



# Putting Migrant Reintegration Programmes to the Test

A road map to a monitoring system

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## Executive Summary

Since 2015, European policymakers have renewed their commitment to increase returns of migrants determined to have no right to stay in the European Union, and to cooperate with countries of origin to support returnees' reintegration. As of 2017, EU Member States were operating at least 96 assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) initiatives. At the same time, many countries of origin have worked to formalise their policies for receiving returning migrants and facilitating their reintegration, with the objectives of improving the situation for returnees and linking reintegration efforts with local and national development plans. A range of reintegration service providers in countries of origin have also stepped up their approach to assisting returnees, including by developing new modus operandi and additional types of support (psychosocial assistance, for example).

These commitments and actions have, in turn, led to increased pressure to assess whether the investments being made in AVRR programmes are living up to the expectations for them. There has been a push to develop monitoring systems to capture these initiatives' outcomes and the quality of the services delivered. Yet, a wide array of factors can affect how a person fares upon return, some of which can be difficult to measure. There is, thus, a need to closely examine reintegration outcomes and the paths that lead to them, including what approaches and activities deliver the desired results, under what conditions, and which service providers should be involved. Such an analysis is critical to inform future decisions on programming, funding, and strategy.

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However, gathering this evidence is not a straightforward endeavour. Until relatively recently, little monitoring and evaluation (M&E) was conducted for AVRR programmes, mainly due to the lack of interest among donors and the operational limitations faced by service providers and origin countries. As a result, reporting on these programmes has often consisted of raw numbers showing how many returns occurred, budget allocations for reintegration assistance, and descriptive reports with anecdotal evidence of migrants' reintegration outcomes. This report makes the case for strengthening monitoring efforts using the following guiding principles:

- ▶ when assessing AVRR approaches, activities, the role of service partners, and outcomes, examine all dimensions of reintegration, especially the social and psychosocial dimensions that have traditionally been less studied;
- ▶ build on the (growing) evidence base of what constitutes successful reintegration;
- ▶ take into account priorities identified not only by donors (usually the European Commission and European governments concerned with voluntary returns from Europe) but also by governments in migrants' origin countries, service partners, and origin-country communities and returnees themselves; and



- ▶ acknowledge that developing and implementing a comprehensive M&E framework is a gradual and reiterative process; M&E frameworks require regular updates in light of emerging research, adjustments to AVRR programmes, and changing priorities and circumstances.

Recognising these guiding principles, while a good first step, is not on its own sufficient. The next steps—designing and rolling out an M&E framework that embodies these principles—can be even more challenging, especially when building common benchmarks across a multiplicity of programmes. Indeed, the varied nature of AVRR programmes, donors, and situations in countries of origin makes it challenging to converge around one set of core indicators. And yet, creating a comprehensive and widely used M&E system would allow for cross-programme and cross-country analysis of reintegration assistance. When developing an M&E system across AVRR programmes, it is important to consider the following questions:

- 1 **Design.** What process should be used to design the M&E framework? Who should be involved and who should steer the process?
- 2 **Ownership and funding.** Who are the owners of the M&E framework (e.g., those who validate the framework), and who will fund M&E activities?
- 3 **Scope.** How comprehensive will the M&E exercise be (e.g., level of detail, extent of data collection), which methodology will be used, and how much budget should be allocated for it?
- 4 **Day-to-day operations.** For example, who will collect, analyse, and/or own the monitoring data? And how will these actors ensure their practices abide by EU data protection rules?
- 5 **Inclusiveness, dissemination, and impact.** How can M&E efforts be intentionally inclusive of all relevant stakeholders (e.g., to build buy-in for recommendations that stem from the analysis)? How should the conclusions and recommendations of the M&E exercise be disseminated, both in terms of format and audience? And what can be done to maximise the M&E system’s impact and ensure its recommendations are integrated into future programming?
- 6 **Flexibility.** How can flexibility be built into the M&E framework to ensure it will be able to adjust to new conditions, approaches, and priorities?

As these questions illustrate, achieving a stronger evidence base for AVRR programmes will not be easy or straightforward. It requires regular engagement and cooperation at various levels, along with careful consideration of what is possible in the short term and what milestones might be achieved over a longer period. At this stage, the commitment observed in the European Union and migrants’ origin countries is promising. Looking ahead, the guiding principles and core questions outlined above can help leverage this commitment and translate it into practical advances that foster cross-programme and cross-country analysis.

# 1 Introduction

The goal of increasing returns of migrants without a right to stay in Europe to their countries of origin has been climbing higher on the agendas of the European Union and its Member States. This has been driven by European governments' growing concerns about low estimated return rates and higher numbers of return decisions.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the surge in migrant and refugee arrivals in 2015–16 threw into sharp relief the weaknesses of EU and national migration and asylum systems. Governments are under pressure to demonstrate they can effectively manage who enters and is permitted to stay in their territory, leading some to focus on boosting the number of returns. This is illustrated by the commitment made by French President Macron at the beginning of his term to achieve a 100 per cent return rate,<sup>2</sup> and by an August 2021 letter from six EU Member States insisting that the European Commission pressure Afghanistan to continue accepting returns even as the country was facing unprecedented challenges ahead of the United States' military withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

Assistance to help returning migrants reintegrate into their countries of origin has long been limited, but some policymakers and practitioners have argued it can create incentives for migrants to return.<sup>4</sup> This perception, which has grown in recent years, has contributed to the proliferation of assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR)<sup>5</sup> programmes across the bloc. As of 2017, Member States were operating at least 96 AVRR initiatives.<sup>6</sup> These programmes, which first emerged in Europe in the 1990s,<sup>7</sup> link return with time-bound support for returnees in their country of origin. Such interventions are generally considered less costly—financially and politically—than forced returns. They also provide a more humane and dignified form of return, as they grant returning migrants (at a minimum) economic opportunities upon arrival.<sup>8</sup> Some

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- 1 According to estimates from the European Commission, the return rate across the European Union—measured as the ratio between third-country nationals ordered to leave and those effectively returned following a return decision—is around 30 per cent, which many policymakers consider too low. This estimate has, however, been challenged by practitioners and researchers for not reflecting the complexity of return dynamics and differences in national situations. For instance, this figure does not account for migrants without legal status who return to their countries of origin before a return decision, nor does it include asylum seekers whose cases are rejected by who are not issued a formal return decision. See European Commission, 'Migration Management: New EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration' (press release, 27 April 2021); Sergo Mananashvili, 'EU's Return Policy: Mission Accomplished in 2016? Reading between the Lines of the Latest EUROSTAT Return statistics' (policy brief, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, May 2020); Martina Belmonte, Dario Tarchi, and Francesco Sermi, *How to Measure the Effectiveness of Return?* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021); Statista, 'Return Decisions Issued to Migrants and Effective Returns in the European Union (EU) from 2011 to 2020', accessed 16 December 2021.
  - 2 Agence France Presse, 'Macron demande un tour de vis sur l'expulsion des étrangers irréguliers', Euractive, 10 June 2021; François-Xavier Bourmaud, 'Macron tente de reprendre la main sur l'immigration', *Le Figaro*, 9 June 2021.
  - 3 Deutsche Welle, 'Six Countries Urge EU to Continue Afghan Deportations', Deutsche Welle, 10 August 2021.
  - 4 While return assistance used to be limited to travel support and limited in-cash assistance, the last decade has seen the development of reintegration assistance programmes. See Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).
  - 5 Returns occur on a spectrum between voluntary and forced. And even though they may be referred to as voluntary in EU assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, this report focuses on 'obliged' (Newland/Salant) or 'accepted' (Danish Refugee Council) returns, whereby migrants who do not have the right to stay in an EU country are driven to accept their departure. See Kathleen Newland and Brian Salant, *Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018); Danish Refugee Council, *DRC Return Policy: Positions and Guiding Principles for DRC's Engagement in Return of Refugees, IDPs and Rejected Asylum Seekers* (Copenhagen: Danish Refugee Council, 2018).
  - 6 Marta Latek, 'Reintegration of Returning Migrants' (briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2017).
  - 7 Erlend Paasche, 'Why Assisted Return Programmes Must Be Evaluated' (policy brief, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2014).
  - 8 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).

European policymakers also see AVRR initiatives as a way to foster cooperation with migrants' countries of origin—a dimension of returns that has long faced challenges.<sup>9</sup>

Not only has the number of AVRR programmes operated by EU Member States increased, but their contents have also diversified due to bursts of innovation and experimentation.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, AVRR assistance now comes in various forms, from traditional in-cash support and help starting a small business to psychosocial counselling, mentoring, and community engagement to combat prejudice against returnees and promote climate-adaptation measures. There is also growing consensus on the importance of tailoring activities to the profile and needs of returnees, and of accounting for specific vulnerabilities when delivering reintegration assistance.<sup>11</sup>

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At the EU level, the European Commission released an EU Action Plan on Return in 2015 to increase the effectiveness of the EU return system by, among other things, enhancing voluntary return and accompanying reintegration measures.<sup>12</sup> An updated action plan followed in 2017.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum called for more effective return procedures, as well as a better monitoring of the situation of returnees.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, in April 2021, the Commission presented its first EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, with the goal of further promoting voluntary return and reintegration as an integral component of a common EU system for returns. The Commission has also increased financial support for reintegration activities in the 2021–27 financial cycle and committed to strengthening coordination among EU Member States and to improving EU-level information tools related to reintegration.<sup>15</sup> Finally, EU actors and Member States have worked towards setting up joint procurement processes for reintegration services to improve the coherence and quality of European reintegration

9 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).

10 For an overview of the different types of reintegration assistance activities, see Roberto Biella-Battista, Georg Bolits, Hanna Mark, and Andrea Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva: International Organisation for Migration, 2019).

11 According to a 2012 study published by the European Commission, all EU Member States reported that all or some of their activities were tailored to the skills or needs of returnees. The new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration also states that reintegration assistance 'should be tailor-made, provided upon arrival, and take into account individual abilities and specific needs, notably of vulnerable groups'. See European Commission, European Council on Refugees and Exile (ECRE), International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices to Interlink Pre-Departure Reintegration Measures Carried out in Member States with Short- and Long-Term Reintegration Measures in the Countries of Return* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012); European Commission, 'The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration', 14.

12 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council: EU Action Plan on Return' (COM [2015] 453 final, 9 September 2015).

13 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on a More Effective Return Policy in the European Union – A Renewed Action Plan' (COM [2017] 200 final, 2 March 2017).

14 European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum' (COM [2020] 609 final, 23 September 2020).

15 European Commission, 'The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration'.

programmes.<sup>16</sup> These joint procurement activities, piloted by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) in 2018–21, will be taken over and further developed by Frontex starting in April 2022.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, Europe’s growing interest in and support for providing reintegration assistance have not been coupled with commensurate efforts to build up the evidence base for reintegration programmes. European policymakers seeking to improve reintegration assistance often have little information on what works, where, and why when making policy and programmatic decisions. This stems, in part, from the fact that there has been relatively little research on exactly *what* successful reintegration looks like and *how* it can be achieved—an issue recognised in the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.<sup>18</sup> To date, efforts to develop evidence in support of AVRR programmes have been rare,<sup>19</sup> and those that exist have often captured an incomplete picture of migrants’ experiences after return. Most have focused on the economic dimension of reintegration,<sup>20</sup> and some on social or psychosocial aspects,<sup>21</sup> but few studies or evaluations have tried to look at reintegration holistically.<sup>22</sup> Evaluations also tend to focus on reintegration outcomes, with limited attention paid to the process leading to those outcomes. Finally, most reports and assessments look at the impact of reintegration assistance on individual returnees, leaving its effects on broader communities in countries of return underexplored.

This report examines what is and is not known about migrant reintegration after voluntary return. It does so by highlighting the different areas of reintegration assistance—economic, psychosocial, and social—and discussing how to address pressing needs for further evidence in the return and reintegration field. This work draws on four workshops co-organised by ERRIN and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe between February and May 2021 during which representatives of EU+ Member States, the European Commission, and Frontex discussed their evidence needs related to the economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions of reintegration assistance. The report first explores the key dimensions of reintegration and outline existing research gaps, illustrating the strong need for more and better monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This is followed by suggestions on how European policymakers and their partners can develop systems to embed evidence into reintegration programmes.

16 European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), ‘What We Do: Joint Reintegration Programmes’, accessed 13 December 2021.

17 Frontex, ‘Call for Proposals for the Establishment of Framework Partnership Agreements with Reintegration Partners Providing Reintegration Services to Non-EU Nationals Returning to Their Countries of Origin’, updated 5 November 2021.

18 European Commission, ‘The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration’.

19 These include the *Guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluation of AVR(R) Programmes* developed by the European Migration Network (EMN) in 2016, and efforts by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in cooperation with Samuel Hall, to improve the evidence base on reintegration programmes through the Mediterranean Sustainable Reintegration (MEASURE) Project. See EMN, *Guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluating AVR(R) Programmes* (Brussels: EMN, 2016); Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards for an Integrated Approach to Reintegration: Summary Report* (Geneva: IOM, 2017).

20 See, for example, Samuel Hall and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan* (N.p.: Samuel Hall and GIZ, 2020); Mary Boatemaa Setrana, ‘Back Home at Last! Factors Influencing Return and Reintegration of Ghanaian Returnees’, *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 11, no. 1 (2017): 27–46; Laurence Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan. External Evaluation* (N.p.: IOM, 2007); Olga Evans and Laura Powlton, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2005: A Process and Impact Assessment* (London: Home Office, UK Border Agency, 2010).

21 Tania Ghanem, ‘When Forced Migrants Return “Home”: The Psychosocial Difficulties Returnees Encounter in the Reintegration Process’ (working paper no. 16, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, October 2003); Nassim Majidi, ‘Assuming Reintegration, Experiencing Dislocation: Returns from Europe to Afghanistan’, *International Migration* 59, no. 2 (2020): 186–201.

22 Examples of studies that have looked at reintegration holistically include Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants* (Geneva: IOM, 2015); Rued Ruben, Marieke van Houte, and Tine Davids, ‘What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre- and Post-Return Assistance’, *International Migration Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 908–37; Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees: Study on Reintegration Outcomes through a Comparative Lens* (Geneva: IOM, 2020).



## 2 What Is Successful Reintegration and How Is It Achieved?

While the group of EU Member States investing, or showing an active interest, in reintegration assistance has steadily grown, a consensus is yet to emerge among stakeholders on what constitutes successful reintegration and how to attain it. Policy and programme documents are often vague in how they describe the ultimate objectives of reintegration activities, and different actors have different working definitions for key terms such as ‘sustainable reintegration’.<sup>23</sup> This has given way to a plethora of approaches across the European Union and to divergent understandings of when, where, and how reintegration support is to be offered to returnees.

The lack of consensus partly stems from the stakeholders’ different agendas. Many policymakers see reintegration activities as a way to incentivise return and are inclined to consider the uptake of return as the main lens through which to measure success.<sup>24</sup> Others seek to leverage reintegration to advance development in migrants’ countries of origin and, thus, are looking for ways to align reintegration activities with sustainable development goals.<sup>25</sup> And for a number of stakeholders, particularly in destination countries, reintegration is considered successful if returnees are less likely to emigrate again—a link embodied by the idea of ‘sustainable return’.<sup>26</sup> Yet, this definition has been contested by researchers, practitioners, and some donors. Critics argue that some returnees may stay in their countries of origin but still not be included in their local community,<sup>27</sup> and other returnees may successfully reintegrate into local communities but choose to remigrate seeking better opportunities.<sup>28</sup>

23 For an overview of some definitions adopted by EU Member States and international organisations, see OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*, 66; Samuel Hall, *Study on Return, Readmission and Reintegration Programmes in Africa* (N.p.: ICMPD, African Union, and European Commission, 2021), 9.

24 The EU programme Return, Reintegration, and Reception of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan (RANA), for instance, had as one of its objectives the return of 5,000 Afghans over a 15-month period. See Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals*. Also mentioned in OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.

25 For instance, according to GIZ’s definition of sustainable reintegration, returnees and members of receiving communities must have equal access to social services and the labour market. For the African Union, ‘reintegration refers to the process of reincorporating a person into their community or state of origin, and may, inter alia, involve socioeconomic assistance and cooperation with the community the person is returning to’. See OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*, 66; African Union, *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018 – 2030). Executive Summary* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission and AU Department for Social Affairs, 2018), 5.

26 For instance, EMN publications on return and reintegration often make reference to ‘sustainable return’, rather than sustainable reintegration. See, for instance, EMN, ‘Challenges and Good Practices in the Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants to Western Africa’ (EMN Inform, European Commission, January 2015). Another example is the case of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), which considers reintegration sustainable if returnees remain in their country of origin for at least three years after return. See OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.

27 Ana Fonseca, Laurence Hart, and Susanne Klink, *Reintegration: Effective Approaches* (Geneva: IOM, 2015); Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*.

28 IOM, *Sustainable Reintegration Knowledge Bites Series: Introduction to the Series* (Geneva: IOM, 2020); Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*.

Despite these differences, countries of destination and origin, AVRR implementing partners, and scholars have increasingly adopted a multidimensional definition of successful reintegration, with an emphasis on sustainability.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) asserts that reintegration can be durable only if a level of reinclusion of returnees is achieved across economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions.<sup>30</sup> Other actors consider additional dimensions—such as political and civic inclusion, or safety and security—key components of sustainable reintegration as well.<sup>31</sup> These multifaceted definitions reflect the complexity of the reintegration process, which is affected by a multiplicity of individual and contextual factors.<sup>32</sup> The UN Network on Migration, supporting the operationalisation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, has sought to build on these trends and develop a common understanding of sustainable reintegration across countries and institutions, though this definition is yet to be widely shared.<sup>33</sup>

This diversity of definitions has led to the use of different metrics to capture success. Several evaluations and studies have used (the absence of) remigration or the intention among returnees to migrate again as the key indicator for measuring AVRR programmes' achievements,<sup>34</sup> while other actors take into consideration broader economic, social, and psychosocial indicators.<sup>35</sup> As several scholars have emphasised, the lack of a common conceptual framework significantly hinders attempts to compare the effects of different interventions and to develop global lessons learnt that can improve reintegration activities.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, most

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*Without systematic monitoring, stakeholders are likely to continue to use working definitions and markers of success based on their own views of reintegration and on anecdotal stories rather robust data and research.*

reintegration programmes produce limited monitoring data, which makes it difficult to unpack whether and how such programmes achieve their reintegration objectives. Without systematic monitoring, stakeholders are likely to continue to use working definitions and markers of success based on their own views of

29 Sustainability is a broader concept than successful reintegration; reintegration could be successful in the short term but not sustainable over a longer period. However, given actors in the field often refer to 'sustainable reintegration', this report uses the terms interchangeably.

30 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*.

31 For instance, a 2021 authored by Samuel Hall and published by ICMPD, the European Union, and the African Union states that sustainable reintegration can be achieved 'when returnees can rely on expanded capabilities to attain a stable, safe, and dignified life of economic self-sufficiency, psychosocial well-being, political, social, and civil inclusion'. GIZ has developed a working definition of sustainable reintegration based on the 'equal participation of returnees and host communities in the social, economic, and political/legal spheres'. Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder have also included security-safety criteria in their index for measuring sustainable reintegration. See OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*, 66; Samuel Hall, *Study on Return, Readmission and Reintegration Programmes in Africa*, 10; Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*.

32 Ine Lietaert and Katie Kuschminder, 'Contextualizing and Conceptualizing Reintegration Processes in the Context of Return', *International Migration* 59, no. 2 (2021): 140–47.

33 The network defines sustainable reintegration as 'a process which enables individuals to secure and sustain the political, economic, social, and psychosocial conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood, and dignity in the country and community they return or are returned to, in full respect of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights' and that 'requires targeted measures'. See UN Network on Migration, 'Ensuring Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration' (position paper, United Nations, March 2021).

34 See, for example, 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: ICMPD, 2015).

35 See, for instance, Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*; Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees*; Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'

36 Lietaert and Kuschminder, 'Contextualizing and Conceptualizing Reintegration Processes'; Giulia Scalettari and Flore Gubert, 'Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges', *International Migration* 57, no. 4 (2019): 91–104.

reintegration and on anecdotal stories rather robust data and research—a status quo that risks failing to help returnees achieve successful reintegration by not fully understanding how it works.

Drawing on the IOM definition of sustainable reintegration as the integration of returning migrants into local communities across economic, psychosocial, and social dimensions, this section explores what the existing literature tells us about what successful reintegration is and identifies critical knowledge gaps.

## BOX 1

### Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) Programmes

AVRR programmes provide reintegration assistance to migrants who return to their country of origin (or to a third country). Reintegration assistance may be provided in kind or in cash, and it often involves services such as business start-up grants, housing assistance, or legal counselling. The eligibility criteria vary between countries of destination, but programmes generally target migrants without legal immigration status and asylum seekers whose claims have been denied or who are unlikely to gain refugee status. Some initiatives focus on the reintegration needs of specific vulnerable groups, such as victims of trafficking, unaccompanied minors, or people with disabilities. Most programmes are open only to migrants who accept return—an approach that seeks to incentivise voluntary, or obliged, returns—while a minority of programmes provide aid to migrants forced to return.

In the European Union, most EU Member States have created AVRR programmes. These programmes are financially supported by the European Union, which covered an estimated 75 per cent of all costs under the multiannual financial framework for 2014–20. Which countries of origin these programmes target varies between donor countries, often depending on historical ties and migration patterns. For instance, the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) operates programmes in the Western Balkans, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, the Maghreb, and West Africa, among others.

The majority of donor countries rely on implementing partners in countries of origin to deliver reintegration services on the ground. These partners range from international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), to large civil-society organisations such as Caritas, to small local partners, including nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), private actors, and chambers of commerce. EU Member States may also provide pre-return counselling and often rely on NGOs (such as Red Acoge in Spain or the Swedish Red Cross in Sweden) to do so. Some European countries, such as Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom, cooperate with diasporas to disseminate information about AVRR programmes among immigrant communities. While the involvement of origin-country authorities remains rare, EU Member States and the European Commission are increasingly looking to engage them in the reintegration of their nationals—as evidenced in the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.

Sources: Organisation for Economic cooperation and Development (OECD), *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020); 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); ERRIN, 'Where We Work', accessed 10 November 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).

## A. *Prioritising livelihoods: Economic reintegration assistance*

Economic reintegration refers to migrants attaining economic self-sufficiency upon return by accessing sustainable livelihoods.<sup>37</sup> Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers usually consider this economic dimension pivotal to the reintegration process, and donors have long focused on providing support in this area.<sup>38</sup> Economic reintegration has also been prioritised, almost to the exclusion of other areas, because of the perception among destination countries that income-generating activities can help offset pressure on returnees to migrate again. The importance attached to economic reintegration is evidenced by the ubiquity of economic-related activities in European AVRR programmes: while initiatives differ widely, economic reintegration support is often the common denominator.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the available research—which is also skewed towards a focus on economic reintegration—falls short of providing conclusive evidence as to which approaches are the most effective, and in which contexts.

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*While initiatives differ widely, economic reintegration support is often the common denominator.*

### Why does economic reintegration matter?

Migrants often struggle economically upon their return, with difficulties securing employment or starting a business.<sup>40</sup> For instance, in a 2009 study involving 178 returnees in six countries, 80 per cent of the returnees had difficulties accessing a stable income and employment.<sup>41</sup> These challenges mainly stem from migrants'

37 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*, 57; Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'. Some authors also include material conditions such as housing in their definition of economic reintegration. For instance, Marie-Laurence Flahaux states that the economic dimension 'refers to the sufficiency and stability of income, housing, access to employment, and dependency vis-à-vis the family or other people'. See Marie-Laurence Flahaux, 'Home, Sweet Home? The Effect of Return Migration Support Mechanisms on Reintegration', *Espace Populations Sociétés* 1 (2017). However, the present report uses 'economic reintegration' to refer to employment and income stability, and housing will be treated as part of the social dimension of reintegration.

38 For instance, IOM asserts that 'without access to income-generating activities that allows returnees to meet their and their dependents' basic needs, it is difficult for return to become successful'. See Fonseca, Hart, and Klink, *Reintegration: Effective Approaches*, 13. Sweden considers sustainable reintegration to have been achieved when 'there is no remigration and the returning migrant is able to economically support him or herself'. For Belgium, this happens when returnees have an income and a place in their community. See OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*, 66.

39 Two mapping studies published in 2011 and 2012 by the European Commission and the EMN found that most EU Member States at the time offered economic assistance. The situation has not changed in the last decade; a 2020 OECD study focusing on eight European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) also found that economic reintegration support was a key pillar of these countries' AVRR programmes. See European Commission, ECRE, ICMPD, and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices*; EMN, *Programmes and Strategies in the EU Member States Fostering Assisted Return to and Reintegration in Third Countries* (Brussels: European Commission, 2011); OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.

40 Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'; Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*; Anda M. David, 'Back to Square One: Socioeconomic Integration of Deported Migrants', *International Migration Review* 51, no. 1 (2017): 127–54

41 Returnees included in the study either applied for asylum in Western countries or lived there illegally and had to return because they could not acquire a permanent stay permit in their host country. The returnees' countries of origin included Afghanistan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Vietnam. See Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'. In turn, returnees themselves have emphasised the importance of gaining access to economic opportunities. For example, most Afghan returnees surveyed in a 2019 study listed economic-related goals, such as financial independence, as their main long-term objective. And a study of the German programme StarthilfePlus found that employment-related assistance was a major concern for returnees, with almost 60 per cent of those surveyed stating that they would like to receive further support in finding a job or starting a business. See Martin Schmitt, Maria Bitterwolf, and Tatjana Baraulina, *Assisted Return from Germany: Motives and Reintegration* (Nuremberg: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2020), 6; Samuel Hall and GIZ, *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan*.



lack of professional networks and skills that are in demand in the communities to which they return—and, often, to a local economy with limited job opportunities and an unfavourable business climate. For many returnees, their economic situation after return is worse than it was before they emigrated, especially if they sold assets or even went into debt to finance their migration journey.<sup>42</sup> The instability fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated these problems.<sup>43</sup> The unprecedented return of thousands of migrants to some countries in just a few months, along with the impacts of lockdown measures and business closures, have further constrained returnees' access to economic opportunities. For example, in a survey conducted by IOM in Cambodia, 95 per cent of returnees said finding a job was their main challenge.<sup>44</sup> And while these difficulties are shared by many returnees, they are often particularly acute for vulnerable groups, such as women, older migrants, and forced returnees.<sup>45</sup>

### Toolbox of economic reintegration activities

To address these economic needs, donors, implementing partners, civil-society organisations, as well as national and local authorities in countries of origin have deployed a range of initiatives targeting returnees and, sometimes, the broader communities to which they return. At present, the most common activity among AVRR programmes is support for setting up a small business. This has also been shown to be the preferred form of assistance among returnees.<sup>46</sup> In addition, most AVRR programmes provide job placement support and vocational training, and some offer access to microcredit.<sup>47</sup> The exact nature of these activities differs significantly in practice. Some interventions provide business training and mentoring, while others do not have any training component.<sup>48</sup> And job placement activities range from apprenticeships to career guidance or cash-for-work schemes.

The assistance can be provided either directly or through referrals, for instance to local employment agencies or job placement companies. Some programmes only offer in-kind assistance, whereas others

42 Ali Ahmad, *From Austria to Afghanistan: Forced Return and a New Migration Cycle* (Vienna: Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation, 2021); Arne Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What? Review of the Voluntary Return Programme to Afghanistan* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2008).

43 Camille Le Coz and Kathleen Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

44 IOM Cambodia, *Cambodia - Returning Migrants Survey* (Phnom Penh: IOM Cambodia, 2020). And in Kyrgyzstan, a study found that the pandemic had a devastating effect on the economic opportunities of returnees, with almost 65 per cent unemployed. In addition, for more than half of those who had a job, the pandemic had led to a decrease in working hours and salary. See IOM, *Kyrgyzstan: Study on the Socioeconomic Effects of Covid-19 on Returnees* (Bishkek: IOM Kyrgyzstan Country Office, 2021).

45 For instance, a study in Ecuador showed that women and elderly returnees were less likely to join the labour market quickly upon return. And in Kyrgyzstan, a study found that 72 per cent of female returnees struggled to find a job, compared to 58 per cent of male returnees. See Marion Mercier, Anda David, Ramón Mahia, and Rafael de Arce, 'Reintegration upon Return: Insights from Ecuadorian Returnees from Spain', *International Migration* 54, no. 6 (2016); IOM, *Kyrgyzstan: Study on the Socioeconomic Effects*. Migrants who feel forced or compelled to return also generally experience worse labour integration outcomes than migrants who want to return. According to a study that analysed the economic reintegration of migrants forced to return to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—including those forcibly deported and others compelled to return due to administrative problems (e.g., lack or nonrenewal of residence permit)—53 per cent of returnees declared that their economic situation had worsened since they first left the country. Moreover, these returnees were substantially more likely than migrants who returned willingly to be unemployed upon return, pointing to the crucial role that preparation and willingness to return play in reintegration outcomes. See David, 'Back to Square One', 133.

46 Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*

47 These activities commonly used in EU Member State programmes mirror ERRIN service specifications for service providers and the IOM *Reintegration Handbook*, which lists these three main components of economic reintegration assistance. Some programmes also provide cash assistance, but this only covers basic needs upon arrival rather than long-term economic reintegration. See Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*; Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals*.

48 Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*

combine it with cash grants.<sup>49</sup> The amount also varies depending on the programme and the country of return,<sup>50</sup> as does the moment within the return and reintegration process when assistance is provided. For example, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) offers skills trainings prior to return for migrants who want to set up a business upon arrival, whereas other organisations run such projects only after migrants' return.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to these schemes for individual returnees, a few donors and their partners provide economic support that benefits the broader communities to which migrants are returning. In Guinea, for instance, IOM implemented a cash-for-work programme under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration that brought together returnees and other community members to clean beaches and public spaces.<sup>52</sup> These projects can even be linked to climate change adaptation and broader development goals. For example, in Niger a community initiative launched in 2018 employed returnees and other community members in land restoration efforts designed to counter the negative effects of climate change and desertification.<sup>53</sup>

### The mixed results of initiatives to date

Monitoring data are lacking on reintegration initiatives overall, but the information that does exist indicates that economic support activities do help smooth the reintegration process. A study conducted by IOM in collaboration with Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex surveyed returnees in 17 countries of origin and found that the provision of training, business creation support, and financial services had positive effects on their reintegration outcomes.<sup>54</sup> Evidence on the connection between reintegration assistance and waged employment is not as strong, though another study (of returnees from Spain to Ecuador) found that returnees who received reintegration assistance and were employed would likely have been unemployed if they had not received the assistance.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, emerging research points to a range of issues in the design and implementation of reintegration programmes that can hamper returnees' sustained employment or entrepreneurship, and that merit further analysis. To name just a few:

- ▶ Returnees are sometimes pushed into entrepreneurship even if they would prefer job placement assistance.
- ▶ Service partners may overestimate the viability of returnees' business plans, or skim over their weaknesses.

49 OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*; Awa Ly and Marion Grégoire, *Mapping System of Stakeholders and Return and Reintegration Assistance: Cameroon, Mali, Morocco, and Senegal* (N.p.: OFII, European Commission, and ERRIN, 2020).

50 Ly and Grégoire, *Mapping System*.

51 OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.

52 IOM, 'Reintegration Good Practice #1 – Cash-for-Work, Guinea' (fact sheet, March 2020).

53 The project brings together service providers with the Regional Directorate for Agriculture and local and community leaders. See IOM, *Addressing the Land Degradation–Migration Nexus: The Role of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* (Geneva: IOM, 2019), 26.

54 Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees*, 16. Other relevant research includes a study in Ecuador that analysed the situation of both beneficiaries and returnees who had not received reintegration support; the study found that access to reintegration assistance was robustly linked to entrepreneurship and satisfaction. See Mercier, David, Mahia, and de Arce, 'Reintegration upon Return'.

55 Mercier, David, Mahia, and de Arce, 'Reintegration upon Return'.

- ▶ The start-up grant model sometimes overlooks the specific challenges female entrepreneurs face.<sup>56</sup>
- ▶ The grants made available to returnees are often insufficient to launch a sustainable business.<sup>57</sup>

A 2008 evaluation of a Norwegian programme in Afghanistan illustrates several of these issues. It found that, despite the programme offering a menu of economic activities to returnees, in practice the service provider only activated the entrepreneurship option. Several returnees were encouraged to start a business even though they would have preferred job placement or training.<sup>58</sup> The evaluation also highlighted how the high rates of success IOM staff estimated for returnees' businesses two and three months after they started rapidly dwindled.<sup>59</sup> The fact that quick, short-term gains do not necessarily translate into long-term economic stability is likely related to another shortcoming of economic reintegration activities: training and business packages often do not sufficiently take into account local market conditions.<sup>60</sup>

### Moving towards a better understanding of economic reintegration

Despite the large volume of EU-funded economic activities, the evidence on what works, how economic reintegration interlinks with the psychosocial and social dimensions (see Box 2), and the impacts on communities of origin and broader development objectives remains surprisingly weak. First, there is limited knowledge about the differential impacts of different types of reintegration activities.<sup>61</sup> Only a few studies have assessed what works best, such as the aforementioned study by IOM, Samuel Hall, and the University of Sussex, which found that returnees benefiting from financial services (e.g., start-up grants) enjoyed better economic outcomes than those who received training.<sup>62</sup> This topic merits further research, as does the question of how, when, and where reintegration activities perform best. For instance, it would be useful to test when to kick off reintegration support, and to what extent starting a

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*The evidence on what works, how economic reintegration interlinks with the psychosocial and social dimensions, and the impacts on communities of origin and broader development objectives remains surprisingly weak.*

56 The 2018 evaluation of a Swiss AVRR programme documented how women may face more constraints or enjoy fewer opportunities in certain countries. See Bawélé Tchalim, *2018 Monitoring Report. RAS – Reintegration Assistance from Switzerland* (Bern: IOM Coordination Office for Switzerland, 2018).

57 Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals*; Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?* Returnees regularly report that the support they receive is not sufficient to achieve long-term reintegration. According to an evaluation analysing the UK AVRR programme, more than two-thirds of returnees surveyed in Pakistan and Zimbabwe declared that the assistance they received did not provide a basis for long-term reintegration. See Evans and Powlton, *The VARRP 2005*.

58 Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*

59 At the time of the evaluation, slightly more than half of the 27 respondents declared that their business was still functioning. See Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*

60 For instance, a returnee in Nigeria pointed to difficulties finding a job due to the training received: 'You know beadwork is not a skill that they can use to employ you in many places'. Evaluations of reintegration programmes in Afghanistan have also found that returnees' business choices are not always well-informed, and they sometimes enter sectors where competition is very strong. See Uwafiokun Idemudia, Nnenna Okoli, Mary Goitom, and Sylvia Bawa, 'Life after Trafficking: Reintegration Experiences of Human Trafficking Survivors in Nigeria', *International Journal of Migration, Health, and Social Care* 17, no. 4 (2021): 455; Tchalim, *2018 Monitoring Report*.

61 Scalettaris and Gubert, 'Return Schemes from European Countries'; Flahaux, 'Home, Sweet Home?'

62 Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees*. Another study assessing the situation of 178 returnees in six countries found that assistance to set up a business was more effective than any other type of support. See Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'

business plan in the predeparture phase or adding a training component to the entrepreneurship package positively affects programme outcomes.<sup>63</sup>

## BOX 2

### One Outcome on Three Fronts: The Interconnectedness of Reintegration Dimensions

Reintegration is a multidimension process, and the impacts of reintegration support in one area spill over into other dimensions. Therefore, more information is needed about the interconnectedness of the economic, social, and psychosocial aspects of reintegration. So far, only a limited number of studies have attempted to fill this knowledge gap. For example, a study focusing on migrants returning to Kosovo found that returnees who did not benefit from adequate housing and support from families and friends experienced negative impacts on their business initiatives and overall health. Some evaluations have also explored the relationship between psychosocial struggles and weak rule of law—a factor that falls under the social dimension of reintegration. Returnees from the United Kingdom and Norway to Iraqi Kurdistan, for instance, saw their employability adversely affected by corruption, leading some to feel alienated from society and to have a diminished sense of belonging. Further evidence on the nature and extent of interconnections between reintegration's multiple dimensions will be important to help programme designers and implementer make informed decisions about how best to support returnees.

Sources: Aliriza Arenliu and Stevan M. Weine, 'Reintegrating Returned Migrants to Kosovo', *Psychological Research* 19 (2016); Erlend Paasche, 'The Role of Corruption in Reintegration: Experiences of Iraqi Kurds upon Return from Europe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 7 (2016).

More research is also needed to understand how AVRR programmes affect broader communities of return. Most evaluations focus on direct beneficiaries and do not explore how migrants' return and access to reintegration assistance have affected other community members, including in terms of economic stability, gender dynamics, and psychological well-being.<sup>64</sup> There is also limited evidence on the risk that reintegration assistance may create tensions within communities, if returnees receive economic assistance while other groups with similar needs do not.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, reintegration actors who want to experiment with community-based approaches have little evidence to support their work. Few studies have analysed how economic reintegration assistance can benefit communities of return by creating opportunities for nonreturnees or gearing returnees' activities towards community-based projects. It is also unknown how these approaches, often less tailored-made than individual support packages, affect individual reintegration outcomes. Finally, the linkages between returnees' reintegration and community economic development could be further explored, particularly to test how reintegration activities could be better integrated into local and national development strategies.

A final knowledge gap relates to the challenges of measuring the impact of external factors on returnees' economic reintegration outcomes and of gauging the extent to which programmes can counter negative externalities. A few studies have tried to do so, for instance by comparing the situation of AVRR beneficiaries

63 Some case studies documented by IOM suggest predeparture training can play a critical role in facilitating reintegration. See IOM, 'Reintegration Good Practice #7 – Pre-Departure Reintegration Assistance in Morocco: Orientation, Counselling and Training' (fact sheet, May 2020).

64 For example, this 2015 evaluation of an AVRR programme in Libya only relied on interviews with returnees (and a very small sample, 10 out of the 790 beneficiaries). See Altai Consulting, *Evaluation of IOM RAVL* (N.p.: IOM, 2015). On the effects of migration and gender dynamics, see, for instance, Ruhi Khalid, 'Changes in Perception of Gender Roles: Returned Migrants', *Pakistan Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 9 (2011): 16–20.

65 This report on community-based reintegration, for example, briefly alludes to this risk: IOM, *Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Community-Based Approaches* (Rabat: IOM, 2019).



with that of nonbeneficiaries.<sup>66</sup> Such information is particularly relevant in fragile contexts, where the challenges returnees face are not only economic but also the result of poor governance and insecurity. For instance, research found that in Iraq and Afghanistan, widespread corruption and nepotism partly explained the limited impact of economic assistance to returning migrants.<sup>67</sup> This also creates challenges regarding how to deliver reintegration assistance and which partners to rely on.

In short, even when it comes to economic reintegration—the dimension of reintegration that is the most funded and the most studied—many fundamental questions remain. Better monitoring data and analysis should help set realistic expectations as to what can be achieved, improve understanding of what approaches are best suited to which contexts, and lead to better assessments of the impact of economic reintegration activities that make it possible to hold service partners and other stakeholders accountable.

## B. *Belonging at home: Psychosocial reintegration*

Psychosocial reintegration is another key dimension of reintegration. It encompasses the ability of returnees to feel safe and at home in the community to which they return, and it has direct effects on returnees' well-being and ability to reconnect with local social networks.<sup>68</sup> However, this dimension has long been neglected by policymakers and practitioners, and researchers have not studied it thoroughly. As a result, AVRR programmes have often overlooked psychosocial support and not offered adequate counselling or community engagement activities.<sup>69</sup> Recently, this has started to change, with service partners such as IOM and Caritas becoming more active in advocating for and delivering psychosocial assistance. IOM has even put together a set of guidelines for delivering psychosocial support to returnees.<sup>70</sup> These efforts are encouraging, but they operate without sufficient evidence, due to a lack of experience in this area and rigorous assessment of past activities that did have a psychosocial component, as well as the intangible nature of psychosocial well-being, which makes it more difficult to monitor than some other reintegration outcomes.

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*AVRR programmes have often overlooked psychosocial support and not offered adequate counselling or community engagement activities. Recently, this has started to change.*

66 See, for instance, Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*. Similarly, an evaluation of Swiss reintegration assistance in seven origin countries suggested that due to external factors, the assistance was unlikely to achieve the long-term economic reintegration of beneficiaries, but that it still contributed to their economic reintegration and gave them a good start. See Daniel Kessler et al., *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration. External Evaluation* (Bern: Swiss Federal Office for Migration, 2013).

67 Erlend Paasche, 'The Role of Corruption in Reintegration: Experiences of Iraqi Kurds upon Return from Europe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 7 (2016). Another study of returnees in Afghanistan found that all the AVRR beneficiaries surveyed had to rely on personal networks to obtain a job, and that the assistance had thus not proved helpful in fostering their labour market integration. See Ahmad, *From Austria to Afghanistan*.

68 As such, psychosocial reintegration refers both to returnees' mental health and to their collective, or social, experiences. See Francisco José Eiroa-Orosa, 'Understanding Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Context of Complex and Multidimensional Problems', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 16 (2020).

69 See, for example, Judith Möllers, Diana Traikova, Thomas Herzfeld, and Egzon Bajrami, 'Involuntary Return Migration to Kosovo: Tackling Challenges for Successful Reintegration' (IAMO policy brief no. 33, Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies, Halle-Saale, Germany, 2017). While this study focuses primarily on involuntary returnees, the study states that 'despite significant reintegration problems, the outreach of assistance measures was found to be relatively low, and much too low in critical areas such as health and psychosocial treatment'.

70 EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, *A Psychosocial Approach to Reintegration Counselling* (Brussels and Geneva: European Union and IOM, 2020).

## What types of psychosocial reintegration support are needed?

While it can be difficult to document, the mental health of many migrants is often negatively affected by the experience of return. This can manifest in various forms, such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, and it is especially common among returnees who have experienced abuse during their migration journey or in the country of destination.<sup>71</sup> For example, a 2015 evaluation conducted by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior found that more than one-third of returnees to Kosovo showed symptoms of depression, while 15 per cent reported signs of severe depression.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, in a survey of returnees to Afghanistan, 84 out of 98 interviewees indicated suffering from at least one mental health issue.<sup>73</sup>

These mental health challenges are often associated with feelings of alienation, as returnees struggle to reconnect with and be accepted by their community of origin.<sup>74</sup> This may be due to changes in the country that occurred while they were away, migrants' struggles to reconnect with what they used to but may no longer consider 'home', or tensions if they are perceived as having returned empty handed.<sup>75</sup> In Togo, for instance, returnees interviewed for one study said that, due to their time spent living abroad, their ties with their community of origin were not as strong as they used to be, leading 60 per cent of them to feel disappointed and misunderstood.<sup>76</sup> This uneasiness has ramifications for efforts to support returnees' broader reintegration, by hampering returnees' ability to engage in economic activities, for example (see Box 2).<sup>77</sup>

## Toolbox of psychosocial reintegration activities

While the range of psychosocial support activities developed for returnees is more limited than those focusing on economic reintegration, some have nevertheless been tested, both predeparture and after arrival. Before return, this support may include individual counselling and activities fostering engagement between returnees and their relatives, previous returnees, and/or members of the community of origin.<sup>78</sup>

71 Prolonged headaches, fatigue, memory and attention deficit, and physical and temporal disorientation are commonly reported by returnees. See Lineth Bustamante, Raphael Cerqueira, Emilie Leclerc, and Elisa Brietzke, 'Stress, Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Migrants: A Comprehensive Review', *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 40, no. 2 (2018).

72 In this evaluation, 36 per cent of returnees also reported a worsening of their physical health after return. See Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*.

73 Samuel Hall and GIZ, *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan*. In a 2013 report focused on Armenia, 56 per cent of returnees suffered from stress-related afflictions due to traumatic experiences during their migration. See Haykanush Chobanyan, *Return Migration and Reintegration Issues: Armenia* (San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2013).

74 Ghanem, 'When Forced Migrants Return "Home"'. For a discussion of the importance of returnees connecting with and being accepted by communities of return, see Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*, 86–96.

75 As a migrant returning to her home country after spending several years in Germany put it, 'people here are completely different from me. I cannot relate to them.' See Ulrich von Lersner, Thomas Elbert, and Frank Neuner, 'Mental Health of Refugees Following State-Sponsored Repatriation from Germany', *BMC Psychiatry* 8, no. 88 (2008). See also Diana Geraci, *Facing Return: An Approach for Psychosocial Assistance to (Former) Asylum Seekers and Undocumented Migrants* (Utrecht: Pharos, 2011); Bustamante, Cerqueira, Leclerc, and Brietzke, 'Stress, Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Migrants'. For other examples of how an inability to connect to home affects mental health, see Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*; Chobanyan, *Return Migration and Reintegration Issues*.

76 Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'. Similarly, returnees from Europe to Afghanistan whose ties to their communities of origin have weakened have been described as struggling to connect back to the networks in their communities of return, and they cannot always rely on family or friends to provide support. See Majidi, 'Assuming Reintegration, Experiencing Dislocation'.

77 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*.

78 As a result, returnees from Belgium to Ecuador proved to be better prepared to start their reintegration. See European Commission, ECRE, ICMPD, and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices*.

The goal is to help returnees prepare for the opportunities and challenges ahead and to manage their expectations for life after return.<sup>79</sup> In Belgium, psychosocial support is embedded in return counselling, and staff discuss with migrants early on the difficulties they are likely to face after return.<sup>80</sup> The programme also assists returnees in connecting with family members and service providers in their countries of origin.<sup>81</sup> Some initiatives provide extra support to particularly vulnerable groups. For instance, in the Netherlands, returning unaccompanied minors received extra counselling to prepare them for their departure, as well as briefings by previous returnees and partner organisations that help track down family contacts in their countries of origin.<sup>82</sup> Finally, the predeparture phase can sometimes be an opportunity to identify returnees' specific reintegration support needs. For example, also in the Netherlands, a project implemented by the Dutch Council for Refugees ensures that a careful mapping of solutions relevant to psychosocial (and other) aspects of reintegration is conducted prior to departure.<sup>83</sup>

After return, psychosocial support is typically provided at the individual level, through counselling, or via group support or activities that engage the broader community of origin, as represented in Figure 1 and described below:

- ▶ **Individual mental health assistance.** The most common form of support is to provide returnees access to a psychologist (or an adequate form of individual counselling), with assistance that ranges from one-time consultations to longer-term care, and sometimes clinical interventions. In Armenia, for example, an ERRIN-funded project established a Counselling and Referral Centre in cooperation with the Armenian Migration Service, which is part of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure. As of July 2021, the centre had hired a trained psychologist whose main tasks were to deliver psychological support and/or psychotherapy to returnees and to map mental health care services in the country.<sup>84</sup>
- ▶ **Group support and mentoring.** Service providers have also offered psychosocial support in the form of group talk or mentoring programmes, with the goal of showing returnees that the challenges they face are shared by others and helping them learn from each other's experiences. In Somalia, for instance, the Danish Refugee Council previously supported group meetings that brought together former and new returnees.<sup>85</sup> In the same vein, between 2018 and 2020, IOM piloted a mentoring programme in Guinea, Morocco, and Senegal that involved mentors who, among other things,

79 OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*.

80 Responses from a representative of Fedasil to a questionnaire developed by the authors, April 2021.

81 Responses from a representative of Fedasil to a questionnaire developed by the authors, April 2021.

82 Such preparations meant that bridges to family or social networks in the country of return could be built early, but also that migrants had time to mentally prepare for their return. See Richard Staring and José Aarts, 'Jong en Illegaal in Nederland' (report 1631b, Netherlands Research and Documentation Centre, 2010), 182.

83 Responses from a representative of the Repatriation and Departure Service in the Netherlands to a questionnaire developed by the authors, April 2021.

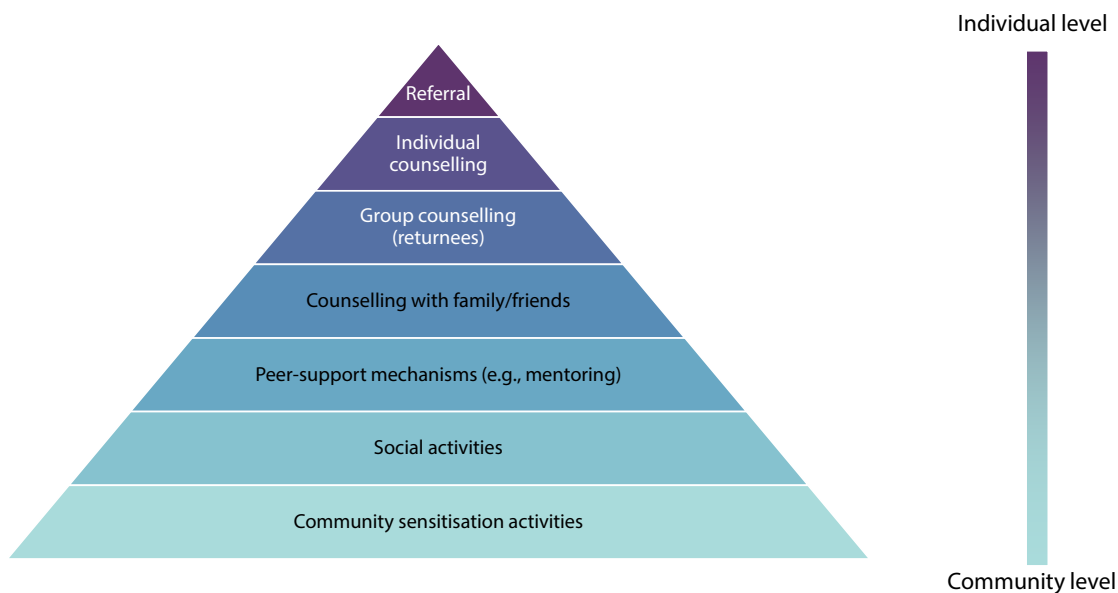
84 The psychologist also provides training to counsellors and case workers who can, in turn, offer further support. Moreover, if returnees in need cannot travel to attend sessions with the psychologist, they are referred to nearby mental health specialists. See ERRIN, 'Return and Reintegration of Migrants in Armenia', accessed 11 November 2021. Information was also gathered via author interview with a representative of the Migration Service of Armenia on 4 November 2021.

85 Responses from a representative of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration to a questionnaire developed by the authors, April 2021. Similarly, IOM previously designed a two-day orientation called 'New Life Beginning', during which returnees could talk about the challenges they faced and strategies for coping with them. See Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees*.

provided emotional support to returnees and helped them reconnect with their community.<sup>86</sup> Some initiatives have incorporated group-based psychosocial measures into other reintegration activities, often as a small add-on component. For example, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative in Nigeria and Senegal previously included group counselling sessions as part of vocational and business trainings.<sup>87</sup>

- ▶ **Engagements with communities of origin.** Some programmes target returnees’ family or their broader community, with the goal of raising awareness about migrants’ experiences, the legal system in Europe (and why migrants had to return), as well as the obstacles they face upon return.<sup>88</sup> For example, a project in Afghanistan that was supported by ERRIN between 2020 and 2021 organised a series of townhall meetings to disseminate information to returnees’ families and communities about what the return process from Europe entails and to try to combat the stigma attached to coming back.<sup>89</sup> Other activities, such as theatre and storytelling, can be used to share returnees’ stories and increase community cohesion.<sup>90</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
**Examples of Psychosocial Support Activities**



Source: Authors’ visualisation.

86 Samuel Hall and the University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees*.

87 European Commission, ‘EU-IOM Joint Initiative Celebrates Its Fourth Anniversary: A Lifeline to Vulnerable and Stranded Migrants amid COVID-19’ (press release, 22 December 2020).

88 The project, which included town halls with more than 500 total participants, helped family members of returnees understand the best ways to support their loved ones in the reintegration process. See Lapis Communications, *ERRIN Sustainable Reintegration in Afghanistan. Information Campaign – Raising Awareness on the Return Process. Final Report* (N.p.: Lapis Communications, 2021), 3.

89 Lapis Communications, *ERRIN Sustainable Reintegration in Afghanistan*. Other experiences have included family counselling (as provided by America–Spain Solidarity and Cooperation [AESCO] in Spain) or social activities with returnees, families, and friends (as tested under the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior’s ReKoKO project in Kosovo). ReKoKO held a series of cultural and sports events for family members and activities targeted at returnees’ children. See Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*. See also European Commission, ECRE, ICMPD, and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices*.

90 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*, 130.



## Moving towards a better understanding of psychosocial reintegration

The focus on economic reintegration has largely eclipsed the need to improve understanding of the psychosocial issues returnees face, as well as the most effective approaches to address them. A few tools exist to assess the psychosocial needs of returnees and, for example, the European Commission's reintegration information exchange system (known as the Reintegration Assistance Tool, or RIAT) aims to capture some of these details.<sup>91</sup> Still, there is a clear shortage of data and analysis on the psychosocial challenges returning migrants face. The COVID-19 pandemic, and signs that it is exacerbating mental health problems among returnees, has brought additional urgency to the issue.<sup>92</sup>

Research is also lacking on the situation of the most vulnerable groups—in particular, children and youth (including unaccompanied minors),<sup>93</sup> victims of trafficking, and victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

For example, there have been some efforts to better document the issues victims of trafficking face and the factors shaping their support needs (e.g., the type of exploitation experienced), but this body of work is still underdeveloped.<sup>94</sup> Another gap involves information

on conditions for minority groups, who may face additional difficulties reintegrating and, thus, experience additional pressure in an already stressful situation. This is true of, for example, migrants who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI), as research on the specific issues they face is extremely thin.

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*Another gap involves information on conditions for minority groups, who may face additional difficulties reintegrating and, thus, experience additional pressure in an already stressful situation.*

Ultimately, these research gaps reflect the difficulty of assessing the success of psychosocial activities, and of measuring returnees' psychosocial well-being more broadly. The few existing evaluations assess feelings of belonging,<sup>95</sup> social relationships and community embeddedness,<sup>96</sup> community perceptions of returnees,<sup>97</sup> or returnees' perceptions of their own psychological well-being.<sup>98</sup> Some studies, such as IOM evaluations based on IOM-Samuel Hall MEASURE indicators, also measure returnees' feelings of safety and security in the country of return.<sup>99</sup> Overall, however, evaluations that provide a comprehensive analysis of all these

91 ERRIN, 'Reintegration Assistance Tool – RIAT' (info sheet, March 2019).

92 Samuel Hall and GIZ, *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan*.

93 In Côte d'Ivoire, the IOM—in recognition of the importance of providing psychosocial assistance to minors—organises psychoeducational group sessions as well as individual sessions with a psychologist in an effort to improve well-being and strengthen resilience among these children and youth. Monitoring of these initiatives is carried out regularly by IOM staff. See Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*, 219.

94 In 2021, IOM sought to increase the body of evidence on the sustainable reintegration of victims of trafficking, in the context of the Cooperation on Migration and Partnerships to Achieve Sustainable Solutions (COMPASS) programme, funded by the Dutch government. See Sibylle Desjardins, 'Research and Development of a Monitoring Toolkit on the Sustainable Reintegration of Victims of Trafficking' (call for proposals, 20 May 2021). See also Sarah Craggs and Guglielmo Schinina, 'Mental Health of Victims of Trafficking: A Right, a Need and a Service', *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 25 (2016): 346.

95 Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*, 16.

96 Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards*; Chobanyan, *Return Migration and Reintegration Issues*, 9; Schmitt, Bitterwolf, and Baraulina, *Assisted Return from Germany*, 7.

97 Strand et al., *Return with Dignity, Return to What?*, 45.

98 Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*; Samuel Hall and GIZ, *Economic Opportunities for Returnees in Afghanistan*, 16.

99 Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards*.

challenges are rare. For instance, researchers studying the well-being of victims of trafficking in Nigeria found that while they had data on social and self-assessed well-being, their analysis was limited by the lack of information on other factors such as community perceptions of returnees.<sup>100</sup>

In turn, data and analysis fall short of providing a solid evidence base on how to deliver psychosocial support to returnees. Top questions that remain unanswered include when it should start, what it should entail, whether it should be delivered directly by the service partner and/or through referrals to specialised organisations, and how long it should last. An analysis by the EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub documented a lack of a significant statistical difference in the psychosocial reintegration outcomes of returnees receiving direct assistance and those receiving referrals, whereas satisfaction with economic or social assistance did decrease when referrals were used in place of direct support.<sup>101</sup> This is useful information, but further research that also look at the specific processes through which service providers offer assistance is needed to refine the evidence and identify programmatic implications.

### C. *Accessing local services and systems: Social reintegration*

Social reintegration is usually understood as migrants' access to key social services upon return, either through direct assistance or referral.<sup>102</sup> This includes access to legal documents (such as identity documents and birth certificates), education, housing, health care, social protection schemes, family tracing and reunification, and justice.<sup>103</sup> While most AVRR programmes offer some sort of social reintegration assistance, it is often overshadowed by economic reintegration measures, and little is known about what is needed and which activities work best and where.

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*While most AVRR programmes offer some sort of social reintegration assistance, it is often overshadowed by economic reintegration measures.*

#### **What is social reintegration, and why is it critical to the overall reintegration process?**

Social reintegration is a precondition for returnees to thrive in all aspects of life, whether by sending children to school, acquiring property, lodging a complaint if their rights are infringed upon, or seeking care from a doctor. Lack of access to social services can have important ripple effects. One type of barrier—such as issues obtaining identity documents—can hinder returnees' opportunities to get support in other areas, such as education and health care, and negatively affect their economic and psychosocial reintegration.

100 Olubukola Oke, Folake Lanre-Babalola, and Ruth Tom, 'Correlates of the Psychosocial Wellbeing of Human Trafficking Survivors in Lagos Estate, Nigeria', *African Journal for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* 21 (2018).

101 The study showed that returnees who received referrals for economic or social reintegration assistance have, on average, lower levels of satisfaction with the results compared to those who receive direct assistance. This was not the case for psychosocial assistance. See EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub, *Knowledge Bite #2- Sustainable Reintegration Outcomes Following Referrals for Reintegration Support* (Geneva: IOM, 2021).

102 It is important to note that some studies and evaluations use the term 'social reintegration' in a different manner, referring to returnees' reconnection to social networks. This report follows the IOM definition of the term, which conceives of social reintegration as access to social services and structures upon return.

103 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*.

Specifically, returnees may face the following challenges:

- ▶ **Documentation.** Returnees often lack identity documents or life event certificates (e.g., birth or marriage certificate) because of difficulties navigating administrative procedures, affording fees, or translating documents acquired abroad.<sup>104</sup> Such barriers are often worse for vulnerable groups, such as women and ethnic minorities. In Afghanistan, for example, only half of returnee women surveyed in a 2021 study had an official identification document.<sup>105</sup> And in the Western Balkans, ethnic minorities and Roma often return to informal settlements, lacking proof of address and other identification documents required to register for social services.<sup>106</sup> Without such documents, returnees may not be able to open a bank account, access education, work, vote, or seek medical help.<sup>107</sup> They are also more vulnerable to extortion, trafficking, child marriage, and family separation.<sup>108</sup>
- ▶ **Housing.** Access to safe and affordable housing plays a critical role in successful reintegration. In Ghana, for instance, returnees who owned houses were found to be significantly more likely to reintegrate successfully than those who did not.<sup>109</sup> However, many returnees have sold their houses or land to pay for their migration journey and, thus, must look for a new place to settle upon return.<sup>110</sup> Security deposits, the requirement of proof of employment, abusive rental practices, and discrimination can all make finding long-term housing difficult, particularly for ethnic minorities and other marginalised or vulnerable groups.<sup>111</sup> Some returnees manage to secure long-term housing thanks to support from family and friends—critical assistance in a time of need, but also a situation that can lead to interpersonal tensions if these relatives and friends do not understand why migrants have returned.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, even those who have access to housing may face poor living conditions. In Sudan, for instance, almost 20 per cent of returnees surveyed in a 2015 study rated the quality of their housing as bad or very bad.<sup>113</sup>

104 See, for instance, Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Syrian Refugees' Right to Legal Identity: Implications for Return' (policy brief, Norwegian Refugee Council, January 2017); Human Rights Watch, 'Coming Home: Return and Reintegration in Angola', *Human Rights Watch* 17, no. 2 (March 2005); World Bank, *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees in the Western Balkans* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2019); Danish Refugee Council et al., *Unprepared for (Re)Integration: Lessons Learnt from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas* (N.p.: Danish Refugee Council et al., 2019).

105 Lack of a proper marriage registration or certificate can also prevent widows or women separated from their husbands from claiming marital rights. See Danish Refugee Council et al., *Unprepared for (Re)Integration*.

106 World Bank, *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees*.

107 African Union, European Union, and IOM, 'AU-EU Technical Workshop on Reintegration within the Framework of the AU-EU-UN Taskforce to Address the Situation of Migrants in Libya' (report from a workshop in Addis Ababa, 27-28 November 2018). For instance, a 2005 report on migrants' return and reintegration to Angola showed that those who did not undergo a formal repatriation procedure encountered difficulties exercising their rights to work, vote, and access public education. See Human Rights Watch, 'Coming Home'.

108 Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Syrian Refugees' Right to Legal Identity'; Human Rights Watch, 'Coming Home'.

109 Similarly, in Kosovo, 'satisfaction with accommodation' was correlated with 'feeling at home' in a 2015 evaluation of the Austrian ReKoKO programme. See Setrana, 'Back Home at Last!'; Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*.

110 A study analysing the situation of 178 returnees in Afghanistan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Vietnam, for instance, found that only 21 per cent of respondents owned their own house, and almost 40 per cent lived in the homes of relatives two years after their return. Among those who were homeowners prior to their migration, only half still owned a house after their return. See Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'

111 See, for instance, Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*; World Bank, *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees*; Olga Evans, *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2006: A Process and Impact Assessment* (London: Home Office, UK Border Agency, 2010).

112 Ruben, van Houte, and Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants?'

113 Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*.

- ▶ **Education.** Children often encounter challenges continuing their education after returning to their countries of origin. In Afghanistan, for example, 61 per cent of returnee households in a 2015 survey sent all boys in the household to school, but a much smaller 37 per cent did so for all girls in the household.<sup>114</sup> Successful transitions between schools in different countries may be hindered by the need to provide school certificates from abroad or by the timing of a child's return (e.g., if it occurs in the middle of the school year).<sup>115</sup> In addition, some children face difficulties adapting to the new school system due to different standards of schooling and curricula, prejudice, or the language of instruction.<sup>116</sup> These issues have important repercussions for young returnees' access to higher education and professional opportunities.
  
- ▶ **Health care.** Returnees may face a number of issues related to accessing health care, including the distance between where returnees live and where health-care services are available, medical treatment fees, problems with registration, or even corruption in the health-care system.<sup>117</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has placed further strain on health systems in many countries, particularly low- and middle-income countries with limited health-care infrastructure, and their ability to provide health care to returnees has been constrained as a result.<sup>118</sup> Difficulty accessing or covering treatment can ultimately translate into barriers that prevent returnees from accessing employment,<sup>119</sup> hindering returnees' economic reintegration, further reducing their ability to cover medical costs, and thus fuelling a vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion.<sup>120</sup>
  
- ▶ **Social protection.** Social protection schemes, such as social security, state-supported health insurance, or food assistance programmes, can help returnees mitigate immediate difficulties and cover basic needs.<sup>121</sup> However, accessing these schemes can be challenging due to a lack of information about them, eligibility issues, and long and complex administrative procedures. In Albania, for instance, returned migrants who engage in rural-urban migration within the country are ineligible for social protections if they have not deregistered in the area to which they originally returned, or if they own (often unprofitable) land in their villages.<sup>122</sup> Migrants returning from a high-income country (where they had access to social protections) may also have expectations that do not match the assistance offered by the often-limited systems in their countries of origin.<sup>123</sup> Finally,

114 Danish Refugee Council et al., *Unprepared for (Re)Integration*.

115 World Bank, *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees*; 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).

116 Danish Refugee Council et al., *Unprepared for (Re)Integration*.

117 See, for instance, Schmitt, Bitterwolf, and Baraulina, *Assisted Return from Germany*; Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*; World Bank, *Supporting the Effective Reintegration of Roma Returnees*.

118 Le Coz and Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration*.

119 This issue is illustrated by the following statement from a returnee, documented in a 2016 study: 'We had to spend money on health issues and had nothing left to invest in the business'. See Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*, 114.

120 Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, Johannes Koettl, and Johanna Avato, 'Social Security for Migrants: A Global Overview of Portability Arrangements', in *Migration and Social Protection – Claiming Social Rights Beyond Borders*, eds. Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Rayah Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

121 Esther Schüring et al., *Social Protection as an Alternative to Migration? An Assessment of the Role of Social Protection in Reducing Push Factors for Migration in Different Country Contexts* (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Versicherungswissenschaft, 2017).

122 Zana Vathi, Veronika Duci, and Elona Dhembo, 'Social Protection and Return Migration: Trans-national and Trans-temporal Developmental Gaps in the Albania-Greece Migration Corridor', *Migration and Development* 8, no. 2 (2019): 243–63.

123 Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*.



benefits accrued in a destination country, such as workers' compensation benefits, are frequently nontransferable, which can prevent migrants who wish to return from accessing (or capitalising on) social protection schemes.<sup>124</sup>

- ▶ **Access to justice.** Returnees may need legal assistance to lodge a complaint if their rights are violated, or to handle issues such as property restitution, civil support, or (in the case of unaccompanied minors) legal guardianship.<sup>125</sup> Access to justice is strongly dependent on the local context, the prevalence of corruption, and the status and position of returnees in their communities of origin.<sup>126</sup> For instance, research in Burundi documented how returnees experienced prejudice in the justice system.<sup>127</sup>

### Toolbox of social reintegration activities

To address these needs, most reintegration programmes offer some form of social assistance, even if not formally labelled as such. This support often follows an individual needs assessment at the predeparture stage, but its amount and the type of support widely vary. For instance, some programmes offer emergency accommodation to all returnees, while others provide this assistance only to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and returnees who cannot join their families upon return.<sup>128</sup> Health-care assistance may include covering treatment costs, basic medical examinations, or referral to hospital care upon return, and educational support ranges from covering tuition fees to providing courses to improve returnees' school performance.

European countries have funded social assistance reintegration initiatives that include:

- ▶ **Documentation assistance.** The Austrian ReKoKO programme in Kosovo offered returnees support with obtaining and paying for any necessary documents upon return, such identification cards, birth and marriage certificates, and registration of residence.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, Germany's reintegration programmes offer to accompany returnees as they seek to obtain documentation from local or central authorities.<sup>130</sup>
- ▶ **Housing assistance.** Instead of only providing short-term accommodation, Germany offers in-kind assistance to help returnees cover the costs associated with building and renovation or acquiring basic equipment for their house.<sup>131</sup>

124 Sabates-Wheeler, Koettl, and Avato, 'Social Security for Migrants'.

125 Biella-Battista, Bolits, Mark, and Salvini, *Reintegration Handbook*.

126 A 2015 study found that returnees' perception of being able to access justice if their rights were infringed upon ranged from 80 per cent in Sri Lanka to 50 per cent in Pakistan. See Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research*.

127 Sonja Fransen and Katie Kuschminder, 'Back to the Land: The Long-Term Challenges of Refugee Return and Reintegration in Burundi' (research paper no. 242, UNHCR, Geneva, August 2012).

128 For instance, the EU RANA programme in Afghanistan offered temporary accommodation for two weeks. By contrast, the Austrian ReKoKO programme in Kosovo offered a three-month emergency accommodation. See Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*; Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals*.

129 Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*.

130 Responses from a representative of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to a questionnaire developed by the authors, May 2021.

131 Returnees benefiting from the REAG/GARP programme and returning to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Lebanon, Tajikistan, or Turkey can receive up to 1,000 euros for individuals and 3,000 euros for families in the form of noncash benefits. See German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 'StarthilfePlus – Supplementary Reintegration Support in the Destination Country for Voluntary Return with REAG/GARP' (fact sheet, January 2020).

- ▶ **Educational assistance.** Some programmes assist children by translating the necessary school certificates to ensure a smooth transition between school systems.<sup>132</sup> Recognising that some children drop out of school due to difficulties adapting to their new learning environment, Belgium funds language courses to ease returnees' transition and improve their academic performance.<sup>133</sup>
- ▶ **Medical assistance.** Some specialised programmes have been created to assist returnees with complex medical needs. For example, Belgium, in cooperation with IOM and Caritas, has developed the project Adapted Medical Assistance After Return (AMAAR) for returnees with complex medical needs. This programme includes assessments both predeparture and in returnees' country of origin, and the development of a medical reintegration plan.<sup>134</sup>
- ▶ **Connecting reintegration assistance with social protection schemes in origin countries.** To contribute to returnees' long-term reintegration, another approach some programmes have adopted is to dovetail reintegration assistance with social protection schemes in the country of origin. Germany, for instance, helps returnees register with the national health-care scheme upon return.<sup>135</sup> In 2019, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative in Sudan launched a one-year pilot programme to help 2,000 returnee families cover the initial premium to participate in the country's National Health Insurance Fund.<sup>136</sup> Finally, the Spanish reintegration programme of complementary aid for the accumulated and early payment of contributory unemployment benefits seeks to ensure that foreign workers returning to their countries of origin can receive all unemployment benefits upon return.<sup>137</sup>

While very little is known about the delivery and effectiveness of social reintegration activities, one well-documented challenge has been a lack of support that goes beyond meeting immediate needs. For example, most programmes provide support to help returnees obtain travel documents in order to facilitate their return, but fewer address returnees' needs for documentation once they are back in their country of origin. Similar challenges apply to housing, which is often focused on the first period after arrival. In Pakistan, for instance, surveyed beneficiaries found a three-month housing allowance too short to establish themselves.<sup>138</sup> And in terms of education, many programmes only cover tuition fees and material needs for a few months but do not provide longer-term support. Reintegration support, thus, helps returnees cover their basic needs in the short term, but it is unlikely to have a significant impact in the medium to long term.

132 According to a 2011 study, Luxembourg, for example, assisted with the translation of school certificates and provided help with school integration. See European Commission, ECRE, ICMPD, and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices*.

133 Responses from a representative of Fedasil to a questionnaire developed by the authors, May 2021.

134 Responses from a representative of Fedasil to a questionnaire developed by the authors, May 2021. See also IOM, 'IOM Country Office for Belgium and Luxembourg Newsletter' (newsletter issue no. 3, IOM, January–June 2019).

135 Responses from a representative of GIZ to a questionnaire developed by the authors, May 2021.

136 IOM, 'Sudanese Migrant Returnees to Access Health Insurance' (news release, 26 July 2019).

137 This option is open for migrants with legal residence in Spain and coming from a country that has an agreement with Spain regarding social protection. In exchange, the returnee must commit to not returning to Spain in the next three years. In the case of returnees in Morocco, they receive the payment in two instalments, one in Spain and the second one upon return. See Spanish Public Employment Service, 'Deseo regresar a mi país', accessed 25 October 2021; Ly and Grégoire, *Mapping System*.

138 Similarly, in Kosovo, beneficiaries rated their satisfaction with their housing situation 4.28, on average, on a 10-point scale. See Demel, *Evaluation of the Medium-Term Effectiveness of Reintegration Measures*.

## Moving towards a better understanding of social reintegration

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers agree there is a dearth of research on social reintegration. This is due in part to the focus on economic reintegration, but also to the difficulties of capturing all of the many aspects of social reintegration services and delineating where this assistance—and, thus, the monitoring of these activities—should end. Among the ERRIN partners, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden report that, at present, no specific indicators are in place to track the quality of social reintegration assistance, and a similar trend can be presumed for many other European AVRR programmes.<sup>139</sup> Service partners also frequently lack monitoring systems for social reintegration activities.<sup>140</sup> To date, the efforts of IOM and Samuel Hall under the MEASURE initiative represent the most notable attempt to embed M&E

*These indicators do not, however, measure the delivery and quality of the social reintegration assistance provided.*

into social reintegration programming. The Sustainable Reintegration Survey born out of the initiative (see Box 3 in Section 3.A.) includes indicators that assess access to housing, documents, social protection schemes, justice, and education for school-aged children, as well as the quality of housing—shedding light on these underexplored dimensions of returnee reintegration.<sup>141</sup>

As is the case in many assessments of economic and psychosocial reintegration support, these indicators do not, however, measure the delivery and quality of the social reintegration assistance provided. Key topics that demand further research include: whether returnees receive accurate and useful information from programme activities, whether medical cases are followed up on and referred for appropriate care upon return, whether families receive appropriate support when enrolling children in school, and whether reintegration programmes have mechanisms to ensure the transfer of returnees' medical and educational records. Addressing these questions will go a long way towards building up the evidence base in this area and in determining what activities work (and why) in AVRR programmes, and which ones are ailing and need improvement.

Furthermore, because access to public services is fundamentally shaped by structural factors in the countries and localities to which migrants return, it remains difficult to infer from returnees' social reintegration outcomes the value and impact of AVRR programmes' assistance in this area. Stepping up monitoring efforts for social reintegration is, thus, essential as it will help to determine the extent to which AVRR activities can help returnees overcome structural barriers and what contextual factors most shape returnee outcomes. In addition, while some European countries have sought to connect their reintegration programmes with development objectives,<sup>142</sup> little is known about how to best align reintegration assistance with broader development strategies—for example, through partnerships with local governments or local actors, or through targeted capacity-building of local services—and what impact such programmes have on both returnees and communities of return. M&E investments to fill these knowledge

139 Responses from representatives of these Member States to a questionnaire developed by the authors, May 2021.

140 An evaluation of Norwegian AVRR programmes, for instance, found that IOM had no monitoring in place to determine whether returnees actually lived in the housing they received support for; this situation could lead some individuals to create pretend rental agreements to obtain financial assistance. See Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*, 73.

141 Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards*, 14.

142 Germany and Switzerland, for example, have tried to combine the provision of individual reintegration packages with investments to improve public service provision (e.g., medical or school facilities) in migrants' country of origin. See Kessler et al., *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration*.

gaps will help the field move away from anecdotal evidence and pave the way for a holistic assessment of the connections between reintegration and development interventions.

In conclusion, the delivery, impact, and effectiveness of social reintegration activities remain largely under-researched. Stepping up the evidence base on social reintegration will provide valuable information for both programme designers and on-the-ground service providers and allow them to set realistic ambitions for what social reintegration assistance can achieve—particularly in contexts characterised by limited services and infrastructure.

### 3 Building a Stronger Evidence Base around Reintegration Assistance

There is growing consensus that an M&E system is not just a ‘nice to have’. Rather, it is a key vehicle to improve programme performance and set realistic policy ambitions for migrant returns and reintegration. EU and Member State policymakers’ renewed commitment to boosting return rates from Europe and to working with countries of origin to improve reintegration outcomes, and associated swelling budgets and operational experimentation, have given rise to questions regarding the returns on these investments—that is, whether the desired results were attained and at what cost. At the same time, the designers and implementers of AVRR programmes have had to rapidly adapt, catering to a more diverse population of returnees and navigating operations in a variety of transit and origin countries. And as the stakes rise for policymakers, so does the pressure on practitioners to show strong results. Evidence that assisted returnees

*Evidence that assisted returnees are settling in, renewing their social ties with the surrounding community, earning a decent living for themselves (and their dependents), and are not intending to remigrate is highly sought after by national and EU policymakers.*

are settling in, renewing their social ties with the surrounding community, earning a decent living for themselves (and their dependents), and are not intending to remigrate is highly sought after by national and EU policymakers. Understanding the fate of migrants upon return can also be valuable for return counsellors, as being able to offer migrants concrete information about the results of integration programmes may enable them to make more informed decision about their own return.<sup>143</sup>

The demands for data in the field of return and reintegration go beyond the question of whether policy and programme goals are being reached. Indeed, the road that leads to success has become a growing, if not equal, object of interest. This stems from heightened awareness that many factors affect how a person fares upon return, and that understanding this environment is crucial for stakeholders to be able to identify which reintegration outcomes can be attributed to (what parts of) the assistance offered. It is also essential for donors and key actors to understand how different service providers deliver different types and levels

<sup>143</sup> It is important to note that the decision to return is influenced by a multiplicity of factors. The literature on this topic suggests that reintegration assistance might contribute to the decision to return, but that it is not the principal factor behind the decision for most migrants. For a discussion of the factors influencing return decision-making and the role of reintegration programmes, see OECD, *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants*, 30–33.

of services, directly or through a network of other service providers or linkages with public institutions. The latest attempts to coordinate reintegration programmes across the European Union—or, at least, in specific countries of origin where a group of EU Member States are active—via the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration as well as the procurement of joint activities via ERRIN and now Frontex raise the burning question: which, of the myriad reintegration approaches that EU actors have developed and deployed, will be favoured moving forward, especially in future procurement contracts?<sup>144</sup> During these bursts of coordination and attempts at harmonisation, strong evidence on the *quality* of reintegration activities and the service partners designing and implementing them is vital.

### A. *M&E for AVRR programmes: The state of play*

As documented in Section 2, there has been limited M&E of return and reintegration programmes until relatively recently. In general, policymakers, programme designers, practitioners, and organisations representing the interests of returnees have had to make do with rather crude impact data, such as the number or proportion of migrants who return to their origin countries upon receiving a return order and the size of budgets set aside for reintegration activities; descriptive analyses, such as reports on what reintegration assistance was offered to returnees; and anecdotal evidence of the impact of this assistance on reintegration outcomes. The few evaluations that have been conducted do not follow a clear pattern for when, where, or why these were commissioned (and others were not). In addition, many have methodological limitations, such as a heavy reliance on small samples and largely qualitative interviews, and describe only a short time period after migrants' return. For a long time, disinterest among donors has partly accounted for the limited progress towards developing M&E systems that could generate the necessary data and analysis. As has been the case in other M&E-barren policy domains, the assumption that 'the expert knows best' has also delayed progress on this front, as policymakers often trust practitioners to make programmatic decisions without deeper investments in data collection and analysis and the translation of findings into concrete actions.

Recent M&E efforts in the AVRR field (see Box 3) are promising, but they have important limitations. In addition to those outlined above, most evaluations and studies continue to be centred around reintegration outcomes, and few shed light on the process that leads to those outcomes. As a result, the quality of reintegration programmes remains a 'black box' in many ways, with many pressing questions as to how and to what degree programme design and service delivery affects reintegration outcomes. In addition, evidence related to the impact of reintegration programmes on higher-level policy objectives, such as driving uptake of voluntary return or improving relations between European countries and migrants' countries of origin, is rarely available. A final limitation is that M&E reports are often used to tick a box in project requirements but not necessarily used to improve programming.

<sup>144</sup> Through a joint contracting process, ERRIN partner countries share one reintegration service provider in each country of return, and this service provider is responsible for delivering reintegration support to returnees from all participating ERRIN partner countries. Frontex will take over this joint procurement of reintegration activities in April 2022. In November 2021, the agency launched a call for proposals to reach agreements with service partners for a four-year period. See ERRIN, 'What We Do'; Frontex, 'Call for Proposals'.



**BOX 3****Recent M&E Efforts for AVRR Programmes**

A budding interest and increased investment in M&E can be observed within the migrant return and reintegration field. For instance, the European Migration Network (EMN) developed M&E guidelines for AVRR programmes in 2016, and IOM published a module in 2019 offering guidance on M&E for reintegration assistance. Another example is the 2017 MEASURE initiative, an ambitious effort to better capture what happens to returnees. Led by IOM, Samuel Hall, and the University of Sussex, MEASURE sought to map returnee outcomes in terms of their economic, psychosocial, and social reintegration. The Reintegration Sustainability Survey, which builds on the work of the MEASURE project, is now used in a wide range of countries—raising the prospect of cross-country comparisons of the data gathered. Another promising step is IOM's continued work on developing M&E systems for specific subgroups of returnees or those with certain vulnerabilities. For instance, IOM has released a monitoring toolkit for the reintegration of child returnees, and it is planning a similar one for victims of trafficking. Existing evaluations often paint returnees with the same brush, whereas these efforts take a more nuanced approach to understanding how reintegration programmes work for different returnees.

In parallel, the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) system, developed by the European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs and initially conceived as a tool for ERRIN Member State authorities to exchange information on reintegration cases, could kickstart a new chapter on the M&E front. The variety of data that RIAT asks return officers and partner organisation to record in its platform, and the invitation to do so at several key moments in the return process, may pave the way to more robust M&E operations that systematically gather detailed and long-term data on reintegration activities, enabling both in-country/programme analyses and cross-country/programme comparisons. The fact that RIAT also covers the predeparture phase is another strength of this system.

Finally, civil-society organisations working on reintegration across several countries—such as Caritas and the Danish Refugee Council—have also deployed and taken steps to strengthen their own M&E systems, as have some local organisations such as the European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) in Iraq and People in Need (a Czech NGO in Armenia). For example, the European Reintegration Support Organisations—a network of NGOs involved in return counselling and reintegration—developed in 2015 a quality framework for reintegration assistance. In Armenia, Caritas ensures that social workers keep in close contact with beneficiaries of reintegration assistance, through both electronic communication and field visits, and the information gathered is used to understand participants' outcomes and inform programme changes. People in Need also gathers data via regular contact with beneficiaries, and it employs external experts to evaluate programmes based on the information gathered.

Sources: EMN, *Guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluating AVR(R) Programmes* (Brussels: EMN, 2016); Samuel Hall and IOM, *Setting Standards for an Integrated Approach to Reintegration: Summary Report* (Geneva: IOM, 2017); Roberto Biella-Battista, Georg Bolits, Hanna Mark, and Andrea Salvini, 'Module 5 - Monitoring and Evaluation for Reintegration Assistance', in *Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva: IOM, 2019); Samuel Hall, *Development of a Monitoring Toolkit and Review of Good Practices for the Sustainable Reintegration of Child Returnees* (Geneva: IOM, 2021); Sibylle Desjardins, 'Research and Development of a Monitoring Toolkit on the Sustainable Reintegration of Victims of Trafficking' (call for proposals, 20 May 2021); ERRIN, 'New Reintegration Assistance Tool', accessed 12 November 2021.

## *B. What should a comprehensive M&E framework look like?*

While there is growing consensus on the need for M&E, the next question is how to build and operationalise a monitoring framework that addresses the identified gaps and fosters global learning among AVRR programmes. These are not easy tasks, and doing so in a coherent and coordinated way is as hard as creating demand for M&E in the first place. Difficulties stem from partners having different objectives, and from programmes operating under different funding streams and timelines, with various levels of and formats for coordination, and different data-sharing practices and monitoring requirements. While aligning the interests of all stakeholders will be challenging, a good starting point is to sketch the main components of the M&E framework, which should ideally do the following:

- ▶ **Assess the outcomes of reintegration support, but also monitors the process that leads to them.** There is a major need for more data on how the design and implementation of a programme affects beneficiaries' reintegration outcomes. To lift the fog that surrounds these programmes and their effects, the framework should capture details about the quality of the services delivered by partners on the ground. In addition to assessing the adequacy of the assistance compared to returnee needs, this could include assessment of the general features of the service provider and how individual activities are delivered in practice.
  - **General features of the service provider.** Capturing this information can be done, for instance, by measuring the local embeddedness of service partners and their knowledge of local dynamics, the human resources available per returnee, and/or the organisations' operational capacity to reach returnees in remote areas.
  - **Component activities and service delivery.** A solid monitoring exercise should look into how assistance is delivered in practice. For example, if a programme delivers start-up assistance, this could involve assessing whether returnees are benefiting from business counselling, or whether the service providers take returnees' skills and local labour market dynamics into account when helping returnees design a business plan. In this way, the framework can shed light on what elements of reintegration programme work and which ones need improvement, feeding into the design of future interventions.
- ▶ **Capture all dimensions of reintegration.** The M&E framework should reflect the fact that reintegration is a multidimensional process, involving psychological and social elements. Attaining economic stability is an important goal but not the only marker of reintegration success.
- ▶ **Weigh a programme's impacts at the individual and community levels.** While reintegration assistance has traditionally been geared towards individual returnees, the emergence of community-based activities and efforts to link returnee reintegration and broader development initiatives raise questions about the impact of reintegration programmes on entire communities as well as individual returnees.
- ▶ **Draw on the insights of a wide range of actors.** Emerging academic research, for instance, offers evidence on the factors that enable or hinder reintegration processes, while service partners and

authorities in countries of origin can shed light on contextual factors and reintegration needs on the ground. The framework could also draw on insights from returnees themselves as to what constitutes reintegration ‘success’ and what forms of assistance support it.

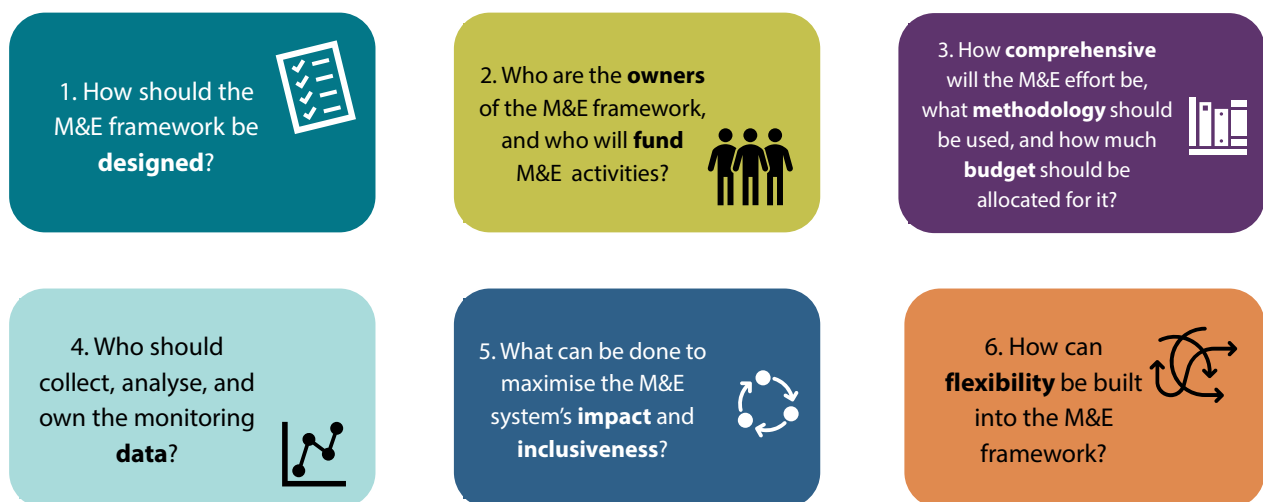
- ▶ **Have the flexibility to be used in a wide range of contexts, including differently structured programmes and different geographies.** Existing M&E efforts are scattered and often assess a particular reintegration programme, hindering cross-country and cross-programme analyses. To produce global lessons learnt and gain different actors’ buy-in to using the framework, an M&E framework should be flexible and take into account differences in how programmes are structured and the range of contexts in which they operate. Options for doing so include creating a common matrix of indicators that actors can then pick and choose from, based on their local context and programmatic needs, or allowing for modifications on particular indicators to capture the information most relevant to a programme or locality.<sup>145</sup>
- ▶ **Be constantly reviewed and regularly updated.** Reintegration programmes have developed quickly in recent decades, and the types of support and ways of providing it continue to evolve. M&E frameworks should reflect this and be adapted based on emerging research, feedback from actors on the ground, and programmatic developments.

### C. Road map for the design and implementation of a monitoring system

Building on these principles, donors, policymakers in countries of origin and destination, service partners, and other actors must next address a range of policy, strategic, operational, and sometimes political questions about the design and implementation of their M&E system. Figure 2 highlights some of these considerations, which are described further below.

FIGURE 2

#### Key Questions for Implementing an M&E System across AVRR Programmes



Source: Authors' visualisation.

<sup>145</sup> For instance, the Child Reintegration Monitoring Toolkit developed by IOM and Samuel Hall envisions some questions being adapted based on the local context. See Samuel Hall, *Child Reintegration Monitoring Toolkit* (Geneva: IOM, 2021), 8.

- 1 **How should the M&E framework be designed?** The starting point of this exercise should be gathering a group of actors who are important stakeholders for the future system (e.g., donors, government representatives from countries of origin and destination, civil-society actors) and who agree to work towards a joint M&E framework they will all use. The process for designing this framework can take different forms. It may entail, for example, researchers or M&E experts submitting proposals for all the stakeholders to review; the origin-country government designing the framework and making it a national reintegration framework; the donor taking the lead through its internal monitoring or research services; or a service partner conceptualising a framework and submitting it to donors as part of its internal system. The wider the consultations, the more relevant and actionable the framework will be. For example, consultations with service partners can ensure that the indicators used to evaluate them are realistic in terms of their targets and whether the data can be collected (e.g., depending on access to the field, or returnees' responsiveness to requests for interviews).<sup>146</sup> In turn, actors involved in the M&E exercise should explore how to integrate or complement existing monitoring efforts conducted by service partners, donors, and countries of origin to ensure any new M&E exercise gains the buy-in of a wide range of stakeholders, avoids duplication of efforts, and builds on the existing knowledge base on how reintegration programmes perform.
- 2 **Who are the owners of the M&E framework, and who will fund M&E activities?** A thorny question is who should validate the M&E framework before it becomes a contractual requirement for service providers. This decision will be a challenging one as different actors have different objectives, perspectives, and constraints, and it will take time and compromises for them to agree on a set of common indicators. So far, for example, countries of origin are not systematically involved in the validation of M&E frameworks for AVRR projects (as is the case for many internationally funded interventions). As a result, their ownership of this process tends to be limited. In addition, operationalising an M&E framework requires significant investments to collect and analyse data and disseminate findings. The donors for reintegration programmes are typically the actors that fund M&E activities, but other models could be explored (co-funding, for instance) to grant other actors a more prominent role. This may be particularly relevant as a way to strengthen the sense of ownership of this framework among origin-country governments.
- 3 **How comprehensive will the M&E exercise be, what methodology should be used, and how much budget should be allocated for it?** The donors and other stakeholders in an M&E system need to agree on how extensive the exercise should be, the type of information they would like to access, and what share of the AVRR budget they want to allocate to M&E. This involves raising questions about the appropriate depth of assessments of reintegration activities, the extent to which the modus operandi of the research partners should be tested, what proportion of returnees should be surveyed (and what criteria should be used in sampling), how often data should be collected during the reintegration process, and how long after the end of reintegration activities information should be gathered. Each of these questions comes with a set of trade-offs. For instance, a longer timeframe

<sup>146</sup> Service partners with experience working with returnees or in a specific location may recognise that some indicators cannot be operationalised because the data that would be needed is too difficult to collect (e.g., requires traveling to unsecure areas) or does not exist (e.g., data on a specific issue may exist in one country of origin but not in another because the government there does not collect that type of data or does but in a different way).

would address the short-termism that has characterised M&E efforts to date and provide a more realistic picture of whether returnees have successfully reintegrated. This approach would also allow for the measurement of programme results against long-term policy objectives. Yet, monitoring the situation of returnees over a longer timespan would require additional resources, and likely encounter practical difficulties as returnees may be more difficult to locate as time passes (and they may be less willing to be interviewed).<sup>147</sup> Countries of destination might also be wary that monitoring returnee outcomes over a longer timeframe might lead to a situation in which they are expected to address any long-term weaknesses found in a programme.

- 4 Who should collect, analyse, and own the monitoring data?** Service partners are often in charge of collecting data about the outcomes of their own activities, both because they have an existing relationship with the returnees and because they already know the ins and outs of their programmes.<sup>148</sup> Yet, third-party monitors and academic researchers are more detached from concerns about contract renewal,<sup>149</sup> which may put them in a better position to produce an unbiased analysis. Specifically, they can comment on the way service providers deliver assistance to returnees and flag any blind spot, misconduct, or negligence. Origin-country actors (for instance, a national statistics institute or a migration research centre) may also be good partners in the collection and analysis of monitoring data, and their grasp of the local environment and national and local policies may help ensure these findings are contextualised. However, such an approach involves funding these teams and, potentially, building their capacity. Ideally, the M&E system's lead actors rely on different sources (e.g., the service partners, local authorities, civil society, independent researchers) and carefully triangulate all the monitoring data available.
- 5 What can be done to maximise the M&E system's impact and inclusiveness?** Beyond the data collection and analysis, a number of key questions relate to how and to whom recommendations are made. Thinking through what products should be produced as a result of M&E efforts (e.g., short memos, quarterly presentations to a committee, annual reports) is critical to ensuring dissemination is adapted to all important target audiences. Another question is how widely the recommendations should be shared. Given that migrant returns are a very sensitive topic, a number of AVRR evaluations are not made public, which allows for some sensitive recommendations to be conveyed candidly to governments of countries of destination and service partners. At the same time, making monitoring reports publicly accessible can increase the accountability of all the stakeholders involved and support global learning (e.g., if academic researchers and other experts can draw on them). Sharing these results with countries of origin is also a crucial step to building their interest in and ownership of reintegration programmes, and facilitating more linkages between these programmes and national and local policies (e.g., national social protection schemes). Lastly, the M&E leads should follow up on their conclusions and think about their implications in terms of funding, governance, political sensitivities, and operational aspects.

147 Furthermore, returnees can live in wide geographical areas and may be difficult to reach for monitoring purposes. For instance, poor communications infrastructure in some parts of West Africa or security concerns in some parts of Afghanistan have in the past hindered monitoring activities. See Tchalim, *2018 Monitoring Report*, 31; Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*, 82.

148 This also simplifies the contracting as the donor only needs one contract with one service partner. Nevertheless, some donors, such as OFII, complement these reports from their service partners with monitoring visits by the donor organisation's staff.

149 This concern may never entirely vanish, even if it is lessened; some third-party monitors may also be concerned about maintaining a good relationship with the service partner(s) and the donor(s).



- 6 How can flexibility be built into the M&E framework?** This is one of the most difficult questions as making adaptations to an M&E framework once it has been created can involve revisiting the fragile compromises M&E partners previously reached. On the one hand, M&E partners need to agree on a common framework and use it consistently to compare results over time. On the other hand, indicators will likely need to be adjusted to reflect changes in programme activities and the environment in which they occur, as well as feedback received on the relevance of the monitoring tools (e.g., some indicators may prove to be irrelevant or impractical). Therefore, a balance needs to be struck on topics such as the frequency and process for revising the M&E system to preserve a common or baseline framework that enables comparison while ensuring the flexibility exists to allow for local adaptation or add-ons to account for changing realities and priorities. Initially, an M&E framework should be relatively simple, but it should be gradually upgraded to better capture local dynamics as well as returnees' specific needs and vulnerabilities.

While this series of questions raises a number of thorny issues, policymakers and practitioners who are serious about strengthening M&E systems need to go beyond simply agreeing that more monitoring is needed and dig into the policy, strategic, operational, and political details that creating such a system entails.

## 4 Conclusions

When it comes to returning migrants and supporting their reintegration, European policymakers and their implementing partners have little clarity—let alone consensus—on what 'success' is or how best to achieve it. This knowledge gap is sorely felt at a time when low return numbers are a top concern for many policymakers, as illustrated in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The emerging evidence base, however thin and fragmented, offers a glimpse of the useful lessons that M&E investments could generate. This includes how to make the effects of reintegration activities more durable (e.g., longevity of businesses set-up support as part of economic reintegration); adding key, but largely ignored, components to a reintegration plan (e.g., tackling the social stigma around return via psychosocial reintegration activities); or leveraging other funding streams and programmes to multiply the resources available to returnees and those supporting their reintegration (e.g., support available to local communities via development programmes).

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*The emerging evidence base, however thin and fragmented, offers a glimpse of the useful lessons that M&E investments could generate.*

And this is just the tip of the iceberg. The systematic monitoring of reintegration goals, activities, and outcomes—if done well, consistently, and independently—will generate data that cater to the interests of a wide set of stakeholders in the return and reintegration field. This information could help answer questions such as: How can reintegration programmes increase the take up of voluntary return options and reduce remigration? How can reintegration activities be best adapted to a specific returnee profile or local context? How can reintegration programmes mobilise different actors (e.g., local public employment services) to support—or, at the appropriate time, take over—the process of aiding returnees in their reintegration

trajectory? And how can AVRR programmes foster a greater sense of ownership among origin-country partners by signalling the benefits they can reap from co-designing reintegration activities?

The road to a stronger evidence base on return and reintegration will be a long one, but interest in and political commitment to investing in M&E has grown steadily in recent years. ERRIN, EMN, and partners such as IOM, ICMPD, Caritas, the Danish Refugee Council, and other members of the European Reintegration Support Organisations network have played a crucial role in this, via efforts ranging from coordination among EU+ Member States' reintegration activities, to work on the first-ever case management tool for return officers, to investments in the design of an indicator system to measure progress. The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration added further weight by spotlighting the need for more and better M&E to improve return rates from Europe and foster quality reintegration. Bringing all key stakeholders to the table will be crucial if a strong support base for M&E and, more broadly, evidence-based AVRR programming and policymaking is to be created. Service partners' involvement will be particularly critical, given they will not only be part of efforts to collect data but also expected to rapidly adapt their reintegration practices as M&E efforts begin to produce analyses on what works, where, and with which groups of returnees. Earning their buy-in will be essential, as will building meaningful partnerships with migrants' countries of origin.

Ultimately, M&E is a means to an end—a tool to generate analysis, which in turn allows a diverse set of stakeholders to cast a critical, but hopefully constructive, eye on endeavours to develop effective policies and programmes. As such, the (often cumbersome) work of developing a commonly agreed upon set of indicators and operationalising them needs to eventually give way to a phase of mechanisation or automation. In this phase, databases or platforms for data collection are readily available (and trusted), and there is an expectation that all parties involved will collect and enter data on return and reintegration activities. And in this phase, tailor-made reports (e.g., assessments of specific return policies or of the success of programmes in a particular third country) are routinely developed, and a steady funding stream is available to finance such activities. Paving the way to this next milestone will be the next big challenge.

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