
Psychosocial reintegration assistance at the community level

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Psychosocial reintegration assistance at the community level includes activities that strengthen social networks within communities to empower returnees within those networks and foster wider acceptance of returning migrants within the community. These activities are most useful when returnees lack strong social links to communities of return or when community dynamics are not conducive to returnees' reintegration.

Beyond individual psychosocial assistance, community social networks and structures are important for the psychosocial reintegration process. Even if returnees have social networks in their country of origin, community dynamics are sometimes not conducive to returnee reintegration or can even stigmatize returnees. In addition, in an individual's mind, migration may have created a gap that has to be filled by interacting and creating new contacts with and within the community. Community-level psychosocial assistance aims to include returnees into social support systems within the community by fostering mutual understanding and acceptance and limiting stigmatization of returning migrants. These initiatives benefit returnees by giving them the social links and support for their empowerment. They help communities by allowing them to benefit and learn from returnees' reintegration processes.

Migrants who return with a mental health condition carry a double stigma: on the one hand they struggle with the symptoms and the disabilities that result from their condition; on the other, they are challenged by the prejudices of the general population and, commonly, those of their family and community. The psychosocial support that the lead reintegration organization is asked to give can be more effectively provided if it involves families and the communities, even before a returnee's actual return. All the activities for engaging communities described in this section can also help fight the stigma connected with mental illness. They include providing information about mental health and promoting contact with the affected returnees. For a detailed description of the steps in which psychosocial support can be offered at individual, family and community level, see [Annex 1](#).

This chapter presents a detailed overview of the different approaches of community-based psychosocial reintegration support.

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- **3.5.1 Community mobilization activities**
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 - **3.5.3 Community networks**

3.5.1 Community mobilization activities

All activities falling under the community-based psychosocial approach to reintegration support the wider objective of community mobilization.

Community mobilization aims to develop inclusiveness and a positive attitude towards returnees' reintegration by counteracting potential stigma. In sensitization activities, community members, groups or organizations plan and carry out participatory activities, either on their own initiative or stimulated by others. Such work involves processes like raising awareness and building commitment; giving community members the opportunity to explore their current beliefs, attitudes and practices; setting priorities; planning how best to meet their challenges, implement their plans and monitor their progress; and evaluating results. Through their participation in the process, communities establish necessary organizational structures and relationships. Returnees develop their social support networks, which helps them to reduce stress factors and improves other aspects of their lives.

With relation to community mobilization in the context of psychosocial reintegration assistance, three types of community level interventions are presented in this section:

- Facilitation of peer-support mechanisms and systems;
- Introduction of returnees to identified cultural, recreational and artistic systems and support to those systems; and
- Promotion and support for events and processes that positively affect the social perception of returnees.

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One successful technique for building trust within groups and reducing intra-group conflict is the **“my story” approach**. In a “my story” activity, group members write short stories about themselves in response to a set of personal questions (such as, are you organized or rather messy? What physical activities do you enjoy? What are your hobbies?) and present their stories with partners or the group. Such exercises foster trust and familiarity in an environment that cultivates openness and informationsharing.

Turner, J. and Y. Kim.

2005 [Learning about building literacy communities in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.](#) *Literacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(1):21–41

See also:

Huddy, S.

3.5.2 Peer support mechanisms

Peer support mechanisms use resources and capacities within the local community (including returnees) to build support networks to deal with reintegration or other challenges. Because they rely on existing resources, the support provided is not only locally appropriate but likely to last beyond the timeline of the programme.

Mentoring approach

This approach is based on a supportive relationship between two peers with similar experiences, for example a newly arrived returnee and a former returnee from the same location. It is an empowering form of psychosocial support that is learned through organized training activities.

Returnees who have been particularly successful in their reintegration, those with experience in community engagement, or those with specific backgrounds (such as social workers or teachers, for example) can act as mentors. These returnee mentors act as an informal support network for the newly arrived returnees. They can help them navigate the difficulties of return or just function as a point of reference.

A network of mentors can be established, formalized and supported with annual reunions and training sessions, such as training in the mentoring approach described below. During individual counselling, returnees should be referred to the mentor network where available and appropriate.

? Who IS a mentor

A mentor is usually a volunteer who is available to support a returnee in acclimatizing to the return context, thus reducing their isolation. They are someone who can understand the experience of the returnee because they have also experienced something similar. They have received some training to fulfil this role. A mentor can also be a community member who might not have migrated, but understands the returnees' needs and opportunities.

? Who a mentor is NOT

A mentor is not a case manager, because mentors act in a more informal fashion. Mentors are not supervisors, because they do not direct or monitor the reintegration of the returnees.

? What a mentor DOES

The mentor supports the newly arrived returnee with solving practical problems, like giving information about services, procedures or formalities, connected with the fact that the country may

have changed and the returnee needs help navigating. The mentor, relying on their personal reintegration story, fosters the returnee's proactivity and also helps reduce the social barriers to reintegration.

? Training for a mentor

Apart from some attitudes such as being sensitive, empathic and available, the mentor should receive training covering such aspects as:

- The types of activities that mentors and returnees can do together;
- How to listen effectively ([see Annex 1.A](#));
- How to manage and adapt expectations;
- How to encourage equal and respectful relationships;
- How to refer the returnee to a help service or agency;
- How to provide Psychological First Aid ([see Annex 1.C](#));
- How to end the mentor relationship.

? How to set up an effective mentoring approach

The lead reintegration organization, with the help of local organizations, communities and authorities, can set up an effective mentoring approach by:

- Meeting the community leaders or, if possible, local communities during collective events to explain the role of the mentor and its value;
- Asking for volunteers, preferably among former returnees who have already benefited from the support of helping organizations or entities. When possible, both male and female volunteers should be selected;
- Organizing formal training on the mentoring approach, covering the topics described above. This should usually entail at least a two-day initial training period and yearly refreshers;
- Organizing regular supervision with the mentors so that they can share their views and tackle the most common issues and ask for solutions;
- Supporting returnees in their emotional needs; and evaluating the mentoring approach on a regular basis by meeting the returnees at the end of a mentoring cycle.

? Peer support groups

Peer support groups are a consolidated form of group support in which individuals having similar life experiences interact and form helping connections. In the context of reintegration, the similarity stems from participants in the peer-support groups having gone through similar migration experiences. In this sense, peer support groups form a social, emotional, physical and tangible support network and can help returnees feel part of a group, overcome feelings of social isolation and build a bridge towards the community. Depending on the context, due consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate or preferable to have mixed or single-gender groups.

Peer groups can form themselves spontaneously, but they can also be programmatically envisaged and structured. A structured peer-support group consists of:

- One to six one-hour initial meetings that the group can decide to extend up to one year;
- Ideally 8 to 20 participants. Although newcomers should not be included in existing groups

and instead form new ones, this can be kept flexible due to geographical distances and consideration of existing bonds;

- An experienced facilitator: they can be identified among professionals or can be a returnee that has been trained to facilitate peer support groups;
- Information about the peer support group should be communicated to the returnee during counselling sessions;
- Community leaders and peers should be informed about the group and as much as possible involved in the activities of the group. This would require the approval from community leaders; and
- Follow-up sessions should be organized based on the interest and availability of the group.

The objectives of peer support meetings are sharing experiences, discussing return and reintegration related topics and giving and receiving support.³¹

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Returnee clusters in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, many returnees have been away for long periods of time and have limited connections with suppliers, other entrepreneurs and the business sector in their communities. This can hinder the sustainability of their businesses.

Since 2007, IOM Sri Lanka has partnered with non-profit CEFE NET Sri Lanka to provide business skills'-development training (BDT) to returning migrants from different countries and assisted through various projects.

The BDT training curriculum is highly interactive and is tailored to respond to returnees' needs, backgrounds and skills. It accompanies them over time through the various phases of business set-up and expansion, using a combination of skills'-development courses and practical support. The courses are made of groups of 20 to 30 returnees.

The curriculum was recently strengthened to help returnees engaged in similar businesses form clusters. These clusters help returnees develop their social capital and network of peers through regular meetings and collaboration mechanisms. For example, clusters for agriculture and transport in Jaffna work closely together, transporting and selling agricultural products. Being part of a cluster produces direct economic benefits, such as scale economies when purchasing goods or services jointly, better leverage for negotiating with producer organizations or lending institutions, and exchange of tips related to overall business management and market dynamics. The clusters also work as a follow-up mechanism to mitigate risks of isolation once assistance ends. In this way, they promote the sustainability of businesses.

Cluster leaders and deputies, elected for 12 months by cluster members, are specifically trained to enhance their leadership skills and knowledge on how to establish relationships with business partners and suppliers, maintain a good team spirit among cluster members, and assist members with specific challenges. IOM regularly follows up with cluster members through social media and messaging apps.

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Target areas where large numbers of migrants return and have common business interests.

3.5.3 Community networks

Cultural, artistic and physical expression can play important roles in supporting returnees and communities to establish or improve social links and combat social stigma during the reintegration process. These interventions recognize that the returnees' culture, experiences, knowledge and skills have changed as a result of the migration experience and sharing this can assist in building more supportive community networks. Storytelling, theatre, visual art, music, dance and sport can all be powerful vehicles for sharing. They can have a strong potential impact on reintegration, social cohesion and on the well-being of individuals.

At the individual level, these activities help release stress and anxiety and promote self-awareness and confidence. Within a group of people, they can create strong bonds and break down barriers by discussing difficult issues through metaphors and in a safe place. At the community level, the expressive arts can produce positive images and increase understanding of returnees. Therefore, it is important for a case manager to:

- Identify and map existing formal and informal theatre, visual art, music, dance, sports and other interest-related collectives and groups in return communities;
- Sensitize these groups and stakeholders using information on the needs and creative resources that returnees may bring;
- Identify any returnees with possible creative interests during counselling;
- Refer the returnees to these groups, based on their interests; and
- Identify support for creative initiatives that are inclusive of returnees, through grants, publicity and so forth.

Building on the partnerships established through referrals, or independently, the lead reintegration assistance can support events (such as exhibitions, readings, storytelling, performances, sport events) that display the creativity and skills of returnees together with those of community members. For example, sports game involving both returnees and non-migrants can bring together not only the players but also the community to watch. Understanding local preferences in cultural, artistic and physical activities can guide decisions on what is appropriate to support.

? Storytelling events

Storytelling is an effective tool for mobilizing communities and promoting social cohesion towards the reintegration of returning migrants. It is the oldest and easiest known form of sharing stories and exerts an emotional impact on both the tellers and the listeners. Stories that relate experiences can create understanding and have the power to unite people while they are being told. They work on a

deep emotional level and benefit all participants: it is not only the listener who learns, but also the teller who becomes aware of the value of his or her own unique experiences and background.

Storytelling can be structured as a group activity or an event, involving returnees, their families and the communities. Returnees who feel so inclined can tell not only about hurdles but also about courage, skills and learned lessons that can be transferred to the community.

Storytelling can be verbal, in the form of a video or a reading. A facilitator can help the returnees combine their stories in different narratives to share in public. Digital media has been playing an increasingly influential role in shaping the perceptions and outcomes of migration processes and can be shared widely and easily between audiences. A digital story, with the editing of images, sound, music and voice does not require extensive technical knowledge or skills and can offer both the returnees and their communities opportunities for learning new skills. A digital storytelling laboratory can bring together members of the community and returnees and enhance social cohesion. Combining the art of storytelling and the practice of exploring meaning through image making, each returnee can engage in remembering, reconstituting and performing their story.

Created with Sketch. Tip

To add value, a storytelling workshop could include not only the returnees but also members of the community, giving voice and images not only to the stories of the those who have left and have then come back, but also to those who did not migrate.

? Staging the experiences of returning migrants

Staging the experiences of returnees in dramas written and played by the returnees themselves is a form of psychosocial support and a tool for community mobilization. It empowers returnees to become protagonists of their own stories. It enhances their sense of control and reduces feelings of helplessness; it can have an effect on the audience as well, changing their perceptions about return migration. Under the guidance of a play writer and of a director, these writing and acting workshops have the power to foster social cohesion and facilitate reintegration.

? Theatre forums

Another example of staging returnees' experiences can be inspired by the forum theatre. Through this technique, a problem that oppresses an individual is presented unsolved in a theatre scene and spectators are actively engaged in the performance. The scene is repeated twice and during the replay, which is facilitated by a presenter or joker (who is also expert in moderating interactions), each audience member can stop the scene at any given moment, step forward and take the place of the oppressed character, showing how they could change the situation to allow a different outcome. Breaking the barriers between performer and audience, the dynamic engagement on stage is powerful and has transformative effects on all the people in the theatre. In addition, practical and shared solutions to general problems can emerge.

Usually, the scene is the result of a workshop of a few days with a group of people sharing similar situations, such as returning migrants. Forum theatres on problems faced by returnees can sensitize communities on these problems and help returnees and communities create bonds and find solutions in a creative and participatory way

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Family and community dialogue in Ghana

Since 2016, IOM Ghana has organized focus group discussions to sensitize community members and relatives of returnees on the difficulties encountered by returnees upon their return, so that they can play a positive role in their reintegration and avoid contributing to their stigmatization, marginalization and isolation.

These focus groups usually gather small groups of about 20 people, including opinion leaders, returnees, family and community members. Sessions generally begin with IOM staff providing a brief background on the reason for the gathering and what the expectations are. Where appropriate, background information on generic challenges faced by returnees is shared, such as difficult migratory experiences, returning empty-handed or feeling like they have disappointed their family and community. Questions to prompt and direct conversation to topics of interest are posed to the group. Where returnees are willing, they share their experiences.

These exchanges can generate a better understanding of the reintegration challenges returnees face. The focus groups provide family and community members with a deeper insight into the support they could give to their relatives and peers. The discussions are also an opportunity to reflect on any unconscious bias that could undermine their reintegration. Because returnees are invited to freely voice their feelings and share their experience with family and community members, these focus groups also have a cathartic function and can help returnees reconnect with their social circles.

Radio programmes help publicize focus group discussions. Involving opinion leaders and local authorities also reinforces the local ownership of these activities.

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Locate focus group discussion venues in high movement areas or easily visible and accessible places.

³¹ To learn more about how to organize these groups, the following guide should be referred to www.mind.org.uk/media/17944275/peer-support-toolkit-final.pdf.

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