Return is sometimes part of the migration process, whether as an intrinsic component of the initial migration project or due to change in opportunities in the destination or home country. Returns may also be imposed when migrants have no options for legal stay in the destination country. This can be the case for example for asylum seekers who received a negative decision, or when the authorisation of stay expires and cannot be renewed. Whatever the motivation of returning migrants, most OECD countries have developed specific offers to assist voluntary return and support reintegration for migrants meeting eligibility. These programmes play a key role in comprehensive migration management system and have recently attracted more attention from migration policy makers, development actors and origin country institutions.

This Migration Policy Debate summarises the key finding of the first OECD multi country peer review of reintegration assistance, including Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRR), in 8 destination countries and 3 origin countries. The review, funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), looks at the conditions under which these programmes can not only support the sustainable reintegration of individual returning migrants but satisfy broader policy goals affecting host and origin communities.

What improves the sustainability of the reintegration component in AVRR?

Summary of the main recommendations to improve the sustainability of reintegration programmes

Increase the visibility of opportunities for assisted return and reintegration

- Better target information campaigns and messaging about options for reintegration support, including via social media
- According to migrant profile, identify key moments for communication about options for return and reintegration assistance. For asylum seekers, this includes the moment of communication of final refusal.
- Focus on appropriate locations and contexts for promoting return to potential beneficiaries and their communities

Invest in reinforcing the legitimacy of return as an acceptable outcome to a migration project

- Partner with existing trusted actors in the destination and origin country, notably civil society organisations, community leaders and caseworkers
- Work in the destination country with institutional and other actors who have a bias against return to improve consensus around circumstances where return is a potentially positive option
- Shift from information provision to support for developing a reintegration plan and a vision of life after return
- Support initiatives which address the stigmatisation and negative perception of return

Adapt reintegration assistance to both individual needs and the cost-savings represented

- Strengthen psychosocial support in the reintegration process before and after return
- Focus in-kind packages on the support needed, including broader family needs, rather than the amount of funding available
- Allow greater expenditure for complex cases, taking into consideration costs associated with the difficulty of removal
- Balance scope and ambition of programmes against the number of potential beneficiaries targeted or applying

Improve coordination and referral

- Ensure continuous case management from the destination to the origin country
- Include pre-return training opportunities where possible to reinforce skills for return and maintain motivation
- Strengthen communication, referral and exchange among implementers of individual and community initiatives to support reintegration, through visits and liaison activities
- Invest in shared platforms for case management, data exchange, monitoring and evaluation, building on existing models.

Invest in the capacity of origin countries to support reintegration

- Open initiatives in the origin country to serve all return migrants and potentially also local residents
- Ensure that individual reintegration assistance is compatible and aligned with, and contributes to, existing community-based programmes and state-offered services
- Empower communities origin to develop local solutions and support existing grassroots initiatives benefitting returning migrants

Expand evaluation of programmes

- Expand the use of external monitoring and evaluation beyond project reporting by implementers and partners, including through building the capacity of local expertise
- Measure individual outcomes of returnees against the difficulty of the starting point rather than in absolute terms
- Broaden assessment of individual outcomes beyond the reintegration plan and the timeline of support to include longer-term capacity to adapt
- Ensure that monitoring and evaluation effectively cover different groups of returnees and their households

Reintegration assistance is part of the policy toolbox for return

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes largely aim to increase and facilitate the re-establishment in the origin country of persons who plan to go back or who do not yet have a right to remain. It provides a more dignified and orderly alternative, in line with national principles and international engagements.

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) has long been available for various categories of migrants, including asylum seekers who withdraw or are refused their asylum request or refugees for whom the situation in the origin country allows return. In many cases AVR obviates the need for costly measures associated with removal. While return assistance was generally limited to travel support and limited spending money, recent years have seen the development of reintegration assistance, which provides cash and in-kind support following return to the origin country. AVRR programmes, largely run by Ministries of the Interior through co-ordinating bodies, share common features in terms of design. In numerical terms, they usually benefit a relatively small share of all return migrants, but have taken on importance as a solution for certain target groups and in light of possible increases in the number of returns. While not all OECD countries have chosen to offer reintegration support, all European countries offer such programmes, through national and EU programmes. Reintegration packages have been added to AVR as a key part of a comprehensive migration policy at both national and EU level in Europe.

Reintegration assistance doesn't just take place through AVRR – it also is organised in the country of origin, after return, rather than part of the return process. Development cooperation also contributes to support the capacity of origin countries to reintegrate returning migrants. Development cooperation components are generally community-based, open to broader categories of returns and may also serve the local population. Sometimes it can be difficult to align individual support packages with a general development perspective; possible solutions are identified below.

There is no magic number in the value of the package

The extent to which AVRR programmes affect individual return decisions remains an open question, as the individual situation of the migrant, the economic, social and political circumstances in the origin country, the opportunities to remain in the destination country, etc. are key determining factors. In origin countries, most returns – even voluntary returns – are not assisted and most migrants do not receive return assistance. At the same time, many of those eligible for assistance do not return, and most returnees who are eligible nonetheless return without the package, for lack of knowledge, mistrust of the bodies offering support, or a perception that the package is ill-suited to their needs. Ultimately, the addition of reintegration packages to AVR is meant to make return a viable option for potential returnees – even beyond the recipient of the package – as well as to contribute to the economic development of communities of origin. It's also meant to reduce forced returns in favour of less expensive voluntary returns as well as achieve and accelerate returns of persons who cannot be removed without their cooperation. Such a complex policy objective makes the evaluation of these programmes both challenging and disputable.

Programmes, individuals and contexts vary so much that it is difficult to assess the extent to which higher budget for assistance improves outcomes. Granting margin to support some returnees when the implementer sees that a specific need can make the difference, however, lends credibility to the programme. Cash assistance is one component of assistance; when offered, it can range from a low 250 Euros per adult in Belgium to a high of 3000 Euros in Sweden. The different impact on reintegration of cash grants rather than in-kind assistance has not been assessed, but the amount or value of in-kind reintegration assistance offered to returning migrants varies and generally exceeds the values of cash assistance. Cash grants give less possibility to build networks and support capacity building in the origin country. The criteria used to set the amount vary among the countries examined, over time, and according to eligibility criteria. In-kind support does not appear to have been a pull factor or have led to international "package-shopping" for the most favourable assistance. In most cases, uptake relative to eligibility is low and is hard to link it to the value of the reintegration package.

Return counselling can encourage uptake of assisted return

Most eligible returnees to AVR and reintegration assistance generally do not initially consider return as an acceptable option, as they are focused on remaining and realising their migration project. A case work approach, addressing individual psychological states of mind at the different points, appears more resource-efficient. While standardised information is provided at different points in the asylum process, for example, the timing of interviews – particularly at the final decision following appeal – appears important. Since the goal is to shift the perception of return and frame it as an opportunity and not a failure, successful counselling approaches, such as the "motivational interview technique", emphasise the chance to take control over one's individual life.

Counselling in the enforcement context – such as detention, reporting and even reception centres – and by actors associated with enforcement is less successful in fostering interest in voluntary return and reintegration than information and counselling by **trusted figures** in neutral contexts separate physically and procedurally from enforcement and legal proceedings. Public actors must continue to provide information and counselling based on the legal obligation to return, although many countries have put a firewall between counselling and enforcement. Beyond this official role, recruiting, training, awareness-raising among, and involving actors such as cultural and religious community figures, diaspora organisations and former returnees allows for a more convincing case. While partnering with civil society can help make the case for return more compelling, these actors cannot be expected to promote return in all cases, but only when they judge it as in the individual's best interest. Contracting civil society organisations and other non-governmental actors thus requires accepting that some eligible beneficiaries will not be advised to return.

Reintegration packages are sometimes also available to people with a legal residence status, including recognised refugees, migrants with an expiring permit, and graduating students. The rationale to provide support to such groups is primarily to support their reestablishment rather than encourage departure, and their legal status allows for more pre-return preparation. Supporting the reintegration of these groups can increase the legitimacy of return, reduce its association with removal and failure, and give programmes a network of contacts in communities and countries of origin.

Contact with the origin country can help develop a perspective on return and improve the reintegration plan

Return counselling involves painting a picture of possibilities after return. This is also supported with testimony of successful return, especially through direct contact with returnees or actors in the origin country, through videoconferences, mediators, informational visits, and other forms of direct contact in order to inform potential returnees of structures and offers available upon return and develop a concrete vision of post-return life. Not all counsellors have knowledge about origin countries, and even an identified roster of contacts in the home country. One successful way to address this gap is to use intermediating bodies to make the connection between host country counsellors and contacts in the origin country who are familiar with the situation. In some cases, the counterpart is the implementing partner or contact who would eventually receive the case or collaborate in a reintegration plan prior to return.

Returnees who have started their reintegration project prior to return appear to fare better, even though most must adjust their projects and expectations to adapt to the post-return reality. One positive factor is training. Skills development prior to return is identified as helpful, although most programmes allow only a limited time for counselling, let alone training, and it is rare to be able to organise pre-return training related to a specific reintegration project. Asylum seekers who are employed or involved in integration programmes while awaiting a decision are usually not inclined to invest in skills for return, since their plan is to stay. Short-module training programmes focusing on skills applicable in destination and origin countries can nonetheless ensure that some skills are acquired even if the asylum application is rejected.

Reintegration assistance packages involve many actors and partners

Reintegration assistance is complex to manage because it requires multiple actors in the destination and origin country. These include partners capable of providing:

- skills assessment and labour market orientation, including assessment and certification

- entrepreneurial support, including development of a business plan, access to credit, mentoring, networks and market information

- social support services, including those working with populations with specific vulnerabilities, and those capable of supporting reinsertion of children in school or with health issues

To better root the programmes in the communities of origin, other actors are also important to involve:

- Private sector actors, especially those seeking specific skills and competences of returning migrants

- Diaspora organisations to identify reintegration opportunities, circulate information and destigmatise return.

- Associations of returnees can orient returning migrants and make them feel part of a community.

- Local actors (committees, cooperatives and councils, as well as regional offices of public services) can help provide support to returnees far from the capitals Local councils can also help shift the narrative

Multiple partners, however, complicate oversight for the coordinator. The coordinator may be the sending country public body – in some cases represented in countries of origin - or an implementing partner in the origin country, often IOM or another partner. No single model applies: the central coordinating mechanism or partnership, or state-led (but supported by ODA) model depends on a range of factors, including the institutional capacity of the destination and origin country, the needs of the individual returnee and the experience and expertise of the partner.

Coordination means accountability, data management and reporting, tender management and financial control, and ensuring continuity and referral. It also means awareness of local resources, similar programmes and efforts to align, complement and share programmes. For return migrants, multiple interlocutors can be confusing; without a referral mechanism, there is a risk of duplication and blurring of responsibility, arguing for case management to be placed with a single body or contact. No single model for coordination has emerged, beyond the transfer to an origin-country case manager following return – which may be state institutions, in the best of cases, or implementing partners who keep the case or pass it to another structure. The fact that individual reintegration support packages end – usually after 12 months – means a sometimes difficult rupture with the beneficiary and even the partners working closely with them.

A whole of government approach needs to be taken in the origin country

Although favouring returns and sustainable reintegration is among the policy priorities for many European countries cooperating with origin countries, reintegration assistance sometimes occurs outside of development assistance frameworks and independent of other diplomatic initiatives. To address this, liaison officers within embassies, regular meetings and key contact points have been effective, especially to identify shared objectives and areas for collaboration.

As reintegration assistance in many cases grew out of return assistance, in which origin countries were often not involved, co-ordination with origin-country institutions has expanded along with the programmes themselves. Direct transfer of cases and resources for reintegration assistance to origin country institutions remains unusual, although a hybrid model is emerging of contributing resources for specific services, and co-ordinating case intervention, with the origin country. This state-led model is being experimented in the Tunisian National Reintegration Mechanism, which brings together public authorities in Tunisia with programme implementers. Reintegration assistance also requires work with local communities to which migrants return, including regional and local offices, local officials and organisations, especially to extend the reach of assistance beyond the capitals where service providers are usually located. One example is the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and

Development programme *Returning to New Opportunities* which aims to improve the entire infrastructure for supporting jobs in the origin country, with a particular but not exclusive attention to the specific needs of returning migrants – whether from Germany or from other countries, including transit countries (Box 1).

Box 1. Advice Centres for Jobs, Migration, and Reintegration in Origin countries

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development programme *Returning to New Opportunities* has created advice centres in countries of origin. The centres are open to the general public in the country, work alongside and in coordination with origin country institutions, and draw on a network of contacts for referral. The centres are active on social media and respond to contacts.

The first centre, created in Kosovo, provides an example. DIMAK (German Information Centre for Migration, Training and Career). DIMAK provides individual advice about opportunities in Kosovo for employment and training. It orients and refers to training provided by different actors, including those offered by GIZ but also other partners. DIMAK also provides psychosocial support to enter the labour market. It works with the Kosovar Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. Centres in Tunisia and Senegal, as well as other partner countries provide similar services and have established partnerships with actors in the country to expand coverage and geographical reach.

With the aim to strengthen transnational case management, potential returnees in Germany are referred or linked to centres prior to return for example through intermediaries such as the reintegration scouts or return counsellors. Through these intermediaries, potential returnees can access information and support, for example in form of preparatory trainings in Germany and are put in contact with advisors from the centres to gain information on further reintegration assistance following return. Psychosocial support has turned out to be very important to achieve an acceptance of return. Targeted support measures have been developed for women, as well as for those with special psychological or health needs.

Centres serve other users; indeed, most clients are not return migrants, but local residents who have never left. The Centre works to orient them towards other opportunities, especially training. Centres have ties with local actors, especially the local German chambers of commerce, which are often able to provide opportunities, particularly to persons with German experience and training. The centres also offer expertise in addressing the specific characteristics (experiences, competences and needs) of returnees from Germany.

For more information:
https://www.bmz.de/en/issues/Sonderinitiative-Fluchtursachen-bekaempfen-Fluechtlinge-reintegrieren/deutsche_politik/perspektive_heimat/index.jsp

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Supporting the mainstreaming of reintegration of return migrants in national policy can improve available support

Recent years have seen the inclusion of return migrants and of reintegration assistance in policy documents in many origin countries, including Nigeria, Afghanistan, Tunisia and Senegal, for example. This reflects the priority it has assumed for destination countries, the technical support offered to origin countries in developing and drafting these policy documents, and the availability of earmarked resources from donors, as well as an awareness of the specific needs of return migrants. Adaptation of public services to serve return migrants appears less universally consolidated, even in the presence of a formal commitment. One means pursued to reinforce capacity while implementing reintegration assistance is to favour and support the use of public services as part of the reintegration package where possible, through referrals or involving public authorities in case decisions. Liaison officers from donor countries can also underline this issue if involved.

Continuous case management can reduce information gaps and drop-out and improve evaluation

Return and reintegration assistance programmes in host countries attempt to ensure continuous case management, so that the returnee has a smooth transition from pre-return preparation to arrival and post-return reintegration. Data sharing is essential in this process, for case management, monitoring and evaluation. Privacy concerns, protection of personal data and the difficulty of sharing information across partners is an obstacle, because transnational case management generally involves some transfer of responsibility for the case to an implementer and partners providing the assistance, as well as feedback and reporting. Data sharing is even more sensitive when institutions or community based organisation in the origin country are involved. In order to address this, platforms have been developed for sharing data. One system which allow multiple partners to access basic information according to needs, respects individual anonymity and can host different kinds of reintegration programmes is RIAT, developed by the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) but scalable to other agencies and programmes.

There is no single definition of sustainable reintegration, complicating programme evaluation

Among the countries offering reintegration support, there is no single understanding of "sustainable reintegration" to serve as a benchmark. Working definitions used by countries and actors vary, according to origin-country circumstances, the migrant involved, and the means, scope and timeline under which programmes operate. Even in the absence of a formal definition of sustainability, reintegration is at a minimum expected to reduce resort to remigration – specifically, irregular migration. The individual outcome is a starting point: for example, the reference to self-sufficiency and well-being, as used by the IOM for example, can guide intervention. A development perspective assesses sustainability by the extent to which reintegration support contributes to the development of the origin country. Indicators of sustainability under this latter perspective must take into account the impact on return migrants, but also the impact on the community as a whole.

Support for reintegration from host countries responds to different kinds of expectations. First, that returns through the programme are less expensive than forced return. Second, that return is effective: at a minimum, recipients of reintegration assistance are not expected to return except through legal channels. The programme cannot be a pull factor for irregular migration or, within Europe, attract applicants from other European countries.

The cost effectiveness of programmes should be seen in light of the alternatives. Returns under AVRR should not only be less expensive than forced returns but also involve migrants facing removal who would not otherwise return, or whose stay is costly. Costly stay can include for example migrants facing removal with health needs which could nonetheless be satisfactorily met in the home country, those living in situations of vulnerability, not to mention those at risk for delinquency.

Another element of sustainability refers to the capacity to adjust these programmes according to demand, downsizing them if the target population falls while conserving capacity to quickly scale them up when the number of returns is expected to increase.

Reintegration assistance in AVRR also reflects policy goals beyond the individuals involved in reintegration assistance. It represents a necessary counteroffer to forced return in a political debate, supporting the legitimacy of an asylum system which contemplates dignified return and tempering potential controversy around forced returns. For countries signatory to the Global Compact on Migration, it responds to Objective 21, which includes reference to reintegration.

A reintegration programme can also contribute to improved relations with origin countries, addressing concerns over the impact of returns by providing assistance to returnees and, in some cases, their communities.

Evaluation of reintegration programmes is complex and partial

In light of the multitude of objectives and the different expectations in terms of sustainability, the current evaluation framework appears in most case inadequate to fully measure the effectiveness of programmes supporting reintegration. Positive individual outcomes of reintegration assistance, whether under AVRR or not, are not in themselves an indicator of programme success and sustainability, and not only because there is rarely a control group for comparison. Furthermore , some programmes have broader objectives and aim for example at strengthening host countries' ability to offer alternatives to forced return to other potential beneficiaries (programme credibility); at destigmatising return in local communities (improved environment for all returning migrants); and at increasing the capacity of origin country institutions to include returnees in mainstream services.

Evaluation should expand to better capture financial sustainability and the impact on origin country institutional and social capacity to support reintegration. Evaluation in the future also needs to refer to alternative solutions, to account for whether objectives assigned to programmes can be met more effectively through other policy measures. Reintegration assistance does not occur in isolation.

Some interventions can be mutualised

National approaches remain very distinct, reflecting differences in institutional arrangements and the composition of the target groups. Many good practices are transferable. More importantly, there are a number

of practices already mutualised which can be further expanded. In particular, fee-for-service reintegration assistance programmes can share implementers and apply common standards, and use the same data sharing platforms and monitoring and evaluation surveys. Community-based evaluation of reintegration can benefit from mutualisation, as it allows for cost savings but more importantly the opportunity to conduct external evaluations rather than rely on internal project monitoring, and to reach beyond the horizon of individual support measures. More coordination with origin countries on policy change and information provision would lead to greater coherence and effectiveness. Cross-referral of beneficiaries can allow for greater coverage of support and information programmes aimed at the resident population and targeting return migrants, particularly those who did not make contact with programme providers prior to return.

In the medium term, however, the multitude of objectives, the differences in resources available and the varying expectations in terms of monitoring suggest that mutualised programmes will coexist alongside national and even regional or grassroots led channels of support for returnees. Individual reintegration assistance packages designed to provide an incentive for individuals to accept assisted return will continue to exist alongside community-based interventions in the origin country addressing the context for reintegration. Better co-ordination among these interventions is possible – at the level of national representation in the origin country, where liaison officers at diplomatic missions can strengthen the ties among different programmes, and at the European level, where space exists for a stronger role in ensuring that programmes work together. Indeed, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, issued in September 2020, calls for a Strategy on voluntary returns and reintegration in 2021, with the aim of developing new approaches to AVRR, greater coherence between EU and national programmes, and schemes improving the links between development initiatives and national AVRR approaches, and increase origin country capacity and ownership..

📖 References and futher reading

OECD (2020), Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5fee55b3-en

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⚲ Useful links

www.oecd.org/migration