
Understanding return migration

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Return migration is an integral part of human mobility. “Return” is the act or process of going back or being taken back to the point of departure. It is also often associated with the process of going back to one’s own culture, family and home¹. This could be within the territorial boundaries of a country, as in the case of a person who has been internally displaced returning home; or across international boundaries, between a host country and a country of origin. This might be the context for migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers or irregular migrants.

Return migration, like migration in general, is a complex phenomenon. However, it is by no means exceptional. When people leave their countries, it is often with the expectation that they will return at some point. This is true for people who migrate for positive reasons such as education or work, but perhaps even more so for those forced to migrate, whose return is usually conditional upon an improvement of the situation that forced them to leave. Some migrants never return. But many others do and under a variety of different circumstances.

However, the mere fact that someone returns to a country or place where they have previously lived does not mean that reintegration is seamless. For some returnees, return is fraught with challenges (*see Case Study 1, below, for one example of this*).

In recent years there has been greater recognition of the challenges, such as those described in Case Study 1, that confront returning migrants. There is more awareness of the need for support to make reintegration sustainable and beneficial for returnees and their families, and for their communities and countries of origin. Understanding the multi-dimensional and multi-level nature of the reintegration process that accompanies return migration is necessary for developing and implementing successful reintegration assistance.

Case Study 1:

Cultural orientation in El Salvador

Some migrants returning to El Salvador have spent many years abroad and lack support networks in their communities of origin. Sometimes these returnees speak only English, and don’t have Salvadoran identification papers. They may have a criminal record in the United States and may have returned to El Salvador because they were deported. All these factors affect returnees’ economic self-sufficiency. They also impact their psychosocial well-being and capacity for social insertion and,

ultimately, hinder their sustainable reintegration.

To assist this subset of uprooted returnees, IOM El Salvador set up a pilot programme that addresses their specific needs. However, assisting them is particularly challenging: they are only a small share of the overall number of returning migrants and because of this can go unidentified. This hinders targeted assessments of their needs.

IOM supports this vulnerable group once the national General Directorate for Migration has referred them after a specific rapid referral protocol.

These returnees often have no personal networks that they can tap into upon return, so assistance includes an emergency package made up of food, clothing, transportation vouchers and accommodation for three months. Returnees can also receive support to obtain documentation. IOM then complements this direct assistance with language classes and cultural orientation workshops conducted in both English and Spanish. Such sessions include cultural information on El Salvador and guidance on budgeting, accessing housing and entering the job market. IOM provides them with psychosocial assistance in the form of individual counselling or support groups and workshops. These sessions help beneficiaries establish new links with their communities and with the services available there.

Tips for success:

Consider reinforcing the capacity of psychosocial aid providers as part of the initiative.

1.1.1 Return types and motivations

There are no universally agreed classifications of return. Yet various subcategories of return are linked to intended duration of the return, level of assistance received in the return process (if any), the various ways in which the return is implemented, as well as subcategories which describe who is participating in the return.

- **Intended length of stay:** Return can be permanent or temporary. For highly skilled migrants, for instance, who wish to contribute to the development of their country of origin by passing on knowledge and experiences they have gained abroad, temporary return may be the preferred option.
- **Return with or without support:** Spontaneous return occurs when individuals decide upon and implement the return themselves. Assisted return occurs when the State or a third party offer returnees financial and logistical assistance for the return, and sometimes for reintegration measures.
- **Involuntary or voluntary return:** Involuntary or forced return is the act of returning an individual, against his or her will, to the country of origin, to a place of transit or to a third-

country that agrees to receive the person, generally carried out on the basis of an administrative or judicial act or decision. Voluntary return is the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another country based on the voluntary decision of the returnee². However, a migrant's decision to return does not necessarily mean that return is the migrant's unambiguous wish. It is possible that other options are limited, for example if economic opportunities are scarce or if a migrant has no legal entitlement to remain on a State's territory³. There is no agreed definition of voluntary return⁴. Some actors consider return to be voluntary only when migrants still have the possibility of legally remaining in their host countries. According to these actors, when a migrant has the legal obligation to leave the host country and chooses to return of their own volition, return should be described as obliged, mandatory, compulsory or accepted return. Others consider that voluntary return should be understood in a broader sense: that migrants can express their will, even in the absence of legal options to remain in a host country, as long as other conditions are met. Specifically, for IOM in the context of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), voluntariness is assumed to exist if two conditions apply: (a) freedom of choice, which is defined as the absence of physical or psychological pressure to enroll in an AVRR programme; and (b) an informed decision, which requires the availability of timely, unbiased and reliable information upon which to base the decision⁵. This Handbook follows the latter approach.

Regardless of the legal frameworks that govern their return, migrants can opt for return for a variety of reasons. A migrant's return decision is often complex and influenced by a variety of sometimes overlapping considerations. These may include improved political, economic or social conditions in the country of origin, as well as family and other private considerations. Some migrants return according to a plan, after having completed their education or work contract or achieved a specific objective. Difficulties in the host country may also lead to the decision to return, such as lack of economic opportunities, language difficulties, social isolation, discrimination, or unfamiliar cultural environments. Some people return in order to spend the last part of their life at home. Often, familial duties (care of sick or elderly relatives, protection of vulnerable family members) are cited as reasons for returning.

Return motivations are dynamic and therefore subject to change. For instance, an asylum seeker might have difficulties adapting to life in the host country and miss family at home and then decide, after receiving a negative decision on his or her asylum application, to return home rather than appeal the decision.

The various motivations for returning can greatly influence a returnee's reintegration experience. This Handbook illustrates reintegration initiatives that can be applied to various types of return, whether forced or voluntary. However, IOM maintains that voluntary return should be the preferred option and that it should be promoted over forced return: it not only gives migrants a choice, but also allows them to prepare for their return, thus positively contributing to the reintegration process⁶.

This Handbook also asserts that reintegration starts before a migrant's return to the country of origin. Whenever possible, migrants and reintegration partners and organizations should be assisted with the preparation for reintegration before departure. Such preparation can include individual assessments and initial reintegration counselling in the host country as well as the preparation of referrals or partnerships in the country of origin. Returnees who are not able to adequately prepare for their return prior to departure may need further assistance with their reintegration in the country of origin.

1.1.2 Evolution of assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes

In an increasing number of settings, States are offering administrative, logistical or financial support for voluntary return to migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host country. Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes provide administrative, logistical and financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host or transit country and who decide to return to their country of origin⁷. IOM has been implementing AVRR programmes worldwide since 1979 and has provided humane and dignified support for the return and reintegration of over 1.6 million people throughout the world. Often conceptualized as a way to address irregular migration, for governments assisted voluntary return is usually a more cost-effective and administratively expedient alternative to other actions such as detention or deportation. For the migrant, voluntary returns allows for a more humane alternative to forced return. It can also provide a solution for migrants in an irregular situation who are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, violence, exploitation and abuse and are in danger of being exploited by crime organizations involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling. For the country of origin, voluntary return is generally more politically palatable and less sensitive than forced return.

Beneficiaries of AVRR programmes could be migrants in both regular and irregular situations. They could include, for example as stranded migrants; asylum seekers who, having claimed asylum, subsequently choose not to pursue their asylum claim; migrant workers at the end of their contracts; or visa over-stayers. Throughout the years, AVRR concepts and practices have undergone major changes, mainly because of the evolving contexts in which AVRR programmes are implemented⁹.

AVRR has gradually expanded beyond Europe and is now embedded in national policies and return migration practices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Americas and the Western Balkans. At the same time, there are an increasing number of voluntary returns from so-called transit countries and higher volumes of voluntary South–South returns, particularly within the Middle East and on the African continent, as well as increased vulnerabilities to which migrants are exposed because of dangerous migration routes. Furthermore, there has been a growth in the last few years in the number and variety of actors funding or implementing voluntary return and reintegration programmes.

Importantly, there has been renewed interest among development actors in supporting sustainable reintegration. AVRR was not originally conceived as a tool to generate development in countries of origin, but rather as a migration management instrument to facilitate the humane and dignified return of migrants who were unable or unwilling to remain in host countries. For this reason, ministries of the interior or their equivalent at the regional or international level have traditionally been the main donors to AVRR programmes. Throughout the years, though, reintegration support has been progressively added to AVR interventions, first in the form of limited cash assistance and then as more comprehensive packages to support returning individuals. This positive evolution reflected the realization that assistance to migrants upon return is necessary to facilitate their sustainable reintegration.

Recent interest from development actors has reshaped thinking about the ultimate goals of AVRR. As a result, more attention is now devoted to the role that communities of origin can play in designing and implementing successful reintegration programmes for the benefit of all. This change has brought a greater focus on the need to enhance the ownership of local actors and reinforce structures and capacities for return- and reintegration-related services, in line with established development

plans.

¹ Migrants may not return to their own communities of origin but to other locations within their home country. Furthermore, return migration can also include 'return' to a third-country, one not of a migrant's country of origin. However, for the purposes of this Handbook, we will be referring to return and reintegration in the country of origin only.

² IOM, Glossary on Migration 2019a.

³ States must adhere to the principle of non-refoulement. Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes need to take into account safety considerations, such as the general level of security, and operational challenges that may affect the provision of return and reintegration assistance. Returns to certain regions or countries may need to be limited or suspended if one or a combination of these factors amounts to a situation that poses a threat to the safety of returning migrants and/or staff involved in the provision of AVRR assistance.

⁴ Newland, K. and B. Salant, [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute (2018) and European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Voluntary Departure and Return: Between a Rock and a Hard Place. [ECRE's Analysis of European Practices in the Area of Return Including "Voluntary Departures" and Assisted Return, with its Recommendations to the EU](#) (2018).

⁵ For more information see IOM's [Framework for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration](#) (2018).

⁶ IOM is prohibited by its constitution from being involved either directly or indirectly in forced return. However, it recognizes that migrants who are forcibly returned may find themselves in vulnerable situations and in need of assistance with socioeconomic reintegration, as much as any voluntary returnee IOM assists under its AVRR programmes ([see section 1.1.2](#)). In the contexts where IOM is not involved in organizing and facilitating the return, IOM may still be involved at the post arrival stage with reintegration activities.

⁷ IOM's work on AVRR is guided by its [Framework for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration](#), which builds on its long-standing contribution in this area and marks an important milestone in the Organization's engagement in AVRR.

⁸ States must adhere to the principle of non-refoulement. AVRR programmes need to take into account safety considerations, such as the general level of security, and operational challenges that may affect the provision of return and reintegration assistance. Returns to certain regions or countries may need to be limited or suspended if one or a combination of these factors amounts to a situation that poses a threat to the safety of returning migrants and/or staff involved in the provision of AVRR assistance.

⁹ The following paragraphs are adapted from: Gravano, N. and N. Darbellay, "A framework for assisted voluntary return and reintegration," Migration Policy Practice, 9(1):9–14 (January–March, 2019b).

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