from a “foster family”, a central element of the programme which has been key to its success. Foster families are allocated an apartment in the same building based not only on need, but also the social, psychological and technical skills they can bring to providing a supportive environment for the other residents.

In addition to its principle aim, the model’s other objectives are to contribute to the implementation of state policies on IDPs; contribute to the closure of IDPs’ temporary shelters; and facilitate the transition from temporary shelters to permanent or alternative accommodation.

Public housing played a major role in the socialist system in all three countries, and the vast majority of stock was privatised and sold to sitting tenants during their economic transition. The privatisations were not, however, accompanied by plans for the development of the land. No new national policies to provide affordable housing were put in place.

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Housing programs and policies that support durable solutions for urban IDPs

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The project has two components, the construction and provision of social housing units and the creation of a supportive environment to facilitate the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. The design of the housing encourages integration and communication between residents. The buildings have a range of different-sized apartments and special attention is given to shared spaces such as common rooms, laundries and outdoor areas where social contact takes place.

Foster families and social workers are trained to support other residents in rebuilding their lives and to monitor their progress. They help with day-to-day problems, encourage the building of networks and relationships and ensure that community guidelines are respected.

The municipality allocates land for the development, and is responsible for the installation of utilities, phone line and roads; building maintenance and repair; the selection of beneficiaries and foster families; the provision of financial and other support to foster families; the appointment of a focal point for social care; and the establishment of a mechanism for utility and other payments. It also pays the social workers’ salaries in some cases.

SDC financed the construction of the initial housing units, and managed and coordinated the implementation of the programme. The construction contracts for the first four beneficiaries and foster families were also managed by SDC, as well as those of social housing in sleds.

The buildings are owned by the municipal and families live there rent-free as long as they fulfil the criteria for such assistance, which is reviewed on an annual basis.

Serbia

The Serbia programme began in 2002 and included IDPs from Kosovo as its main beneficiaries from 2006. By 2014, more than 1,000 apartments had been built in 42 municipalities. Refugees and IDPs who had been living in collective centres make up 80 per cent of beneficiaries, and the remainder are members of the local population. Neither the beneficiaries nor their foster families pay rent, and each municipality determines whether the foster families, who are themselves refugees or IDPs, are paid for their services.

Local Centres for Social Work allocate housing units to elderly people and couples, self-supporting single parents and families with ill or disabled members. Foster families take part in capacity building workshops focusing on topics such as being a good host, providing help and encouragement, establishing dialogue and the amicable resolution of conflicts.

Special care is taken to ensure that the housing provided is in keeping with national standards in order to avoid stigmatisation and social segregation. The programmes are integrated into the host town or cities’ urban planning strategy and the developments are set among other residential buildings with access to the transport network and other public services. Due attention is given to the needs of the people with disabilities. The building ground floor is barrier-free and the apartments are accessible for the disabled.

The main partners in the project were the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, UNHCR and local Centres for Social Work. Municipalities were selected based on the number of refugees, IDPs and collective centres in their area, their interest and capacity to participate in the programme, the land available, the vulnerability of potential beneficiaries and the commissariat’s strategic plans. SDC led the programme in terms of construction until 2004 when its office closed, after which the local NGO Housing Centre, UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Intersos and others took over.

Armenia

Following a study tour to visit the programme in Serbia, the SHSE model was first implemented in Armenia from 2004 to 2008 in the Kanaker-Zeyton district of Yerevan. It was then replicated in Gori, Syunik region from 2010 to 2012. In Kanaker-Zeyton, the NGO Mission Armenia was the owner and operator of the social housing, while in Gori it was the municipality. The two areas were chosen because they had a significant number of IDPs and refugees, but there were also problems of persecution, the threat of violence, difficult socio-economic conditions and the presence of landmines.

A committee made up of representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Urban Development, regional and municipal government, local NGOs and SDC selected the beneficiaries and foster families. They were chosen from IDPs, refugees and other marginalised people living in poor conditions in domiks, administrative buildings and private accommodation. The domiks were removed as part of the programme, allowing urban space to be recovered.

In Kanaker-Zeyton, one social housing building was built. Each one had at least 28 apartments and communal facilities with space for around 70 IDPs and vulnerable members of the local population. Ten two-storey buildings, each with 14 apartments, were the only one constructed in five locations. Over its three phases, the programme provided housing for over 250 IDPs and 120 local people.

SDC led the implementation of the programme. Its partners included the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees, the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, the Adjara autonomous region’s Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, UNHCR, UNDP, the Italian Development Cooperation and the municipalities involved.

With SDC funding, during the last phase of the programme UNDP trained municipal staff in the basics of social work and the management of SHSE facilities and drafted guidelines for social housing and future agreements between beneficiaries and municipalities. SDC and UNDP also advised the government on possible amendments to national legislation on social housing.

The Georgia programme also included advocacy to promote the SHSE approach among government officials. Given that the government does not provide social housing and there is only limited state funding available for the repair of IDPs’ shelters, SDC focused its efforts on pushing for a national social housing strategy and the creation of a dedicated government unit responsible for the issue.

Impact and challenges

An external review of the programmes in all three countries was conducted in 2009. For Armenia and Georgia, it concluded: “Continuation of the project is justified by its demonstrated effectiveness, the magnitude of remaining needs, pending achievement of the main policy goal and a generally positive outlook regarding the project’s impact and sustainability.”

For Serbia, it found: “Services of social protection through SHSE have provided an adequate response to the needs of extremely vulnerable refugees, internally displaced

Towards a social housing scheme

Government of Armenia. It was based on experience with the SDC programme. Later, three social housing units were built financed from the state budget in the town of Manalik, in the northern Shikar region. The SHSE model and selection criteria were replicated.

Georgia

Based on the experience in Armenia, similar programmes were implemented in Georgia from 2007 to 2012 over several phases. SDC chose to work in Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Gori, Rustavi and Bolnisi, given their high numbers of IDPs. The pilot project comprised four two-storey buildings with 28 apartments and communal facilities with space for around 70 IDPs and vulnerable members of the local population. Ten two-storey buildings, each with 14 apartments, were then constructed in SEGUE TO INTACT SDC.

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persons and domicile population. This form of social pro-
tection has provided a high level of beneficiaries’ social
inclusion and has significantly influenced improvement of
their living conditions.13

### Improved living conditions

The SHSE approach improved living conditions and qual-
ity of life for IDPs and other vulnerable people in all three
countries substantially, and the 2009 external review in
Serbia found that beneficiaries gave the programme sev-
en out of ten for satisfaction. They highlighted better
housing conditions, convenient transport, healthcare fa-
cilities and post offices, and the fact that their children
attended primary and secondary school regularly. Some
families also invested in the installation of telephone lines and cable television, landscaping and construction of
auxiliary buildings.

One beneficiary in Georgia had suffered from cancer
and could not work for five years. She believes the im-
proved living conditions the SHSE programme provided
were instrumental in her going into remission. Another
said she had been renting a crowded and dilapidated
apartment with relatives before becoming a programme
participant. Some beneficiaries focused solely on mainte-
nance issues, and the fact that their children attended
primary and secondary school regularly. Social workers
reported that beneficiaries regularly asked for more financial help despite already receiving assistance with access to healthcare and util-
ity payments. Some residents have difficulty in meeting
their basic needs and paying communal services. Some
beneficiaries of the SHSE programme have found em-
ployment,6 but many have not regained their self-reliance.
Self-reliance is not a goal of the SHSE social housing model, rather it is a solution for the most vulnerable IDPs
who are unlikely to reach self-reliance.

### Law and policy

None of the three countries had laws or policies on social
housing when the programme was first implemented.
A new institutional set-up was needed to ensure social
housing was linked with the social protection system.
While the programmes ran, Serbia introduced a social
housing law in 2009 and Armenia adopted a policy on the
issue, including eligibility criteria, in 2010. Local govern-
ments have also increasingly recognised their responsi-
bilities towards vulnerable people.

Georgia still has no such framework, but Tbilisi city coun-
cil asked SDC for technical training that would equip it to
design and build social housing independently by 2013.
The municipalities of Rustavi, Bolnisi, Batum and Zugdidi
later asked for the same support. This allowed SDC to
undertake its planned withdrawal from SHSE activities
after transferring its knowledge and technical expertise.
It also devised a set of planning and design standards
for social housing,8 which the Ministry of Economy and
Sustainable Development adopted.

SDC also cooperated with academia in the development
of two standards: one on social space and urban de-
velopment, and the other on social housing, social work
and homelessness. Both are already being taught at the
Tbilisi State, Ilia State and Georgia Technical universities.

### Municipal budgets

Stable and sustainable municipal funding for the SHSE programme is key. Each municipality pays a share of
building maintenance, and utility costs are highly sub-
sidised. The programmes are not self-sustaining, but they
are likely to cost the state less in the long run than caring
for vulnerable people when their situations become criti-
cal, when health costs in particular would be much higher.

### Conclusion

The SHSE approach is an innovative form of social pro-
tection for IDPs in Armenia, Georgia and Serbia. In all
countries it reinforced government policy to help
IDPs integrate locally, provided them with adequate and
affordable housing, and served as a way of close collec-
tive centres in a dignified way for the most vulnerable
people who could not secure housing on their own. The
practice was also successful in that it improved the living
conditions of other vulnerable members of the local popu-
lation, contributing to social cohesion.

Municipalities’ capacity needs to be developed so that
they can implement their own social and affordable hous-
ing programmes effectively. Significant time and open
minds will be required to allow changes to take place,
everyday practices to be transformed and new knowl-
dge and skills to be acquired. Training at the initial stag-
es of the programme was key to informing all partners in
about their obligations. Contracts with foster families
should define their role and obligations more clearly.

IDPs’ main concern about social housing, over ownership
and unlimited tenure, also needs to be addressed. IDPs
living in private accommodation should be eligible for
social housing assistance, because their living conditions
and tenure security can be worse than those in collective
centres. The programmes took place in an institutional
vacuum. Ideally a clear framework would be in place to
define municipal budget allocations and the conditions
for funding and the termination of right to use.

### Notes

1. SHSE Pilot Projects in Armenia and Georgia, ex-
ternal review report, p.32
2. Housing Centre and Ministry of Labour and Social
Policy, Social Housing in a Supportive Environment
(SHSE), 2010
3. Ibid
4. IDMC interview, October 2012
5. Housing Centre and Ministry of Labour and Social
Policy, Social Housing in a Supportive Environment
(SHSE), 2010
6. Ibid
7. Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, Survey of
Target Groups’ Attitudes and Expectations Related
to Social Housing, May 2011
8. Monitoring indicators in Serbia showed “a certain percentage” of people capable of work and an in-
creased employment rate among tenants between 2002 and 2005
9. SDC, Urban Planning and Architectural Standards
for Social Housing Architectural Design

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Review of practices and case studies

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**Housing programs and policies that support durable solutions for urban IDPs**

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