



Assisted return of rejected asylum seekers – how can we create sustainability?

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Despite the growing policy focus on assisted voluntary return as a preferred alternative to deportation of rejected asylum seekers, actual programme uptake is disappointing. This policy brief offers recommendations for a sustainable approach to assisted return.

Zachary Whyte, zachary@whyte.dk

Dan V. Hirslund, dan.hirslund@anthro.ku.dk

European asylum systems are producing increasing numbers of rejected asylum seekers who have proved difficult to return to their countries of origin. Deportation systems are expensive, politically complex and have been criticised on humanitarian grounds, prompting a heightened focus on voluntary return measures as a more humane and cost effective alternative. However, rejected asylum seekers often remain hesitant to join existing return programmes, despite the availability of economic benefits for those who return voluntarily.

This brief identifies a number of routes to a more successful and sustainable return of rejected asylum seekers from Denmark and comparable northern European countries. In general, assisted return policies should adopt a more development-oriented focus that prioritises the long-term integration, or embeddedness, of returnees in the local cultural and socioeconomic environment. This requires a better understanding of specific return contexts and returnee populations, as well as a better integration between pre- and post-return measures. To achieve this, increased institutional cooperation across states and between governments and NGOs in national and international contexts is called for.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The situation of returnees in return contexts should be enhanced by catering not only to their economic, but also to their social, networks and psychosocial embeddedness. Returnees should be empowered to take a leading role in the return process.
2. Programme packages designed to assist the reintegration process of returnees should be tailored to individual returnees and return contexts. A flexible combination of cash grants, occupational assistance, material support and community-focused projects is recommended.
3. Sustainable return starts in the pre-return phase through trustworthy information, counselling and support documenting and enhancing asylum seekers' skills. To combat institutionalisation asylum seekers should be kept active.
4. Cooperation between states, development organisations, humanitarian actors and service partners should be increased and institutionalised to share knowledge across organisational divides and coordinate activities.
5. Monitoring and evaluation of assisted return programmes should be improved and prioritised in order to learn from past experiences, share knowledge, and ensure the safety and sustainability of return.



WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE RETURN?

A sustainable return focus takes into account both the situation of the individual returnee relative to the local population and the overall return context, which should not be negatively affected by return programmes. Return measures that only focus on removing rejected asylum seekers from host countries without considering the process of reintegration in return countries often lead to poor results; they risk leading to new cycles of hazardous migration, putting individuals at risk and aggravating local social environments.

Basic levels of security are a necessary prerequisite for any sustainable assisted return programme. It is, understandably, the primary factor identified by potential returnees, when asked about factors influencing their decision to return. Security issues should be determined individually and locally. To do so requires both a good understanding of individual returnees to assess their vulnerabilities and options, and an up-to-date and

detailed understanding of the situation on the ground in the return country.

A sustainable return approach highlights the comprehensive embeddedness of returnees. Three separate but interrelated dimensions can be discerned:

1. Economic embeddedness, referring to the material conditions for building sustainable livelihoods.
2. Social network embeddedness, which outlines access to and information on social contacts and relations.
3. Psychosocial embeddedness, which is important to construct identities, to feel at home, safe and psychologically well.

FRAMING COOPERATION

Developing a binding, transparent framework for effective, safe and dignified return is best served by political initiatives that follow international guidelines, have general applicability and a sustainable focus. International cooperation between returning states should be explored where possible, particularly in return contexts where low numbers of rejected asylum seekers are to be returned.

Assisted return programmes are almost universally implemented – at least in part – by international and non-governmental organisations, rather than directly by states. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the single largest global actor in the arena of assisted return of rejected asylum seekers but is often supplemented by other organisations that are involved in the different stages of assisted return programmes. Reports suggest that there is great value in maintaining a diversity of partners involved in pre-return assistance, as this increases the range of options on offer and improves the possibilities for tailoring return possibilities for individual rejected asylum seekers. Further, there is an unrealised potential in linking assisted return up with existing development initiatives run by national and international NGOs as well as local partners in return countries. This would both be a cost-effective alternative to fully-fledged independent programmes and maintain sensitivity to local contexts from a development perspective. This diversified approach presents some challenges, particularly to do with information management. However, strong guidelines, effective monitoring, and in-

stitutionally grounded cooperation can help mitigate some of these risks.

TAILORING HOLISTIC RETURN APPROACHES

A holistic approach to return schemes interlinks pre- and post-return assistance at a programmatic level so as to enhance return preparedness and outcomes. Indeed, interlinking pre- and post-return assistance is a topic of increasing interest to host countries and implementing partners. Returnees also report strong appreciation of coherent return programmes stretching from pre- to post-return.

Sustainable return is often hampered by “one size fits all” approaches to return programmes, resulting in inflexible instruments that do not adequately place returnees’ needs and wishes at the centre of attention. Taking the profile, history and particular needs of individual returnees and return contexts into consideration is an important factor in programme success. This presupposes the early involvement of the prospective returnee in the details of planning the assisted return programme, so as to better fit the programmes to their needs and wishes. This has the advantage of ensuring interlinkage in the return process and increasing the potential returnees’ sense of ownership of the return process.

Better knowledge of rejected asylum seekers and tailoring of return programmes to individual needs drama-

tically increases the efficacy and attractiveness of assisted return programmes. Despite the rapid growth in return programmes for rejected asylum seekers from Northern Europe in the past decade, surprisingly little evaluation and monitoring has been carried out of the many different programmes implemented. This is a problem with respect to developing best practices and long-term reintegration programmes. It seriously hampers the possibilities for evaluating the sustainability of existing return programmes and therefore the ability to suggest how to make improvements. It limits the possibilities for providing potential returnees with accurate, up-to-date information on return conditions. Finally, it reduces the ability to monitor risks of human rights abuses.

REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

Sustainable return and reintegration implies that returnees will successfully embed themselves in their country of return and become self-reliant. Reintegration assistance has a positive impact on sustainable return when measuring subjective as well as objective conditions, though outcomes remain dependent on a conducive socio-economic environment. Though reintegration assistance generally focuses on returnees' economic embeddedness, it can usefully be expanded to aid their social networks and psychosocial embeddedness.

Four different aspects of reintegration assistance have been identified. They are usually offered in combination, but have different effects on sustainable return and differ in their relevance to individual returnees.

- 1. Financial support:** usually given as cash in connection with the return journey to allow returnees not to return empty-handed. This is the most widely-used instrument of reintegration and has several advantages: it is easy to implement; it can make the return more dignified, particularly when compared to deportations; and it transfers responsibility for creating embeddedness directly to returnees. Financial support thus gives individuals influence over how to best create sustainable return and is a highly flexible integration tool that can be adapted to many different circumstances. Yet cash allowances are often insufficient to invest in livelihood measures and should be considered along with other initiatives.
- 2. Occupational assistance:** comprises job placement, vocational training, business start-ups, cash-for-work, and micro-loans. These are complex devices and far from always successful because of their reliance on the wider financial and political environment, and the need to prepare migrants for economic activity after long periods of absence (and passivity). Nevertheless, they are important and increasingly popular tools for sustainability. Increasing the effect of occupational assistance

requires early, context-specific planning and flexibility in implementation. Occupational assistance should start already in the host country and local employment resources in return countries should be involved when integrating returnees in the job market. In situations where occupational assistance is unsuccessful, returnees should be given additional financial assistance instead, as this is a better use of resources than wasting them on irrelevant training courses and unpromising business ventures.

- 3. Material support:** comprises a number of specific forms of in-kind support, from the purchasing of medicine to materials to rebuild houses, as well as less tangible support such as acquiring documents or legal aid, particularly over land and property issues. While they are important elements to shield against poverty and to address specific or unusual needs, they often operate in the short term. In addition, reminiscent of humanitarian relief, they might fail to address questions of empowerment that have been identified as central to a sustainable return experience. An important exception is that of kinds of support that promote returnees' capacities for reintegration, such as native language training for children or similar educational tools that do not fall under vocational training. Material support should be considered an important supplementary tool, particularly for vulnerable groups and for tackling some non-monetary types of reintegration efforts.
- 4. Community development:** investing in infrastructure, welfare services or programmes that benefit local communities has been used occasionally, not least to prevent conflicts between returnees and locals in areas they return to. It also carries a significant potential for strengthening the return process, but requires thorough and culturally sensitive planning. It is a particularly useful strategy in post-conflict areas, where social and material reconstruction efforts are already underway. It can complement other instruments, but may also be usefully deployed where occupational assistance is unlikely to yield significant results. Community development supports the long-term development of the local areas where returnees come from and not just the position of individuals in society. This is an area of assistance that is particularly well suited for linking up with existing developmental efforts.

PRE-RETURN PREPARATION

Pre-return assistance plays a key role in promoting the sustainability of assisted return programmes. Effective pre-return assistance increases the attractiveness of return programmes to rejected asylum seekers while being a vital component of the eventual success of reintegration packages in countries of origin. Deploying and developing the



resources of potential returnees can achieve higher levels of embeddedness and a comprehensive approach to assisted return will have strong pre-return components.

The three most important instruments are:

1. **Information and counselling.** For rejected asylum seekers to make an informed decision to return voluntarily, they need to have up-to-date and comprehensive information about the situation in their home countries, detailed knowledge of reintegration schemes available to them, as well as individual counselling tailored to their particular circumstances. They should further be fully aware of their legal options in the country of asylum as well as possible other destinations, where appropriate. There is a premium on the trustworthiness of the sources of this information, its availability in a format that is easily accessible to them, and the timing of its delivery. This task is best handled by NGO partners. A much more extensive use of new technologies (e.g. video chat, digital photos, informative homepages, etc.) and potential returnees' social networks is recommended.
2. **Capacity maintenance and development.** The swift and sustainable reintegration of returnees in their homelands depends on their ability to establish viable livelihoods. This in turn minimally requires the maintenance of asylum seekers' skills in the host country and maximally their active development. It also requires attention to the health of potential returnees, which generally deteriorates over long asylum periods. The premium put on empowerment for successful return embeddedness requires an active combating of the prevalent institutio-

nalisation of asylum seekers. A greater degree of freedom and autonomy for asylum seekers significantly increases their participation in voluntary return schemes, while longer stays in asylum institutions – particularly once their claim has been rejected – generally reduces participation along with health, independence, and viable skill sets.

3. **Specific preparation measures.** While the time between the acceptance of the assisted return package and the return journey may be quite short, it is important to optimise returnees' preparedness. Social networks in return countries should be included, where possible, in the individual's return plans. Supporting returnees also means building up a supportive network around individuals. In addition, pre-departure cash grants can prove helpful, as they allow returnees to buy gifts for family and social networks in the home country, or may be used to make the returnee more presentable and so reduce the stigma of failed migration on return. These are often of great importance to the returnees and a sustainable return begins with a good start on the return journey.

FURTHER READING

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