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**SOCIAL HOUSING IN SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT (SHSE)  
Sustainable housing solution for the most vulnerable refugees, internally  
displaced persons and domicile population in Serbia**

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**1. Summary:**

Social Housing in Supportive Environment (SHSE) is a program that provides housing and shelter for the most vulnerable, primarily refugees and IDPs. It has been realised in Serbia in the period from 2002 up till now, with the financial support of international donors and the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

The project was jointly initiated by the Ministry of Social Policy of the Republic of Serbia, Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia and the Humanitarian Department of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), who was initially the main donor of the project. After 2004 the financing of the project was taken over by the EU, through the EAR, the UNHCR, the UNDP, the EC, the Governments of Serbia and Germany and private donors.

Social Housing in Supportive Environment (SHSE) represents a right in the field of social protection, defined by the Law on Social Protection and Provision of Social Security for the Citizens of the Republic of Serbia, Article 9, Para 4. It is among the so-called 'extended rights', which are in the competence of the local community. In addition, SHSE is a form of so-called "open protection", deinstitutionalized and decentralized citizens' protection, the development of which is anticipated as a priority by the Strategy on the Development of Social Protection in Serbia.<sup>1</sup>

SHSE is an example of sustainable, municipality owned housing solution for the socially vulnerable, realized within the prevailing laws, despite the lack of social housing policy and adequate legal frame for social housing in Serbia. Existing legal framework has utilized and modified in the best possible way.

From 2002 up to the present moment **430 apartments in 22 municipalities** have been built in Serbia, in which, with the support provided by the local community, about **1.100 vulnerable citizens** of Serbia reside.

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<sup>1</sup> Adopted by the Government of Serbia in December 2005

## **2. About Housing Center**

Housing Center – *Housing Development Center for Socially Vulnerable Groups* is a non-profit, non-governmental organization gathered around the idea of improving the housing condition of vulnerable groups. Housing Center advocates the interests of the socially vulnerable, by providing adequate space for their life and work and by facilitating their social integration and self-reliance.

Housing Center began its activities in October, 2004, during the closure period of the Swiss Development and Cooperation (SDC) Housing Office, the experience and activities of which it was based on. SDC Housing Office was the main implementing partner of UNHCR for Shelter Program in Serbia since its opening in 1995, until the termination of SDC Humanitarian Aid Program in 2004. Members of HOUSING CENTER developed, together with UNHCR and other partners, numerous projects referring to housing and integration, especially projects intended for the most vulnerable groups. Since the very beginning, the objectives and strategy of Housing Center have been to assist in providing decent accommodation, especially to the most vulnerable groups of refugees and IDPs.

Housing Center has 18 founders and a network of partners and associates - mainly architects, engineers of different profiles and social workers.

## **3. Background**

### **3.1 Initial situation**

The implementation of this housing project began in Serbia in 2002. As the consequence of war conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Serbia was host to about 600.000 refugees at that time. A large number of them was accommodated in collective centers that were, by the official decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, in the process of closure. The closure of the refugee camps was connected with the fact that it was impossible for many of the refugees to return to their country of origin and thus their integration into Serbian society was seen as the only solution. Due to the unfortunate circumstances, the refugees accommodated in collective centers found themselves incapacitated in terms of finding solutions for themselves, dependant on external support and without any initiative or active participation.

The population accommodated in collective centers is the most vulnerable and consists mainly of single parents, the elderly and poor families. They are for the most part unemployed and receive limited access to job opportunities; many rely on social relief programs and seasonal employment. In addition to those displaced living in collective centers, an important number of the displaced are hosted in private accommodation with extremely poor living conditions (partially finished dwellings, poorly insulated, etc).

It was a challenge to develop an approach where the principle of social dependence could be diminished and vulnerable people given a feeling of a social affiliation.

The initial idea was outlined in the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Serbia. The strategy envisages the building of small housing communities for the elderly – small homes for the elderly in which one “foster family” i.e. a family with children is “employed in the social protection system and is in charge of 5-6 elderly families that are capable of taking care of themselves”.<sup>2</sup>

While the two pilot projects in 2002 were exclusively intended for the elderly people, the scope of beneficiaries was enlarged in the projects that followed. In the response to the stated needs, presently the beneficiaries of this project are the elderly capable of

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<sup>2</sup> - National Strategy for resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, Belgrade 2003

living independently, self-supporting parents with children and “other categories of especially vulnerable families – socially and financially vulnerable families that because of health problems, disability or a chronic disease of a family member cannot provide for themselves”.<sup>3</sup>

SHSE was the first project of alternative housing solutions for IDPs in Serbia and it was a turning point of the official policy regarding the housing projects for IDPs. The project has confirmed the enormous need for housing solutions of this type for vulnerable IDP population in Serbia.

### **3.2 Situation in housing sector in Serbia:**

In Serbia, housing sector is not seen as the political objective. Serbia neither has a system of affordable and social housing nor an adequate housing policy in place. The mechanism that would assist the vulnerable in solving their housing needs has not yet been established. The absence of the housing policy and strategy on a national level resulted in all groups of residents, with no exception of the most vulnerable, being forced to find a solution for their housing situation under the market conditions. Unfortunately, it is not feasible for a large number of Serbian citizens. Some of the reasons are as follows:

- Average net salary in Serbia in July 2008 amounted to 430 EUR.<sup>4</sup>
- The lowest price of a square meter of an apartment on the Serbian market is estimated to 600 EUR/m<sup>2</sup> and higher.
- The estimated 6.6 % of population, that is half a million of citizens of Serbia, lives in poverty. The poorest are the ones residing in rural areas, uneducated and unemployed persons, refugees and IDPs, the elderly and the disabled.<sup>5</sup>
- The unemployment rate in Serbia is 18,8 %, being highest in comparison with the neighboring countries.<sup>6</sup>
- It is estimated that the present shortage of apartments is about 100.000, which additionally raises the apartment prices on the market.
- Serbia is currently host to about 205,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from Kosovo and some 97,000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. About 6,000 refugees and IDPs now live in 60 remaining collective centers.<sup>7</sup>
- Only approx 50% of IDP population in Serbia (some 100.000) would like to return to Kosovo. The wish for return is equally distributed between different age and educational groups.<sup>8</sup>

Under these conditions, it is obvious that the necessity for the support in solving housing needs of the most vulnerable is indispensable and urgent. The SHSE project is implemented, and is still being implemented as a response to that need. That need has not yet been fully met.

### **3.3 Ministry of Social Policy and decentralization process:**

The SHSE project is a part of the social protection system of Serbia. During as early as the first phase of the project the Ministry of Social Policy entered into extensive reform processes and decentralization. Having in mind the significance that the local community holds in the project and its role in the project funding, the project implementation was feasible only in a decentralized environment. Furthermore, due to the lack of social housing legislation and adequate communication among the ministries in charge, this project could not rely on the Ministry of Infrastructure.

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<sup>3</sup> - Extract from the Partnership Agreement on Cooperation, 2008

<sup>4</sup> - The Republic of Serbia, Bureau of Statistics, July 2008

<sup>5</sup> - [www.prsp.sr.gov.yu](http://www.prsp.sr.gov.yu)

<sup>6</sup> - [www.prsp.sr.gov.yu](http://www.prsp.sr.gov.yu)

<sup>7</sup> - UNHCR, 22 August 2008

<sup>8</sup> - UNHCR & Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Serbia Survey, prof S. Cvejic, January 2008

The organization of the social protection system in Serbia, pursuant to the Constitution, is within the jurisdiction of the Republic, whereas municipalities, i.e. local communities, are in charge of meeting the social needs of citizens on the local level. Rights in the field of social protection are stipulated in the Law on Social Protection and Provision for Social Security of the Citizens (in 1991, last changes in 2005).

The policy of the Republic of Serbia in the field of social protection is stipulated by the Social Protection Development Strategy, adopted on 01 December 2005 by the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The basic aim of the Strategy is more efficient social protection of citizens by means of an integral model, which should enhance the quality of life of the citizens that are in need of help. The Strategy confirmed that one of the basic courses of the social protection development, as well as the realization conditions of its general aim, is decentralization.

The role of the Center for Social Work is extremely important in this process and the Center is an integrative agent in terms of the activities in the local community.

Until the 1990's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Republic of Serbia had had the decentralized social protection system that was strongly centralized in the 1990's. The return to the decentralized system is thereby greatly facilitated since its experience has left trace. Therefore, the Ministry has been a good partner in the creation and realization of a complex housing project such as SHSE.

#### **4. Concept: What is SHSE?**

SHSE is an attempt at providing a sustainable housing solution for the vulnerable people who – mostly in combination with economic problems – do not have the necessary social skills and living competence to organize a self-reliant independent live. What they have in common is the lack of ability to solve their housing problem on their own. The role of SHSE is not only providing housing, it is also an important instrument for facilitating social inclusion.

SHSE is the right within the corpus of expanded social protection rights in Serbia. The beneficiaries of the project are the socially most vulnerable persons in the community – refugees, IDPs, and the local population, as follows:

- Self-supporting single parents with children
- The elderly, single or couples, who do not need special care, capable of independent living
- Other categories of especially socially vulnerable families, which due to physical or mental disease, chronic disease or disability of a family member cannot provide conditions for existence.

SHSE is an **innovative and comprehensive approach** to social housing, fulfilling a number of social objectives. Apart from helping the socially disadvantaged to meet their housing needs, SHSE contributes to the creation of an inclusive and integrated society by creating an environment that assists specific target groups in improving their opportunities in life.

The key innovative aspect of this project is the role of the Host Family.

#### **5. Project Components:**

The project has two components – construction of social housing units and creation of supportive environment.

### **5.1 Construction of social housing units**

The apartments are of different size and they accommodate one to five persons. Special attention is given to common places - common living rooms, common laundries, terraces and outer space (gardens, patios, etc.). These are the central spots for regular social contact and exchange among the inhabitants and with the neighborhood.

Although the standards and norms, particularly those defining the minimum housing and construction standards for social housing do not exist in Serbia, special care is taken that:

- Standards of the apartments correspond to the average housing quality in the country, in order to avoid stigmatization and social segregation
- Project is developed within the framework of a city's overall urban planning strategy. Project is integrated into urban structure, placed among other residential buildings and has appropriate access to transport network and public services.
- Lifetime Building Standards securing the adaptability of the buildings to the needs of the ageing population are respected.

Due attention is given to the needs of the people with disabilities. The building ground floor is barrier-free and the apartments are fully accessible.

### **5.2 Creation of Supportive Environment**

Creation of socially supportive environment is a continuous process, composed of a set of activities and services provided by the Host Family and the Centre for Social Work.

- The Host Family is a socially vulnerable refugee or IDP family with the working capacity. The family lives together with other families in the building and, by sharing the everyday activities, provide them with daily assistance of a good neighbor. It facilitates the integration in the new social environment, the development of good neighborly relationship among the tenants, positive atmosphere in the building and mutual respect between the tenants and the neighborhood. It is a catalyst of the social life in the buildings, supports the tenants' initiatives, mediates in conflicts, encourages dialogue and supports group activities of the tenants and the neighborhood. It assists the development of solidarity among the tenants and their self-reliance.
- The Center for Social Work is the basic unit of the social protection system in Serbia and it exists in each municipality. The Center renders professional services in the field of social protection and manages the buildings for social housing in supportive environment. The Center monitors the work of the host family and is responsible for its training. The Center defines the tailored support to the needs of each tenant and stimulates the creation of the conditions for independent life in the community. The Center concludes the Contract on use with the selected beneficiaries.

The roles and obligations of Host Family and Center for Social Works are precisely defined. Whole system has been developed in that regard.

## **6. Sustainability:**

### **6.1 Social sustainability**

Besides providing housing, SHSE is an important instrument for facilitating social inclusion. The project reflects the idea that social integration of vulnerable people in a local context is possible through independent organization of their life, by living in community and recognizing vulnerable people as dynamic personalities.

The results of the project are monitored on regular basis, thoroughly recorded and, with the purpose of further enhancement, incorporated in every project that may follow.

- Regular monitoring and evaluations confirmed the social sustainability of the project. Beneficiaries report a substantial improvement of living conditions and quality of life and they become socially integrated in their housing unit as well as within the local community.
- The series of 5 extraordinary workshops were organized and attended by the representatives of the local communities, Centers for Social Work, Ministry, NGOs, Host Families and beneficiaries. The Centers for Social Work have gained the capacity to take over their roles in the project – they become independent in reaching decisions and further developing the basic SHSE concept. The process of host family education has begun, with the participation of beneficiaries. One of the important results of the workshops is the new, clarified Project Concept based on the gained experience.
- The Centers for Social Work from the municipalities that developed SHSE project have created the Network and the Initiative Board of the Network, the purpose of which is the exchange of experiences and project build-up.

## **6.2 Financial Sustainability**

Local community is the key guarantee for the project sustainability. It has the numerous roles in this project:

1. It grants the construction land equipped with infrastructure for construction of the building, which is situated in the urbanized tissue, in the developed area, near the public institutions and services.
2. It provides urban planning and technical documents for project elaboration, day-to-day supervision during the construction work and regular maintenance of the building
3. It organizes a transparent public selection of the beneficiaries
4. It makes the Decision on Social Housing in Supportive Environment as the Extended Right in the Field of Social Protection at the local level, defining the conditions for its effecting and resources and manners of financing.

Being the owner of the apartments and buildings, municipality is responsible for the regular building maintenance. By issuing the Decision, the long-term financial sustainability is achieved.

## **7. Impact & Achievements:**

A large number of municipalities in Serbia are interested in the development of this form of protection intended for the socially most vulnerable citizens, especially IDPs and refugees. It is proved to be a convenient, efficient and cost-effective approach to social housing for the most vulnerable. The Social Protection Development Strategy in Serbia anticipates further development of this form of social protection that is in the capacity of the local community.

Following the implementation of the pilot projects in two municipalities in Serbia in 2002, the project has been further developed in Serbia with the support of different donors (SDC, UNDP, UNHCR, EAR, German Government, some private donations, etc). So far (2002-08) altogether **430 housing units** have been built in **22 municipalities** in Serbia, for about **1.100 extremely socially vulnerable persons**.

“The concept of Social Housing in Supportive Environment helped the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to develop a new, de-institutionalized, decentralized and cost-effective approach to the care of the elderly and the handicapped – or the

vulnerable in general, since the approach has manifold purposes. The Social Housing in Supportive Environment approach experiences high identification of the beneficiaries and wide acceptance of the municipalities..... The project concept of social housing in supportive environment was an innovative and highly suitable answer to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the collective centers' residents showing a rising tendency towards special vulnerable groups. In Serbia-Montenegro the approach had and still has a relevant impact on the country's preparation of social housing policy and further implementation".<sup>9</sup>

After the successful implementation of projects in Serbia (2002-2005), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation decided to replicate the SHSE - Social Housing approach and to start similar projects in Armenia (2005) and Georgia (2006) as well. The projects in Yerevan and Goris (Armenia) and Tbilisi (Georgia) are ongoing.

SHSE approach is presently one of the housing solutions for the vulnerable IDPs and refugees in Serbia which shall be funded on the larger scale by European Commission - IPA funds in the following years. The Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Serbia has recently announced the Call for Proposals under the "Support to Refugees and IDPs in Serbia" program. The program, amounting to 9.000.000 EUR, is intended for the enhancement of living conditions of refugees and IDPs, and substantial emphasize is placed on the "construction of apartments in socially protected conditions".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> - External evaluation of SDC DuSo Program Balkans, by Hannes Herrmann & Ernst Rüegg, on behalf of the SDC Humanitarian Aid Europe + CIS Division, February 2005

<sup>10</sup> - [www.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/work/procedures](http://www.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/work/procedures)