Green Reintegration

Supporting Returning Migrants in Climate-Affected Communities

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Executive Summary

Climate change is reshaping global migration dynamics, particularly in low- and middle-income countries that face some of its harshest impacts and that have the fewest resources to prepare and adapt. Many of these countries also welcome back significant numbers of returning migrants, who often settle in areas affected by disasters and environmental degradation. Thus, the reintegration challenges returnees typically face—including finding work and housing—are compounded in areas where slow- and rapid-onset climate events are negatively affecting livelihoods, the housing supply, and community dynamics. These factors can undermine migrants' ability to re-establish themselves after return and have driven some policymakers and practitioners to explore "green" approaches to providing reintegration assistance that are responsive to environmental and climate considerations.

So far, only a few such initiatives have been rolled out, and they have typically been small in scale. These include community-based projects to build climate-resilient infrastructure and support entrepreneurship in green sectors such as solar energy and waste management. A major obstacle to the expansion of this work is the limited interest and funding such approaches have received from donors that often prioritize other aspects of reintegration assistance, including boosting the number of return-

ees that programs serve and investing in protection for vulnerable groups. On an operational level, green pilot projects have also faced challenges related to their narrow focus on economic reintegration, limited in-house technical expertise on climate issues, and gender dynamics in communities of return (e.g., biases that may disadvantage women entrepreneurs in green sectors).

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There are, however, a number of strategies policymakers and practitioners can use to make reintegration assistance more responsive to climate change. Potential pathways involve expanding the goals of green reintegration projects beyond their current livelihoods focus to also address issues such as the need for safe housing and psychosocial support, and raising awareness among people in communities of return about climate change and ways to mitigate its impacts. Forming new alliances with climate-focused actors will be vital to overcome limitations in funding and capacity. Finally, building understanding of when and how green practices work and tailoring green reintegration initiatives to specific local

contexts are essential to the development of effective programs and to earning the trust of returnees and the broader communities in which they live.

1   Introduction

While the effects of climate change are being seen the world over, low- and middle-income countries are often the most affected. Climate events and slow-onset changes can sometimes trap people in place, unable to meet their basic needs and access livelihoods,[1] and in other cases drive people to leave their homes and move either within their country or internationally.[2] When migration is planned for and managed, it can help communities adapt to climate change and avoid its worst impacts.[3] Yet climate-related movements often happen suddenly, leading to mass displacement and increasing the vulnerability of affected populations.

Migrants returning to countries affected by climate change and environmental degradation can face heightened challenges as they settle. Some may not be able to return to the communities where they once lived due to climate disasters or slow-onset events that have made them uninhabitable.[4] Others may be able to return but find fewer economic opportunities, especially in rural areas where droughts and other climate impacts constrain livelihoods.[5] This can become a source of tension within communities, especially in regions where residents must compete for limited resources.[6] In some urban environments, meanwhile, inhabitable areas are shrinking, more neighborhoods are at risk of natural disasters, and returnees may find it hard to access safe housing. Returning migrants may also struggle with the realization that the place they once lived is experiencing fires, droughts, or other disasters and will never look the same again.[7] Altogether, these dynamics can increase pressure on communities, jeopardize migrants' reintegration, and even drive

some to migrate again, sometimes irregularly for lack of access to legal channels.[8]

Around the world, these realities are driving some policymakers and practitioners involved in providing reintegration assistance to returning migrants (often termed "reintegration partners") to think about how to respond to climate change's impacts on returnees, including through "green" reintegration programs.[9] A few pilot initiatives have been launched recently in sub-Saharan Africa, driven in part by the rationale that reintegration assistance can contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. These programs have involved vocational training for roles in the green economy and efforts to make local infrastructure more climate resilient, for example.[10]

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The newness of this policy area has, however, posed challenges for efforts to move toward greener reintegration programming. There is limited empirical research on how reintegration processes and climate change impacts overlap. There are also no clear guidelines on what green reintegration looks like. Besides, incorporating climate considerations into reintegration programming can be (or at least appear to be) an added layer of complexity within an already complex task. This brief provides an overview of what approaches to green reintegration have been used to date, what obstacles projects have faced, and how interested policymakers and practitioners can build a case for reintegration programming that responds to the challenges posed by climate change.

2   Current Practices

Green approaches to providing reintegration assistance have their roots in the growing acknowledgment among policymakers in both destination and origin countries that migrants returning to areas affected by climate change face obstacles to sustainable reintegration that go beyond those encountered by returnees elsewhere. In Senegal, for instance, Casamance and Kolda are two regions of migrant departure and return where climate change has negatively affected access to water and local biodiversity.[11] This has harmed agricultural production for returnees and their communities, leading some to consider moving or moving again.[12] So far, however, only a few reintegration programs have piloted projects to help returnees and their communities adapt to changing conditions such as these.

The two most common approaches to green reintegration consist of funding community-based actions to develop climate-resilient infrastructure and promoting green livelihoods opportunities. This first approach usually entails small, one-off community projects. Reintegration partners may implement cash-for-work and short-term employment projects to engage returnees—and in some cases, other local residents as well—in building infrastructure such as flood-resistant buildings or better waste management systems. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) partnered with the nongovernmental organization CARE to improve city cleaning and waste management,[13] resulting in 200 returnees and community members being hired in 2019 to help with garbage collection in the city of Daloa.

The second, livelihoods-focused approach has taken different forms in rural and urban settings. The priority in rural areas has been promoting sustainable agriculture practices. In Casamance and Kolda, IOM partnered with the local nongovernmental organiza-

tion Trees for the Future to fund community-based actions to equip 30 returnees and other community members with the skills to launch agroforestry businesses.[14] The initiative, which began in 2018, only lasted a year and was discontinued when the pilot ended for lack of funding to continue operations—a common challenge in the reintegration field. While it benefited a very small group of people, it still opened new opportunities and promoted ecological practices in the areas where it took place, and demonstrated the potential of such approaches.[15]

In urban centers, some reintegration programs have aimed to boost entrepreneurship in green sectors.[16] For example, in 2022, the German development agency (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, or GIZ) ran a four-week training course for returnees and other community members in Nigeria, in which participants learned about solar panel installation and repair, among other things.[17] Trainees were then encouraged to launch their own businesses in the solar sector, with support provided by GIZ for up to six months.[18] Similarly, in Senegal, the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) provided direct support and a business grant to five migrants who were returning from France and interested in opening a green business in the horticulture and waste management sectors. OFII has also observed a growing interest among returnees more broadly in such assistance, due to changing conditions in Senegal (notably, inflation) and growing awareness of climate change.[19]

While reintegration programs usually lack adequate monitoring mechanisms,[20] all of the partners involved in these examples of green projects have invested resources in documenting best practices and lessons learned. IOM, for instance, has produced a range of research and learning products on how to mainstream environmental concerns into reintegration assistance.[21] GIZ has set up a working group on climate and migration (as part of its broader Migration for Development initiative) and analyzed the

main challenges and lessons from its pilot project in Nigeria.[22] And as of July 2023, OFII was working on an analysis of what its project in Senegal has achieved and how this information could be shared with other reintegration partners in the country.[23] However, this budding knowledge base is not fully public, with many analyses taking the form of internal documents, and reintegration partners have not systematically come together to discuss how they could advance green programming within the field.

3   Barriers to Green Reintegration

Despite the growing need among returnees and their communities for climate-responsive assistance, the number of green reintegration projects has thus far remained limited, most only benefit a small group of people, and few have the means to scale up their operations. This is primarily due to a lack of interest among the donors that fund reintegration programs.[24] The European Commission and many European countries, for example, have invested in creating and expanding reintegration assistance programs over the past decade, leading to improvements in how these programs address returnees' social and psychosocial needs and protection concerns. However, reintegration support still remains insufficient compared to the scale of need for it, and many donors view working toward greener practices as an add-on rather than a strategic priority, and one they do not have budget for.

On a technical level, green reintegration pilot projects have faced three main challenges. First, green projects have largely focused on the economic reintegration of returnees and failed to address other ways climate change may affect returning migrants. Its social impacts can include difficulty accessing housing, such as in areas threatened by rising sea levels.[25] Climate change can also put returnees and

their communities at heightened health risks resulting from heat and other hazardous conditions, while taking a psychosocial toll on those who experience anxiety and depression associated with witnessing environmental degradation.[26] These are not anecdotal accounts. Research has repeatedly shown how returnees' access to safe housing and care for physical and mental health conditions are critical to successful reintegration.[27]

A second challenge is that green projects often require specialized expertise that traditional reintegration partners do not poses. The need for external support to deliver on a green agenda makes such projects more complicated and resource-intensive to manage than traditional assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programming. OFII Senegal, for example, did not have the in-house expertise to mentor the five returnees granted green business support and instead relied on a consultant for the duration of the pilot. This technical gap also helps explain why green projects tend to have a limited number of beneficiaries. The IOM has been able to develop more expertise in this area, with a unit dedicated to the climate-migration nexus,[28] but this support does not exist within all IOM teams managing AVRR programs around the globe.

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In this context, opportunities to connect and create synergy between climate-related development programs and reintegration assistance are often missed. In Senegal, for instance, many donors support initiatives in the areas of climate change mitigation and

adaptation,[29] but those projects generally do not include returning migrants as a target population. This is a missed chance to improve support for returnees in the country by tapping into climate-responsive initiatives that could unlock livelihoods opportunities in new economic sectors and improve social and psychosocial well-being. For these development programs to effectively serve returnees, however, they would need to account for the specific challenges migrants face upon return and adapt their modus operandi to reflect the profile of local returnees.[30]

The third set of challenges that green reintegration projects have encountered in some countries relates to gender norms and biases in the sectors these projects focus on. This was the case in Nigeria during the GIZ pilot that delivered training on the solar sector: while both men and women participated in the training, female beneficiaries faced more difficulties launching their businesses due to prejudice against female entrepreneurship in this area.[31] Similarly, IOM has documented the obstacles women in some of their pilot activities have encountered due to social norms in agroforestry.[32] These dynamics suggest some green reintegration activities may be even more constrained by gender inequalities than regular AVRR initiatives due to the sectors they target.

4 Better Integrating Climate Concerns into Reintegration Programs (and Vice Versa)

Climate change is already affecting returning migrants' reintegration in many contexts, and these impacts are only going to grow in the coming years. Yet, green reintegration remains a low priority for many donors and policymakers. The following strategies can help address this mismatch, improve the quality of reintegration assistance, and raise awareness about the value of environmentally sensitive approaches to supporting reintegration:

► **Rethink some of the goals of green reintegration initiatives.** For many projects that have taken a green approach to reintegration, the primary objective has been to ensure returnees have access to economic opportunities despite climate impacts in the communities where they settle. While this is a valuable and welcome goal, activities related to other dimensions of reintegration (notably, social and psychosocial reintegration) could also be deployed. This could include facilitating access to safe housing and clean water, and responding to the emotional distress caused by environmental change.[33]

► **Raise awareness among policymakers and residents in regions of return about climate change's impacts on migration and the value of environmentally sensitive practices.** To date, some initiatives have sought to align reintegration activities with climate mitigation and adaptation agendas, while clearly acknowledging that reintegration projects are not large enough to produce results on a structural level. Still, green reintegration projects could continue to raise awareness about climate change and environmentally sensitive practices, including through direct contact with returnees and their communities as well as broader public outreach. IOM, for example, has held a series of public events and produced a podcast episode about green reintegration.[34] And in July 2023, OFII Senegal announced via social media that it was working on a short movie to spread awareness about the importance of connecting reintegration and climate actions.[35]

▶ **Forge new alliances to tap into new sources of funding and expertise.** Reintegration partners and the local providers with whom they work could start by reaching out to donors and development agencies active on climate action or the climate-migration nexus, even if they do not have previous experience in the field of reintegration.[36] This engagement could activate new referral mechanisms between reintegration and climate-related projects, which would make it possible to expand the range of supports available to returnees. Of course, the process of building these operational connections will take time, requiring reintegration programs to map relevant initiatives active in target locations. Most likely, it would also involve tweaking the eligibility criteria for climate-related projects to make returnees eligible and facilitate their participation. Breaking down the silos between reintegration and development programs has already proved very challenging,[37] and this process would similarly require overcoming barriers to cooperation between reintegration programs and climate actors, most of whom have little or no previous experience with migration-related projects.[38] Green reintegration programs may also find it strategic to target countries or regions where the central or local government has made climate action a top priority. This would help rally institutional support, facilitate implementation, and potentially boost fundraising efforts.[39]

▶ **Ensure green initiatives are rooted in the local context, reflecting economic and social conditions in communities of return.** Although not unique to green reintegration programming, a main takeaway from the IOM, GIZ, and OFII pilot projects has been the importance of contextual understanding in program design and implementation

to help ensure uptake among returnees and their communities. When not properly grounded in local realities, green projects may be perceived as offering support that is less economically promising than other available opportunities. For instance, OFII found that their green approach in Senegal attracted a lot of interest because the rising prices of fertilizers and pesticides made returnees more open to moving away from established agricultural practices.[40] By contrast, partners of IOM in the Senegalese region of Casamance observed that returnees sometimes got impatient with the gradual approach promoted by environmentally friendly agriculture projects.[41] Indeed, a main challenge is that the economic rewards of such initiatives often take longer to materialize than in non-green sectors. Green reintegration programs should also be mindful of social dynamics, including gender inequalities, that may constrain some returnees' ability to fully benefit from reintegration assistance. This could include taking gender and other factors into consideration when selecting which sectors will be the focus of efforts to promote green jobs and/or providing additional support to female workers and others likely to face heightened barriers to working in targeted sectors (e.g., tailored mentoring).

▶ **Build up the evidence base on climate change, reintegration, and green projects' effectiveness.** Many questions remain about what exactly green reintegration entails, what the benchmarks of success are, and how promising approaches can be replicated and scaled up. While some reintegration partners have actively engaged in research, monitoring, and evaluation on these issues, more needs to be done to support learning across institutions, be they government

agencies, civil society, or other reintegration stakeholders. In addition, involving returnees and other community members in these efforts and sharing findings publicly and in accessible formats would help encourage more community trust in and ownership over this new type of approach.

Together, these strategies hold the potential to pave the way toward more durable practices in the area

of reintegration. Such actions would help improve how reintegration projects address the wide range of issues that are becoming more pressing as climate impacts intensify in the regions to which migrants return. However, implementing green projects more systematically will require significant investments from donors and policymakers, and their impact will depend on reintegration partners working hand in hand with organizations engaged more directly in climate actions.

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Endnotes

1   Fanny Thornton, Diogo Andreolla Serraglio, and Alec Tornton, "Trapped or Staying Put: Governing Immobility in the Context of Climate Change," *Frontiers* 5 (March 24, 2023).

2   Alex de Sherbinin, "Climate Impacts as Drivers of Migration," *Migration Information Source,* October 23, 2020.

3   Dina Ionesco and Mariam Traore Chazanoel, "Migration as an Adaptation Strategy to Climate Change," International Organization for Migration (IOM), accessed July 19, 2023.

4   Rachel Schmidtke and Kayly Ober, *Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, 2023); IOM, "Annex 11. Guidance for Mainstreaming Environmental and Climate Considerations into Reintegration Programming," in *Reintegration Handbook* (Geneva: IOM, 2020).

5   IOM Iraq and Social Inquiry, *Impact of Conflict, Climate and the Economy on Agriculture in Districts of Return in Iraq* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq, 2023); EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub, "Fostering and Strengthening Interlinkages between Sustainable Development and Reintegration Programmes" (Knowledge Paper #2, European Union and IOM, August 2021), 22; IOM, "Annex 11. Guidance for Mainstreaming Environmental and Climate Considerations."

6   EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub, "Fostering and Strengthening Interlinkages."

7   For example, social philosopher and lecturer at Aix-Marseille University Joëlle Zask observes that a key challenge for communities after a wildfire is to accept that their environment has been irremediably altered and may not recover in their lifetime. See France Culture, "Feux de forêt, quand la faune disparait, avec Joëlle Zask" (podcast, Les Matins de France Culture, August 8, 2023).

8   Compared to other community members, returnees may be quicker to respond to the impacts of climate change with renewed migration ambitions, especially shortly after returning when they are typically less settled. Author interview with a representative of the Women Empowerment Literacy and Development Organization (WELDO) Pakistan, March 15, 2023; UN Network on Migration, "Mainstreaming Environmental and Climate Considerations into Migrants' Reintegration Programming," Migration Network Hub, February 8, 2022; participant discussions during Meeting 5 of the Community of Practice on Voluntary Return and Sustainable Reintegration (a group of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who meet regularly to discuss issues related to voluntary return and reintegration, with the steering of the Migration Policy Institute), March 16, 2023.

9   Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) defines green reintegration measures as "employment promotion measures that aim to place returning migrants into green jobs." GIZ, "Green Reintegration – Solar Panel Installation Training in Nigeria" (internal document, shared with the authors in July 2023). In this report, "green reintegration" refers to a broader range of climate-sensitive measures, including those focused on reintegration's social and psychosocial dimensions.

10   IOM, "Annex 11. Guidance for Mainstreaming Environmental and Climate Considerations."

11   International Committee of the Red Cross, "Casamance: L'accès à l'eau et l'assainissement au coeur de la réponse humanitaire du CICR," updated March 22, 2022; IOM Regional Office for West and Central Africa, "Exodus from Casamance: Climate Change Endangers Lush Vegetation," accessed July 19, 2023.

12   EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub and Migration Policy Institute (MPI), "Episode 4. Renforcer les liens entre réintégration durable et résilience climatique" (podcast, Exploring Migrant Reintegration, 2022).

13   IOM Environmental Migration Portal, "Mainstreaming Environmental Dimensions into Reintegration Support to Reduce the Effects of Climate Change on Migration in West Africa," accessed July 19, 2023; IOM, "Make Our City Clean Again," Medium, July 15, 2019.

14   See IOM Environmental Migration Portal, "Mainstreaming Environmental Dimensions"; Lindsay Cobb, "For Senegal's Migrants, Hope is Green," Trees for the Future, June 18, 2020; Lawrence Huang, "Efforts to Manage Climate Migration Are Slowly Growing, but Their Focus Is Often Indirect," *Migration information Source*, March 1, 2023.

15   In Casamance, IOM similarly partnered with the local nongovernmental organization Casabio to provide training to returnees and other community members and promote sustainable agriculture practices. See EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub and MPI, "Episode 4. Renforcer les liens."

16   The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines green jobs as "decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency." See ILO, "What Is a Green Job?," updated April 13, 2016.

17   GIZ, "Green Reintegration – Solar Panel Installation Training in Nigeria."

18   In Ethiopia, the nongovernmental organization Positive Action for Development (PAD) partnered with IOM between 2021 and 2022 to offer training to 120 returnees and other community members on plastic recycling and compost production. PAD also supported trainees in starting a small company afterwards. Author interview with a representative of PAD, June 14, 2023; IOM Return and Reintegration Platform, "Creating Livelihoods through Environmental Rehabilitation in Ethiopia" (Reintegration Good Practice #11, IOM, 2022). A similar initiative was implemented in Côte d'Ivoire as part of a reintegration project. See IOM, "Make Our City Clean Again."

19   Author interview with a representative of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), June 13, 2023.

20   Lucía Salgado, Radu-Mihai Triculescu, Camille Le Coz, and Hanne Beirens, *Putting Migrant Reintegration Programs to the Test: A Road Map to a Monitoring System* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2022).

21   IOM Environmental Migration Portal, "Mainstreaming Environmental Dimensions."

22   Author interview with a representative of GIZ, July 3, 2023.

23   Author interview with a representative of OFII, June 13, 2023.
24   Author interview with a representative of IOM Regional Office in Dakar, May 18, 2023; author interview with a representative of GIZ, July 3, 2023.
25   William Park, "The Country Disappearing under Rising Tides," BBC Future, September 2, 2019.
26   World Health Organization, "Why Mental Health Is a Priority for Action on Climate Change" (news release, June 3, 2022).
27   IOM, "Coming Home Can Be Harder Than Leaving: The Psychosocial Challenges of Being a Returnee," accessed July 19, 2023.
28   IOM, "Migration, Environment and Climate Change," accessed July 19, 2023.
29   See, for instance, Agence Française de Développement, "Sénégal," accessed July 19, 2023.
30   Camille Le Coz and Ravenna Sohst, *Linking Migrant Reintegration Assistance and Development Goals* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2023).
31   Author interview with a representative of GIZ, July 3, 2023.
32   UN Network on Migration, "Mainstreaming Environmental and Climate Considerations."
33   Glenn Albrecht et al., "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change," *Australasian Psychiatry* 15, Suppl. 1(1) (February 2007): S95-8.
34   IOM, "Introducing Environmentally Sustainable Reintegration: A Two-Fold Strategy," accessed July 19, 2023; EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub and MPI, "Episode 4. Renforcer les liens."
35   OFII Senegal, "Post from April 5 2023" (facebook post, August 5, 2023).
36   This could include, for instance, the Food and Agriculture Organization, which has recently been more active in supporting returnees and their communities while also supporting a transition toward greener practices in rural areas. See EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub, "Fostering and Strengthening Interlinkages."
37   Le Coz and Sohst, *Linking Migrant Reintegration Assistance and Development Goals.*
38   Lawrence Huang, "Why Financing Responses to Climate Migration Remains a Challenge" (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, October 2022).
39   Author interview with a representative of IOM Regional Office in Dakar, May 18, 2023.
40   Author interview with a representative of OFII, June 13, 2023.
41   EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub and MPI, "Episode 4. Renforcer les liens."

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