

Building a better future:

Older people in Serbia

November 2001

HelpAge
International

Leading global action on ageing

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives.

Building a better future: Older people in Serbia

Published by: HelpAge International

PO Box 32832, London N1 9ZN, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 7778

Fax: +44 (0)20 7713 7993

Email: hai@helpage.org

Web: www.helpage.org

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Registered charity no. 288180

Written and edited by Bo Priestley, with Paul Hinchliff and Nadia Saim

Layout by Sue Grant, Twenty 3 Crows Ltd

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Introduction

About HelpAge International

Founded in 1983, HelpAge International is a unique development agency, made up of a network of community-based development, research and social service organisations which share a common mission to improve the lives of disadvantaged older people. Increasingly, we are involved in the formulation of national and international strategies on ageing. We work:

- **Practically** We support and fund projects which combat economic insecurity and poor health among older people, and tackle social issues such as isolation, fear, discrimination, disability and abuse.
- **At policy level** We challenge the poverty, inequality and discrimination which prevent many older people achieving their potential and realising their rights. We strengthen older people's involvement in development activities and policy making; promote awareness of their rights, needs and concerns; and support their participation in finding solutions to problems.
- **In emergencies** We respond to the specific needs of older people affected by civil conflict, economic collapse or natural disasters.

Our membership includes national organisations, community-based groups and regional networks. We help members learn from each other's experience, through funding and resource mobilisation, training and capacity building, and project management.

We have worked with older people's groups and non-government organisations in East and Central Europe since 1991. In 1994, we established a support and information network which now has over 40 members in 12 countries.

Through the East and Central Europe network, we aim to:

- Build the capacity of organisations working with older people across the region, by providing training in fundraising, organisational development and agecare.
- Promote exchange visits and the dissemination of evidence, information and good practice.
- Assist the development of national networks and joint advocacy platforms.

Our worldwide emergencies unit has 15 years' experience of supporting older people in natural disasters and in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Activities in the Balkans have included relief and primary healthcare work with older people in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and assistance for older refugees in Kosovo and Macedonia.

One of our key aims in emergencies is to help international and local humanitarian agencies provide effective relief to older people. In 2000, we published *Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: Guidelines for best practice*, a set of practical guidelines to raise awareness and

Our membership includes national organisations, community-based groups and regional networks

This publication highlights the situation of older Serbs as citizens, refugees and displaced people

understanding of older people's rights and needs. The project was supported by the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Research into the work of 180 humanitarian agencies showed that, while older people represent a significant vulnerable group in disasters and conflicts, their specific needs and contributions are often poorly understood. Older people told us they wanted to be seen, heard, and understood, to be able to access essential support services on an equal basis, and to have their potential and contributions recognised, valued and supported.

Aims of this publication

Serbia, in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, is an ageing society. By the end of the 1990s, people aged 60 made up 18 per cent of the region's population, and this proportion will continue to grow.

Across Europe, this shift to ageing populations has put pressures on areas of social provision critical to older people's wellbeing, such as pensions and healthcare. But in the last decade, Serbia has experienced additional stresses that have affected the quality of life of many older people.

The financial instability associated with economic transition for people throughout the Balkans in the post-Soviet era brought with it a severe drop in the value of older Serbs' pensions and savings. High unemployment has made it difficult for younger people to support older family members in traditional ways, and has placed unexpected burdens on older people's shoulders to bolster family income and help keep households going.

The 1991-95 conflict that erupted in the wake of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, and the subsequent redrawing of national boundaries, has had a widespread impact on older Serbs. Many of those who fled their homes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, or who were internally displaced by the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, still live in Serbia's collective centres, or in rented accommodation they can barely afford.

Building a better future: Older people in Serbia has been produced to highlight the situation of older Serbs, as citizens, refugees and displaced people, and to put forward practical suggestions for action to improve their welfare and wellbeing in the future. It offers a quick snapshot of key issues, and is not intended to be a comprehensive study.

It aims to:

- Identify practical ways to meet older people's needs in community and camp settings.
- Present the voices of some older Serbs and the organisations that work with them.
- Explore older Serbs' contributions to their families, communities and society.

It will be of interest to:

- Government policy makers working at national level in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and at regional level in Serbia.
- International non-government organisations working in Serbia.
- Older people's groups, such as pensioners' associations, working nationally and regionally.
- Local community-based groups working with older people in Serbia.

We seek to act as a catalyst, helping voluntary and public sector bodies coordinate their efforts

Sources

The analysis and recommendations brought together in this publication are based on:

- **A HelpAge International needs assessment** An assessment of older people's needs in Serbia was carried out by HelpAge International staff and advisors from 28 November to 4 December 2000, based on interviews with agencies and non-government organisations in Belgrade, Vrsac and Kragujevac (see *Appendix 1, p19*, for details). Its aims were to:
 - obtain preliminary information on the economic and social situation of older people, in communities, care centres and collective centres,
 - build links with non-government organisations, community-based groups working with older people, international aid agencies and local authorities.

The needs assessment found that the food assistance programme provided by a range of international organisations in Serbia effectively supported older people's basic needs. It identified that HelpAge International could play a useful role as a catalyst, helping voluntary and public sector bodies working with older people to coordinate their efforts and develop best practice. A key recommendation from interviewees was that HelpAge International should organise a workshop to look at the needs of older people, and publish the results.

- **Visits to collective centres** Visits to three collective centres housing refugees and displaced people in Vojvodina, Smederevo and Belgrade were made by HelpAge International staff in December 2000 and June 2001 (see *Appendix 2, p20*, for details). The aim was to gather testimony directly from older people and from staff. A semi-structured interview checklist was used to standardise questioning.
- **A HelpAge International workshop** On 7 June 2001, a participatory workshop in Belgrade brought together older people from pensioners' associations and collective centres, and representatives from international and national non-government organisations, the United Nations and local government (see *Appendix 3, p21*, for details). Its aims were to:
 - share information and knowledge about situation of older people in post-conflict Serbia,
 - highlight practical ways to meet older people's needs now and in the future,

- raise awareness of older people’s potential as contributors in situation of economic and social pressure across all age groups.

The recommendations in this publication are substantially based on discussions in that workshop.

- **HelpAge International research** A commissioned study of the situation of older people in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, especially Serbia, and of voluntary and public sector activities to support them, was published in August 2001 by Dr Irena Grozdanic, Medical Advisor for the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). A summary of the research also appeared in a HelpAge International report: *Making our voices heard: Older people and decision-making in East and Central Europe*, published in September 2001.

Summary and recommendations

Summary

Older people now make up 16 per cent of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's total population of 10.6 million – a proportion set to rise to 21 per cent by 2021. In the area of Serbia, with a significant population of older refugees and displaced people, the proportion of older people stands at 18 per cent.

Research conducted by HelpAge International during 2000/2001 found that life for many older Serbs was very hard. Over the last decade, economic transition, financial crisis in the public sector, and conflict has affected them on many fronts – economically, physically, socially and psychologically.

This report looks the situation of older citizens living in their own homes or institutions provided by the state (see *Older people in the community, p8-11*), and of older refugees and displaced people living in camps (see *Older people in collective centres, p12-18*).

Non-government organisations interviewed during HelpAge International's needs assessment in Serbia consistently described older people's situation within their communities as 'extremely difficult'. They spoke of poor accommodation and little government support with rent and utility costs; badly fitting footwear and unsuitable clothing; poor stoves and little fuel to get through the winter months; and problems in paying for medicines and fresh foods.

They reported that the inadequacy and unreliability of pension payments, the main form of support for most older people aged 65 and over, was a major source of unhappiness. At the same time, the value of savings had plummeted. Many older people were finding difficulties paying for rent, light and heating. While delaying payments on utilities was a common coping strategy amongst the general population, older people tended to settle bills as a priority, even when this meant going without food.

While healthcare remains nominally free for all older Serbs, we were told that many basic prescription medicines cannot be purchased or are unaffordable, as a result of cutbacks in domestic pharmaceutical production. Medical aids for older people who are sick or bedridden were also in short supply. During HelpAge International's needs assessment, interviewees regularly mentioned difficulties in obtaining drugs, sheets, and hygienic items.

Many organisations we spoke to stressed that Serbia has traditionally put the family at the heart of care for older people. Over half of all older Serbs still live in extended families, and those who live separately typically maintain regular contact. But economic crisis and displacement have put huge pressures on families' ability to care for older family members, and one in five older Serbs now lives alone. Families are on the whole reluctant to resort to residential care, and nationally, there are few places available in institutional facilities. Community-based approaches, such as daycare and homecare, are still at an early stage of development.

Non-government organisations describe older people's situation in their communities as 'extremely difficult'

Older people represent a significant and vulnerable group within the larger refugee population

We found that older Serbs continue to contribute to their families and communities in a wide range of ways. Many support the family budget with their pensions, or take care of grandchildren while children work. Increasingly, older people are forming self-help groups, visiting other older people in their homes and organising basic health services and social activities.

The 1991-95 war and the 1999 conflict in Kosovo have clearly had profound effects on many older Serbs. They have seen death, displacement, NATO bombing, economic difficulties and international sanctions. Older people who fled their homes to escape fighting in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo represent a significant and vulnerable group within the larger refugee population.

Older people form a third of those 100,000 people still housed in collective centres. Their political and legal status – including citizenship and entitlement to pensions and property – typically remains unclear, both in their new location and place of origin. Most have suffered an almost complete loss of their normal way of life.

Older refugees and displaced people interviewed by HelpAge International in collective centres across central Serbia felt pessimistic about regaining their old way of life, and feared they would die or be ejected from the centres before their situation was resolved. They had little access to advice about their options and rights. A culture of disempowerment and despair appeared to be widespread.

Non-government organisations spoke of widespread feelings of dislocation and pessimism about achieving a comfortable old age among older people in Serbia in general – and among those living in refugee camps in particular.

Recommendations

Participants at the HelpAge International workshop held in Belgrade (7 June 2001) made the following recommendations for action by older people themselves, government and non-government organisations to build a better future for older people in Serbia.

Older people should:

- Take an active role in increasing their own visibility as a significant social group, by:
 - working with other age groups in their local communities to tackle social problems,
 - taking part in older people's associations and self-help networks,
 - raising public awareness and funds through their associations and networks.

Government should:

- Establish the wishes and legal status of older refugees and displaced people in Serbia, and work with other governments and international bodies to agree appropriate long-term solutions, whether integration into the community or support to return home.

- Seek to unlock resources at local level to support older people, by promoting voluntary activity, self-help networks, local fundraising and civil society groups.
- Take an active role in supporting Serbia's significant number of poor older people, by:
 - systematically identifying the most vulnerable older people, whether citizens, refugees or displaced people, and targeting them through public and voluntary sector programmes,
 - creating targeted mechanisms such as hardship payments and loans,
 - working with the International Monetary Fund to maintain pensions at minimum agreed levels, as a 'ring-fenced' social investment with widespread benefits,
 - initiating a public education campaign to raise awareness of older people's needs.

International non-government organisations should:

- Develop their ability to support older Serbs as a significant vulnerable group, by:
 - continuing to meet basic humanitarian needs whilst initiating longer-term development strategies,
 - taking steps to increase their own awareness of older people's needs in their programmes,
 - advocating on behalf of older Serbs with governments and international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, in connection with the Stability Pact,
 - working with national governments to repatriate or integrate refugees and displaced people.

Local non-government organisations should:

- Advocate for, support and seek to complement public and voluntary sector efforts to identify and meet the needs of vulnerable older people, by:
 - working with collective centres to ensure the welfare of older refugees and displaced people,
 - complementing national public sector provision in areas such as health, homecare and daycare, research and training,
 - building strong strategic and operational links with local government,
 - raising awareness of older people's needs among donors, government, local community and the public.
- Commit themselves to the full participation of older people in planning, programmes and activities.

Current pension levels are simply failing to cover many older people's basic needs

Older people in the community

Economic issues

People living in Serbia face huge economic challenges. While the region was part of former Yugoslavia, they enjoyed a comprehensive system of state provision. But this system is now jeopardised, as a result of economic transition, a crisis in public funding, and the costs of war.

Age-related pensions remain a universal entitlement for all older citizens, and Serbian pensioners' organisations say government policies on retirement are good. But current pension levels, averaging 20-80 Deutschmarks per month, are simply failing to cover many older people's basic needs, and most older people have few opportunities to generate income from working or other sources.

International and local non-government organisations working with older people in the community say they struggle to meet the cost of regular items such as rent, food and heating in the winter months. Sudden outlays, such as medicines for illness, or burial expenses, can put impossible strains on already over-stretched budgets. HelpAge International has anecdotal evidence of older people living in temporary rented accommodation, which can cost as much as 150 Deutschmarks, who are forced to sell of the food aid they get from international organisations to pay their rents.

Until recently, pension payments were often irregular or delayed by periods of several months. The new government is tackling these problems but finding it difficult to settle all the arrears owed. For those older people already struggling to make ends meet, delays and shortfalls in pension payments can rapidly translate into crisis. For the one in five older Serbs without any family support, life can be very hard.

High levels of unemployment, coupled with a substantial increase in low-paid, insecure employment during the 1990s, have eroded younger people's ability to help parents and grandparents, and placed new responsibilities on older people's shoulders. Many pensioners support younger family members financially.

Non-government organisations have direct evidence of substantial poverty among older people living alone in urban areas. For example, United Nations World Food Programme staff report that 4,500 of New Belgrade's 65,000 pensioners live alone, and 7,000 suffer from chronic or acute health problems. Emergency food aid distributions have been organised in the area.

Older people living alone in rural areas – with little access to services and support from the state or the voluntary sector – also face considerable hardship. Non-government organisations say that older farmers face particular difficulties: 'They never know whether they will be paid for the produce they sell, and either get low pensions or no pensions at all. They also have problems accessing healthcare so they can keep working.'

Participants at HelpAge International's workshop were clear that, in the longer term, older people's situation would only improve if the national economy and production base were strengthened. They spoke of the need for government to balance the requirements of economic and social development, and to protect older people from the full rigours of transition to a market-led economy, as an investment in wider social stability and cohesion.

Health issues

Nominally, healthcare for Serbs aged 65 and over is free, with standards and types of services for older people laid down by national legislation. In reality, lack of funds has eroded almost every aspect of public health provision, including equipment, infrastructure and medicines.

The funding crisis has had disproportionate impacts on older people, who typically require medical services more often than other population groups. Coupled with poor nutrition and high levels of stress, it has led to a rise in mortality rates among older people in during the 1990s, against worldwide trends.

Problems in accessing even basic medicines are widespread. Many prescription drugs are unavailable from state outlets, or can only be obtained at a high cost from private pharmacies. Pharmaceutical companies, formerly powerful bodies within Yugoslavia, have been at a standstill for some time. The situation has been exacerbated by steep rises in the price of basic medicines and sanitary items, such as incontinence pads.

Most state hospitals and clinics cannot offer older people the free treatment required by law, due to shortages in staff or supplies. Older people who can afford to do so resort to one of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's many expensive private clinics. But for most, it's a question of managing without. In the short term, funding for health services is likely to worsen. It has been suggested that the World Bank should help with funding government safety nets as part of its loan strategy.

Participants at the HelpAge International workshop felt that access to medical services was a critical issue for many older people, in particular, transport to clinics and hospitals. There was a need for more understanding of and training in geriatric healthcare among medical personnel, and for health education programmes which encouraged older people to look after their own health.

Social issues

Serbia has traditionally put the family at the heart of care for older people. Over half of all older Serbs still live in extended families, and those who live separately typically maintain regular contact. Many younger people still live with their parents because they cannot afford to move out and set up houses and families themselves. Most people's sense of security and stability is rooted in family life.

The funding crisis in public health provision has had disproportionate impacts on older people

There is an urgent need to develop more community-based care for older people

Older people interviewed in Belgrade told HelpAge International that they could not survive without financial and social support from their children. One pensioner estimated she needed 200 Deutschmarks a month to live adequately and pay all her bills – far more than her pension. She could only manage with help from her daughter.

Economic constraints have put huge pressures on families' ability and willingness to care for older family members. Non-government organisations say that older people are sometimes neglected simply because their needs are not seen as a priority in the face of other urgent demands.

HelpAge International's needs assessment found that older people living on their own often feel very isolated, especially in the winter months when they stay hidden at home. Many cannot afford telephones. Older people working as volunteers for a centre in Belgrade said that one older woman, whom they visited at home recovering from a car accident, told them no one had come to her house for several years.

Families are increasingly resorting to residential care for ageing family members unable to cope on their own. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia funds some residential care, but there are only 8,000 places for over 700,000 older people nationwide. Only 2,000 older people are eligible for home help, 3,000 for daycare. There is an urgent need to develop more community-based care. As one interviewee put it: 'Big residential facilities are not what we need. We should build smaller centres in the community, so older people don't feel rejected or isolated from society.'

Voluntary sector organisations report that many of the older people they work with suffer from loneliness and social isolation. The younger generation does not show older people the respect they traditionally had in the villages. Feelings of stress and uncertainty are widespread across the generations, but many older people feel intense pessimism about their own future and that of their families.

Non-government organisations say that older people's issues have a low profile nationally. Older people's associations do not have any formal representation in at government level, and there is little political or public debate round the need to develop new models of care. Relatively few community-based organisations have the training or funding to meet older people's needs on the scale required.

Workshop participants felt there was a need for many more practical, community-level projects to support older people and enable them continue coping and contributing. Older people's organisations, including pensioners' organisations, could play an important role in spreading ideas and supporting new initiatives.

Older people's contributions

There is widespread consensus that events of the past decade have proved profoundly disruptive to older people's traditional way of life. Conflict-linked displacement has made traditional forms of self-reliance, such as gardening, small-scale farming or animal husbandry, more difficult. Social activities found in established communities in the past, such as cultural events and clubs, have been disrupted.

In spite of this, many older people make substantial contributions to their families and societies. They often take the lead role in caring for grandchildren while parents are at work, and, in extended families, help clean the house and work in the garden. Their pensions can form a critical part of household income.

Non-government organisations report that, increasingly, older people are taking part in voluntary sector activities, helping plan and implement new initiatives, and volunteering their time, experience and ideas. There are many examples of older people supporting each other through self-help groups and other networks.

This kind of direct involvement by older people is critical to the work of non-government organisations and older people's associations, and to ensuring that efforts are effectively targeted at needs. The last Gerontological Congress of Serbia in made it clear that older people must not be seen – by themselves or others – as passive recipients of welfare. They need to take action to ensure their own wellbeing, and that of future older Serbs. They must raise public awareness of the issues which affect them and of what they can offer.

Workshop participants felt that non-government organisations could play an important role in training and strengthening older people's groups, and encouraging voluntary activities by older people themselves. Given the difficulties in raising pension levels significantly in the current economic climate, older people needed more help to help themselves. Public and voluntary sector income-generating projects should be targeted specifically at older people – who typically have a wealth of skills and experience they can use, if given the chance.

Increasingly, older people are taking part in voluntary sector activities, such as self-help groups

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Older people in collective centres

Context

Half a million Bosnian, Croatian and Kosovan Serbs were displaced by war over the last decade. Refugees and internally displaced people now make up 7 per cent of the total population of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. HelpAge International was told that 100,000 out of a total refugee population of 750,000 still live in collective centres – a third of them aged 65 and over.

The public and voluntary sectors face huge challenges in ensuring adequate living standards for such significant numbers of refugees. The Red Cross, for example, says that a large proportion of those who fled Kosovo live in rented accommodation they simply cannot afford.

HelpAge International's experience worldwide has shown that older refugees are among those who find it hardest to recover from the disruption and trauma of conflict, and as a group tend to suffer from its effects longer. In Serbia, older people typically form a disproportionate share of those in collective centres, and face significant barriers to re-establishing themselves economically and socially.

We visited three collective centres, in Belgrade, Smederevo, and Vrsac. Older people in the centres told us that, without pensions or some other source of income, they could imagine how they would rebuild their lives in Serbia. Those who wished to return home remained profoundly uncertain about their safety and status, and in many cases had lost their homes and villages in the fighting.

The National Commissariat for Refugees, a government body, formally appoints management boards for registered collective centres, but funding and running them to consistent standards is extremely difficult. International agencies have proved an important source of short-term support, supplying food and non-food items, but in longer-term strategies must help older people help themselves.

At HelpAge International's workshop, there was a clear consensus that older refugees form a substantial and highly vulnerable group, requiring both humanitarian and developmental assistance.

Economic issues

HelpAge International found that many older Serb refugees and displaced people in collective centres are effectively destitute. Unable to claim pensions in their country of origin or host country, and with little likelihood of finding work, they face a daily struggle to meet basic costs such as medicines.

Technically, citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are entitled to pensions from those states. In practice, however, the situation is complex. Older people spoke of going home to find their homes empty shells and their villages deserted, and of difficulties in proving their legal title to property and benefits.

At the same time, without citizenship and contribution records, they cannot claim pensions in the Republic of Yugoslavia. As one older refugee put it: 'I don't belong there, and I don't belong here.'

Many older people told us they longed to have a home of their own again – 'Nothing else really matters!' said one. Above all, they want to live independently, be secure, and enjoy a clear legal status. Many said that they would be happy to continue to live within Serbia, rather than return home, if housing or help with loans could be provided.

Their chances of finding work, in the context of high unemployment and few job opportunities even for younger people, are slim. High unemployment levels amongst younger people were a major cause of concern.

In the collective centres we visited, older people appeared to be living in basic conditions, often with poor food, facilities and inadequate clothing. Questions about coping mechanisms were largely irrelevant – it was clear that, for most older people, the issue was basic survival.

Many of the collective centres are industrial or prefabricated buildings remote from centres of population, so that contact with the local community is difficult. They are often unhygienic and in poor repair, due to lack of funds. In one centre, where families or groups sleep and eat together in large rooms, often damp in the winter, some residents told us they had left and moved into private accommodation. But they could not earn enough to pay the rent, and had been forced to come back.

During one visit, older people told us there were often few clothes suitable for them in the care packages they received. One older woman said she did not know the last time she had something new to wear; another pointed to her ill-fitting shoes.

Workshop participants felt that the government needed urgently to identify ways of addressing older refugees' almost complete lack of resources by providing them with clear legal entitlements and status. They should either be made eligible for state pensions, or offered short-term loans to help them get re-established. Those in collective centres should be allocated pieces of land to grow food and generate a source of income.

Health issues

In the collective centres we visited, older people spoke of a high incidence of health problems, coupled with difficulties in accessing adequate healthcare. Chronic conditions associated with age included diabetes and cardiac conditions.

Poor sanitation emerged as a recurrent issue. In one centre, where there were two showers and four lavatories to each 'barrack' of 15 and 20 people, older people told us that the system didn't work properly, and were worried about disease. In the summer, the sewage sits in pools under the buildings – 'We sleep on top of it,' said one. So far, no repairs had been done. There had also

Older people in collective centres appeared to be living in basic conditions, often with poor food and inadequate clothing

Older people in collective centres feel isolated and invisible, both within the community, and to policy makers

been problems with electricity – for example, during the previous winter, there had been no heat or lighting for a fortnight.

While older refugees and displaced people are in theory eligible for free healthcare, in practice necessary medications are often not available and it is difficult to access treatment. At one centre we visited, for example, older people had the right to emergency treatment in hospital, but first had to get a written referral from the doctor 3km away, then find their way to the town 13km away. They had no money for bus fares, and little contact with anyone outside the centre who could help.

Most of the older people we talked to ate in central canteen facilities, and many said they would like to be able to cook their own food. In one centre, an international aid agency provided fresh food and other items, all much appreciated. In another, older people were concerned that the sort of food they were given – for example, fatty foods, with few fresh fruit and vegetables – would increase their rates of heart disease.

Workshop participants felt there was an urgent need for regular medical check-ups for older people in refugee camps, to identify diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer, and what kinds of medicines should be supplied on a regular basis. Older people's nutritional needs should be systematically researched and planned for.

Social issues

HelpAge International's visits suggested that older people in collective centres felt isolated and invisible, both within the local community, and to policy makers. They wanted to be seen, heard and understood.

They had few contacts with local people and felt their presence was sometimes resented, given levels of hardship in the wider community. In the district surrounding one of collective centres we visited, for example, many ex-farmers were struggling to make ends meet on low-level pensions, and there were high levels of unemployment. In another centre, there was no public telephone, adding to residents' feeling of being cut off from the wider world.

There were few organised social or other activities. Many older refugees come from rural areas, where they led active lives as part of the community. In one centre, a 75-year-old older woman had managed to get work helping out on a local farm. In another, residents were beginning to set up individual vegetable gardens, in order to grow their own food, generate income, and get back to work. A staff member commented: 'Older people have been very shaken by their experiences as refugees. I think the gardens are really important for them – they help them feel part of a community, and keep them busy. When they are active, they are not so sad.'

Older people in one centre said they felt the government didn't really understand their situation or care about it. 'They could ask us more about what we need,' says one. 'Really, we need several different organisations – donors and government – to get together and look at our problems.'

Non-government organisations spoke of a culture of disempowerment in the collective centres, which can be particularly acute among older people. Some of the older residents we met were worried about being evicted, though this was not a real danger. Others feared they would die in the camps.

Suicide rates among older people in collective centres are worryingly high – over 200 older people killed themselves in one recent year alone, according to research commissioned by HelpAge International from Dr Irena Grozdanic.

Legal and political issues

The longer-term prospects for older people in collective centres remain confused and uncertain.

Non-government organisations working in the centres point out that the exact numbers of those wishing to leave or remain in Serbia has never been established. Without this information, it will be difficult to plan realistic solutions.

Many of the older people we talked to felt they were too old to make a new life, and wanted to be buried in the place they originally came from. But they feared they would not be able to claim pensions or property at home, and would not be welcome. Croatian refugees in one collective centre, for example, told us they no longer had rights to benefits or land there, but didn't want to go to a Croatian transit centre because they would not be safe there.

For those who wanted to stay, lack of money was perceived to present an impossible obstacle to setting up a new home. Some older people worried that the centre they were in would close down, and they would be homeless.

In general, older people felt they did not know what the future would bring. Those who wanted to go home were worried about getting the right documents, feared their families would not be able to find work, and said it was difficult to get visas. Others wanted to get Yugoslav citizenship, but knew it was a complex process. The future of family units was a key consideration. 'Our children and grandchildren are what we care most about,' said one older person. 'What they do will affect whether we go home.'

HelpAge International's needs assessment found that there was a lack of advice or legal aid available to older people trying to work out their options. Many did not know if they had a right to reclaim property in their country of origin, or whether they could get their pensions restored on the basis of past contributions. Efforts to provide legal advice are now beginning.

In some collective centres, residents receive money from donors, and can start to save for the future. Older people told us that they would find this very helpful. They said they did not want gifts, but a way of getting life back to normal. 'We want to work with others to sort things out.'

Older people in collective centres said they did not want gifts, but a way of getting life back to normal

Government and international bodies must find durable political solutions for older refugees and displaced people

Workshop participants felt that, in the short term, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia should establish a visa regime that made it easier for refugees to visit their homes. They should be allowed to travel on special permits rather than full visas.

In the longer term, the governments of Yugoslavia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina needed to work together with international organisations to find durable political solutions for the problems of older Serb refugees and displaced people. Clarity about citizenship and pension provision, and which governments were liable for whom, would be critical to planning for a better future.

Testimony and case studies

Testimony: older people displaced from Kosovo

'My husband and I are both 72 years old, and we come from a village in Kosovo. We had to leave there earlier this year because of the fighting. Our daughter made her own way out, and at first we lost touch with her, but we've now made contact through the Red Cross.

We managed to get a lift out of Kosovo with some UNHCR transporters, and then we caught buses to get ourselves to Serbia. Other refugees told us about this collective centre. It was hard travelling so much. We had to live with strangers and rely on other people. We were afraid and exhausted.

We've been in this centre for just over a month. For the first couple of weeks we didn't have a bed – we just had to sleep on the ground. We get flour, but we don't have any way to cook. But our daughter now has some temporary work and gives us a bit of help.

We don't know what's going to happen to us. We'd like to go home, but it doesn't seem likely. We'll just have to stay here and see what happens.'

Testimony: older refugees from Croatia

'I'm 65 years old, and I come from Croatia, where I lived on a farm. We had a good life there – we kept sheep, cows and pigs – we were always busy.

We left Croatia six years ago, during Operation Storm, with all of us – my husband and two daughters, and me – perched on a tractor. My youngest daughter, aged 20, drove – her husband was away fighting. But we lost the tractor and all the things we had with us on the journey, and had to come part of the way on foot. At one point, we were taken prisoner.

We spent our first year in Serbia with my husband's brother. Then my husband managed to get us a room here in the collective centre. To begin with, there were five people to a room. We had no bed, but we asked the Yugoslav Red Cross for help and got a sponge mattress.

We've been here five years now. We are used to it now, though we still feel sad a lot of the time, and my husband especially can't forget the past. We have a garden we can work in, but it's not good soil like our farm used to be.

We haven't any pension here – we would have had one in Croatia. Luckily, my husband has got a temporary job with city parks, and my daughters get the odd bit of work. But I worry about money. Both of us have high blood pressure and heart conditions.

Now, we have nothing left. My husband and one of my daughters went back once to see what was left of our home, and there was nothing of ours there any more. Everything was burnt down, because our village was near some military installations that got bombed during the war. Some people have gone back to their villages, but our village has gone.

We'd like to get our own house, but we have no money. I don't know what will happen to us – it's hard to have any kind of picture of the future.'

Voluntary sector case study: Lastavica (Swallow), Belgrade

The core aim of Lastavica, founded in 1996, is to help refugees in the Pancevo and Surcin municipalities, near Belgrade, establish themselves in their local communities.

The task is huge. In the industrial town of Pancevo, for example, with an indigenous population of 12,000, a further 13,000 refugees and displaced people live in collective centres and rented accommodation. In the agricultural community of Surcin, with a population of 20,000, there are 2,500 refugees and displaced people.

Women on their own, especially older women, formed a significant vulnerable group. Lastavica started as a small support centre for 10 women in Surcin, and quickly went on to open a centre in Pancevo for a further 8 women. It now offers medical support, counselling and legal services to refugees, along with basic accommodation. It also organises social, educational and employment activities.

With Lastavica's help, older refugees are developing their own sources of income. Some produce handicrafts and sell them through a shop in Belgrade – and to supporters in America. Others have set up a small business for broiler chickens and eggs – about 80 per cent of the output is sold, and the rest used for direct consumption. They also produce and sell preserved food, using traditional methods like pickling. 'It's vital that older people feel they can play a useful role,' says Milena Skoric, one of the organisation's project co-ordinators.

From the beginning, Lastavica has focused on building refugees' self-reliance and coping mechanisms. Most collective centres are dealing with such large numbers that they have little time for this kind of labour-intensive work. Its approach has won a local and international recognition – it works closely with local government and has been supported by several international aid agencies.

Lastavica has focused on building refugees' self-reliance and coping mechanisms

Sunce has drawn on the skills of volunteers from the local and refugee communities

Voluntary sector case study: Sunce (The Sun), Kragujevac

Founded in 1994, Sunce started as a group of students supporting children in collective centres across the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It now works with refugees and internally displaced people of all age groups, including older people.

Its activities include practical humanitarian support, individual counselling, income generation, social events, and education activities. Artistic expression is encouraged and plays have now been performed in nearly a hundred collective centres.

Sunce has been particularly effective in mobilising volunteer support. Over the years, it has drawn on the skills and talents of volunteers from the local and refugee communities, and from the worlds of medicine, teaching, social work and the arts. It has received recognition and funding from international donors including UNHCR and UNICEF.

It places a strong emphasis on training and has hosted workshops on a wide range of topics, including work with older people and managing non-government organisations.

Public sector case study: Smederevo municipality

In the Smederevo area, many people within the community and from elsewhere need special help.

Some 12,500 local people are unemployed. There are 18,000 refugees and displaced persons, 1,500 of them still housed in collective centres. Some of the most vulnerable are older people

Coordination between public and voluntary sectors is a key to meeting such large-scale needs effectively. The Smederevo municipal assembly has put in place a new humanitarian committee – which brings together local government staff, non-government organisations and services users – to oversee all emergency welfare activities. It also acts as a central contact for community groups and international donors.

Helping meet refugees' short-term needs is a priority. In the longer term, the committee is looking at how to help those who want to stay to integrate into the local community.

The group believes that the situation of older refugees and displaced people will need special thought. As Mr Andjelkovic, Smederevo's head of humanitarian affairs, says: 'It's vital we ensure that older people stay part of the community. We are not keen on solutions which would isolate them on the basis of age – by grouping them separately in pre-fabricated houses, for example.'

Appendix 1: HelpAge International needs assessment interviewees

An assessment of the needs of older people in Serbia was conducted 28 November - 4 December 2000. The aims were to gather information about the situation of older people in community, institution and camp settings; and to identify how HelpAge International could best complement the work of the voluntary and public sectors in the future. HelpAge International staff and advisors conducted interviews with the following:

Ivan Bojanic, Head of Office, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), Belgrade

Radomir Buric and Vera Kovacevic, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Liaison Office, Belgrade

Zivorad Gajic, Director, Grig, Belgrade

Marcel Grogan, Humanitarian Affairs Officer, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), Belgrade

Irena Grozdanic, Medical Advisor, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), Belgrade

Markovic Dusan, President, Pensioners' Association of Serbia, Belgrade

Zoran Ilievski, Project Manager for Serbia and Armenia, CAFOD, London

Geoff Loane, Head of the Economic Security Unit, Health and Relief Division, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva

Vojo Lucic, Programme Manager, Sunce, Kragujevac

Anthony McEvoy, CARE Yugoslavia

Ljiljana Milanovic, Social Affairs Department, Red Cross of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

Desanks Narga, General Secretary, and **Jasmina Tosic**, President, Bread of Life, Prijedor, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Ljilja Radinovic, Coordinator, Lastavica, Belgrade

John Roche, Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator, and **Peter Stocker**, Head of Delegation for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Belgrade

Staff, Havecia collective centre for refugees, Vrsac, Vojvodina

Natasa Subasic, Deputy Director, Bezanijska Kosa, Belgrade

Spomenka Zarkovic, President, Tera – Creative Woman, Belgrade

Appendix 2: Collective centres visited

In 2000-01, HelpAge International staff and advisors visited three collective centres housing refugees and displaced people, to gather information and testimony directly from older people and from staff. The centres were:

Godomin-Mihajlovac Barake, Smederevo, Serbia

Description: Houses 100 refugees and displaced people from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, a fifth of whom are aged over 60.

Date of visit: June 2001

Havecia collective centre, Vrsac, Vojvodina

Description: Houses over 100 refugees, half of them older people.

Date of visit: December 2000

Viadukt Barake, Belgrade, Serbia

Description: Houses 160 refugees, 60 per cent of whom are from Bosnia-Herzegovina, with smaller numbers from Croatia and Kosovo. Older people and children make up over half of all residents.

Date of visit: June 2001

Appendix 3: HelpAge International workshop participants

A participatory workshop was held in Belgrade (7 June 2001), in response to requests from several of the contacts interviewed during HelpAge International's earlier needs assessment in Serbia (December 2000). The aims of the workshop were to share information about situation of older people in post-conflict Serbia; to highlight practical ways to meet their needs; and to identify the ways in which they supported families and communities in a situation of economic and social pressure for all age groups. Participants representing a range of perspectives attended:

Older people and staff from collective centres

Barake Godomin-Mihajlovac collective centre, Smederevo

Mille Turasic; Draginja Veselinovic, Centre Manager

Barake Viadukt collective centre, Belgrade

Blagoje Kovacevic, Centre Manager

Older people's organisations

Pensioners' Association for New Belgrade, New Belgrade

Milos Ivosevic, President

Pensioners' Association of Serbia, Belgrade

Dusan Markovica, President

International humanitarian non-government organisations

CARE

Boban Korizma, Project Officer

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Belgrade

John Roche, Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator; Pedreg Sivotic, Public Health Consultant

International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), Belgrade

Dr Irena Grozdanic, Medical Advisor

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), Belgrade

Marcel Grogan, Humanitarian Affairs Officer for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Belgrade

Mirela Mladenov, Community Services; Olivera Vukotic, Community Services

Local non-government organisations

Bread of Life, Prijedor, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Ana Medenica; Snezana Saric

Grig, Belgrade

Zivorad Gajic, Director

Lastavica, Belgrade

Milen Skoric, Project Coordinator; Sanja Stanisic, Project Coordinator

Osmijeh, Gracanica, Bosnia

Hamdija Kujundzic, President; Vahida Huzjrovic, Project Officer

Red Cross of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

Natasa Todorovic, Social Affairs Officer

Sunce, Kragujevac

Verica Kovacevic; Vojo Lucic, President

SVIMA, Zagreb, Croatia

Nives Radeljic, Director

Viktorija, Kragujevac

Mirjana Milenkovic, President

The public sector

Municipal Assembly of Smederevo, Smederevo

Dr Dragan Andelkovic, Vice-President

HelpAge International resources

Publications on East and Central Europe

Building a better future: Older people in Serbia examines the situation of older people in Serbia, as citizens, refugees and displaced people, and puts forward practical recommendations for action to improve their welfare and wellbeing in the future.

Free. English and Serbian.

Nothing about us without us: Older people and decision-making in East and Central Europe focuses on the situation of older people in Albania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and includes a directory of NGOs working with and for older people in each country. The complementary publication, ***Making our voices heard: Older people and decision-making in East and Central Europe*** examines Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia), Macedonia, Moldova, Romania and the Ukraine.

Free. English. A summary of both these publications is available in Russian.

Briefing papers

Capacity building and ageing: a position paper

Emergencies and ageing: a position paper

Gender and ageing: a position paper

Participation and ageing: a position paper

Poverty and ageing: a position paper

Free. Also available at www.helpage.org.

Other publications

The mark of a noble society: Human rights and older people (2000) Published to mark UN Human Rights Day 2000, this discussion paper sets out HelpAge International's position on older people's rights and argues that poverty, social exclusion and discriminatory attitudes are setting age limits to human rights.

Free. English and Spanish. Also available at www.helpage.org.

The Ageing and Development Report: Poverty, Independence and the World's Older People (Editors: Judith Randel and Tony German, 1999)

A HelpAge International report on the circumstances of older people in developing countries and countries in transition, with chapters on economic security, health, family and community life, poverty, gender and emergencies. Contains information on demographic trends and ageing in specific countries and regions.

Price: £14.95. Available from Earthscan. Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 0433. Email: earthinfo@earthscan.co.uk. Website: www.earthscan.co.uk.

The Ageing and Development Report: a summary (1999)

A summary of the full report is available in English, French and Spanish.

Free. Available at www.helpage.org in English, French and Spanish.

Regular publications

Ageways

A journal exchanging practical information on ageing and agecare issues, particularly good practice developed in the HelpAge International network. Free to carers, health workers, members of older people's groups and project staff working with or for older people in developing countries and East and Central Europe.

Published three times a year in English and Spanish (Horizontes). Free. Also published in Ukrainian and Russian. Contact: Viktor Mishchenko, Ukrainian Fund for Charity and Health, Artyoma Street 55 'b, Kiev 252053, Ukraine. Tel: +380 44 219 1 418.

Ageing and Development

A regular briefing which aims to raise awareness of the contribution, needs and rights of older people and to promote the development of laws and policies that will bring a lasting improvement to the quality of life of disadvantaged older people. Free to policy makers, programme planners and researchers concerned with development and poverty eradication.

Published three times a year in English and Spanish (Tercera Edad y Desarrollo). Free.

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