Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR)

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration, and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

Introduction

IOM's assisted return activities have become an indispensable part of ensuring the integrity of regular migration. They are part of a comprehensive approach to migration management, which includes timely asylum adjudication, effective removals of irregular migrants, regular migration options and accurate public information on those options. When implemented quickly, they can also be an effective deterrent to irregular migration.

AVR advantages all players on the origin-transit-destination spectrum: for the migrant it is an humane alternative to deportation; for the country of destination it is more cost effective and administratively expedient than forced return; and for the country of origin, and its bilateral relations with the country of destination, it is politically more palatable and less sensitive than the return of émigrés "in shackles" whilst significantly facilitating the reintegration of their nationals.

For migrants who seek, or need, to return home but lack the means to do so, AVRs are often the only solution to their immediate plight. The consequences of not returning such migrants in a safe and speedy way can be grave for the migrants, and place heavy socio-economic burdens on destination and transit countries' asylum and social welfare systems.

AVRs have been operating for close to three decades now, beginning with the German REAG programme. In the past 10 years, AVRs have assisted more than 1.4 million migrants to return safely to over 160 countries of origin – many of them from Europe. Those assisted include any person abroad requiring the humane and cost-effective support of IOM, such as unsuccessful asylum seekers, irregular migrants, stranded migrants, victims of trafficking, and qualified and skilled nationals able to assist the development/reconstruction of their home countries.

As migration becomes more complex, there is also increasingly a need for international brokering of cooperative approaches between origin, transit and destination countries.   IOM has established some multilateral fora to foster effective partnerships on return migration.

With its global network of over 300 offices in countries of origin, transit and destination, IOM is well placed to develop and manage these comprehensive approaches to voluntary return migration.

Key Policy Considerations

When establishing AVR programmes, key policy considerations are:

- Reinforce the integrity of regular migration programmes and preserve fair asylum procedures;

- Respect international law principles and standards concerning migrants, particularly in irregular situations;

- Enhance cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination;

- Address the root causes of irregular migration thereby ensuring sustainability of the return for the migrants, governments, and affected communities - through reintegration measures that support the socio-economic re-absorption of returning migrants.

Types of AVR programmes and Projects

At present, IOM implements more than 20 AVR regular programmes and some 100 projects world-wide. IOM operates three types of AVR programmes:

- General return assistance for irregular migrants, unsuccessful asylum seekers, refugees and others wishing to return from the host country;

- Specific return and reintegration assistance tailored to the needs of certain groups (e.g. nationality, vulnerable groups, skilled and qualified nationals);

- Assistance to migrants stranded en route.

Additionally, there are a variety of initiatives that support these AVR programmes including outreach to potential returnees, enhanced return counselling and information services and reintegration support, as well as capacity building of states and NGOs in AVR.

Key Policy Considerations

The assistance provided to returnees in IOM's programmes is spread out to cover a number of activities conducted at different stages of implementation. There may be differences between programmes, but the essential elements of a standard AVR are three-fold:

Pre-departure stage - information dissemination and counselling, provision of return-related, origin country information, medical assistance (e.g. medical examinations and documentation), and transport assistance arrangement including travel documentation.

Transportation stage – departure assistance (incl. travel and reinstallation allowances), transport (movement coordination, transit assistance, escort assistance, unaccompanied baggage, documents and formalities) and medical assistance (pre-embarkation medical checks and medical escorts).

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR)

Post-arrival stage – reception, inland transport, health-related support, disbursement of return or re-installation grants, reintegration assistance (often in cooperation with local entities, and non-governmental organizations) as well as monitoring follow up.

Enhanced Services for Sustainable Returns

Since the first of the AVR programmes in 1979, IOM has increasingly adapted its services to the needs of returning migrants and host governments, and expanded its services to more countries.

Post conflict returns have been on a large scale: most recently to Bosnia and Herzegovina (over 187,000 persons), Kosovo province (some 200,000 persons), and East Timor (nearly 200,000 persons), with tailored reintegration assistance provided after their return.

Key tools for sustainable return include: information on situations and prospects in the country of return to support the migrant's decision to return; socio-economic profiling of potential returnees to assess their needs and motivations; return-related information for service providers and sponsors; and post-return monitoring to facilitate appropriate and sustainable delivery of reintegration assistance, and make necessary adjustments to the programme. Such a concerted approach, using IOM's network of offices, can help achieve economies of scale and coherence of programme delivery.

Return Information and Counselling Services

Return counselling and information services is an integral part of many AVR programmes. Where possible, information on all aspects of voluntary return assistance is made available to the beneficiaries at the earliest stages of the immigration and asylum processes, to better inform and prepare the migrants and those providing the return and reintegration assistance to them.

Counselling and information services can also strengthen cooperation among partners in host and origin countries, help better tailor return assistance to the needs of the returnees, and aid sustainability of return.

These services are provided in close cooperation with Government authorities, NGOs and migrant communities.

Accurate information on the return process is of critical importance in achieving the informed and voluntary decision of migrants. All available options in the host and origin countries should be presented objectively to the migrants.

This includes information on the labour market, housing conditions, educational possibilities, legal aspects, etc. The information should be provided prior to departure, and after return, through referral systems and information centres that facilitate return management.

Reintegration Strategies

Reintegration assistance is critical to facilitating sustainable returns for all parties - the migrants, and host and origin countries. Unless the factors that compelled people to emigrate by irregular means in the first place are addressed, a substantial number of returnees might not stay in the country of return, but will continue pursuing migration options in the face of unsustainable living conditions at home.

Types of reintegration assistance: reintegration assistance can range from limited reinstallation allowance at the micro-level, to a variety of social, educational and economic assistance measures, provided directly to the migrants (i.e cash grant and micro credit) or, in the form of institutional assistance at the macro-level, to the communities of return in the country of origin.

Targeting communities of return, rather than just the individual returnees is another strategy sometimes used. By addressing the needs and concerns of the communities of returns, it avoids the dilemma of disadvantaging the local/non-migrant populations by tailoring assistance to returnees. It further contributes to preventing outbound migration in an irregular manner in the communities under high pressure for such migration.

Other AVR Services

Managing Transit Migration

In regions and countries affected by transit migration, such as Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean regions, South East Asia, and the Americas, IOM implements a number of AVR programmes aimed at strengthening the capacity of transit countries to manage their return migration caseloads. Countries of destination have provided the necessary funding or expert support for these, in an effort to strengthen the migration management links in the trans-national chain of irregular migration. IOM offers its expertise in those countries where return assistance is key in an overall technical assistance to address significant irregular flows; and where AVR could lessen the burden on regular migration and asylum systems, while assisting those stranded and often destitute without any means to return on their own.

Research

IOM has increased its targeted research and surveys on AVR. It has become more critical than ever to understand the motivations behind individual decisions to return, the push/pull factors (e.g. length of absence from origin countries and of stay in host country;

degree of integration and eligibility for welfare schemes; access to information on the return process; nature and extent of reintegration assistance, etc.), the timing in uptake of the assistance, and how these two factors may be affected.

At issue is what is meant by 'successful' return programmes – e.g. the number of returnees, cost-effectiveness, co-operation with countries of origin, public perceptions, stemming of irregular migration, safeguarding the integrity of the legal and humanitarian admission systems, and discouraging smuggling practices. Another important element is sustainable return; it is achieved when returnees are able to reintegrate in the community of return, often through a productive role as a member of their community, without immediate cause to leave again in an irregular manner.

Co-Management of Return Migration

As migration becomes more complex, multi-directional and inter-active, states are increasingly resorting to partnerships to manage it.

IOM has fostered a co-management approach to migration, which can benefit all countries on the migration spectrum, including the migrants themselves. In this effort, IOM is exploring how regional migration processes can take advantage of its AVR services.

One such effort is the "Cluster" initiative, which brings together origin, transit and destination countries to discuss practical solutions to common migration issues (e.g. effective cooperation on returns, sustainability of return through reintegration strategies, capacity building in migration management in origin countries). IOM will continue facilitating such dialogues for better management of return migration.