

# Leveraging Predeparture Counselling to Support Returning Migrants' Sustainable Reintegration

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## Executive Summary

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes are on the rise in Europe. These programmes aim to incentivise certain groups of migrants (often irregular migrants and those whose asylum applications are denied) to voluntarily return to their countries of origin, and to foster their sustainable reintegration. While the lion's share of reintegration assistance takes place after returnees arrive in their countries of origin, such as through business start-up projects or assistance with accessing local social services, policymakers and practitioners in the field increasingly recognise that counselling at the predeparture stage can play a key role in smoothing this transition and supporting reintegration. Counselling helps migrants prepare mentally for the journey ahead, develop a clear sense of what opportunities and challenges they may face on return, and build trust that the AVRR programme will support them once they reach their origin country. At the same time, predeparture counsellors collect information about returning migrants—such as their vulnerabilities, immediate and long-term needs, or skills—that can help partners in origin countries prepare and deliver support in a timely manner after return.

To realise the full potential of predeparture counselling, European policymakers will need to pay greater attention to an often-overlooked aspect of

AVRR programmes: information-sharing between actors in origin and destination countries. At present, many reintegration programmes are plagued by information-related challenges, such as a mismatch between what returnees expect life to be like after return and the situation they encounter on arrival, the poor quality of much of the predeparture case information actors in Europe share with origin-country service partners, and the fact that origin-country authorities are rarely kept in the loop about migrants returning through AVRR programmes. Moreover, due to diverging approaches to predeparture counselling across Europe, key stakeholders have different understandings of what information should be provided to returnees at the predeparture stage and what should be shared with origin-country service partners before returnees' arrival. As a result, the quality of information that returnees and service partners receive varies. There is also limited evidence of what work best and why due to insufficient monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in many AVRR programmes, further exacerbating this challenge.

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There are, however, promising efforts underway to improve information-sharing and better leverage predeparture counselling. For instance, organisations providing predeparture counselling in Europe are increasingly experimenting with ways to connect returnees virtually with origin-country service partners before they return. Some initiatives have also aimed to improve the quality of the information predeparture counsellors have access to, and can thus share with migrants planning to return, through increased exchanges with service partners. Meanwhile, the development of online case management tools by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the European Commission has opened a new chapter in the way information is shared between actors in origin and destination countries.

Policymakers can build on this work and experiences to date in a number of ways, including by:

- ▶ enhancing communication between returnees and origin-country service providers prior to departure, for instance through virtual counselling, to increase returnees' trust in AVRR programmes and diminish the risk of misinformation and inaccurate expectations;
- ▶ setting minimum standards for predeparture case information to ensure the quality of the information sending countries and counselling organisations share with service partners, and building quality checks into information-exchange processes to ensure these common standards are met;
- ▶ strengthening M&E on counselling and information-sharing at the predeparture stage, and building feedback loops so that predeparture counsellors receive information on how counselled returnees fare upon return and can adjust their work accordingly; and

- ▶ investing in digital case management systems while addressing key questions, including those related to data protection, the digital infrastructure of origin-country service partners, training for new users of these digital tools, and the interoperability of different case management systems.

Delivering on the promise of predeparture counselling will not be easy. It will require addressing thorny questions related to information standards and data protection, as well as targeted investments to ensure actors in destination and origin countries have the necessary resources and capacity to efficiently share the information that is critical to each party's work. But with the stakes high for both individual returnees and for European migration systems, investments that smooth the transition between migrants' departure from Europe and arrival in their countries of origin could have significant payoffs in terms of improving their chances of sustainable reintegration.

## 1 Introduction

Across the European Union, assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes have proliferated over the past several decades, mirroring growing interest in migrant reintegration globally.<sup>1</sup> Mounting pressure on policymakers to increase the return rates of migrants without a right to stay in Europe, which are estimated to be very low, has sparked increased interest and investments in reintegration programmes to offer incentives for migrants to return to their countries of origin.<sup>2</sup> These programmes are also considered more cost-effective, humane, and pragmatic from a diplomatic perspective, given long-standing challenges related to cooperation on returns with third countries. And, ultimately, many hope that AVRR programmes can help migrants reintegrate successfully and, thus, reduce their propensity to move again.<sup>3</sup>

Successful reintegration, however, is not easy. When returnees arrive in their origin countries, they often face challenging circumstances. Many returnees have sold their assets to pay for their initial migration journey, and they may lack the skills or knowledge that are in demand in their local (and possibly now changed) communities. The migration and return process can also take a toll on the mental well-being of returnees, who may struggle to reconnect with social networks; this, in combination with other stressors, can put them at greater risk of suffering mental health issues—especially in countries where returnees suffer from stigma after what is perceived as a failed migration journey. And for migrants who have been abroad for a long time, navigating the procedures to access local services, such as schools and health care, can be a formidable task. Particular factors, such as gender, age, and modality of return (e.g., forced rather than voluntary return), can exacerbate these challenges.<sup>4</sup>

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Reintegration programmes aim to help returnees overcome these challenges through cash or in-kind support, such as assistance with starting a small business upon return, job placements, psychological counselling, or medical care. However, there is a growing recognition among European policymakers that for reintegration to be successful, support may need to start before a migrant's return journey. For instance, the 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration highlights the importance of pre-return, tailor-made counselling for sustainable reintegration.<sup>5</sup> This can have the dual benefits of helping migrants develop a clearer picture of life after return, and of collecting information that origin-country service providers can use to support

them effectively after they arrive. Yet, the potential of predeparture counselling may remain untapped if information exchange is limited between actors in origin and destination countries.

This policy brief explores how policymakers can improve information-sharing in AVRR programmes and, in doing so, better leverage predeparture counselling to support sustainable reintegration. It draws, in part, on interviews conducted between January and February 2022 with representatives of civil-society and international organisations that provide predeparture counselling in Europe, service partners in origin countries, government officials, and other experts.

## 2 A Fragmented Landscape: The Challenges of Transnational Information-Sharing in AVRR Programmes

Counselling at the predeparture stage generally aims to inform returnees about their reintegration support options and to help them mentally prepare for return and reintegration.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, counselling can help returning migrants gain a sense of agency and control over their situation and reduce feelings of stress, frustration, and anxiety linked to prolonged uncertainty over the future.<sup>7</sup> Discussing reintegration options with counsellors at the predeparture stage can also help build returnees' trust in AVRR programmes and manage their expectations, reducing the risk that they grow disillusioned upon return and drop out of the programme.<sup>8</sup> In addition, predeparture counsellors usually assist returnees with the practicalities of return, such as obtaining

administrative documents needed after return and organising travel arrangements.

Predeparture counselling is also essential to facilitate the work of service partners that deliver reintegration assistance in origin countries. Counsellors in Europe collect personal information about returning migrants, such as their migration history, immediate and long-term needs upon return, vulnerabilities, skills, and social networks in the country to which they are returning. This information is then shared with origin-country service partners to ensure that they can prepare in advance and deliver reintegration assistance swiftly after migrants arrive. This can be particularly important for returnees with specific vulnerabilities (e.g., those with medical needs or victims of trafficking), and in cases where returnees require immediate assistance upon return, such as airport pick-up or temporary accommodation.<sup>9</sup> Sharing information about returnees with country-of-origin authorities is rarer in European AVRR programmes, but doing so could help authorities account for the needs of returnees in government plans and adapt public services accordingly.<sup>10</sup> However, data exchange with origin-country authorities is a sensitive matter, and increasing information exchange would require robust guidelines to ensure compliance with data protection standards.

Efficient information-sharing and coordination between European actors and origin-country service providers are therefore crucial to improving the information migrants receive before their return and to ensuring a continuum of support from the

predeparture to the post-arrival phase, which can ultimately increase the chances of successful reintegration—a goal shared by returnees, counsellors, authorities in origin and destination countries, and service partners.

While policymakers are increasingly recognising the essential role of predeparture counselling and information-sharing in sustainable reintegration, the landscape of predeparture counselling in Europe is still a fragmented one. Most EU Member States provide some return counselling, but different approaches are used and different actors are involved (see Box 1). To a certain extent, these diverging approaches reflect different understandings of the level of information returnees should be provided prior to departure, as well as the type (and amount) of information that should be shared with service partners before a returnee's arrival in the country of origin.

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Because of this variation in approach, the challenges related to transnational coordination and information-sharing at the predeparture stage also vary across European countries and reintegration programmes. However, existing research and expert interviews point to some common bottlenecks in AVRR programmes, described in the sections below.

**BOX 1****The Landscape of Return and Reintegration Counselling across Europe**

Counselling migrants on their return and reintegration options is a key component of assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes in Europe, but the nature (and extent) of counselling varies. While not all EU Member States adapt their counselling based on what stage of the migration continuum an individual is in—for instance, whether the person is waiting for a decision on an asylum application or has been ordered to return—the European Commission distinguishes between three main types of counselling:

- ▶ **Information and outreach.** During this stage, counsellors aim to provide migrants with general information about their options to stay in Europe or return voluntarily to their countries of origin with the support of AVRR programmes.
- ▶ **Decision-making.** At this stage, return counsellors provide more specific information about the return process and the support available in order to help migrants make an informed decision about whether to return.
- ▶ **Predeparture preparation.** For migrants who have decided to return, counsellors provide tailored information about reintegration opportunities and may help migrants prepare a reintegration plan.

This policy brief will focus on the third type of counselling, which plays a key role in facilitating reintegration and occurs at a stage when information-sharing between origin- and destination-country actors becomes crucial. This type of counselling is referred to as 'reintegration counselling' by some actors in the field, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Caritas, while others favour the term 'return counselling' for all types of counselling that occur before return.

To date, Member States have focused on different types of pre-return counselling, and their programmes have also differed in terms of the type of actors providing counselling. Most rely on IOM or civil-society organisations, including Caritas, the Red Cross, or national and local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). In some countries, such as Denmark, the same organisation provides counselling to migrants seeking information about the possibility to return and those who have chosen to return via an AVRR programme. In others, such as Belgium, different actors conduct different types of counselling. Furthermore, while some Member States rely on one or two partners to provide counselling, Germany and others utilise an extensive network of NGOs and organisations. In a few Member States, including Austria and France, return and reintegration counselling is mostly provided by the government.

Sources: European Commission, 'Commission Staff Working Document: The EU Framework on Return Counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool' (SWD [2021] 121 final, 27 April 2021); European Migration Network (EMN), 'Policies and Practices on Return Counselling for Migrants in EU Member States and Norway' (EMN Inform, European Commission, August 2019); IOM, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva: IOM, 2019); Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).



## A. *Mismatch between returnees' expectations and origin-country realities*

For migrants facing the prospect of return, understanding the situation that awaits them is often difficult—particularly for those who have been abroad for a long time, those with weak ties in the local community, and those returning to a locality that is changing rapidly.<sup>11</sup> Without accurate information about the opportunities and challenges ahead, returnees can find it difficult to prepare for life after return, increasing the chances that they will struggle to reintegrate.<sup>12</sup> Predeparture counselling aims to fill these information gaps, but it may not always manage to do so completely. While evaluations and interviews show that many returnees find predeparture counselling helpful,<sup>13</sup> they also suggest that, all too often, returnees still have inaccurate information and unrealistic expectations when they arrive in their country of origin.

Several interviewees involved in predeparture counselling suggested that, after arrival, returnees often have inaccurate information about the reintegration assistance available to them, such as the nature of the support, the amount, or the process to access it. In programmes that provide assistance in kind (such as support with starting a business), a widespread misperception among returnees is that they will receive cash;<sup>14</sup> this can fuel resentment and get their relationship with service partners off to a bad start.<sup>15</sup> In the words of a representative of an organisation delivering reintegration assistance in Pakistan: 'Most returnees think they will receive cash, but once they arrive, they realise it's in kind [...]. Most are OK with it and once the whole process is explained to them, they understand how the programme works. But 2–5 percent are really angry that we don't have cash for them.'<sup>16</sup> Returnees sometimes also have misconceptions about the amount of assistance they can

receive. For instance, they might not know that there is a budget limiting their reintegration support options, or they might be unaware that they (usually) cannot obtain assistance from several programmes at the same time.<sup>17</sup> Some returnees also have inaccurate information about the timeframe or the process for obtaining reintegration assistance, which can have dire consequences for their ability to access support.<sup>18</sup> And in extreme cases, returnees might even be unaware that they have applied for reintegration assistance and simply not seek it out after returning.<sup>19</sup>

Misinformation about the available assistance can also be programme or country specific. For example, in Afghanistan, several returnees surveyed in a 2008 evaluation of a Norwegian AVRR programme reported having been wrongly informed about the possibility of acquiring land through a government land allocation scheme, when in reality they were not eligible for the scheme.<sup>20</sup> And in the past, some migrants returning to Ukraine were not aware that tax regulations in the country had an effect on the final amount of reintegration assistance they would receive, leading to mistrust towards the reintegration service provider when the tax was applied and returnees received less support than they expected.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, returnees may find the economic or security situation in the origin country to be very different than what they had imagined. For example, returnees surveyed in the aforementioned 2008 evaluation of a Norwegian AVRR programme reported that the situation in Afghanistan was worse than they expected, with a few believing that IOM, the Norwegian Refugee Council, or the Norwegian police had actively tried to mislead them to persuade them to return.<sup>22</sup> Inaccurate information and expectations can thus not only negatively affect migrants' reintegration, they can also harm the overall credibility of AVRR programmes.

When migrants who have been counselled prior to departure report having inaccurate information after return, it is not easy to track down where and why these gaps arise. Some degree of information mismatch may occur even when this counselling is robust and properly conducted. In interviews, a number of representatives of international organisations and other providers of predeparture counselling suggested that the stress of the return process may make it difficult for returnees to think through and process information about reintegration after return,<sup>23</sup> and that language barriers between returnees and counsellors can hinder understanding, even when an interpreter is available.<sup>24</sup> Returnees may also receive inaccurate information from friends and family, or former returnees who returned under different programmes.

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In some instances, missing information can be linked back to information challenges that return counsellors themselves face. Counsellors often have access to multiple sources of information, such as country leaflets and websites, but when counselling migrants returning to a variety of countries and under myriad reintegration programmes, they may struggle to navigate all of the information available.<sup>25</sup> Predeparture counsellors may also lack accurate information about specific aspects of the situation in origin countries, such as economic opportunities available to returning migrants,<sup>26</sup> and they might be unaware of other types of support available to returnees outside of AVRRE programmes.<sup>27</sup> And when information is hard to find, counsellors may not have a direct line of communication with origin-country service partners to ask for further information,<sup>28</sup> especially if these actors belong to different organ-

isations. The strength of the flow of information between counsellors and service partners often depends on individual working relationships, and thus it can be negatively affected by high turnover rates among counsellors in European countries<sup>29</sup> or may take time to develop when a collaboration between actors in Europe and partners in the field is new.

Lastly, while counsellors in some European countries receive information about the reintegration progress of returnees they have worked with,<sup>30</sup> others do not receive systematic feedback about how counselled returnees fare after return. In some cases where formal feedback mechanisms are absent, returnees may contact their return counsellors informally through social media or WhatsApp.<sup>31</sup> But this lack of systematic feedback can make it harder for counsellors to assess whether the information they are providing to returnees is correct, and to identify information gaps that are negatively affecting returnees' reintegration and that they should work to remedy.

## ***B. Poor quality of case information shared with origin-country service partners***

Organisations delivering assistance in origin countries sometimes lack sufficient information before returnees' arrival to do their work effectively. For instance, in Pakistan, a representative of the service provider Women Empowerment Literacy and Development Organisation (WELDO) pointed out that they do not always receive the contact details of returnees, which results in returnees losing access to the reintegration assistance.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, other interviewees suggested that the information service partners receive about returnees' vulnerabilities before their arrival is often basic and lacks important details, such as about medical conditions in health cases or about mental health issues.<sup>33</sup> Service partners may also not receive detailed information about

a returnee's personal history, which could help the organisations assess risks that the returnee might face in a locality (e.g., due to family feuds).<sup>34</sup> And in the case of families, service partners usually receive information about the lead applicant, but detailed information about the other family members is often missing.<sup>35</sup>

*There is a lack of consensus among key stakeholders about what data should be collected and shared with origin-country service providers.*

Several factors can contribute to these information gaps. In some cases, predeparture counsellors find it challenging to collect relevant information from returnees. Returnees are sometimes preoccupied with the more immediate return process and are not yet giving much consideration to their post-return reintegration options.<sup>36</sup> And in some instances, returnees might be hesitant to provide details about certain aspects of their lives, such as their origin-country social networks or their migration history. A representative of BRAC, a service provider in Bangladesh, suggested that even when this information is collected, what returnees tell reintegration counsellors in Europe—especially details related to their migration journey—can be incomplete or misleading, and that case managers in Bangladesh often have to start from scratch to obtain 'the real story'. It was suggested that this is due to the fact that Bangladeshi returnees may have learnt to tell a particular story to asylum officials, and that they find it easier to trust case managers from Bangladesh who speak their language and can better understand their situation than counsellors in Europe.<sup>37</sup> Another challenge is that psychological issues can be difficult to identify in predeparture counselling, especially when returnees have not been treated for mental health problems before and do not show any symptoms during the counselling sessions.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, collecting in-depth information about

individual cases can be particularly challenging for counsellors dealing with a high volume of returnees.<sup>39</sup> The information gaps these issues result in can be magnified if the data collected are not properly recorded or shared in a timely manner with local reintegration partners.

Beyond these practical challenges, there is a lack of consensus among key stakeholders about what data should be collected and shared with origin-country service providers in the first place. This issue is connected to the lack of harmonisation of counselling standards across Europe (see Section 2.D). While some stakeholders believe that service partners should be provided with as much information as possible to ensure a continuity of support upon arrival—including information related to returnees' vulnerabilities, immediate and long-term reintegration needs, social networks, and skills<sup>40</sup>—several representatives of service partners suggested in interviews that only some information is essential for them. This includes returnees' date of arrival, contact details, information on vulnerable cases (e.g., returnees with health problems, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied minors), and immediate needs upon arrival. In countries with a fragile security situation or those where families might have left their town due to security concerns, information about returnees' intended final destination and potential threats they may face can also be important.<sup>41</sup> Staff of a service partner based in El Salvador also signalled the importance of receiving information about returnees' emotional state.<sup>42</sup> According to some interviewees, other types of information, such as on returnees' background, wishes, and long-term needs, is a 'nice to have'; discussing it in predeparture counselling can help returnees start thinking about the reintegration process before they return and facilitate the work of service partners, but it is not a necessity.<sup>43</sup> Some origin-country stakeholders argue that, in fact, non-immediate needs and hopes for the future, especially when it comes to income-generating opportunities, are often better assessed after arrival



and once returnees have a better understanding of the situation in the country of origin.<sup>44</sup> This lack of agreement among key stakeholders about the type and level of detail of the information to be collected in predeparture counselling means that some origin-country service partners assisting returnees from different countries in Europe receive far more information about some returnees than others.

### *C. Limited involvement of origin-country authorities in AVRR programmes*

Information-sharing is also hampered by the fact that, in general, origin-country authorities have limited involvement in European AVRR programmes. While there is a growing consensus among European policymakers that countries of origin should increase their involvement in (and ownership over) AVRR programmes serving their nationals,<sup>45</sup> this is an ambition that, to date, has not materialised. EU Member States and organisations providing return counselling in Europe usually exchange information about returning migrants with the service partners that provide assistance in an origin country, but local or national authorities are rarely kept in the loop.<sup>46</sup>

This can be partly attributed to a perceived lack of interest on the part of origin countries in playing a part in AVRR reintegration programmes; in reality, however, the interest of origin-country authorities in voluntary returns varies, and many origin countries are also stepping up their efforts to provide reintegration assistance to their nationals—even if they sometimes lack the expertise or capacity to increase their involvement.<sup>47</sup> A representative of the Armenian government, for example, signalled capacity issues affecting the government's ability to manage information about all returnees.<sup>48</sup> Yet, sharing information with origin-country authorities about all of their nationals, whether their return is forced or voluntary, would allow local and national authorities to better account for returnees' needs in local services,

such as housing, employment services, and health care. Furthermore, strengthening the exchange of information with origin-country representatives could enhance the information predeparture counsellors provide to returning migrants about local conditions and public services they can access upon return, diminishing the risk of misinformation and unrealistic expectations.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, exchanging information on returning migrants—particularly on vulnerable groups—would require sending and receiving countries to adhere to strict data protection standards.

### *D. Diverging approaches to predeparture counselling across Europe*

The reintegration field in Europe is highly fragmented, with different types of programmes, assistance, and actors involved in the reintegration process (see Box 1 above). Moreover, predeparture counsellors operate under different national priorities: while some Member States embrace a migrant-centred approach at all counselling stages, aiming to provide support adapted to the needs of each returnee, other countries prioritise ensuring compliance with return policies.<sup>50</sup>

In the last few years, European policymakers have stepped up their efforts to improve coordination among EU Member States in this area. This is exemplified by the launch of joint contracting of reintegration services<sup>51</sup> and the development of the European Commission's Reintegration Assistance Tool (see Section 3.D). In 2021, the European Commission also published the EU Framework on Return Counselling, which explores the potential of an EU-wide approach to return counselling to ensure consistency and quality.<sup>52</sup> And since January 2021, the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) has contributed to the harmonisation of return counselling practices through the project Capacity Development and Training for Return Counsellors (CADRE),

which aims to enhance the training, practices, and technical tools of return counsellors across Europe.<sup>53</sup>

While these are steps in the right direction that promise to create a more harmonised approach to predeparture counselling in the future, at present, diverging practices and national priorities persist. This fragmented landscape also affects how information is collected and shared with origin-country service partners, who often have to use different communication channels for different Member States or AVRR programmes.<sup>54</sup>

*This lack of systematic M&E extends to reintegration counselling and information-sharing with service partners, hindering understanding of how to best leverage predeparture counselling.*

Disagreements over what information should be provided to migrants preparing to return and local service partners preparing to support them can only be resolved with strong evidence on what works best and why. However, to date, AVRR programmes have had a relatively weak evidence base and insufficient monitoring and evaluation (M&E). While the last five years have witnessed growing efforts to improve the monitoring of AVRR programmes, only a limited number have been subject to robust and continuous M&E. The evaluations conducted often have methodological limitations, such as small samples or a lack of control groups to account for the role of external factors in reintegration outcomes. They also focus on (mostly economic) reintegration outcomes and do not capture the process leading to those outcomes.<sup>55</sup> As will be further discussed in Section 4, this lack of systematic M&E extends to reintegration counselling and information-sharing with service partners, hindering understanding of

how to best leverage predeparture counselling for the sustainable reintegration of return migrants.

### 3 Delivering on the Promise of Predeparture Counselling for Sustainable Reintegration

Over the last decade, several governments and organisations providing counselling in Europe have developed approaches to enhance the information provided to returnees and improve information-sharing with origin-country service partners. These approaches include establishing direct links between returnees and local service providers prior to departure, enhancing the flow of information to return and reintegration counsellors, building quality checks into the information-exchange continuum, and exploring the potential of digital case management systems.

#### A. *Putting migrants preparing to return in direct contact with origin-country service partners*

In most AVRR programmes, returnees only meet the origin-country service provider after return. But of late, key organisations providing return and reintegration counselling in Europe, such as IOM, Caritas, and the Danish Refugee Council, have increasingly experimented with facilitating an introduction or initial exchange at the predeparture stage (see Box 2). Returnees are put directly in contact with service partners prior to departure through WhatsApp, social media, and other digital platforms so that they can meet origin-country case managers and ask them questions. In some instances, this type of virtu-

**BOX 2****The Growing Use of Virtual Counselling in European AVRR Programmes**

Some of the main counselling providers in Europe have experimented with virtual counselling. For example, in Germany, IOM launched a virtual counselling project in 2019, which was mirrored by IOM in the Netherlands in 2021. The Danish Refugee Council organises tripartite Skype sessions between a return counsellor, origin-country service partner, and returnee preparing to leave Denmark. The fact that counsellors are also present in the call allows them to build on returnees' exchanges with service partners in their other predeparture counselling sessions. A counsellor can also support the discussion by asking specific questions of the service partner that might be relevant for the returnee (e.g., on safety or medical treatment). In 2020, the Danish Refugee Council built upon this approach for migrants returning to Armenia by offering them up to three virtual counselling sessions before return and have dedicated follow-up interviews with the counsellor three and six months after return. The initiative was found to improve returnees' trust in the reintegration programme and feelings of involvement in the return process, and to speed up the development of a reintegration plan after return. The same initiative has since been expanded to Jordan and Uganda. Meanwhile, in Austria and Belgium, Caritas also offers virtual counselling to some AVRR beneficiaries, such as highly vulnerable returnees or those found to have low trust in the reintegration programme.

Sources: IOM, 'Virtual Counselling Helps Migrants Learn More about Return and Reintegration Options', updated 3 April 2020; IOM Netherlands, 'Virtual Counselling for Migrants Opting for Voluntary Return', updated 4 May 2021; author interview with Zsuzsanna Réka Fodor, Integrated Return Management plus (IRMA plus) II Project Leader, Caritas Austria, 1 February 2022; author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap, Reintegration Counsellor, Caritas International Belgium, 7 February 2022; author interview with Lea Balskilde, Senior Advisor and Programme Specialist, and Signe Søndergaard, Senior Advisor and Programme Specialist, Danish Refugee Council, 21 January 2022.

al counselling is available not only for AVRR beneficiaries, but also for migrants who have not yet decided to return and seek to make an informed decision.

Further research to assess the effectiveness of virtual counselling is needed, but counsellors in Europe, service partners in origin countries, and government representatives suggested in interviews that it has a number of advantages. First, because virtual counselling allows returnees to ask questions about reintegration in their own language and to meet the person who will help them upon return, this contact can build trust in an AVRR programme and diminish the risk of misinformation due to language barriers.<sup>56</sup> Given that service partners often know the local situation in an origin country better than a European counsellor, virtual counselling can also ensure that returnees receive accurate information about the opportunities and challenges on the ground. Meeting returnees prior to their arrival can also be helpful for origin-country service partners. A representative of WELDO in Pakistan, for instance, signalled that

virtual counselling allows them to tackle common misperceptions among returnees and to build a relationship with them before their return.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, virtual counselling can help service partners gather important information about returning migrants (e.g., related to vulnerabilities) and to better prepare for their arrival.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its potential, only some AVRR programmes include this type of support, and even in those cases, very few returnees actually benefit from it. When available, virtual counselling is often not a standard offering for all returnees, but rather an option available to migrants seeking to make a decision about return or AVRR beneficiaries with certain characteristics, such as those who are particularly vulnerable,<sup>59</sup> who speak a local dialect and cannot communicate with return counsellors,<sup>60</sup> or who have lower levels of trust in the programme. In some cases, the availability of virtual counselling may also depend on whether a service partner explicitly requests it,<sup>61</sup> or it may only be available for migrants of certain nationali-

ties.<sup>62</sup> This means that, even when virtual counselling is part of a programme, in reality very few returnees have contact with origin-country partners prior to departure.<sup>63</sup>

To leverage the potential of virtual counselling, making it a standard part of AVRR programmes rather than an opt-in option could help ensure that all returnees can benefit from it. In Belgium, for instance, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) has a tripartite agreement with IOM and Caritas—the two organisations providing reintegration counselling prior to departure—that specifies that both organisations should facilitate contact between returnees and local reintegration partners prior to departure.<sup>64</sup> The pandemic and its sweeping acceleration of the use of digital technologies could prompt more European countries to nurture and expand this approach. At the same time, making predeparture virtual counselling a standard component of AVRR programmes would be easiest in programmes with a relatively small caseload; for service partners that receive high numbers of returnees from Europe, counselling all of them could strain their capacity.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, policymakers and programme managers would need to ensure that service partners have the necessary digital infrastructure, and it might require special training on predeparture virtual counselling for case managers in origin countries.<sup>66</sup>

An alternative approach is to bring case managers from origin-country organisations to Europe to talk to returnees in person before their return. WELDO, for instance, conducted visits to some European countries before the pandemic to talk to migrants returning to Pakistan, and the government of Armenia has used this approach to inform returnees about the government's reintegration programme.<sup>67</sup> This approach based on regular visits, however, means that only some migrants can benefit from this contact at the predeparture stage. To address this

and encourage returnees to provide key information during the predeparture stage, a representative of BRAC in Bangladesh suggested having permanent staff from origin-country service partners based in Europe to conduct predeparture counselling.<sup>68</sup> This option, however, would require a deep rethinking of the current AVRR infrastructure, as well as a substantial increase in resources to service partners. The digital counselling initiatives that have become more popular during the pandemic may be a cost-efficient alternative.

## *B. Improving the quality of origin-country information available to return counsellors*

In many European AVRR programmes, return and reintegration counsellors rely on material such as country fact sheets to obtain information about reintegration options in different AVRR programmes and countries of origin.<sup>69</sup> While written material can be helpful, counsellors may struggle to make sense of the plethora of available information. And given that fact sheets usually provide general information, counsellors might not be able to answer specific queries from returnees (e.g., related to the type of vocational trainings available in the town where they will live).

To ensure that predeparture counsellors provide accurate, up-to-date information to returning migrants, several organisations have dedicated staff who coordinate the flow of information between counsellors in Europe and origin-country service partners.<sup>70</sup> However, this exchange often hinges on the strength of the working relationship between a European organisation and its origin-country partners, and some counselling organisations may prioritise this relationship-building more than others. Plus, maintaining regular communication with service partners might be easier for major organisations

such as Caritas or IOM, which have local offices in several countries of origin, than for the smaller local or national NGOs that provide counselling in some Member States.

An innovative approach in this sense is the one adopted by the Returning to New Opportunities programme, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the German development cooperation agency. In 2017, GIZ launched a team of 'GIZ reintegration scouts', who are based in Germany but liaise with the programme's Advisory Centres for Jobs, Migration, and Reintegration in origin countries and advise counsellors on reintegration options in those countries (see Box 3). This approach has the advantage of allowing return counsellors to go beyond the generic information available on fact sheets and ask for tailored information relevant to particular cases,

improving the quality of the information provided to returnees. In addition, the fact that the team is available to counsellors across Germany provides a level playing field for all counselling organisations, including small ones with no ties in origin countries. At the same time, the team of scouts—still a young initiative in the process of expansion—can only liaise with the countries of origin where the Returning to New Opportunities programme operates, meaning that not all counsellors (and, consequently, not all returnees) can benefit from this tailor-made information. While a similar system could be built that extends beyond the programme's partner countries to include other origin countries, this would require providing extra resources to the service partners supplying information to the scouts—on top of the investment needed to build the capacity of reintegration scouts teams in Germany (and potentially other European countries that choose to adopt this model).

### BOX 3

#### Scouting for Reintegration Opportunities in the Returning to New Opportunities Programme

In the Returning to New Opportunities programme, the team of reintegration scouts is embedded in some of the main return counselling centres in Germany and advises counsellors about reintegration options in origin countries, such as business or educational opportunities, psychosocial counselling, and legal support, as well as training opportunities offered by the programme to migrants before they return. To obtain information, the scouts liaise with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH focal points in the following origin countries: Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Iraq, and Pakistan.

The initiative has developed a detailed process through which return counsellors can submit information requests to the reintegration scouts to inquire about reintegration options for individual cases. With a returnee's consent, this request can contain personal information (to signal, for instance, specific family or health issues), but it can also be submitted anonymously. Through an internal case management system, the reintegration scouts then channel requests to GIZ focal points in the relevant origin countries, who provide tailored information to return counsellors. If the counsellors still have questions after receiving the written answer, GIZ offers to hold a virtual meeting between them and the focal point to clarify those remaining questions. In addition, the returnee usually participates in a predeparture call with the return counsellor and the reintegration scout.

Sources: GIZ, 'Reintegration Scouts and Returnee Advisory Centres. Voluntary Return with Prospects' (fact sheet, 2021); author interview with GIZ project management staff, 7 February 2022.



Another interesting initiative is Talk2Connect, which leverages the increased use of virtual communications during the pandemic. Launched by ERRIN in 2021, this initiative aims to bring together return counsellors in Europe and service partners through monthly virtual sessions during which they can discuss origin-country conditions. Apart from providing information, Talk2Connect also aims to build stronger working relationships between return counsellors in Europe and service partners in origin countries. The initiative, according to an ERRIN representative, helps return counsellors further understand the situation in origin countries and build trusting relationships with their local partners.<sup>71</sup> Compared to the reintegration scout model used in the Returning to New Opportunities programme, this approach is easy to implement and does not require significant investments from local partners or return counsellors. At the same time, the information sessions focus on general information on reintegration opportunities and challenges; they are less suited to obtain tailored information for individual cases. Furthermore, investing in building up bilateral relationships between return counsellors and local service partners, while helpful and even encouraged by some service partners, might also strain the resources of these organisations if they start receiving many more information requests from return counsellors and similar questions are not channelled through a coordinator.

### *C. Building quality checks into information-exchange processes*

To ensure that the information shared with returnees and service partners before departure is of quality, some stakeholders have begun building quality checks into the information-exchange continuum. This can involve, for example, reviewing the information collected from returnees at the predeparture phase before this is shared with service partners. In Austria, Caritas assists the government's return

counsellors with vulnerability screenings and acts as a liaison with partners on the ground in origin countries. As part of this supporting role, Caritas advises return counsellors on how to collect information on vulnerabilities and reviews the information collected before it is shared further, asking counsellors for additional information where needed. While this review stage can help ensure service partners receive sufficient information, it requires that the relevant parties agree on common information standards in advance, as otherwise different reviewers may assess the quality of the information collected differently.

Quality checks can also be embedded into online case management platforms. For example, the European Commission's Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) is built around three 'key moments' to collect information and validate it (see Section 3.D). In the predeparture phase, authorities in Member States record information collected by counsellors in the platform, and this is made accessible to service partners in origin countries, who receive an online application form via RIAT with information about the case. Service partners then have the option to either accept or reject the application, if they believe that the information provided is insufficient.<sup>72</sup> While this validation moment allows service partners to assess the adequacy of the information they receive, they might be hesitant to reject applications and demand more information from EU Member State authorities, given the contractual relationship between the European countries as funders and the organisations as implementing partners. Alongside quality checks, making counsellors directly responsible for data entry can help ensure that the entry of information into the system is not seen as a mere administrative step and might increase the quality of the data shared with service partners.<sup>73</sup>

Lastly, quality checks can help ensure that returnees receive accurate information and appropriate guidance at the predeparture stage. For instance, in Greece, IOM shares the reintegration plans it devises with returnees prior to departure with service

partners in the migrants' origin countries so that they can assess its feasibility, diminishing the risk of unrealistic expectations and disillusionment among returnees.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, this type of review requires time investments from service partners, and because there is still debate in the field over whether reintegration plans should be developed prior to departure, this may not be an option in all programmes or national contexts.

#### *D. Building out and finetuning online case management platforms*

The tools and systems used to record, share, and store information also play an important role in how efficiently information is shared. Digital case management tools, for example, can speed up communication between actors in destination and origin countries, organise the data shared about returnees in a single platform, and facilitate data protection—but the potential of these systems remains to be fully leveraged.

Until very recently, most stakeholders in the field relied on traditional communication channels, such as email and written documents, to exchange information about returnee cases prior to departure. But recent years have seen the development of online case management platforms to improve the flow of information. RIAT, developed by the European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs in cooperation with ERRIN and Fedasil and launched in 2019, is a digital case management tool designed to simplify information-sharing between EU Member State authorities and service providers in origin countries about returnees and their reintegration process.<sup>75</sup> RIAT is also a data-collection tool, as it prompts stakeholders in destination and origin countries to collect information at three 'key moments': before departure, after arrival, and at the end of the reintegration project.<sup>76</sup> RIAT was initially piloted with some cases in France, Germany,

Belgium, and Austria,<sup>77</sup> and it has since undergone a quick expansion of its user base. By April 2022, it was expected to be used by a total of 20 EU Member States and associated Schengen countries. The European Commission, in its 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, further encouraged all Member States to use the platform.<sup>78</sup> In parallel, IOM's global case management system Migrant Management Operational System Application (MiMOSA) is undergoing rapid development. This internal system facilitates the exchange of information between IOM missions in countries migrants are preparing to leave and IOM offices in their origin countries that will provide them with assistance.<sup>79</sup>

The expansion of these digital case management platforms is a promising development and could bring multiple benefits, including:

- ▶ **Harmonised data collection at the predeparture phase.** Given that these platforms have specific information fields regarding predeparture case information—such as which reintegration supports a migrant qualifies for and what their vulnerabilities, needs, or skills are—they hold the potential to harmonise the data collected by counsellors across Europe.<sup>80</sup>
- ▶ **Efficient and fast information exchange.** Sharing (and storing) predeparture case information in a single platform that is accessible to actors in origin and destination countries can allow for more efficient and timely exchanges of information.<sup>81</sup>
- ▶ **Improved data protection.** If data protection is embedded in the design of the platforms, they can automatically ensure the protection of personal information, instead of leaving encryption and other security concerns up to individual case managers.<sup>82</sup> Online case management tools can also offer different levels of protection based on the type of personal data.<sup>83</sup>

- ▶ **Stronger M&E.** The quantity of data entered into these platforms, and the fact that both RIAT and MiMOSA already include monitoring questions, can allow for the quick production of statistics and reports and could help strengthen the evidence base of reintegration programmes.
- ▶ **Better information for predeparture counsellors.** Embedding information about different reintegration programmes and their outcomes in these online case management tools could also help predeparture counsellors access more accurate information about the best option for returning migrants.<sup>84</sup>

In order to further advance these digital case management tools, policymakers and other stakeholders will need to address certain key questions. To avoid fluctuations in the level and quality of the data users input into these systems—an issue arising from diverging understandings of what information should be collected at the predeparture stage—a crucial step will be to reach a consensus among key stakeholders on common information standards. And once a consensus has been reached, the next question will be how to implement those standards. In addition, as these case management systems expand, it will be important to ensure that all origin-country service partners have sufficient internet access to use them, which can be challenging in some local contexts.<sup>85</sup> It will also be essential to avoid a situation in which stakeholders use a variety of communication channels for sharing data about returnee cases, which can increase the risk that information is lost or duplicated.<sup>86</sup> Lastly, as more European countries start using RIAT, a key issue will

be how to ensure compatibility between that system and IOM's MiMOSA. Having two different case management tools for different European AVRR programmes risks undermining harmonisation efforts and hindering global learning if different sets of data are collected, shared, and analysed in each platform. RIAT and MiMOSA stakeholders have begun engaging in conversations about how to address some difficult questions, including those related to information and data protection standards.

## 4 Strengthening the Evidence Base around Predeparture Counselling and Information-Sharing

The expansion of AVRR programmes in Europe has not been accompanied by a similar push to monitor and evaluate them. Programmes have generally not been systematically monitored, with evaluations often relying on descriptions of the reintegration assistance provided and anecdotal evidence of reintegration outcomes.<sup>87</sup> Yet in the last decade, there has been a spark of interest among policymakers in improving the evidence base for reintegration programmes. Notable efforts include the 2017 Mediterranean Sustainable Reintegration (MEASURE) initiative led by IOM and Samuel Hall, which aimed to better map returnees' reintegration outcomes, and a project launched in 2021 by ERRIN to develop a monitoring framework to capture the quality of reintegration programmes, in partnership with the Migration Policy Institute Europe (see Box 4).<sup>88</sup>

**BOX 4****Developing a Quality Monitoring Framework for Reintegration Assistance**

In February 2021, ERRIN launched a project in partnership with the Migration Policy Institute Europe to develop a monitoring framework to capture the quality of reintegration assistance. While existing M&E efforts in the field often focus on reintegration outcomes, little is known about how and to what degree programme design and service delivery affect those outcomes. Working in close cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders—including EU Member State authorities, the European Commission, Frontex, civil-society organisations, and origin-country service partners—this ongoing project aims to address this gap.

The monitoring framework will capture the quality of support provided to migrants after return in three key dimensions: economic, psychosocial, and social reintegration. Building on this research, the framework will also look into the underexplored topics of predeparture counselling and information-sharing, using targeted research questions and indicators that capture the views of predeparture counsellors, origin-country service partners, and returnees. The table below illustrates the types of questions and indicators that could be used to capture some of these issues.

TABLE 1

**Sample M&E Questions and Indicators on Predeparture Counselling and Case Information**

Research Questions	Sources of Information	Indicators
<b>What information about the returnee is collected at the predeparture stage? Is it reliable?</b>	Service partner or counsellor in the destination country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes/No answer to the question of whether the predeparture counsellor determined whether a returnee had urgent needs to address upon arrival</li> <li>• Yes/No answer to whether the predeparture counsellor conducted a vulnerability assessment</li> <li>• List of documents collected by the predeparture counsellor that could be relevant to the reintegration process</li> </ul>
	Service partner in the origin country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of surveyed service partners who answer 3, 4, or 5 when asked to rate the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5: 'How detailed was the information you received about the returnee before his/her return?', with 1 being 'not detailed' and 5 being 'very detailed'.</li> <li>• Proportion of returnees for whom surveyed service partners answer 'no' to the question: 'Did you need to ask the sending organisation/Member State for further information regarding the returnee's vulnerabilities?'</li> </ul>
	Returnee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of surveyed returnees who answer 'yes' to the question: 'Do you think that the personal information you gave the predeparture counsellor was correctly shared with the organisation that provided you reintegration support in your origin country?'</li> </ul>

Source: ERRIN, 'Quality Monitoring Framework for Reintegration Assistance', accessed 6 May 2022.

Despite these growing efforts to embed M&E into the reintegration field, the evidence base on predeparture counselling is still very limited. The few evaluations that include predeparture elements usually ask returnees general questions about their satisfaction with the counselling and support they received prior to departure,<sup>89</sup> or about the quality of the information received prior to departure.<sup>90</sup> With only a few exceptions, evaluations fail to capture where the information gaps lie: Do returnees have unrealistic expectations about the reintegration assistance programme? Do they have an adequate understanding of how to access it upon return? Do they feel they received accurate information about the situation in their origin countries? Without specific research questions and targeted indicators to assess these interrelated but distinct factors, it will be hard to pinpoint information breakdowns and identify strategies to improve predeparture reintegration counselling. Methodological limitations, such as the use of small samples and a lack of control groups, can also hinder robust assessment of the impact of predeparture counselling on reintegration. Moreover, most evaluations rely solely on returnees to assess the quality of the information they received at the predeparture phase; soliciting the views of local service partners could shed additional light on the expectations and information that returnees have upon arrival. A welcome development in this sense is RIAT's attempt to also include service partners' assessment of the information returnees received prior to departure in the information they submit to sending countries shortly after returnees' arrival, even if the platform could do more to expand monitoring questions about the predeparture stage.

Another aspect of AVRR programmes that has been largely overlooked in M&E efforts is information collection and sharing with local service partners prior to departure. Interactions between destination- and origin-country actors are sometimes formally recorded, particularly when they occur through case management tools. But several representatives of or-

igin-country service partners and organisations providing counselling in Europe suggested that, when stakeholders rely on other channels such as email communication to exchange data about returnees, these interactions are often not formally stored and tracked.<sup>91</sup> This makes it difficult to assess the amount (and type) of information about returnees that is shared, and the instances when service partners need to request further information. Moreover, even when exchanges are recorded, monitoring efforts usually fail to capture what type of information about returnees is collected prior to departure, how it is recorded, and how (and when) it is shared with local service partners. This hinders assessment of the quality of information-sharing in reintegration programmes. Importantly, a strong monitoring system should capture not only information flows from sending countries to origin countries, it should also capture whether reintegration programmes have feedback loops that channel information about returnees' reintegration outcomes back to counsellors—a crucial feature for ensuring continuous learning and improvement of predeparture counselling.

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*A strong monitoring system should capture not only information flows from sending countries to origin countries, it should also capture whether reintegration programmes have feedback loops.*

Shedding light on these internal information mechanisms may not be seen as a top priority for monitoring efforts, with many focused intently on returnees' reintegration outcomes themselves. But without better evidence on these predeparture information flows, European policymakers risk overlooking an element of AVRR programmes that is crucial to efficiently delivering reintegration assistance and, ultimately, to the sustainable reintegration of returned migrants.



## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Predeparture counselling for migrants preparing to return to their countries of origin is becoming a key component of European AVRR programmes. This counselling helps returnees prepare for their return and reintegration, have a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges ahead, and develop trust in AVRR programmes. At the same time, by collecting information about returnees' needs and vulnerabilities (among other things), predeparture counselling helps service partners in origin countries prepare to deliver assistance in a timely manner upon returnees' arrival. But if information-sharing between these parties is weak—due to insufficient communication or poor data quality—this potential will remain untapped, or even result in returnees receiving inaccurate information, growing disillusioned, and struggling to reintegrate after return. This disillusionment may, in turn, be channelled back to diaspora communities in Europe and negatively affect uptake of AVRR programmes.

Increased efforts by European policymakers in recent years to harmonise and improve predeparture counselling and information-sharing—coupled with the flurry of activity in the digital communications space during the COVID-19 pandemic—provide a window of opportunity to strengthen these previously neglected components of AVRR programmes. Avenues for action include:

- ▶ **Enhancing communication between returnees and service providers prior to departure.** Establishing direct links between returning migrants and origin-country service providers before return, for instance through virtual counselling, can improve the information provided to returnees and foster their trust in an AVRR programme. However, expanding virtual counselling—or even exploring in-person predeparture counselling by service partners—would require resource investments as service partners take on this new task.
- ▶ **Setting minimum standards for predeparture case information and building quality checks into information-exchange processes.** Amid myriad approaches to predeparture counselling, European policymakers should agree on minimum information standards to ensure the quality and consistency of the information shared with local service partners prior to migrants' return. Some pieces of information, such as details on returnees' vulnerabilities and immediate needs upon arrival, are likely to be particularly important for service partners. Distinguishing between this essential information that should always be shared with service partners and helpful but nonessential information that service partners can gather themselves after returnees' arrival (such as business ideas and long-term needs) may be low-hanging fruit as stakeholders work towards broader shared standards. This strategy may be particularly suitable for AVRR programmes with large caseloads, in which counsellors can find it difficult to collect detailed information about all returnees.
- ▶ **Strengthening M&E on predeparture counselling and information-sharing, and building feedback loops.** A solid M&E system for AVRR programmes should capture the quality of the information provided to returnees at the predeparture stage, as well as the efficiency of information-sharing between counsellors and service partners (including what data are collected and shared, and how this is done). This will

allow policymakers to identify and address information gaps and problems with information management. Furthermore, policymakers and programme managers should seek to build feedback loops so that predeparture counsellors regularly receive information on how counselled returnees fare upon return and can continuously improve the quality of their counselling.

- ▶ **Investing in digital case management systems.** The rapid growth of RIAT and MiMOSA hold promise for AVRR programmes on several fronts, including improved data collection, more efficient information-sharing, enhanced data protection, and better M&E. Policymakers should continue to invest in and finetune these online case management platforms, with the long-term ambition of reducing the number of communication channels counsellors and service partners use and, thus, streamlining the exchange of information. This will require investments in digital infrastructure for service partners as

well as in training for new users. It will also require key stakeholders to address thorny questions related to information and data standards. Ultimately, policymakers should aim to make the different case management systems used in EU AVRR programmes interoperable to support global learning through comparable data.

In the fragmented field of European AVRR programmes, improving predeparture counselling and information-sharing will take concerted effort. It will require regular conversations involving both sending countries and origin-country service partners—and, where possible, also origin-country authorities—on issues such as case information and data protection standards. And it will require targeted investments and funding. But in the long term, these investments will smooth the transition between returnees' departure from Europe and arrival in their origin countries, and ultimately improve their chances of sustainable reintegration—a goal shared by returnees, sending countries, and origin countries alike.

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*In the long term, these investments will smooth the transition between returnees' departure from Europe and arrival in their origin countries, and ultimately improve their chances of sustainable reintegration.*

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for instance, Kathleen Newland and Brian Salant, *Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration* (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).
- 2 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration' (COM [2021] 120 final, 27 April 2021). It is important to note, however, that reintegration assistance is often not the principal factor influencing an individual's decision to return. See Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 30–33.
- 3 Importantly, some migrants may choose to remigrate even if they have 'successfully' reintegrated. Several academics and other stakeholders in the field have argued that returnees may reintegrate upon return but still remigrate out of choice, rather than necessity. In addition, some may decide to stay but still not be successfully reintegrated in the local community. See International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Towards an Integration Approach to Reintegration in the Context of Return* (Geneva: IOM, 2017); Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants* (Geneva: IOM, 2015).
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of the challenges that returned migrants usually face after return, see Lucía Salgado, Radu-Mihai Triculescu, Camille Le Coz, and Hanne Beirens, *Putting Migrant Reintegration Programmes to the Test: A Road Map to a Monitoring System* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2022).
- 5 See European Commission, 'Migration Management: New EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration' (press release, 27 April 2021).
- 6 Katharina Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of the Reintegration Measures of the Projects 'Reintegration in Kosovo – Cooperation with Microcredit Institutions and the Economy' (ReKoKO I – III)* (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2015).
- 7 Author interview with Anke Mertens, Project Manager, European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), 17 January 2022; author interview with Jo Matyn, Reintegration Programme Manager, Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), Belgium, 25 January 2022.
- 8 Awa Ly and Marion Grégoire, *Mapping System of Stakeholders and Return and Reintegration Assistance: Cameroon, Mali, Morocco, and Senegal* (N.p.: French Office for Immigration and Integration, European Commission, and ERRIN, 2020).
- 9 Author interview with Sijal Aziz, Director of Returns and Reintegration, Women Empowerment Literacy and Development Organisation (WELDO), 9 February 2022; author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap, Reintegration Counsellor, Caritas International Belgium, 7 February 2022; author interview with Genci Pjetri, Programme Coordinator and Developer, and Altin Kurdari, Project Coordinator, IOM Albania, 17 February 2022; author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili, AVRR Programme Coordinator, and Nino Ormotsadze, IOM Georgia, 21 February 2022.
- 10 A representative from the government in Armenia, for instance, outlined the importance of receiving information from European authorities about the arrival of forced returnees as they, unlike voluntary returnees, usually lack the support of European AVRR programmes. Author interview with Haykanush Chobanyan, Head of Return and Reintegration Division, Migration Service of Armenia, 23 February 2022.
- 11 OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*; author interview with Haykanush Chobanyan.
- 12 Readiness or preparation for return has been linked in the literature with successful reintegration. See, for example, Jean Pierre-Cassarino, *Return Migrants to the Maghreb Countries: Reintegration and Development Challenges* (Florence: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2008).
- 13 For instance, an evaluation of the German StarthilfePlus programme found that survey respondents were positive about the counselling and information they received related to the programme, the duration of counselling, and the support received in organising their return. Other evaluations of AVRR programmes in Switzerland and the United Kingdom have had similar results. See Martin Schmitt, Maria Bitterwolf, and Tatjana Baraulina, *Assisted Return from Germany: Motives and Reintegration. Key Findings the Study on the Federal Programme StarthilfePlus* (Nuremberg: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2019); Fiona Wigger, *Return and Reintegration Assistance External Evaluation: Country Study Kosovo* (Bern-Wabern: Swiss Federal Office for Migration, 2013); Olga Evans, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2006: A Process and Impact Assessment* (London: UK Home Office, 2010).
- 14 Author interview with Anke Mertens; author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 15 Author interview with Sijal Aziz; author interview with Anke Mertens; author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 16 Author interview with Sijal Aziz.
- 17 Constanza Vera Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg, and André Asplund, *Those Who Were Sent Back: Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq* (Stockholm: The Migration Studies Delegation, 2021).
- 18 Author interview with Anke Mertens.
- 19 Author interview with Mikaela Hagan, Project Manager, Swedish Red Cross, 17 January 2022.
- 20 Arne Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What? Review of the Voluntary Return Programme to Afghanistan* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2008).

- 21 Author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 22 Some claimed that they had also received information from friends and the media. In addition, the report suggests that returnees might have been told by Norwegian authorities that they saw no risks to their security in the context of their asylum application, which they might have interpreted as a positive assessment of the security situation. See Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*
- 23 Author interview with representatives of IOM Netherlands, 4 February 2022; author interview with Joselito Aviles Cruz, Director, and Arnoldo Urbina, Programme Coordinator, Caritas Santiago de Maria, El Salvador, and with Jolien Visscher, Reintegration Counsellor, Caritas International Belgium, 21 February 2022; Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*
- 24 Author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.
- 25 Author interview with Anke Mertens.
- 26 Several interviewees, for example, signalled that business plans developed at the predeparture stage very often change based on the conditions returnees encounter after arrival. Author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari; author interview with Sijal Aziz; author interview with Mihret Seifu, Returnee Integration Project Officer, Caritas Ethiopia, and with Katrien Van den Bergh and Louise Martens, Reintegration Counsellors, Caritas International Belgium, 25 February 2022.
- 27 Author interview with Lea Balskilde, Senior Advisor and Programme Specialist, and Signe Søndergaard, Senior Advisor and Programme Specialist, Danish Refugee Council, 21 January 2022.
- 28 For instance, a representative from the Pakistan-based organisation WELDO mentioned that the organisation was in regular contact with European project managers, but not with return counsellors. The lack of communication channels between return counsellors and service partners is also the reason ERRIN launched the initiative Talk2Connect in 2021 (see Section 3.B. for more information). Author interview with Sijal Aziz; author interview with Kjell-Terje Torvik, Project Manager, ERRIN, 21 February 2021.
- 29 Author interview with Anke Mertens.
- 30 In Greece, for example, where IOM is in charge of predeparture reintegration counselling, counsellors receive systematic feedback about returnees' reintegration progress. In the Netherlands, IOM representatives also signalled that counsellors have access to the Migrant Management Operational System Application (MiMOSA) and can see the reintegration process. In addition, regular sessions are held with counsellors to update their knowledge and bring any issues to their attention. Author interview with a representative of IOM Greece, 18 February 2022; author interview with representatives of IOM Netherlands.
- 31 For example, in Austria, Caritas acts as a link between the government's return counsellors and partners on the ground and has regular calls with local partners to examine reintegration progress in return cases, but this information is not systematically transferred to return counsellors. Meanwhile, in Denmark, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is in charge of return counselling and has dedicated coordinators who receive reports on how returnees fare upon return; however, unless counsellors specifically want to follow up on a particular case, this information is not systematically shared with them. Author interview with Zsuzsanna Réka Fodor, Integrated Return Management plus (IRMA plus) II Project Leader, Caritas Austria, 1 February 2022; author interview with Lea Balskilde and Signe Søndergaard.
- 32 Author interview with Sijal Aziz.
- 33 Author interview with the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) staff, ERRIN, 24 January 2021; Author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari.
- 34 Author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari.
- 35 Author interview with RIAT staff, ERRIN.
- 36 Author interview with representatives of IOM Netherlands; Kesia Reeve, David Robinson, Nadia Bashir, and Emily Eisenstein, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008: A Process and Impact Assessment* (London: UK Home Office, 2010).
- 37 Author interview with Shariful Islam Hasan, Head of the Migration Programme, BRAC, Bangladesh, 23 February 2022.
- 38 Author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 39 Author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.
- 40 Author interview with Joris Kennis, Senior International Expert, MigraLAB, 20 January 2022. In its reintegration handbook, IOM also encourages reintegration counsellors to conduct assessments on risks, vulnerabilities, family, and skills as early as possible, 'ideally before return'. See IOM, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva: IOM, 2019). Several evaluations of different AVRR programmes also recommend starting to design a reintegration plan prior to return, which would require discussing with returnees their wishes, previous work or educational experience, and skills. See Samuel Hall and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan* (N.p.: Samuel Hall and GIZ, 2020); Reeve, Robinson, Bashir, and Eisenstein, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008*.
- 41 Author interview with Joselito Aviles Cruz, Arnoldo Urbina, and Jolien Visscher; author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari.
- 42 Author interview with Joselito Aviles Cruz, Arnoldo Urbina, and Jolien Visscher.
- 43 Author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze; author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari; author interview with Sijal Aziz.
- 44 Author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari; author interview with Mihret Seifu, Katrien Van den Bergh, and Louise Martens. A representative of WELDO also signalled that non-immediate needs could be assessed at the predeparture stage by the service partner, who has a better understanding on the situation on the ground. Author interview with Sijal Aziz.

- 45 For instance, in the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, the European Commission calls for cultivating the ownership of countries of origin over the reintegration of their own nationals. See European Commission, 'The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration'.
- 46 In some countries, this information gap is most pronounced in cases of voluntary return, as there is more coordination with origin-country authorities on forced returns. In Armenia, for example, EU Member States usually share information on forced returnees prior to their arrival through a dedicated readmission case management system. Information includes the charter flight, date of arrival, and vulnerabilities. Author interview with Haykanush Chobanyan.
- 47 Camille Le Coz, *EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Crafting a Road Map to Better Cooperation with Migrants Countries of Origin* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).
- 48 Author interview with Haykanush Chobanyan.
- 49 European Commission, 'The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration'; Le Coz, *EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration*.
- 50 European Migration Network (EMN), 'Policies and Practices on Return Counselling for Migrants in EU Member States and Norway' (EMN Inform, European Commission, August 2019).
- 51 ERRIN has piloted the joint contracting of service partners by several EU Member States. Frontex launched its Joint Reintegration Services in April 2022, with the aim of taking over these ERRIN services in the coming months. See ERRIN, 'What We Do: Joint Reintegration Programmes', accessed 23 March 2022; Frontex, 'Returns and Reintegration', accessed 12 May 2022.
- 52 European Commission, 'The EU Framework on Return Counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool' (SWD [2021] 121 final, 27 April 2021).
- 53 ERRIN, 'Capacity Development and Training for Return Counsellors (CADRE)', accessed 4 March 2022.
- 54 For instance, a representative of Caritas Ethiopia signalled that they received sufficient predeparture information about returnees coming from Belgium and Germany, but received no information prior to departure for returnees coming from France. Author interview with Mihret Seifu, Katrien Van den Bergh, and Louise Martens.
- 55 For more information on the state of play and limitations of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the field, see Salgado, Triculescu, Le Coz, and Beirens, *Putting Migrant Reintegration Programmes to the Test*.
- 56 Author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.
- 57 Author interview with Sijal Aziz.
- 58 Author interview with Zsuzsanna Réka Fodor.
- 59 In Austria, for example, virtual counselling is conducted for highly vulnerable returnees. A representative of IOM Georgia said that, for returnees to that country, virtual counselling is conducted for some vulnerable cases on an as-needs basis. Author interview with Zsuzsanna Réka Fodor; author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.
- 60 In Greece, IOM has only conducted virtual counselling for a few cases where the specific dialect spoken by the returnee hindered communication with the counsellor. Author interview with a representative of IOM Greece.
- 61 Caritas International Belgium, for example, often offers virtual counselling to returnees in order to establish trust between origin-country reintegration partners and returnees. The combination of predeparture counselling by a Caritas counsellor and virtual counselling ensures that returnees are well informed. For Iraq, such virtual counselling is even required by the local reintegration partner, in order to manage returnees' expectations and avoid misunderstandings after return. Author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 62 For instance, the virtual counselling programmes of IOM Germany and the Netherlands have only been piloted with returnees of selected nationalities.
- 63 For example, a representative of IOM Greece mentioned that only a few cases in recent years needed virtual counselling. Representatives of IOM Georgia estimated that they only spoke with returnees prior to departure in 20–25 percent of vulnerable cases. Author interview with a representative of IOM Greece; author interview with Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.
- 64 Author interview with Jo Matyn.
- 65 Author interview with Mihret Seifu, Katrien Van den Bergh, and Louise Martens.
- 66 IOM Netherlands, for example, has provided training for IOM staff in targeted origin countries on virtual counselling as part of the launch of the initiative. IOM Netherlands, 'Virtual Counselling for Migrants Opting for Voluntary Return', updated 4 May 2021.
- 67 Author interview with Haykanush Chobanyan.
- 68 Author interview with Shariful Islam Hasan.
- 69 Author interview with Kjell-Terje Torvik; author interview with Anke Mertens; author interview with Jo Matyn; author interview with Thomas Goedgezelschap.
- 70 In Austria, for instance, Caritas acts as the link between return counsellors from the Austrian Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services and service partners in returnees' origin countries, and through its regular communication with partners on the ground, Caritas advises counsellors when they need clarification about reintegration opportunities in origin countries. Similarly, in Denmark, DRC has dedicated coordinators channelling information between DRC counsellors in Denmark and local partners in origin countries, who also can obtain information for counsellors if needed. Author interview with Zsuzsanna Réka Fodor; author interview with Lea Balskilde and Signe Søndergaard.
- 71 Author interview with Kjell-Terje Torvik.
- 72 Author interview with RIAT staff, ERRIN.
- 73 Author interview with RIAT staff, ERRIN.



- 74 This information is shared through email and MiMOSA. Author interview with a representative of IOM Greece.
- 75 ERRIN, 'Work Progressing on Digital Case Management Tool', updated 30 March 2019; OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.
- 76 OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.
- 77 ERRIN, 'New Reintegration Assistance Tool', accessed 14 March 2022.
- 78 European Commission, 'The EU Framework on Return Counselling'.
- 79 In this sense, compared to RIAT, IOM's case management system is not open to external stakeholders; it is only accessible by IOM staff. IOM is piloting the IOM Migrant Assistance Portal (IMAP), an extension of MiMOSA that allows for coordination with implementing partners that migrants are referred to as well as for the inclusion of monitoring data collected through IOM's Reintegration Sustainability Survey. IMAP is being piloted in Algeria and Lebanon, and it includes template data-sharing agreements, training materials in different languages, and centralised support.
- 80 Author interview with Joris Kennis. For instance, in RIAT, predeparture counsellors are encouraged to input information about returnees' reintegration entitlements, needs, and skills or assets, while MiMOSA also allows predeparture counsellors to enter information related to returnees' vulnerabilities, skills, educational background, and more. Author interview with RIAT staff, ERRIN; author interview with representatives of IOM Netherlands.
- 81 For example, a representative of WELDO signalled that RIAT allows for fast and easy communication compared to traditional emails. A representative from Caritas Ethiopia also remarked that RIAT saves time in their communications with partners in Europe. Author interview with Sijal Aziz; author interview with Mihret Seifu, Katrien Van den Bergh, and Louise Martens.
- 82 For example, in Austria and Belgium, Caritas shares predeparture case information through encrypted emails. The DRC in Denmark also relies on email encryption to share this information. Author interviews with Thomas Goedgezelschap; author interview with Lea Balskilde and Signe Søndergaard.
- 83 IOM's MiMOSA, for example, has a higher level of security for medical transcripts and information on victims of trafficking, which can only be opened by authorised personnel. Author interview with representatives of IOM Netherlands.
- 84 RIAT, for instance, envisages integrating the European Commission's Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory, which compiles information on all EU AVRR programmes, into the system. This would allow the platform to guide counsellors towards the AVRR programmes that best match the profile and needs of a returnee. Author interview with RIAT staff, ERRIN.
- 85 A representative of Caritas Ethiopia, for instance, signalled difficulties using RIAT, due to limited internet connectivity in the country. Author interview with Mihret Seifu, Katrien Van den Bergh, and Louise Martens.
- 86 For instance, in the case of MiMOSA, local IOM offices do not receive an automatic notification when a case is uploaded to the system, which means that IOM missions in sending countries have to first email their partners to inform them about incoming cases so that they can prepare in advance.
- 87 For a more detailed overview of current monitoring efforts in reintegration programmes, see Salgado, Triculescu, Le Coz, and Beirens, *Putting Migrant Reintegration Programmes to the Test*.
- 88 Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards for an Integrated Approach to Reintegration: Summary Report* (Geneva: IOM, 2017).
- 89 Wigger, *Return and Reintegration Assistance*; Arne Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo: A Comparative Evaluation of Effectiveness and Outcomes* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2016).
- 90 Reeve, Robinson, Bashir, and Eisenstein, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008*.
- 91 For example, representatives of IOM in Albania, Greece, and Georgia noted that information exchanges are stored in IOM's case management tool, and emails are sometimes used as proof of payment approvals. But in general, information exchanges that occur outside of MiMOSA are not formally stored and tracked. However, this seems to vary among service partners. Author interview with Genci Pjetri and Altin Kurdari; author interview with a representative of IOM Greece; Rusudan Imnaishvili and Nino Ormotsadze.

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