

# FAMILY MATTERS

A Study into the Factors Hampering Voluntary  
Return of Migrants Residing at Family Locations



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This publication has been developed under the project, Innovative Actions in Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) from the Netherlands, funded by the Repatriation and Departure Service of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

Fictitious names have been used to protect the privacy of the respondents. No children were interviewed, which means that the information collected from migrant families are the views of the parents.



Repatriation and Departure Service  
*Ministry of Justice and Security*

Publisher: International Organization for Migration  
17 route des Morillons  
P.O. Box 17  
1211 Geneva 19  
Switzerland  
Tel.: + 41 22 717 9111  
Fax: + 41 22 798 6150  
E-mail: [hq@iom.int](mailto:hq@iom.int)  
Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)

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Cover photo: The future of the children including good education is one of the main factors identified in this research why migrants in the Dutch family locations decide not to return to their country of origin. © IOM 2016/ Muse MOHAMMED

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Return of Migrants Residing at Family Locations

Researcher: Jelmer Brouwer



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the help of several people and organizations. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to thank a number of them who have supported me during this research project.

First of all, I want to thank Olivier Sprée and Pieter Maas for giving me the opportunity to carry out this study. Their support throughout the research period – including planning of the interviews and feedback on draft sections of the report – was a big source of motivation. Besides their support on a professional level, they were also great company during the several meetings we had.

Several organizations have been of great help in implementing this study and making sure all the fieldwork ran relatively smoothly. I would like to express my appreciation to the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers for facilitating the interviews and to the Repatriation and Departure Service for providing excellent quantitative data. The Project Officers of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have been crucial in finding migrants willing to be interviewed. It was often a thankless job, as finding respondents was far from easy, but their help has been greatly appreciated.

Obviously, I owe a debt of deep gratitude to all my respondents. The stakeholders working for the various organizations took generous time and provided me with invaluable information and insights. Migrants were willing to share their stories and discuss sometimes very personal matters with me, without gaining anything in return. I have appreciated their cooperation immensely.

Several people have read and commented on earlier versions of this report. Besides comments from various people working for IOM, feedback from Patrick van Berlo and Joanne van der Leun has greatly improved this report. Mr van Berlo was also a great source of help throughout the research project.

Finally, my favourite migrant in the whole world, Sarah Castéran, has corrected countless versions of this report and listened to never-ending stories about family locations. The fact that she managed to (pretend to) stay enthusiastic and provided plenty of good ideas until the very end, means she basically deserves to be co-author. Thank you for always supporting me.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>ACVZ</b>     | Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken (Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs)        |
| <b>AVR</b>      | Assisted voluntary return  |
| <b>AVRR</b>     | Assisted voluntary return and reintegration  |
| <b>AZC</b>      | Asielzoekerscentrum (Asylum Reception Centre)  |
| <b>COA</b>      | Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) |
| <b>CRC</b>      | Convention on the Rights of the Child  |
| <b>DT&amp;V</b> | Dienst Terugkeer en Vertrek (Repatriation and Departure Service)                         |
| <b>ECHR</b>     | European Convention on Human Rights  |
| <b>IND</b>      | Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (Immigration and Naturalisation Service)              |
| <b>IOM</b>      | International Organization for Migration   |
| <b>NGO</b>      | Non-governmental organization  |
| <b>VBL</b>      | Vrijheidsbeperkende locatie (freedom restricted location)                                |
| <b>VWN</b>      | Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland (Dutch Council for Refugees)                                 |



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study deals with the issue of voluntary return of migrant families in the Netherlands, who have been rejected for asylum or are staying irregularly in the country. Normally, when migrants without a legal right to stay in the Netherlands do not leave the country and cannot be returned forcefully, they lose their right to shelter and will therefore have to provide for themselves. However, since several years, an exception is made for irregular migrant families with children under the age of 18. Following the 2012 ruling of the Dutch High Court in the *Ferreira* case, the Government of the Netherlands is obliged to provide housing for migrant families with children under the age of 18. Those families are now residing at designated family locations.

The regime at these locations is relatively sober, with minimal provisions for adults. However, the children have access to education and full medical care. As the migrant families currently residing at those family locations have generally exhausted all legal remedies, they are obliged to leave the Netherlands. Nonetheless, actual return rates from the family locations are low. The aim of this study is to provide more insight into the factors hampering voluntary return of migrants residing at the family locations. Based on those factors, possible incentives are identified that Dutch agencies could consider addressing these obstacles to return. To that end, the study draws on quantitative population data provided by the Repatriation and Departure Service and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 migrants and 22 stakeholders working at the family locations.

Previous studies on voluntary return of migrants have identified a number of factors on both macro and micro level that influence the willingness of migrants to return. These factors can be distinguished between push, pull, stay and deter factors. Push factors make someone want to leave the country where he is staying, whereas stay factors make someone want to stay. Pull factors make someone want to return to his/her country, while deter factors achieve the opposite and make migrants reluctant to return. This framework is used to assess the main factors that cause migrants residing in the family locations to not voluntarily return to their country of origin.

The population data provided several important insights. First, the number of migrants residing at the various family locations remains relatively stable, with about 1,500–2,000 migrants staying at the family locations at any given time. These migrants had, on average, spent about 2.5 to 3 years at the family location. Of the population, 55 per cent is female due to a relatively high number of single mothers. In November 2017, the most common nationalities were Armenians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans.



The annual number of people leaving the family locations has gradually decreased over the last five years, from more than 1,000 in 2013 to around 500 in 2017. One reason for this is a sharp decrease in voluntary departures in 2017, which to a large extent seems to be the result of the exclusion of a number of nationalities from assisted voluntary return and reintegration services. Since these policy changes, migrants with nationalities that frequently leave voluntarily arrive less often at the family locations, thus causing a decrease in the overall number of voluntary returnees. People returning voluntarily generally do so relatively quickly, after less than a year at the family location. This changes in 2017, when voluntary returnees have spent considerably more time at the family location before they return.

The interviews helped to better understand the main reasons why most migrants did not want to return to their country of origin. A relatively wide range of factors were brought forward by both migrants and stakeholders to explain this. The ones mentioned most often were the long time spent in the Netherlands, the security situation in the country of origin and the hope to receive a residence permit. The future of migrants' children featured prominently throughout these three different factors. Despite their precarious legal situation, many parents did not want to return because they were convinced that their children would have a better future in the Netherlands than in their country of origin.

Return becomes more complicated over time. An important reason for this is the integration of children. Once the children have started going to school, parents become hesitant to leave the Netherlands again. As many children were very young when they left their country of origin or were even born in the Netherlands, they had little to no attachment to the country where they had to return to. Better preparing children for return – for example through language classes or other forms of schooling – could therefore make a difference. Many migrants also felt their children would not receive the same quality education in their country of origin. It could therefore be particularly beneficial to ensure children continue to receive a good quality education in the country.

For most respondents, the security situation in the country of origin was also an important reason for not returning. For some nationalities, such as Afghans and Iraqis, this was based on the general lack of security in the country. In other cases, migrants had more individualized reasons for believing it was unsafe for them to return to their country of origin. Migrants were particularly concerned about the future of their children in their country of origin. Whereas financial or in-kind support might do little to address this issue, a combination of information provision about the country of origin and counselling might help to shift perceptions regarding the situation in the country of origin. Such information must be both easily accessible and as objective and neutral as possible.

The analysis of interviews further suggests that many migrants still hoped they would receive a residence permit someday. Even migrants who had

exhausted all legal remedies – meaning their chances of still getting a residence permit were relatively small – frequently still hoped they would eventually receive a residence permit. Reasons that were identified for this are as follows: (a) relatively high number of migrants who do indeed receive a residence permit after staying for several years at a family location; (b) the recent child amnesty provision; and (c) the many procedures migrants can start again to try to get a residence permit. It is important for migrants to be adequately informed about the legal reality of their situation, ensuring they are aware of the unlikelihood to receive a residence permit. This has generally been done repeatedly, but it is nonetheless an important issue to mention here again.

The above-mentioned factors all play a role in the return attitude of migrants; they influence the unwillingness to leave the Netherlands and return to the country of origin. At the same time, obstacles hampering return are highly individualized and differ strongly between migrants. The range of factors that play a role in the return decision makes the situation of these migrants both complex and difficult; organizing voluntary return from the family locations is almost always a matter of being tailor made. It is therefore important to realize that quick-fix solutions for this population are simply not available.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, the return of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants has become an increasingly important political topic throughout Europe (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Noll, 1999; Van Wijk, 2008). The Netherlands is no exception to this, as the realization of return has been marked as one of the highest priorities of migration policy (Europees Migratie Netwerk (European Migration Network) (European Migration Network), 2009). In policy circles, it is generally reasoned that an effective return policy is essential to the effectivity and legitimacy of the asylum and migration system. It is also seen as an effective way to prevent and reduce irregular migration, as it sends a signal to (potential) irregular migrants that is strictly regulated, monitored and enforced. The combination of an effective return policy with a restrictive admission policy is furthermore seen as a prerequisite for maintaining public support for the country's asylum and migration policy (European Migration Network, 2006).

Like most host countries, the Government of the Netherlands strongly prefers voluntary return over forced return, as it is considered to be less controversial and more humane. It is also much less costly than forced return and helps to strengthen the integrity of the migration management system (European Migration Network, 2009; Van Wijk, 2008). Only if voluntary return is not possible,

forced return will come into view. This emphasis on voluntary return has resulted in various policy measures and return programmes aimed at stimulating voluntary return of migrants who have no legal right to stay in the Netherlands (for an overview, see European Migration Network, 2009). In the Netherlands, the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V) is responsible for carrying out the return policy. However, the Government traditionally assumes a relatively small role in providing direct assistance and support for assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR). Instead, the facilitation of voluntary return is primarily done by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and several smaller non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (European Migration Network, 2009 and 2016).

When migrants without a legal right to stay in the Netherlands do not leave the country and can also not be returned forcefully, they lose their right to shelter and will therefore have to provide for themselves. However, since the 2012 ruling of the Dutch High Court in the *Ferreira* case, the Government of the Netherlands is obliged to make an exception for migrant families with children under the age of 18. Before then, families with children who had their asylum application rejected but nonetheless stayed in the Netherlands, ended up on the street. However, in the

*Ferreira* case, the court decided that terminating the shelter of a mother and her three young children constituted a violation of the rights of the child. In response to this decision, the Government of the Netherlands now organizes the housing of migrant families whose asylum application has been rejected in designated family locations (*gezinslocaties*), until the youngest child reaches the age of 18. As long as a return has not been effectuated, these families can reside there until the youngest child reaches the age of 18. At the time of research, there are six of these designated family locations, located throughout the country. Although the regime at these locations is relatively sober, with minimal provisions for adults, the children have access to education and full medical care.

In the same year as the ruling in the *Ferreira* case, the Government of the Netherlands introduced the so-called Rooting law or Mauro law, named after a much-publicized case involving the planned forced return of a 17-year-old rejected asylum seeker from Angola who had been staying with a foster family in the Netherlands for nine years. Children of rejected asylum seekers or unaccompanied children without a residence permit, who had been staying in the Netherlands for more than five years, could qualify for a residence permit on the basis of the rooting principle. This resulted in a child amnesty provision in 2013, legalizing a group of children and their direct families. These developments were intended to make a clear distinction between

the right to stay in the Netherlands and the obligation to leave.

Migrant families currently residing at one of the family locations have generally exhausted all legal remedies and are therefore obliged to leave the Netherlands. Being obliged to offer housing to families with children without a legal right to stay in the Netherlands, the State has made these families a priority in its return policy. Because voluntary return is preferred, the Government seeks close collaboration with IOM and NGOs to develop a specific return arrangement tailored to the needs of families with children. In the case of voluntary return with IOM, families can receive a financial contribution as well as tailored reintegration support. Furthermore, IOM has started the Innovative Action project in 2017, which makes it possible to combine several forms of support. As the actual return rates from the family locations have been relatively low over the years, the additional support scheme aims to further reduce barriers to return to the country of origin.

As these family locations are a relatively recent phenomenon, to date, no empirical studies have been conducted into the reasons why most people residing here are not able or not willing to leave the Netherlands. This report therefore seeks to provide more insight into the factors causing migrant families in these family locations to stay there. In particular, the exploratory study aims to identify obstacles these migrants face in returning to their country of origin,



whether factual or psychological, including views and concerns over the future of their children. The overall aim of the study is to inform policies and programmes for assisting the voluntary return of migrant families, including the use of possible incentives towards return that could be considered by relevant Dutch agencies. The main research question of this study is as follows:

*What are the main factors causing migrants residing in the family locations to not voluntarily return to their country of origin?*

The main research question will be answered through the following sub-questions:

- What is the legal, political and social context of the family locations?
- Given the existing studies on decisions regarding return migration, what factors are known to influence these return decisions?
- What are the characteristics of the population residing at the family locations? How many migrants previously residing here have returned to their country of origin?
- What are the most important factors identified by migrants residing in family locations that form an obstacle for their return? And what are the most important factors identified by relevant stakeholders?
- To what extent are differences discernible in these factors between different migrant

groups (for example, on the basis of nationality)?

- What possible incentives could relevant Dutch agencies consider in reducing return obstacles for migrants residing in family locations?

These research questions will be answered on the basis of a study carried out between October 2017 and January 2018, which consisted of a review of relevant case law and policies, a literature review of existing studies on factors influencing voluntary return, quantitative data on the population of the family locations, and 43 qualitative interviews with migrants residing in family locations and relevant stakeholders.

### 1.1. A note on terminology

Terminology in the field of return migration is often opaque, lacking clear definitions or precision. For example, European Union return policy discourse generally emphasizes *return* to the country of origin or another third country, whereas Dutch policy discourse focuses on *departure* from the Netherlands. The Dutch Aliens Act 2000 uses the terms *departure* and *expulsion* instead of *return*. The term *departure* is used similarly to the umbrella term *return* that is used within the European Union context. Furthermore, in the Dutch context, a distinction is generally made between forced departure, independent departure and absconding (European Migration Network, 2009). *Absconding* means that a migrant's whereabouts are no longer known to the government, and it is unknown whether he/

she has left the Netherlands; this is normally registered as unsupervised departure. When a migrant has not left the country, it means he/she is staying illegally in the Netherlands.

Much has been written about the extent of “voluntariness” in the case of voluntary return. Whenever someone who does not have a legal right to stay in the Netherlands anymore returns to his/her country of origin, it is questionable whether it is indeed possible to speak of “voluntary” return (European Migration Network, 2006). This is one of the reasons why in the Netherlands the term *independent departure* (*zelfstandig vertrek*) is often used instead of voluntary return. Others have argued that the term voluntary return is nonetheless adequate, because despite the fact that someone is not legally allowed to stay in the host country, he/she nonetheless chooses to cooperate and return (Beltman, 2012). The European Migration Network (2009) has identified four different return scenarios, ranging from voluntary to forced return:

- (a) A third-country national with a legal right to stay in a member State returns voluntarily to a third country, without any obligation to leave the host State;
- (b) A third-country national without a legal right to stay in a member State returns to a third country before he/she is detected or apprehended by the authorities in the host State;
- (c) A third-country national without a legal right to stay in a member State and already subjected to a return decision cooperates with the obligation to return to a third country; and
- (d) A third-country national without a legal right to stay in a member State and already subjected to a return decision is forcefully returned to a third country.

Somewhat similarly, IOM (2004) generally recognizes three different forms of return. *Involuntary* or *forced return* is defined as “return as a result of the authorities of the host state ordering removal”. For voluntary return, IOM distinguishes between voluntary return with and without compulsion. *Voluntary return without compulsion* occurs “when migrants decide at any time during their sojourn to return home at their own volition and cost”. *Voluntary return under compulsion* is “when persons are at the end of their temporary protected status, refused asylum, or are unable to stay, and choose to return at their own volition”.

For the sake of uniformity, this report uses the term *voluntary return*, except where explicit reference is made to laws and policies that employ another terminology. Given the population the report focuses on, this should generally be understood to constitute voluntary return under compulsion. The same applies to terms as “choosing” or “deciding” to return. Although the report does not deny the agency migrants

possess to decide whether to return or not, it should be kept in mind that these decisions take place “under different and changing structural circumstances, with different capacities and desires, creating different levels of agency over mobility” (Van Houte, Siegel and Davids, 2016:3). Thus, although these terms are used for the sake of clarity, it is acknowledged that migrants often have little to choose or decide.

## 1.2. Readers' guide

The report contains seven chapters and is structured in line with the different aforementioned sub-questions. The first chapter hereafter describes the data and different methodological approaches that were used for the current study. Chapter 3

then provides the legal and policy background of the family locations. This is followed by a literature review in chapter 4, which gives an overview of existing studies on factors influencing voluntary return, with a specific focus on factors that can be expected to be relevant for the migrant population at the family locations. The following two chapters comprise the empirical core of the report. Chapter 5 analyses the quantitative data on the family location population, including characteristics of people who have left the family locations over the last years, while chapter 6 presents the result of the interviews with migrants and stakeholders. The report is finished with a conclusion and recommendations in chapter 7.



## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions previously set out, a wide range of data has been collected through different methodologies. Each research methodology will be discussed in more detail below.

### 2.1. Literature review

At the onset of the study, a literature review has been conducted. Relevant national and international literature, as well as policy papers and reports, were studied to conduct the literature review in chapter 4. This literature review in turn informed the questionnaires that have been drawn up for the interviews with migrants and stakeholders. The literature used for this report can be divided in two bodies of work. First, there is a growing number of studies on the issue of voluntary return of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers – including a relatively high number of papers and reports from the Netherlands. Second, since the establishment of the family locations, several reports have described the legal and policy framework governing the family locations, as well as the experiences of migrants residing there.

Literature was first searched through a number of well-known search engines, resulting in both academic and more practice-oriented work in English and Dutch. As a second step, the literature list of each relevant article and report was scanned to seek additional literature that could be relevant

for this study. A reasonable body of work that examines the issue of (voluntary) return of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers exists, while there is also a handful of reports on everyday life at the family locations. However, to date, no study exists that specifically addresses the obstacles migrants at the family locations experience in order to leave the Netherlands. Nonetheless, both strands of work – on the issues of return and family locations – proved helpful for the current report. As can be seen in chapter 4, the existing work on factors influencing voluntary return decisions has helped to gain insight in common obstacles that are faced by a wide range of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers – at least some of which can be expected to be relevant for migrants residing at the family locations. Furthermore, some of the existing reports on the situation at the family locations and the experiences of migrants residing there provided relevant information to better understand the context in which the target group of this study makes its decisions. Together, these two strands of work helped to formulate the theoretical background for the research instruments and the empirical part of this study.

### 2.2. Quantitative data

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the current population residing at the different family locations, significant changes in the

population during the last years, as well as characteristics of migrants leaving the family locations. This overview is based on data provided by DT&V, which keeps a record of all migrants arriving at one of the family locations.<sup>1</sup> The anonymized data contained information on a number of migrants' characteristics, including age, sex, nationality and duration of contact with DT&V. It also keeps track of the departures from the family locations, including the reason why people leave. This information is also used to provide insight into the characteristics of those who voluntarily return from the family locations throughout the years.

### 2.3. Qualitative interviews

In November and December 2017 each family location – except Goes, for practical reasons – was visited at least two times to interview migrants and stakeholders from partner organizations working at the family locations.<sup>2</sup> In total, 43 respondents were interviewed: 20 migrants and 23 stakeholders. The interviews were semi-structured, based on questionnaires that were developed on the basis of the literature review.

#### 2.3.1. Interviews with stakeholders

A number of governmental, international and non-governmental organizations work on the family locations; the most important of these are the Central Agency for the Reception of

Asylum Seekers (COA), DT&V, IOM and Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland/Dutch Council for Refugees (VWN). COA is responsible for the reception of all asylum seekers, managing the various asylum centres, as well as the family locations. As such, their staff often stays in close contact with many of the migrants at the family locations, sometimes building good relationships. DT&V is part of the Ministry of Justice and Security and carries out the Government of the Netherlands' return policy. It is responsible for the preparation and organization of independent departure and forced return of migrants without a legal right to stay in the Netherlands. Each migrant who is obliged to leave the Netherlands is assigned a departure supervisor of DT&V. This departure supervisor regularly meets with the migrant to talk about the different possibilities for return and try to motivate him/her to leave the Netherlands independently. IOM has dedicated Project Officers in all regions of the Netherlands working on assisted voluntary return (AVR), who also cover the family locations. Most of them usually have a fixed day every week where they hold consultation hours at the family location. IOM also works closely with COA and DT&V, with all organizations referring to each other during the return process (European Migration Network, 2009). Finally, VWN traditionally assists asylum seekers with their asylum case and, when successful, integration

<sup>1</sup> The researcher would like to thank André Nieuwenhout (DT&V) for providing these data.

<sup>2</sup> Two interviews were conducted at the closed facility in Ter Apel, with one migrant and one stakeholder. Although Ter Apel is not a designated family location, there are nonetheless several rejected asylum seeker families staying there.

into Dutch society. More recently, they have also initiated a project to support (former) asylum seekers who want to return to their country of origin, including those residing at family locations.

The original aim was to interview someone representing each organization at all family locations that were visited in the context of this study, but time constraints meant this was eventually not achieved everywhere. Nonetheless, a total of 22 stakeholders were interviewed, divided relatively evenly between the different family locations. This includes five COA employees, seven DT&V departure supervisors, five IOM Project Officers, and four VWN employees.<sup>3</sup> The interview took place 15 times with one person, and 4 times with two persons (one time with COA and VWN and two times with DT&V). The interviews were semi-structured, with some of the questions tailored to the specific organizations, and lasted anywhere between 30 and 90 minutes. All respondents were asked about their daily tasks, views on the situation at the family locations, and what they believe are the most important obstacles preventing voluntary return. In many cases, a range of other topics was also discussed, as most respondents were happy to talk about different aspects of their work. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, no references are made to individual family locations. The report also does

not discuss differences between the various family locations.

### 2.3.2. Interviews with migrants

Finally, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 20 migrants at the various family locations. Respondents were primarily recruited through the IOM Project Officers, although at some locations, COA invited potential participants for the interview. The IOM Project Officer or a COA employee explained the purpose of the interview and provided information about the research. When a migrant subsequently agreed to participate, he/she would be invited for the interview on a specific day and time. Interviewees did not receive any compensation for their participation. In various family locations, it proved difficult for IOM Project Officers to find migrants who were willing to participate in the research project. In combination with a tight schedule, this is the main reason the final number of respondents is not as high as initially expected.

As in most cases the selection of potential respondents was done by the IOM project officer, this means the final sample is likely to be somewhat biased. After all, most respondents were already known to the Project Officer, and since IOM operates on the basis of voluntariness, it is likely that these migrants might be more positive about return to their country of origin than migrants who never even get in touch with IOM in the first place. At the same time, it does not necessarily mean that the

<sup>3</sup> The researcher would like to thank Willy van der Mark (COA) for her help in planning the interviews with COA location managers.

obstacles faced by the respondents in this study differ substantially from the overall population at the family locations. Moreover, this study is explicitly intended to have an explorative nature; as such, the results are not intended to be representative of all migrants residing at the family locations.

The interviews took place in the office of IOM or in one of the consultation rooms of COA. Where possible, the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Dutch, English or French, generally making it easier to engage in a more open conversation, ask additional questions and build trust. Nonetheless, in many cases the help of a translator was needed. This was done through the commonly used translating telephone service that is available on all asylum locations. After calling the central reception of the translating service with a request, a translator is usually found within a few minutes. During the interview, the office phone sits in the middle of the table and is put on speaker. The translator translates the questions of the researcher from Dutch into the native language of the respondent, and the responses from the respondent are translated from his/her native language into Dutch. Interviews conducted with the help of a translator generally had a more structured and less conversational nature. Where respondents agreed, the interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In other cases, notes were taken during the interview, which were used to write a more extensive report on the interview the same day or

the day after the interview. This was the case for all interviews where a translator was used, as the translation service does not allow the recording of these conversations.

At the start of each interview, the purpose of the study and the interview were explained to the respondent, as well as the background and position of the researcher. It was clearly emphasized that all interviews were anonymous and confidential, and that participation was on a voluntary basis; if respondents wished to not answer a question or withdraw from the interview altogether, they could do so at any moment. The researcher also emphasized that the aim of the interview was absolutely not to convince participants to return to their country of origin, but rather to learn about their experiences and perspectives. Before starting the actual interview, respondents were then given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have.

The questionnaire that was designed prior to the interviews was primarily used to ensure all relevant information for the study was covered; often, several questions were simultaneously addressed in the course of responding to an initial, very broad question. Interviews themselves were structured in three parts: (a) background and life before coming to the Netherlands; (b) life in the Netherlands and current situation at the family location; and (c) perceptions on the future, including the issue of voluntary return. However,



in reality, conversations often flowed freely from this predefined structure. As all respondents had voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, there was generally a high willingness to talk about their situation. On the other hand, there were also interviews where it was hard to get the respondents to talk about their feelings and experiences. For example, some of the interviewees became visibly emotional when talking about their experiences or current situation, making it ethically problematic to probe for further information. As a result of the differences between interviews with migrants, the chapter uses a relatively high number of quotes from a few migrants. This is not because such points were exclusively brought up by these migrants, but rather because of the very clear and lively way these migrants spoke about their experiences. These were often interviews that could be conducted in Dutch and English, without the use of a translator.

All interview transcripts have been analysed with Atlas-Ti, a software package for analysing qualitative data. A set of predefined codes has been drawn up in accordance with the research questions of the study, with further codes being created during the analytical process. The results of the interview data are discussed in chapter 6. Throughout the chapter, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of respondents, while maintaining readability and transparency about the source of quotes. All quotes from stakeholders in this chapter have been translated from Dutch to English by the researcher. For quotes from migrants, this depends on the language the interview was conducted in. Quotes originally in Dutch and French have been translated by the researcher. Quotes from interviews conducted with a translator are used relatively little, but when they are used, it will be indicated that these are paraphrased and translated by the researcher from Dutch.



### 3. LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY LOCATIONS

For the duration of their asylum application, asylum seekers have a legal right to stay at an Asylum Reception Centre (*Asielzoekerscentrum* or AZC). When an asylum application is rejected, people furthermore have a right to reception for the duration of the return period. This period is normally four weeks, after which the right to reception ends. If expulsion seems feasible within two weeks, people can be placed in immigration detention. If expulsion seems unlikely within two weeks, a freedom restricting measure can be imposed for 12 weeks. During this period, an asylum seeker is able to stay at a so-called freedom restricted location (*Vrijheidsbeperkende locatie* or VBL), but only if he/she cooperates with return to the country of origin. After those 12 weeks, the right to reception normally ends and rejected asylum seekers need to organize their own housing. Dutch law does not provide for a right to housing for rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

However, since 2011, families with children who have lost their formal right to reception are nonetheless offered shelter in special family locations. As mentioned above, the establishment of these family locations was a direct result

of the *Ferreira* case, involving a mother and three young children. The family was residing in a VBL in Ter Apel after their asylum application had been rejected and they were supposed to return to their country of origin. As the family did not return, the Dutch State threatened to terminate their stay in the VBL, after which the family would end up on the streets. In July 2010, the Court of The Hague decided in an interim ruling that it would be unlawful for the State to terminate their stay in the VBL.<sup>4</sup> The unlawfulness of the termination was based on a variety of national and international laws, including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the European Social Charter and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Court took into account that the mother did not have the financial means to provide her children with the necessary level of care and housing.

The interim ruling provided the Dutch State with the opportunity to offer concrete measures that would be taken to ensure adequate housing and sufficient financial means to afford subsistence costs and schooling for the children. The State responded by indicating that it would be possible for the children to be temporarily

<sup>4</sup> Court of Justice of the Hague 27 July 2010, no. 200.063.511/01, JV 2010/328.

placed with a foster family or in a childcare institution. However, in its final ruling on 11 January 2011, the Court concluded that the proposed measures by the State would amount to a violation of the children's right to a family life, and that termination of their stay in the VBL would therefore be unlawful.<sup>5</sup> The Court emphasized the young age and poor health of some of the children, while there was no evidence the mother had neglected her duty of care for the children. The Dutch State decided to appeal the ruling, arguing that the Court failed to properly take into account the migrant's own responsibility, but in 2012, the Dutch Highest Court upheld the ruling.<sup>6</sup>

The State responded to these rulings with the creation of the family locations. The locations provide shelter to families with minor children whose asylum application has been rejected and other migrant families without a legal right to stay, who have been informed they have to leave the Netherlands. A stay at a family location is nonetheless fully aimed at preparing for and organizing return to the country of origin. The Minister for Security and Justice gave two reasons for the creation of largely separate locations where these families are placed together. First, the regular asylum reception centres are primarily aimed at asylum seekers who are still in the middle of their procedure. Second, it is more complicated to work on facilitating the return of these rejected asylum seekers when they

are dispersed over many locations throughout the country (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2011). The locations are operated by COA, while departure supervisors from DT&V work on these locations to facilitate and organize the return of migrants to their country of origin.

There are several organizations at the family locations offering support to migrants who want to return to their country of origin. IOM has a Project Officer at each family location, who is usually there on a fixed day every week. The Organization offers consultation and information about voluntary return, assistance with obtaining the required travel documents, as well as logistical and financial support to plan the journey. Migrants who return can receive furthermore a financial allowance to cover expenses during the first period after return, as well as in-kind assistance, such as goods or services that support a successful reintegration in the country of origin. The AVRR programme focuses on education, starting a small business or, if necessary, accommodation. For migrants at the family locations, there is also the Innovative Action project, which makes it possible to provide extra support based on the specific needs of individual migrants and families.

Besides IOM, VWN has recently also started a programme that offers support to migrants who do not have a residence permit and are thinking about returning to their country of origin. The organization

<sup>5</sup> Court of Justice 11 January 2011, no. 200.063.511/01, JV 2011/91.

<sup>6</sup> High Court 21 September 2012, no. 11/01153.

already has offices at all family locations. The types of support it offers are quite similar to IOM. In several countries, VWN cooperates with partner organizations to provide up-to-date information about the country of origin and offer continued support after departure from the Netherlands. Finally, there are several small NGOs that also offer support to returnees, sometimes with a more specialized focus than IOM and VWN.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Wereldtools' project from Stichting Wereldwijd offers a box with specific machines, materials or tools to start a small business in the country of origin, while Solid Road focuses primarily on supporting Armenian migrants.

### 3.1. Family locations

At the time of research, there were six family locations, located in Amersfoort, Burgum, Emmen, Gilze, Goes and Katwijk (see Figure 1). Previously, there were also family locations in Almelo, Den Helder and Vlagtwedde (Ter Apel), but these locations now hold different groups of migrants.

In general, only migrants already residing in an asylum reception centre are eligible for the family locations (Slingenberg, 2012). They can stay there until their youngest child reaches the age of 18. Otherwise, a stay in a family location can normally be terminated on the basis of four reasons: (a) the family returns to their country of origin; (b) the family receives a right to stay; (c) the family leaves for an unknown

destination (usually this means they stay illegally in the Netherlands); or (d) a new asylum procedure is started that gives the family the right to reside in an asylum reception centre. In the latter case, families sometimes nonetheless stay at the family location.

Conditions at family locations are meant to be relatively sober. For adults, there is only a minimum of services available, as the aim of the locations is to facilitate return to the country of origin. They are not allowed to study or work, although sometimes they can do some chores at the family location for a small remuneration. For children, the facilities are similar to those at an asylum seeker reception centre. At all locations, there is a playground, a study centre and a homework area, and a local NGO

Figure 1: Family locations in the Netherlands: (1) Amersfoort; (2) Burgum; (3) Emmen; (4) Gilze; (5) Goes; and (6) Katwijk.

Source: [www.coa.nl/nl/zoek-locatie](http://www.coa.nl/nl/zoek-locatie)



<sup>7</sup> These are Solid Road, Stichting Wereldwijd, Stichting ROS, Stichting Bridge to Better and Stichting IETA.

organizes recreational activities that are not directly related to return. Children retain their right to education; usually, they can receive their primary education at the school at the family location, while for secondary education, they are placed at a regular high school. Children also remain fully entitled to health care, while adults only have a right to urgent medical care (Boersema et al., 2015). Migrants no longer receive money for travel expenses related to legal procedures. They do receive a small living allowance, although this is lower than the amount received by asylum seekers.

A freedom-restricting measure is imposed on all families residing in one of the family locations.<sup>8</sup> This means they are obliged to stay within the municipality where the family location is located, although an exception is made for schoolchildren who go to school outside the municipality (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2011). As a result of this freedom-restricting measure, all migrants above the age of 12 also need to report to the Alien Police once a week.<sup>9</sup> Failure to stay within the municipality and report to the Alien Police constitutes a criminal act. Residents also need to register every weekday around noon with COA at the family location itself, although again, schoolchildren are generally exempted from this. Failing to register with COA results in a reduction of the weekly living allowance. The rationale behind these restrictions is that migrants

need to be available for both formal and informal contact with the authorities working on their return (ibid.).

### 3.2. Modifications at the family locations

Several NGOs have been critical of the living conditions at the family locations. The working group Child in AZC – a coalition of UNICEF, the Netherlands, Defence for Children, the Dutch Council for Refugees, Church in Action and War Child – has published several critical reports about the family locations (Defence for Children and UNICEF, 2011; Werkgroep Kind in AZC, 2014). These reports argue that the situation at the family locations causes physical and psychological illnesses and violates the CRC. There are also concerns about the accessibility of health care and education for children, while the living allowance is insufficient to cover basic necessities, such as food, diapers, baby food and clothing. The working group has furthermore been especially critical about the daily registration obligation, claiming that it disproportionately restricted the freedom of the children and made it nearly impossible for parents to go to church or stay in touch with family or friends elsewhere in the Netherlands (Defence for Children and UNICEF, 2011). In response, the State Secretary for Security and Justice decided that registration was no longer required on Sundays and holidays (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Article 56, Aliens Law 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Article 54, Aliens Law 2000.

However, in its more recent report, the working group notes that young people particularly still experience this obligation as a severe restriction on their daily life (Werkgroep Kind in AZC, 2014).

In March 2013, the Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs (Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken (ACVZ)), an independent committee that advises the Government of the Netherlands and Parliament on immigration law and policy, published an advisory report on the situation in asylum reception centres and family locations (ACVZ, 2013). The committee concluded there were insufficient possibilities for migrants to engage in meaningful activities, especially in the VBLs and family locations, where a more sober regime is in place. The lack of things to do during the day could undermine residents' health, and particularly long-term residents became increasingly dependent, passive, frustrated and depressed. The committee argued this also made it harder to motivate residents to take initiative and work on their future. Migrants are therefore less inclined to work on organizing their return to their country of origin. The ACVZ advised to expand the possibility of activities in the asylum centres and family locations during a pilot period of several years. It offered several suggestions: (a) recreational activities; (b) short-term skills training; (c) access to the Internet; (d) creation of study rooms; and (e) information about the possibilities to engage in activities. The committee believed these activities could improve residents'

well-being and create space for them to think about their future.

The State Secretary followed up on this advice by implementing a pilot in three family locations, from March 2014 to March 2015. The main goal of the pilot was to increase voluntary return of migrants residing at the family locations. Another goal was to improve residents' health and well-being. The pilot was carried out by COA and DT&V, the two governmental organizations working at the family locations. DT&V was primarily responsible for providing short courses and vocational training, as well as so-called "return areas" where migrants could receive information about their country of origin. COA offered recreational activities, occupational counselling and some short courses (Boersema et al., 2015). An evaluation study of the pilot showed that both residents and staff working at the family locations were generally positive about the increase in activities that were offered (ibid.). The study concluded that these activities did seem to improve overall well-being of family location residents. However, the researchers did not find evidence that this led to an increase in voluntary return, although they noted that more time might be needed for this effect to take place. Despite the questionable effect of activation on voluntary return, the study nonetheless concluded that meaningful activities are important and valuable for residents' health and well-being. Until now, the pilot has not been followed up by a more permanent project.





## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW: FACTORS INFLUENCING RETURN MIGRATION

This chapter aims to provide an overview of existing knowledge about factors related to return migration decisions. As noted in the introduction, the family locations have only recently come into existence and, as such, this is the first empirical study looking into the return attitudes and intentions of the migrants residing in these locations. However, this does not mean there is no existing literature to build upon. For a long time, very little research examined the return decisions of migrants, but in recent years, there has been growing attention for return among both policymakers and researchers, resulting in various new studies. These studies will be discussed here, with particular focus on the specific population residing at the family locations.

### 4.1. From migration decisions to return migration decisions

The literature on return migration cannot be understood without taking into account the wider work on migration decisions in the field of migration studies. Within this field, a large body of research has examined migrants' decision to leave their country and move to another country (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). Initially, this research mainly came from the field of economics, looking at the

migration decision as the outcome of a rational choice process primarily involving monetary considerations. Later, more sociological and interdisciplinary work has drawn attention to other non-financial migration determinants. The focus has also expanded beyond the individual migrant, instead taking account of the household or family level (*ibid.*). One particularly popular and widely adopted approach to understand migration decisions is the push and pull factors approach, which focuses on determinants that makes someone leaves his/her country (push factors) and decide to migrate to another country (pull factors).

As noted, research on return decisions is far less prevalent, with some authors even claiming that "return migration in general remains a neglected field" (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015:76). Although there have been quite some studies on return migration and transnationalism of labour migrants, asylum permit holders and other legal migrants, the results of these studies cannot be automatically applied to return decisions of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants, who face considerable State pressure to return (Leerkes, van Os and Boersema, 2017). However, in recent years, there have been several studies looking into the

decision-making process regarding return migration of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Whereas this body of research initially primarily consisted of qualitative examinations (Black et al., 2004; Kox, 2011; Van Wijk, 2008), more recently, several quantitative studies have been conducted (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010; Leerkes, van Os and Boersema, 2017). Understandably, most of this research has built upon the existing research on migrant decision-making, as at least some of the factors can be expected to also play a role in the decision to return. At the same time, there are some important differences between the initial decision to migrate and return migration decisions. For example, migrant smugglers and other agents are less likely to be involved, and return migrants normally have no choice of destination, as this will be their country of origin.

Several of these studies have come up with models to explain decisions related to return migration. Although these models share several similarities, they also offer different conceptual approaches of return decisions. The most important ones will be outlined in this report, before examining more in-depth the numerous factors that are part of these models.

#### 4.2. Attitude, capacity and intention: A conceptual model of return migration

There are two broad theoretical discussions addressing return migration (Van Houte, Siegel and Davids, 2016). First, there is the

question whether return decisions are primarily the result of structural factors or individual agency. In other words, to what extent is return migration the result of a free and voluntary choice, and to what extent are external forces at play? In the migration context, *agency* refers to the capacity of individuals to overcome barriers and reform structure, whereas *structure* means the political, institutional, economic, social and cultural context within which migration occurs (Kuschminder, de Bresser and Siegel, 2015). Besides this agency–structure duality, there is also research focusing on the links between aspirations on the one hand, and capabilities on the other hand. Various studies explore the differences between the wish to return and the possibility to actually do so. Van Houte, Siegel and Davids (2016) present a model in which human behaviour, including migration decisions, are the result of an interaction between these four elements: agency, structure, desire and capacity.

Studies focusing on return decision-making have also drawn on the migration aspirations literature to better understand the different mindsets of migrants with regard to return migration (Cassarino, 2004; Kuschminder, 2017). A particularly influential conceptual approach has been offered by Cassarino (2004), who makes a useful distinction between willingness to return, readiness to return and preparedness to return. *Willingness* to return means that a migrant might be willing to return someday, but this says little about concrete actions taken towards that return. A lot of migrants have

the aspiration to someday return to their country of origin, but do not take any actions towards this return in the foreseeable future. This willingness of return therefore only becomes meaningful when it is matched by a *readiness* to return. For a migrant to be ready to return requires sufficient information and resources to make a concrete plan and also execute this plan. It is only when return intentions are matched by capabilities that return migration might actually be realized. When a migrant is both willing to return and ready to return, Cassarino (2004) speaks of *preparedness* to return.

A similar but slightly different approach is offered by Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout (2010). In their assessment of return decisions, they rely on the theory of planned behaviour. This theory assumes that human behaviour is, to a large extent, the result of an intention to behave in a certain way. This intention, in turn, is influenced by an individual's attitude towards that behaviour, subjective social norms and whether someone believes to be competent enough for the planned behaviour. A more recent study has equally relied upon this theoretical approach involving the theory of planned behaviour (Klaver, Telli and Witvliet, 2015). These authors conclude that in the context of return of rejected asylum seekers, *attitude* and *competency* – perhaps better phrased as *capacity* – are indeed important factors influencing the intention to return. Social norms were found to be less relevant, because for most migrants, return is not a positive norm. This

makes the model more or less in agreement with the conceptual model of Cassarino (2004).

Both conceptual approaches require the identification of factors that influence return attitudes. Therefore, a number of primarily qualitative studies have identified a wide range of factors that influence return decisions (Black et al., 2004; Kox, 2011; Van Wijk, 2008). These factors have, to a large extent, been further confirmed by more recent quantitative studies (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010; Leerkes, van Os and Boersema, 2017). A useful distinction can be made between factors that stem primarily from the destination country and factors that stem primarily from the country of origin. This distinction is in accordance with the widely used push-and-pull paradigm. In this approach, push factors are reasons to leave a country, whereas pull factors are reasons to move to a specific country. When applied to return migration, the perspective of the push–pull model changes. In this context, push factors make migrants want to leave their host country, whereas pull factors make them want to return to their country of origin.

In this study, the reasons why people do not return to their country of origin are of primary interest. Therefore, it is important to not only focus on factors that make people want to return, but also look at factors that cause people to stay in their destination country. For this purpose, the approach introduced by Van Wijk

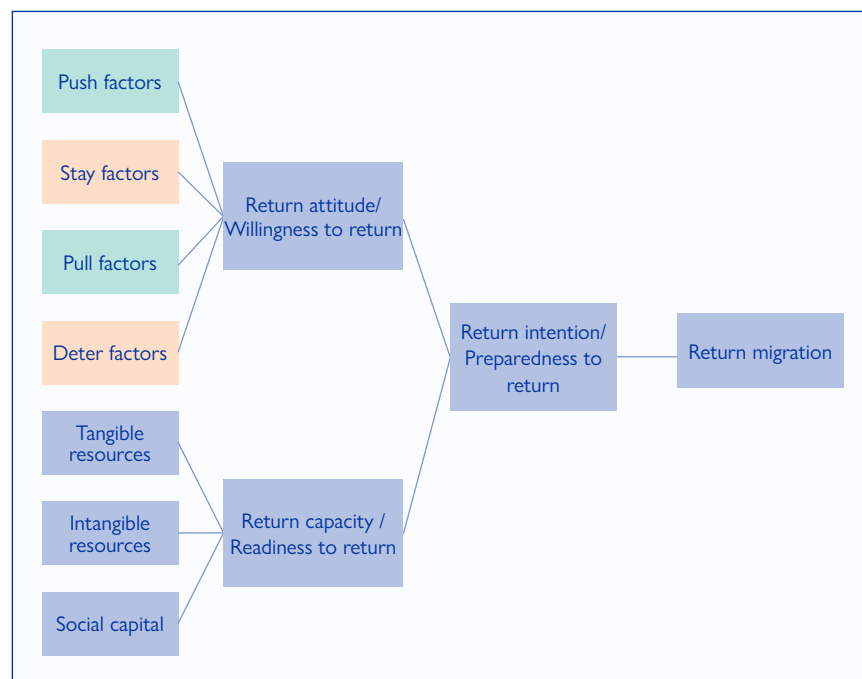
(2008) is helpful: in addition to push and pull factors, he introduced stay factors and deter factors. Whereas push factors stimulate migrants to leave their home State, stay factors achieve the opposite: they make migrants want to stay in the current country. And whereas pull factors make a migrant want to return to the country of origin, deter factors result in a reluctance to return. For a full and holistic understanding of return migration decisions, it is crucial to take into account all these four categories. The absence of push and pull factors and the presence of stay and deter factors will generally make it less likely that a migrant wants to return.

Return intentions are thus the result of a willingness to return and the capacity to do so. The former is influenced by different push and stay factors in the destination country, and pull and deter factors in the country of origin. Return capacity requires adequate resources, information and social

capital. A visualization of this model, drawing on the works of Cassarino (2004), Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout (2010) and Klaver, Telli and Witvliet (2015), is presented in Figure 2.

There are several ways to further categorize the factors that play a role in the decision-making process of migrants. Many studies make a distinction between factors on a macro and a micro level, although it is commonly acknowledged that a strict distinction between these two is often not possible (Kox, 2011; Van Wijk, 2008). Other studies make a similar distinction, but term these different categories structural and individual factors (Black et al., 2004). In general, factors on a micro level are within the realm of the individual migrant, either on an individual or family level. This includes personal, social and physical well-being, and also the interplay with family members and social networks. It might also encompass age, gender and family

Figure 2: A model of return migration



situation. Macro-level factors, on the other hand, are largely outside the individual realm of a migrant. Instead, focus is on the public domain. This includes the political, economic and security situations in host and home State, and also local, national and international policies.

All studies emphasize that return is not the result of one single factor, but rather a complex interplay of a wide array of different factors related to the personal situation of the migrant, current life in the destination country and the situation in the country of origin (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). Indeed, even migrants themselves often might not know what factors exactly influenced their return decisions (Black et al., 2004). Kox (2011:24) summarizes this well, when she notes that:

*Migrants hover between a variety of push, pull, stay and deter factors, both on micro and macro level, or on structural and individual levels. These factors cannot be seen separately. They are almost all related to each other and they often merge.*

In other words, the factors influencing return are a complex mix and differ strongly between different groups of migrants, as well as individual migrants (De Haas and Fokkema, 2011). Moreover, the exact effect of specific conditions often strongly depends on the situation of an individual migrant. A good example of this can be found in a recent Norwegian study by Strand et al. (2016), who identify three different types of individuals choosing for AVR services. The first

ones are those who feel positive about their decision to return, often citing family members in the country of origin as an important reason to return. The second group consists of returnees who view their return very negatively, frequently because they believe the situation in their country of origin that led to their initial migration has not changed. In the third group, individuals have mixed feelings about their return, and mainly cite negative factors in the destination country as reason to return. This categorization shows the different factors that might be at play, depending on the individual characteristics of the migrant. A “push, pull, stay and deter model” is therefore useful to map the relevant factors influencing return in the case of an individual migrant (Van Wijk, 2008). Such a model can also help to identify common factors that influence voluntary return among migrant groups with shared characteristics, such as country of origin or original migration motive.

It is important to recognize that the final decision is not the result of a strictly rational weighing of pros and cons on behalf of the migrant. Instead, it is widely acknowledged that this decision is a highly personal and emotional one, which might make a decision seem very “irrational” (Black et al., 2004). Moreover, it is not so much an objective and factual assessment of the various factors that influences attitudes towards return, but rather the way these factors are subjectively perceived by an individual (Mommers and Eijkhout, 2009). The information migrants have about, for example, conditions in the country of origin and the

possibilities of return assistance, are crucial parts of the return decision (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). Finally, it is important to understand who is involved in deciding whether to return or not. Especially in the case of families, decisions about return are often made on the household level (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Van Wijk, 2008). It cannot automatically be assumed that the head of the household independently makes these kinds of decisions. Rather, immediate family members, extended families and communities may all play their own particular role in this (Mommers and Eijkhout, 2009). It is important to keep these caveats in mind when aiming to understand attitudes towards return.

Below the various push, pull, stay and deter factors that have previously been found to influence the return decision will be discussed. It focuses particularly on factors that can be expected to be relevant for the context and the population of the present study, i.e. migrants residing at the family locations in the Netherlands.

### 4.3. Push factors

Push factors are generally negative factors in the destination country that make someone want to leave. The legal obligation to leave can be considered as a push factor, although obviously many migrants do not experience it as such (Mommers and Eijkhout, 2009). Instead, legal status or the lack thereof is only one of many factors influencing return decisions, and often not even the most important one (Black et al., 2004; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015).

A macro-level push factor is the presence of specific European or national policies in the destination country aimed at stimulating irregular migrants to leave the country. For example, over the last decade, the Netherlands has adopted a number of restrictive migration policies intended to “discourage” irregular migrants from staying in the country. This discouragement policy is aimed at making life as an irregular migrant as unattractive as possible. The idea is that the more unattractive life as an irregular migrant is perceived, the more likely it is that people might consider leaving the Netherlands (Brouwer, van der Woude and van der Leun, 2017; Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010). Dutch studies suggest that the threat of ending up in a very marginal position discourages some migrants from staying in the country. At the same time, the majority of irregular migrants still prefers to stay in the Netherlands (Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010; Van Wijk, 2008). The circumstances in the country of origin are often cited by irregular migrants as a reason not to return, despite these toughening circumstances in the Netherlands (Black et al., 2004; Kox, 2010). In other words, life as an irregular migrant in the Netherlands is still perceived to be better than life in the country of origin. As a result, several authors question the effectivity of an even more restrictive policy towards irregular migrants (Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010; Van Wijk, 2008).

Another macro-level factor stimulating return could be the possibility of assistance

with voluntary return. Instead of focusing on making stay as unattractive as possible, AVRР programmes operate on the basis of making return more attractive. Nonetheless, existing research suggests that the availability of AVRР programmes rarely influences people's return attitudes. For example, Black et al. (2004) note how assistance was rarely able to overcome other obstacles, such as the security situation and prospects of long-term unemployment in the country of origin. Several other studies have shown that the decision to return was almost always made before being informed about AVRР options (Collyer et al., 2009; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Kox, 2011). Once people feel there is no alternative to returning – in particular because of the threat that they will otherwise be deported – they find assistance and the possibility of non-forceful return to be very helpful (Black, Collyer and Somerville, 2011). In other words, return programmes might not do much to change migrants' willingness to return, but it can certainly help to increase their readiness to return by improving their information position and increasing their resources. Yet without a credible threat of forced removal in the background, such programmes might do little to actually increase return rates (Black et al., 2004; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). Koser and Kuschminder (2015:45) therefore conclude that "return policy may be most effective when it combines 'sticks' with 'carrots.'" They argue that "the threat of removal is a critical component

to the take-up of voluntary return programmes, and that the programmes in themselves do not generally motivate return."

There are also more personal, micro-level factors that can influence migrants' return attitudes, although some of these have a clear interaction with the above-noted macro-level factors. For example, several authors note how particularly irregular migrants might become tired or frustrated about their situation in the destination country and therefore decide that returning might be a better option (Kox, 2011; Van Wijk, 2008). There are a number of reasons why migrants might feel this way: from a lack of chances to get a residence permit to economic hardship and struggling to find work. The opposite situation of this is migrants who want to return to their country of origin because their migration mission was accomplished. The lack of social contacts or a social network for support in the destination country can also be a push factor (Van Wijk, 2008). Respondents who do not have any family in their destination country have been found to be more willing to return to their country of origin (Black et al., 2004). Physical or mental health of migrants is sometimes cited as a reason why they might want to return (Kox, 2011).

#### 4.4. Pull factors

Most pull factors described in the literature are related to improvements in the perceived life opportunities in the migrant's country of origin. Improvements in the security or economic situation

in the country of origin are often mentioned as important reasons to return (Black et al., 2004; Van Wijk, 2008). The perceived improvements in life opportunities in the country of origin with the biggest impact are often those related to the initial migration reason (Leerkes et al., 2010). For example, asylum seekers who come from a country where the security situation has considerably improved, might feel it is now safe and therefore become willing to return. This could be related to the political situation, but also other aspects that impact on a migrant's security. On the other hand, migrants who primarily left for economic reasons might be willing to return when they believe there are now better opportunities in their country of origin to find a job and earn a good salary (Kox, 2011). This will be even more likely to motivate someone to return when opportunities in the destination country are comparatively limited.

On a personal level, migrants may want to return when they miss their country of origin, for example because they feel homesick (Van Wijk, 2008). Some migrants also want their children to grow up in their home country (Black et al., 2004). Leerkes et al. (2010) found that strong ties with the country of origin has a positive effect on return intentions. An important element of this is the presence of social relations in the country of origin – especially relatives, a partner or children. A migrant with relatives or other important social relationships in the country of origin might be more willing to return than someone who does not

have any significant relationships in his/her country of origin anymore. Indeed, one study found that family reunification was the single most important motivation for people to participate in a voluntary return project, followed by conditions in the country of origin (Morrison, 2000). A more recent study equally found that social factors in the country of origin – in particular a desire to rejoin family members – play an important role in the decision to return (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). As these authors note (*ibid.*, 44), this “is a strong reminder that migration, and return migration, are as much social processes as they are economic and political processes.” Other factors that have been found to increase the likeliness of return are a higher level of education and/or previous employment in the country of origin (Leerkes et al., 2010).

#### 4.5. Stay factors

As noted above, Van Wijk (2008) extended the popular push–pull model specifically for return migration decisions and included stay and deter factors. In a study focusing on potential obstacles to return, these two categories are essential to understand why some migrants decide not to return. As will become clear, many of these factors are very similar to push and pull factors, except that they work in reverse. Thus, pull factors in the country of origin resemble stay factors in the destination country, whereas push factors in the destination country are similar to deter factors in the country of origin.



Most stay factors described in previous studies relate to life opportunities in the destination country in comparison to life opportunities in the country of origin. If the above-mentioned pull factors – security situation, social relationships and economic factors – are perceived to be better in the destination country than in the country of origin, it is more likely that migrants want to stay in the destination country. This is especially the case when migrants have made significant investments – financially or personally – to come to the destination country (Kox, 2011).

Leerkes et al. (2010) note that many rejected asylum seekers feel they need to make a choice between involuntary return to their country of origin and staying illegally in the Netherlands. As noted above, restrictive immigration policies might therefore function as a push factor, as the life chances for irregular migrants in the destination country diminish. However, even with such harsh policies, life in the destination country might be perceived to be better than in the country of origin (Kox, 2011). Moreover, it is important to realize that these national policies often do not directly translate into local practices (Van der Leun, 2006). Indeed, it is commonplace in the migration studies literature to point at the wide gap between policies and realities, especially when it comes to return (Leerkes et al., 2017). In the Netherlands, there has been debate in recent years about the question whether rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants

should be provided with some minimal needs, referred to as “bed, bath and bread”. In practice, many local authorities, especially in the larger cities, provide basic shelters where irregular migrants can sleep and receive a meal. This is out of humanitarian need, and also to prevent these people from having to live on the streets and disturb public order. Such practices or policies can therefore function as a stay factor, as they facilitate life in the destination country (Kox, 2011). At the same time, NGOs increasingly also work on return, to some extent mirroring national policies (Van der Leun and Bouter, 2015). Eltink (1999) already argued that the willingness of rejected asylum seekers to leave the Netherlands was, to a large extent, dependent on their attachment to the destination country. However, she also noted that government assistance for rejected asylum seekers in the Netherlands was another factor that made them less likely to return. Support can be also offered by local support groups, such as NGOs or religious organizations. According to Van Wijk (2008), such support is more often provided to families than to individual migrants.

The chances of return might also be related to the initial migration motive. According to Van Wijk (2008), there is a difference between economic migrants, who primarily come to the Netherlands for temporarily work, and asylum seekers, who generally expect to stay long term. In his study, the number of irregular economic migrants returning was four times as high as the number of rejected

asylum seekers. He notes that economic migrants frequently wanted to return, either because they had earned enough money or because it was too hard to earn money. Rejected asylum seekers, on the other hand, have invested much energy and time in the asylum procedure, which makes them less likely to see return as a viable option. Instead, they might first want to try other ways to receive a legal status. Leerkes et al. (2010) found that the original migration motive and (a lack of) possibilities for circular migration could probably help to explain why labour migrants are generally more inclined to return than asylum seekers, although it was not relevant enough to influence differences within the group of asylum seekers.

De Haas and Fokkema (2011) found in their study that sociocultural integration in the destination country makes it less likely that migrants want to return to their country of origin, whereas economic integration had a more ambiguous effect. Another study found that labour migrants are more likely to stay in their destination country when they obtained work experience or have serious partners and/or children (Jensen and Pedersen, 2007). Indeed, one of the most important factors making migrants stay in the destination country is their social network. This can involve a wide range of social ties, although family features particularly prominent in existing studies (Jensen and Pedersen, 2007; Van Wijk, 2008). Attachments to migrant networks can also act as a stay factor, as such

a network can provide emotional support or help migrants to survive (Kox, 2011). This can be especially important for irregular migrants who receive no support from the state and depend on third parties for food, housing and work (Leerkes, van Os and Boersema, 2017; Van Wijk, 2008). For immigrants who feel at home in the destination country, departure may be particularly undesirable (Constant and Massey, 2002; Eltink, 1999). On the other hand, Leerkes, van Os and Boersema (2010) concluded in their study that ties with the Netherlands actually resulted in a more positive attitude towards return. Although it is generally presumed that longer stay in a country automatically leads to more integration and stronger ties to that country, the existing research suggests this relationship is more complex and depends on a range of other factors (De Haas and Fokkema, 2011),

Stay factors do not necessarily need to be related to an individual migrant, but can also concern family members. In the case of families with children, it is not so much the life opportunities of migrants themselves that is a crucial factor in the decision-making process, but rather the life opportunities of their children (Klaver, Telli and Witvliet, 2015). Indeed, numerous studies have found that migrants with children who have grown up in the destination country are generally very reluctant to return (De Haas and Fokkema, 2011; Kox, 2011). Educational concerns feature prominently in reasons why migrants want to stay in the destination country. Many migrants

believe that the education system in the destination country is better than in their country of origin (Black et al., 2004; Klaver, Telli and Witvliet, 2015). For example, a study among Bosnian and Eritrean migrants in Europe found that many were not only reluctant to return because of social and economic issues in their countries of origin, but also because they wanted to let their children finish their education in the destination country (Al-Ali, Black and Koser, 2001). These migrants believed that their children would not be able to receive a comparable education in their country of origin and therefore did not want to return. Indeed, Van Wijk (2008) believes that families with children are more likely to stay in the destination country than individual migrants. When these people have children who are born in the Netherlands, go to school where they have friends, and speak Dutch, their parents are less likely to return. They fear their children will not be able to attend a good school, because it is too expensive, or good education is absent altogether. Moreover, these children might be unfamiliar with the culture and language of the country of origin, thus making it hard for them to establish a social life.

More on a micro level, Klaver, Telli and Witvliet (2015) note that many rejected asylum seekers have come to the Netherlands with certain expectations for a better life and are understandably disappointed that these expectations have not come true. Those migrants need to get used to the idea that they

will not be allowed to stay in the Netherlands and reimagine their future. The question is how they will respond to this. Some migrants will take their losses and indeed leave the Netherlands, whereas others might be less motivated to do so. One reason to stay is the hope of migrants to obtain a residence permit in the destination country. Such hopes do not necessarily need to be based on realistic chances: debates or just rumours about regularization schemes or departure moratoria might already constitute a significant stay factor (Kox, 2011). As Van Wijk (2008:23) puts it, “the world of migration is a world of rumours and rumours create hope.” This is related to what he refers to as the “fata morgana effect”. He uses this term to describe how irregular migrants always believe that in the near future, there is a good job waiting for them, they just need to wait a little bit longer. Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout (2010) apply this same metaphor to migrants who keep hoping for a residence permit, no matter how small the actual chance of getting it is. The combination of hope and rumours – for example about an upcoming regularization scheme – acts as a strong stay factor (Van Wijk, 2008).

#### 4.6. Deter factors

Much like stay factors, deter factors nearly all involve a comparison of the life opportunities in the country of origin and the destination country. It thus seems logical that a declining or bad economic, political or security situation in the country of origin is considered a

strong deter factor (Kox, 2011). These factors are assumed to be somewhat different depending on the original migration motive. For example, the economic situation in the country of origin is likely to be more important for labour migrants than for asylum seekers, although asylum seekers have economic reintegration concerns too. However, most research suggests that for rejected asylum seekers, fear is the most important factor hindering return (Black et al., 2004; King, 2000; Leerkes, van Os and Boersema, 2017; Van Wijk, 2008). Klaver, Telli and Witvliet (2015) claim that this fear is often stronger than the fear of staying illegally in the Netherlands.

Migrants who lack strong ties to their country of origin, or do not feel at home there anymore, are less likely to return. Thus, whereas the presence of family and social relations in the destination country is an important stay factor, the lack of important relationships in the country of origin can constitute a deter factor (Kox, 2011). And whereas family or other important social relationships in the country of origin often act as a pull factor, they can also form a deter factor. For example, migrants might have been “chosen” and helped by their families or other people to migrate to Europe. When their stay abroad has been unsuccessful and they return with empty hands, they might feel they have failed their expectations and experience strong feelings of shame (Klaver et al., 2015; Kox, 2011). Migrants might also feel embarrassed that they have not stayed in touch with family members in the country of origin

(Van Wijk, 2008). Health problems of a migrant might constitute a deter factor too, especially when migrants believe they cannot receive the same standard of health care in the country of origin as they receive in the destination country (Kox, 2011). As such, it can also be conceptualized as a stay factor. Leerkes, van Os and Boersema (2010) find that there is a strong positive correlation between overall health and return intentions.

Finally, Van Wijk (2008) draws attention to the way rumours might have a deter effect. He offers the example of Chinese migrants who are hesitant to return to China, because they have been told by fellow Chinese migrants that returnees are fined upon arrival. Another rumour that circulated was that migrants who return with IOM upon arrival in the country of origin are searched by border guards who are interested in the money that returnees receive for their reintegration. Although it was unclear to what extent such stories were actually true, for many migrants, these rumours acted as a deter factor.

#### 4.7. A hierarchy of factors?

An important question is whether there is some “hierarchy” in these factors influencing whether someone voluntarily returns or not. Is it possible to identify what the most critical factors are? Van Wijk (2008) is rightfully cautious about this, as he notes most studies rely primarily on qualitative data. Moreover, as already argued above, the most crucial factors influencing the return decision

differ strongly between individual migrants. Nonetheless, in recent years, several studies on the basis of more quantitative data have been conducted (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout, 2010). These studies have tried to quantify the various factors that determine return attitudes. This does not necessarily mean that it is now possible to readily discern the most crucial factors that influence return. Generally, a range of factors interact with each other to shape the return attitude of migrants, making it impossible to highlight one single factor. Nonetheless, the combination of existing qualitative and quantitative studies allows for a general picture of the factors that are most often identified as influencing migrants' return attitudes.

The various studies examined here differ in their findings, but many argue that the actual or perceived security situation in the country of origin is the most important factor hindering return. For example, King (2000) concludes that non-economic factors in the country of origin have the strongest effect. Similarly, Black et al. (2004) came to the conclusion that for asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, the security situation in the country of origin is the most important factor influencing voluntary return, followed by the location of family members and other important social relations. Focusing on rejected asylum seekers, Leerkes, Galloway and Kromhout (2010) also find that for most migrants, perceptions regarding the security in the country of origin – in

comparison to their perceived situation as irregular migrants in the Netherlands – is the most important factor influencing voluntary return, far outweighing factors related to the economic situation in the country of origin. A third factor they find to be an important determinant for return migration is the migrant's health. Furthermore, the three factors strongly interact with each other. Klaver, Telli and Witvliet (2015) summarize this as a trade-off between the perceived life opportunities in the country of origin and the experienced quality of life as an irregular migrant in the destination country. Van Wijk (2008) finds that the situation in the country of origin and the migrant's social network primarily determine the return decision. He therefore warns policymakers they should be modest about the capacity to actually influence the decisions of individual migrants, as these are factors they have little to no control over.

However, a more recent large-scale study by Koser and Kuschminder (2015) found some surprisingly different results. Among their respondents, the most important factor influencing return decisions is conditions in the destination country, followed by individual factors, social factors, policy interventions, and lastly, conditions in the country of origin. A large part of the migrants interviewed for this study were labour migrants, which might explain some of these differences. Indeed, difficulties finding employment or having no right to work in the destination country was cited twice as often as

having received a negative decision on an asylum application. Other factors frequently mentioned were tiredness regarding living as an irregular migrant, wanting to reunite with family, the possibility to profit from AVR services and better job opportunities back home. These authors therefore emphasize that conditions and policies in the destination country might be of critical importance in determining return decisions.

## 5. POPULATION OF, AND DEPARTURES FROM, THE FAMILY LOCATIONS

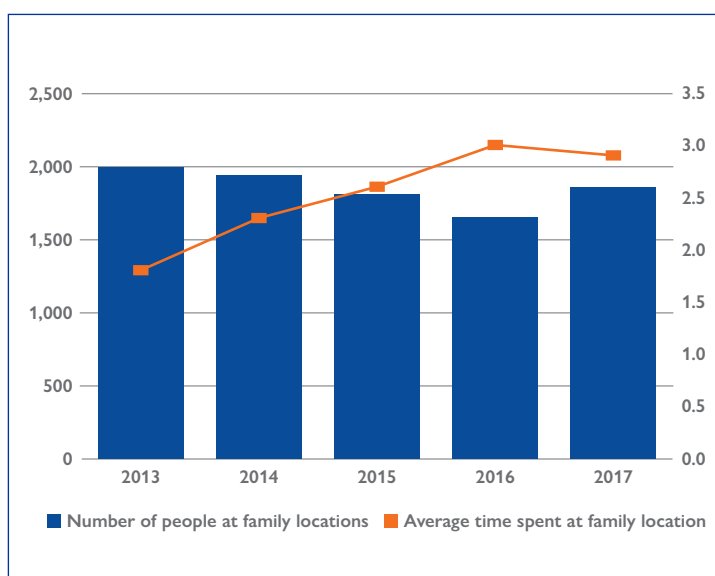
This chapter takes a look at some of the characteristics of the population residing at, and leaving from, the family locations. It covers the period 2013–2017 and is based on data provided by DT&V specifically for this study. The data was received in, and accordingly runs until, November 2017. The first part of the chapter focuses on the characteristics of the population currently residing at the family locations, while the second part looks at the various types of departure from the family locations over the last five years.

### 5.1. Population of the family locations

Figure 3 shows the total number of people residing at the various family locations during the period 2013–2017, as well as the average duration of their stay. For each year, this refers to the number of people that were registered on 1 November. The only exception is 2013, where the numbers for November were no longer available; therefore, the number of people registered on 1 December has been used for this year. An earlier report looking at the population at the family locations showed that for the period 2012–2015, the highest number of new arrivals occurred in 2012 (Boersema et al., 2015). In that year, 1,823 new

people were placed at one of the family locations, while in all other years, this fluctuated around 1,000. Between 2013 and 2017, the total number of people staying at the family locations is relatively stable between 1,500 and 2,000 people. Although there is a small annual decline from 2013 to 2016, in 2017, the number slightly increases again. Two possible reasons might account for this. First, 2015 saw an unusual high influx of asylum seekers, and those who have been rejected will by now have started to arrive at the family locations. Second, as will be further illustrated in paragraph 5.2, the number of people voluntarily returning to their country of origin from one of the family locations significantly decreased in 2017.

Figure 3: Number of people and average time spent at family locations in years, 2013–2017



The orange line indicates the average number of years people have resided at a family location (indicated on the axis on the right). As could be expected, this initially increases from below two years (2013) to an average of three years in 2016. However, 2017 sees the first small decline in average time spent at the family location.

Table 1: Age and sex of the population of the family locations, November 2017

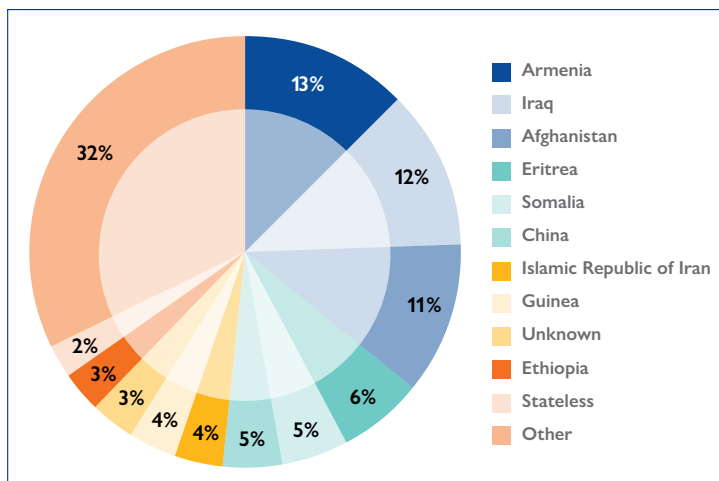
| Sex   | N     | %  |
|-------|-------|----|
| Man   | 833   | 45 |
| Woman | 1,027 | 55 |

| Age               | N          | %         |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| 0–6               | 505        | 27        |
| 7–12              | 335        | 18        |
| 13–17             | 144        | 8         |
| <b>Total ≤ 17</b> | <b>984</b> | <b>53</b> |
| 18–25             | 143        | 7         |
| 26–40             | 514        | 28        |
| 41–60             | 198        | 11        |
| 60–99             | 22         | 1         |
| <b>Total ≥ 18</b> | <b>877</b> | <b>47</b> |

Table 1 gives an overview of the age and sex of the people residing in one of the family locations in November 2017. As can be seen, there are more women than men at the family locations. An important reason for this is the relatively high number of single

Figure 4: Nationalities at family locations, November 2017



mothers, compared to very few single fathers. An earlier study showed that in 2015, there were 732 families with only one adult, or roughly 57 per cent of all families, and that in 683 instances, this single-adult family member was a woman (Boersema et al., 2015).

In terms of nationality, diversity is high at the family locations. Between 2013 and 2017, 87 different nationalities and 104 different countries of origin have been registered by DT&V. Figure 4 shows the most common nationalities in November 2017, as reported by migrants themselves. The largest group of residents comes from Armenia, followed by those from Iraq and Afghanistan. Together, these three nationalities comprise more than one third of the overall population. What is furthermore noticeable is that 2 per cent of migrants are stateless. As long as the nationality is unclear or statelessness formally unrecognized, they cannot be returned. Finally, the diversity of the population is illustrated by the relatively large group of other nationalities, consisting of 52 different nationalities.

It is important to realize that nationality is not necessarily the same as country of birth. Both categories are registered by DT&V. However, nationality is officially based on what a migrant says is his/her “preferred nationality”, whereas country of birth refers to the country where someone was born – and this regularly means a country that no longer exists today. Unlike nationality, the most common country of birth at the family locations is actually



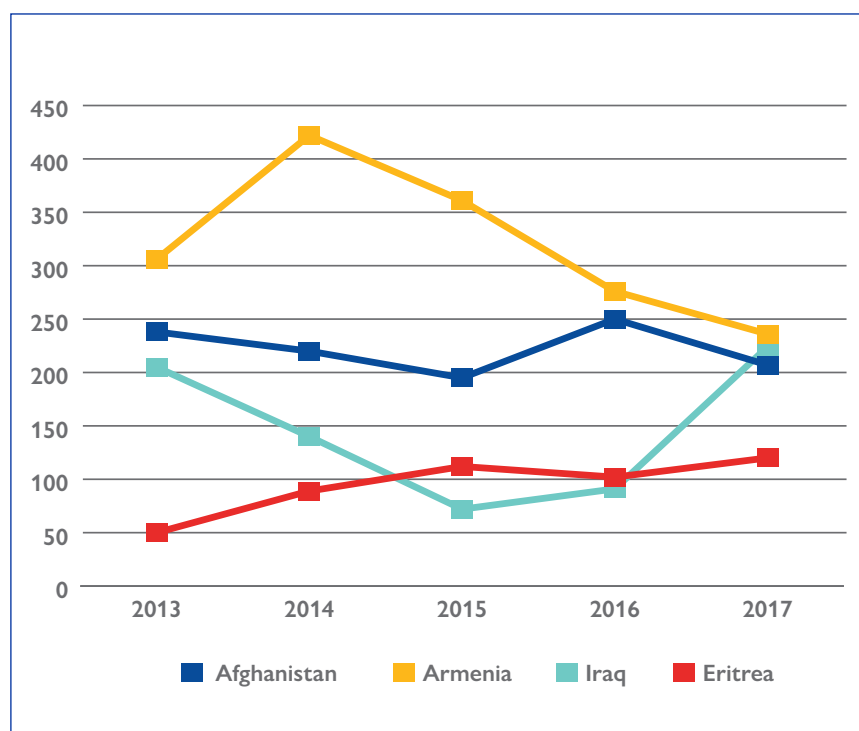


Figure 5: Four most common nationalities at family locations, 2013–2017

the Netherlands. This is because there are a large number of young children born in the Netherlands to parents without a legal right to stay. So although they are born in the Netherlands, their nationality is usually the same as their parents'. The second most common country of birth is the former Soviet Union, which consists of people with a range of different nationalities. Iraq and Afghanistan form the third and fourth most common countries of birth.

The four most common nationalities at the family locations are Armenians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans. As seen on Figure 5, the total number of residents from these four countries has fluctuated somewhat between 2013 and 2017. It shows that after a sharp rise, in 2014, over 400 Armenians stayed at the various family locations, accounting for more than 20 per cent of the total population at that time. However, since then

the number of Armenians has decreased substantially and in 2017, the number of Armenians was roughly half of the number in 2014. The second most common nationality in 2017, Iraq saw a different development during the same period. Decreasing from 205 residents in 2013 to only 72 in 2015, the number of Iraqi families started to rise again in 2016 and saw a particularly sharp increase in 2017. Finally, the number of Eritreans steadily increased, whereas the number of Afghan families remained relatively stable for the last five years.

## 5.2. Departure from the family locations

This section takes a look at annual departure rates from the family locations during the period 2013–2017. A distinction is made between four categories: (a) receiving a residence permit for the Netherlands;

- (b) departure without supervision;  
 (c) independent departure; and  
 (d) forced departure.<sup>10</sup>

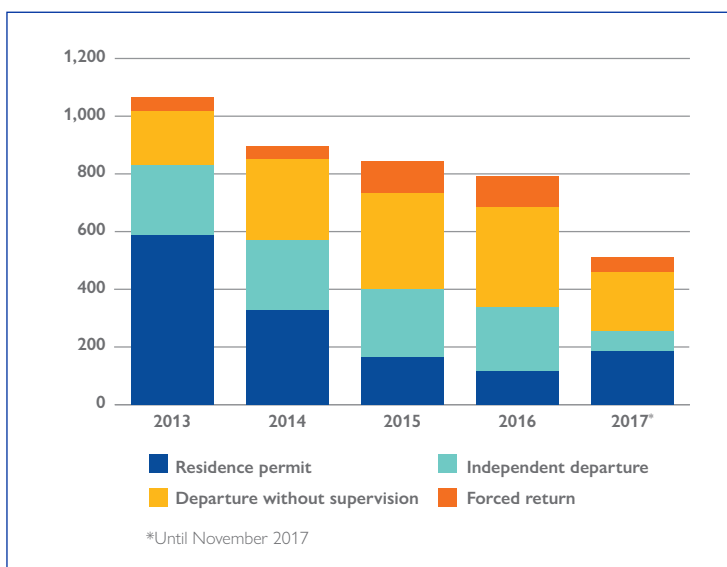
As seen on Figure 6, the total number of people leaving the family location decreases each year since 2013, although there are important differences between the different categories of departure. In 2013, 588 migrants at the family locations received a residence permit to stay in the Netherlands after all. This number then substantially decreases each year afterwards, although 2017 actually saw an increase of this type of departure again. The number of unsupervised

departures initially increases every year, but sees a sharp decrease in 2017. Something similar happened with forced departures. Whereas in 2013 and 2014, approximately 50 migrants from the family locations were forcefully returned, in both 2015 and 2016, this number was more than 100. However, in 2017, the number of forced departures was back to 50 again.

The annual number of independent departures remains very stable between 2013 and 2016, but then decreases sharply in 2017. The first four years of the data, between 221 and 243 migrants voluntarily returned on an annual basis, yet during the period January–November 2017, the number of voluntary returns was only 52. As will be explained in more detail below, an important reason for this decrease is a string of asylum policy decisions by the Government in 2016 and 2017, including the official exclusion of a large number of nationalities from receiving government-funded return and reintegration support.

Table 2 shows the most common nationalities for the four different

Figure 6: Types of departure from family locations, 2013–2017



<sup>10</sup> *Departure without supervision* means people left the family location without informing the authorities about their whereabouts. It is also referred to as departed with unknown destination and usually means the family absconded and stays illegally elsewhere in the Netherlands. The DT&V category “independent departure” generally means voluntary return with IOM. In relation to the family locations, it is safe to assume that all these migrants left with at least some financial and/or in-kind assistance. In the remainder of this chapter, the terms independent departure and voluntary return will be used interchangeably. The category “forced return” includes all migrants who have been forcefully returned to their country of origin. This category is somewhat complicated, as there are no forced returns taking place directly from the family location. Instead, families are first transferred to the immigration detention centre in Zeist and only then forcefully returned to their country of origin. DT&V therefore only registers “transfer to immigration detention” as a category of departure from the family location. However, not all migrants who are placed in immigration detention eventually depart and some actually return to the family location after their forced return failed. During the period 2013–2017, 65% of family location residents placed in immigration detention were eventually returned. The figure indicated here under “forced departure” therefore comprises only those migrants who have been transferred to immigration detention and subsequently returned. The total annual number of people transferred to immigration detention during the study period was 96 (2013, 51 returned), 84 (2014, 48 returned), 152 (2015, 113 returned), 142 (2016, 107 returned) and 79 (2017, 52 returned).

| Residence permit         |              | Independent departure                     |              | Unsupervised departure |              | Forced return          |            |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|--------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------------|------------|
| Afghanistan              | 253          | Mongolia                                  | 211          | Armenia                | 263          | Armenia                | 91         |
| Iraq                     | 152          | Serbia                                    | 178          | Afghanistan            | 234          | Afghanistan            | 76         |
| Unknown                  | 149          | Bosnia and Herzegovina                    | 93           | Iraq                   | 80           | Nigeria                | 33         |
| Somalia                  | 142          | Armenia                                   | 71           | Somalia                | 54           | Russian Federation     | 25         |
| Islamic Republic of Iran | 82           | the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia | 59           | Russian Federation     | 49           | Albania                | 24         |
| Armenia                  | 70           | Albania                                   | 43           | Guinea                 | 49           | Serbia                 | 22         |
| Burundi                  | 39           | Ukraine                                   | 37           | Nigeria                | 49           | Kosovo <sup>11</sup>   | 11         |
| Azerbaijan               | 36           | Russian Federation                        | 36           | Serbia                 | 44           | Georgia                | 8          |
| Guinea                   | 35           | Iraq                                      | 27           | Mongolia               | 39           | Bosnia and Herzegovina | 7          |
| Other                    | 424          | Other                                     | 252          | Other                  | 490          | Other                  | 74         |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>1,382</b> | <b>Total</b>                              | <b>1,007</b> | <b>Total</b>           | <b>1,351</b> | <b>Total</b>           | <b>371</b> |

types of return from the family locations during the period 2013–2017. It shows that migrants from Afghanistan most often end up receiving a residence permit after all, followed by migrants from Iraq. For these two groups, receiving a residence permit was the most common reason they left the family location. Much in line with Figure 6, this primarily occurred in 2013 and 2014. In later years, this number considerably decreases and then slightly rises again in 2017 for both nationalities. The third largest group of migrants who receive a residence permit have an unknown nationality, while the fourth largest group has the Somalian nationality. Despite being a large group at the family locations, Armenians receive considerably less often a residence permit, especially in the latter years of the research period.

When it comes to forced return, Armenians and Afghans are the most common nationalities. At the same time, people rarely

get forcefully returned to Iraq – only in 2017, four migrants were forcefully sent back to Iraq. The list further consists of Nigerians, Russians, several countries in the former Yugoslavia, and a large group of other nationalities. As for unsupervised departure, or departure with unknown destination, Armenians and Afghans are the most common nationalities, with numbers that are much higher than all other nationalities. Indeed, for Armenians, unsupervised departure is even the most common type of departure. It is possible that many of these migrants fear they will be forcefully returned in the near future and therefore decide to abscond from the authorities. At the same time, Iraqis and Somalians also depart relatively often with an unknown destination, while these nationalities very rarely get forcefully returned. Finally, it is notable that Eritreans are not in any of the four lists, showing how rarely migrants

Table 2: Most common nationalities per type of departure, 2013–2017

<sup>11</sup> References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

from this group depart from one of the family locations at all. Only 11 migrants received a residence permit between 2013 and 2017, while 19 migrants left unsupervised and another 4 returned voluntarily.

The most interesting list for this study is the one with independent departure. Here, the three most common nationalities are Mongolians, Serbians and those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, together comprising 482 returnees. The list furthermore features several other countries that were part of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, as well as the Russian Federation and Ukraine. As for the four most common nationalities residing at the family location, voluntary return was not a main reason for departure from the family location for any of these groups. The main group is Armenians, with 14 per cent of the departures constituting voluntary return. For Iraqis, this is 10 per cent, while for Afghans, it is only 3 per cent. For Eritreans, it is 12 per cent, but since the overall departure numbers are so low, this only counts for 4 people.

As noted above, many of the most common nationalities to depart independently between 2013 and 2017 are no longer eligible for AVRR services or not eligible for the full package. Only vulnerable migrants of these nationalities could still be eligible for special assistance and services. These decisions came in response to the relatively high influx

of asylum seekers from countries of origin that are considered safe, as well as reports about abuse of reintegration assistance by migrants from some of these countries (see ACVZ, 2018). The Government of the Netherlands therefore decided to exclude migrants from countries that are allowed visa-free travel to the Netherlands from all return assistance, as well as to exclude from reintegration assistance migrants from countries located in what is referred to as a “ring around the European Union”.<sup>12</sup> Since these policy changes, the number of new arrivals at the family locations from many of these countries considerably decreased, while the large majority of voluntary returnees from the family locations came from exactly these countries. This is clearly illustrated in Table 3, which shows the annual number of independent departures for the three most common nationalities identified in Table 2, as well as the number of migrants from these countries staying at the family locations. Together, these three nationalities comprised more than half of all independent departures during the period 2013–2016. It clearly shows that in 2017, there are basically no longer independent departures of migrants from these countries. This is not the result of an increase in other departure types among these nationalities. Rather, it seems that there are just fewer new migrants with one of these nationalities arriving at the family locations.

12 Algeria, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Kosovo,<sup>11</sup> Lebanon, Morocco, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Tunisia and Turkey (DT&V, *Uitgesloten nationaliteiten voor herintegratieondersteuning bij zelfstandig vertrek uit Nederland* [Nationalities excluded from reintegration support in case of independent departure from the Netherlands]).

The number of migrants from these three countries residing at the family location decreases in 2016 and 2017, while their population numbers were already very low compared to their relatively high departure numbers. This suggests that in 2016 and 2017, nationalities that constituted the main group of voluntary returnees but are no longer eligible for AVRR services arrive much less often at the family locations than in earlier years. As a result of these fewer arrivals, the number of independent departures from the family locations was considerably lower in 2017 than in the years before. Furthermore, the list of most common nationalities to return voluntarily has undergone drastic changes.

Figure 7 shows that the most common nationalities to return independently to their country of origin in 2017 are Afghans, Russians and Iraqis. However, as already outlined above, the overall numbers are relatively low, especially in comparison with earlier years. Moreover, the average time spent at the family location is much higher for this group than for those who returned independently in earlier years. Figure 8 shows the average time people have spent at a family location before they leave, divided between the different types of departure. This duration of stay differs considerably between the different types of departure. Migrants who end up receiving a residence permit stayed the longest in a family location, on average 2.5 years. Migrants who were forcefully returned spent an average of 2 years at a family location, while

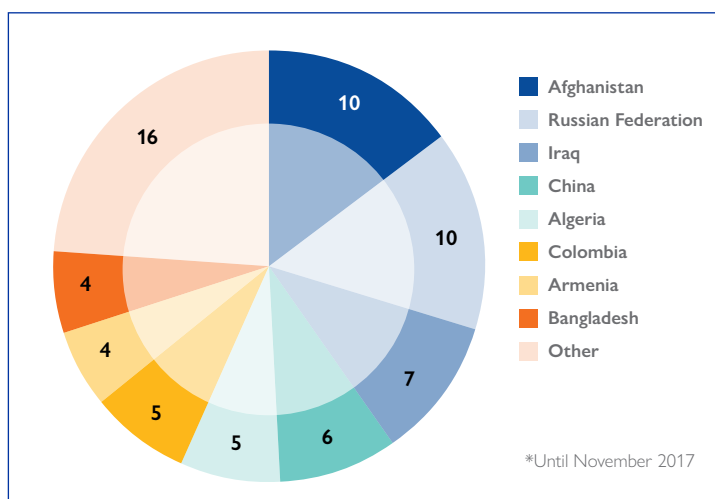
|                               | 2013       | 2014       | 2015       | 2016      | 2017      |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Independent departures</b> |            |            |            |           |           |
| Mongolia                      | 21         | 50         | 76         | 64        | 0         |
| Serbia                        | 54         | 50         | 42         | 29        | 3         |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina        | 34         | 35         | 20         | 4         | 0         |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>109</b> | <b>135</b> | <b>138</b> | <b>97</b> | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Population</b>             |            |            |            |           |           |
| Mongolia                      | 34         | 43         | 43         | 38        | 39        |
| Serbia                        | 38         | 38         | 38         | 11        | 18        |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina        | 11         | 0          | 5          | 0         | 0         |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>83</b>  | <b>81</b>  | <b>86</b>  | <b>49</b> | <b>57</b> |

those who left unsupervised did so on average after 1.5 years.

What is particularly noticeable in this overview is the average amount of time spent at a family location before voluntary return. Between 2013 and 2016, this was on average about 7 months, considerably shorter than for all other types of departure. However, in 2017, this is suddenly 2.2 years. Only migrants who receive a residence permit stayed on average for a longer period at the family location in the last year. It is likely that this change is related to the exclusion of many nationalities from voluntary return support. Many migrants who returned

Table 3: Independent departures and population: Mongolia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013–2017

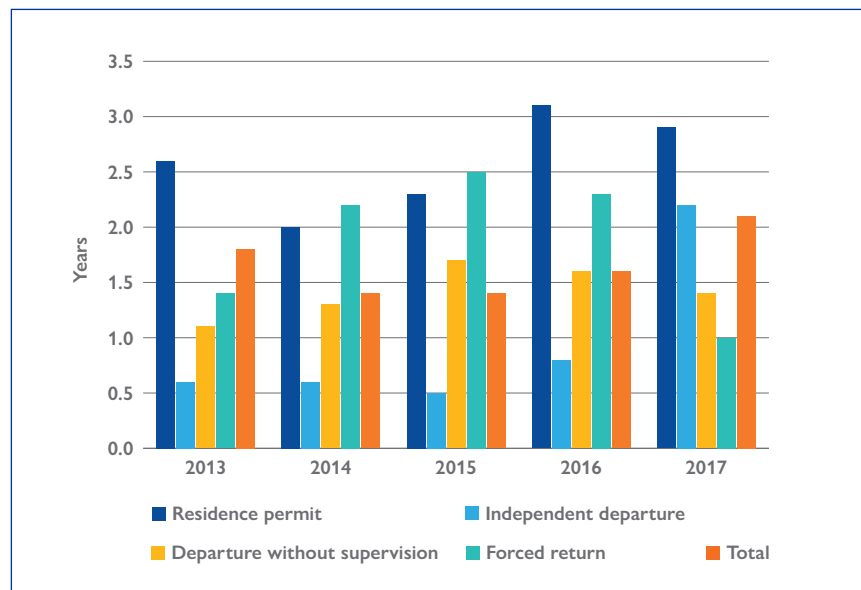
Figure 7: Independent departures, 2017\*



voluntarily came from relatively “easy” countries of origin; i.e., countries that are considered to be safe and where the government generally collaborates with the Dutch authorities on return. Since assistance and support for voluntary return to these countries

is no longer offered, the migrants returning independently in 2017 generally go to more “complicated” countries. As a result, they have, on average, spent much more time at the family location before they actually return.

Figure 8: Average time at family location until departure, 2013–2017



## 6. PUSH, PULL, STAY AND DETER FACTORS AT THE FAMILY LOCATIONS

This chapter is based on the interviews that have been conducted with both migrants residing at the family locations and the different stakeholders working there. The findings that follow provide an insight into some of the factors that play a role in the reason why migrants do or do not return. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that these factors are highly individualized, and one should therefore be careful not to draw generalized conclusions on the basis of them too easily. Nonetheless, combined with information from the stakeholder interviews, the chapter gives a good impression of some of the most important factors hampering voluntary return.

The chapter is divided in four sections based on the conceptual model introduced in chapter 4. As the primary focus of this study is on factors hampering voluntary return, most emphasis will be placed on stay and deter factors. These particular factors were also discussed most during the in-depth interviews. Nonetheless, as it is also valuable to know what factors might have an influence on voluntary return, push and pull factors will also be discussed. Factors in the host country will be first discussed, i.e. push and stay factors. This will be followed by

a discussion of the pull and deter factors relating to the country of origin. As already noted in chapter 4, not all factors fall neatly in one of the four categories, with some factors possibly falling into several categories.

### 6.1. Push factors

As the focus of the research project was factors hampering voluntary return, push factors were relatively little discussed. They were mainly brought up by migrants who were currently considering returning to the country of origin, which was a minority of the respondents. In other cases, these factors were discussed by migrants, but did not outweigh the stay and deter factors. The main push factors that migrants talked about were tiredness about life as an irregular migrant and avoiding forced return. Life at a family location was also mentioned several times, but often as part of an argument that it was still a better alternative than returning to the country of origin.

#### 6.1.1. Tiredness

All interviewed migrants were former asylum seekers, and most had exhausted all legal remedies. This means they no longer had a right to stay in the Netherlands and were legally obliged to leave the country. For some migrants,

this contributed to a willingness to consider return to the country of origin. Three interviewed migrants mentioned that they were tired living without a legal status, and therefore wanted to leave the Netherlands. Several stakeholders also knew about some people who were fed up with the whole asylum process and had therefore decided to just give up and leave the Netherlands. Alida (Burundi)<sup>13</sup> was one of them. She had been staying in the Netherlands since 2011 with her 5-year-old daughter. When she arrived in the Netherlands, she was pregnant and had applied for asylum. She repeatedly expressed frustration about the fact that it took more than a year before the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (Immigratie-en Naturalisatiedienst or IND) had given a negative decision on her asylum application. She explained that she was tired because of her life in the Netherlands, without a passport, without a job, and with all the uncertainties that comes with that. Therefore, she had decided to get in touch with IOM to discuss options for return to Burundi. Another migrant, Helen (Eritrea), also said:

*I got to a point where I was so exhausted, I was like: I want to go back.*

Blessing (Nigeria) also explained that the first time she thought about returning was after more than 10 years in the Netherlands and because she was tired. However, in her case, this was before she lived at the family location, at a time when

she had been staying irregularly in the Netherlands for more than 10 years. She had then met an IOM Project Officer, who informed her about the possibilities for return.

*He was a friend of mine, I met him at [deleted]. I started talking with him and told him: "I am tired. What am I going to do?" He told me they helped people to return to Nigeria. Then for the first time, I started to think about returning. (Translated from Dutch)*

For Blessing, it was the combination of a history of human trafficking and a life on the streets that added to her tiredness. As this was not further discussed during the interview, it is not clear whether this is still the case now that she is staying at a family location.

### 6.1.2. Avoiding forced return

An important reason for migrants at the family location to consider voluntary return was to avoid forced return. There were migrants who were convinced that they would not be forcefully returned, usually because their country of origin is not cooperative on forced returns. However, most migrants indicated that expulsion was something they were worried about, and in some cases, the threat of forced return was one of the main reasons to start talking with IOM about voluntary return. For example, Tigran and Anahit (Armenia) had been working on their return with IOM, but were eventually allowed to stay at least temporarily in the Netherlands on

<sup>13</sup> As noted in chapter 2, all names used in this report are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.



medical grounds. They explained that the main reason they had been preparing for their return to Armenia was that they believed they would be forcefully returned if they did not return themselves. Another Armenian migrant, Marian, explained:

*You are afraid every day that maybe tomorrow you will be deported. Maybe that, maybe this. So this tension stays in your head, and you cannot enjoy. [...] If I had seen a final chance, then I would have taken it, but it does not work. So if I will be deported with police anyway, then I prefer to go with IOM. (Translated from Dutch)*

The threat of forced return was the most cited reason why stakeholders believed migrants might consider voluntary return. Many stakeholders argued that it was very hard to motivate migrants to consider voluntary return, and that in many cases, only the threat of forced return could lead to voluntary return. As Klaartje (COA) stated:

*What is the trigger for people to finally work on independent departure? I think 8 out of 10 times this is because they can be deported. Although this is becoming less of a trigger, you see a lot of people just disappear before this happens.<sup>14</sup>*

Most departure supervisors from DT&V also stated that without a credible threat of forced return, it was nearly impossible to motivate

people to consider return. This means that most stakeholders saw important differences between different nationalities. For example, the Armenian authorities are generally experienced as very cooperative in establishing the identity and nationality of people and providing laissez-passers. This makes it more likely that these migrants are effectively “removable”, which then forces them to think about return.

In chapter 4, it was signalled that rumours may play an important role in the migration world. Although in existing studies this is primarily linked to rumours about legalization schemes, at the family locations, such rumours also seemed to occur in the context of forced returns. For example, Amir (Afghanistan) had heard stories about DT&V sending people back to Afghanistan, even if they were not able to get a laissez-passer. They could do this because they had direct contacts with the Afghan embassy. Blessing (Nigeria) and Alida (Burundi), although residing at different family locations, had both heard that DT&V sometimes uses fake papers to forcefully return people. Alida said she wanted to avoid this at all costs, because during forced return, people are treated as animals. Therefore, she preferred returning with IOM, and had recently started talking with the Project Officer. Blessing also said that if she had no options left anymore, this was an important reason to return with IOM.

<sup>14</sup> All interviews with stakeholders have been conducted in Dutch. As a result, all stakeholder quotes in this chapter have been translated from Dutch. This will not be mentioned separately at every quote.

### 6.1.3. The family location

The regime at the family locations is relatively sober, as this is meant to be a centre where people work on return to their country of origin. Adults at the family locations cannot study or work, and people are officially not allowed to leave the municipality where the family location is located, although this is of course hard to enforce. Migrants also have to report with COA every weekday, usually around noon. This daily obligation gave many migrants the feeling that they were stuck. Many migrants complained about the situation and daily life at the family location, regularly comparing it to a prison. Without the ability to engage in meaningful activities, many migrants indicated it could be tough to pass the days. Some migrants explicitly stated they believed that because the aim of the family location is to make people leave the Netherlands, the authorities try to make life for the residents as hard as possible. At the same time, Kox (2011) already noted that immigration detention seemed to hardly influence the willingness to return of migrants who had applied for asylum and/or has a partner and children in the Netherlands. Since conditions at the family location are arguably better than in immigration detention, it is not surprising that it did not influence the return attitude of the majority of migrants.

With the low return rates from family locations, stakeholders generally did not believe that the circumstances there constituted a push factor for many migrants. Nonetheless, for Helen (Eritrea), the lack of possibilities was an

important reason for wanting to leave the Netherlands altogether. She was born in Eritrea, but had moved to South Africa when she was 2 years old. She had been a university student in South Africa and spoke fluent English. During the interview, she explained how she found her stay at the family location hard, as she felt her life was put on hold.

*The first time I came here, I saw the location and I was like: I am going to lose my mind and kill myself. This is not the life I planned for myself. [...] I am not crazy; I want to start my life. I have been sitting here for how long? Yes, I am raising my daughter and I am thankful for that, but that is not it. That is not my life goals. [...] I am a second-year psychology student at the University of [deleted], and after sitting here and doing absolutely nothing, it is enough and I said: "It is okay; you can send me to Ethiopia. I can go there, and I can hassle for my life, because I have hassled for the longest and did not expect anyone to pay for my school fees. I have worked for my things." And I was like: "Help me go back."*

Besides the absence of meaningful activities and the overall sober circumstances, there is another way the family locations potentially function as a push factor. Whereas the hope of a residence permit constitutes an important stay factor (see section 6.2.5 of this report), the absence of hope might influence return attitudes and get migrants to consider voluntary return. Ingrid

(DT&V) remembered a family that had said they did not believe there was any chance for them to legally stay in the Netherlands. Therefore, they had decided they would return, even though forced return to their country was rather complicated and therefore not very likely. Although this was not a common sentiment among interviewed migrants – most of whom still hoped they would receive a residence permit someday – it was carefully suggested a few times that the absence of hope was a reason to consider leaving the Netherlands. This was most clearly stated by Mariam (Armenia), when she explained the difference between staying at an asylum reception centre and at a family location:

*There is a difference between, for example, an asylum seekers' centre and a family location. Here, it is a family location, it is for families who have to go back. It is basically a deportation centre. Because when you are in an asylum seekers' centre, you still have hope: maybe I will receive a permit. Because you still have a procedure. But here, it is a family location. You are constantly thinking: "Do I have to go back? Do I have to go back, and when will that happen?" That is the difference. (Translated from Dutch)*

Mariam's explanation not only illustrates the way the family location can push people to consider leaving the Netherlands, it also shows how fear of forced return can be another important factor influencing the return decision.

#### 6.1.4. Money

Financial support was generally not mentioned by migrants as a reason to consider return, but Jochem (DT&V) was particularly convinced about the role of money in stimulating migrants to return to their country of origin. He believed offering money was the primary factor that could make a difference between stay and return.

*Money is still very important for a migrant. Even if it is just a little bit, that can make a difference. Look, if you return alone, you only have to take care of yourself. But a family needs to provide for a man, woman and often several children. If you then arrive at the airport with nothing [...] so I think that makes quite a difference.*

His colleague Freek (DT&V) was less convinced about financial support, but did think money could help overcome some hurdles after return, such as being able to travel onwards from the airport to the place of origin and not coming back empty-handed. However, just as Lydia (COA), he believed money could only help to convince migrants who already want to return because of homesickness or family they miss. In other words, money can help migrants with a positive return attitude to increase their return capability, but it will not change the return attitude of migrants who are sure they do not want to return.

Several stakeholders mentioned the recent policy changes excluding certain nationalities from financial or in-kind return assistance. Klaartje

(COA) explained that before these changes, mostly migrants from relatively “easy” countries returned. Many of these returnees knew in advance the amount of money they would receive and left the family location relatively quickly after their arrival. Remco (DT&V) concurred, adding that these were very easy cases for departure supervisors. He also believed many of these migrants came specifically to the Netherlands to receive the money associated with the return assistance, which meant they did not have to be convinced to return. As these migrants are now excluded from AVR services, many stakeholders believed that migrants currently residing at the family locations are generally less inclined to return because of financial support.

## 6.2. Stay factors

Both migrants and stakeholders mentioned a range of different factors in the host country why migrants want to stay in the Netherlands, despite the precariousness of their current legal situation. Most of the identified stay factors fall within two broad categories: the fact that many migrants have been in the Netherlands for a long time and the hope that they will still receive a residence permit someday. Various other factors were brought up, some of them highly specific and individualized. Many of these other factors were ultimately related to the two factors mentioned above.

### 6.2.1. Migration journey

Several migrants had travelled for a long time before they arrived

in the Netherlands, making them relieved to have finally been at their destination. This meant people were reluctant to move again. For example, Ella (Eritrea) spoke about the long journey she had made to end up in the Netherlands, involving the common migration route across the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. She explained that this was an important reason she wanted to stay where she was at all costs. Her long journey had been a traumatic experience, and she felt that she was not able to be on the move again. In other words, the investment she had made to arrive in a safe country had been so big – not only financially, but also emotionally – that it was impossible to imagine having to move again. Linda, who worked for VWN, said that particularly African women had often made perilous journeys and dealt with considerable traumas. This made it very difficult for them to start moving again.

### 6.2.2. Time spent in the Netherlands

Practically all stakeholders agreed that a longer stay in the Netherlands generally makes it much harder for people to decide to leave again. As Mark, a departure supervisor for DT&V, said:

*The longer it takes, the more people get used to life in the Netherlands. This man whose asylum application was rejected after six weeks and subsequently returned, he said: “Way too cold here for me, I am leaving”. Not these people here though. Most of them have been here for years. Next week,*

*we will draw up a list of people who are at the family location for seven years or more. They exist. And there is no way they will return. No way.*

Although most stakeholders agreed that it depended on the individual how long it took before return became highly unlikely, they generally agreed that the best chances for migrants to leave voluntarily was within their first year at the family location. This idea is also supported by the data presented in chapter 5. Ruud (IOM) even believed that in general, people might be willing to return with IOM only during the first few months at the family location:

*Look, they should not be in the Netherlands for too long if you still want to be able to motivate them to return. You are really speaking about a few months. When it is a few years, then it becomes [...] The longer it takes, the more difficult it gets.*

In some cases, the initial decision on an asylum application already lasted very long, something that was linked by some stakeholders to capacity problems at the IND – the organization deciding on asylum applications – and the lived reality of migrants. Furthermore, many stakeholders believed an important reason why rejected asylum seekers were staying in the Netherlands for such a long time is because they are able to start new procedures aimed at receiving a residence permit after all. Migrants can start a range of procedures after their rejected asylum application, ranging from a new asylum application to a

request to get temporary relieve from forced return proceedings on the basis of medical grounds. Although on the one hand these possibilities were seen as humane and fair from a rule-of-law perspective, stakeholders from all groups sometimes questioned the integrity of lawyers who were always willing to start a new procedure, even when there was practically no chance this would succeed. Departure supervisors regularly expressed frustration at what they saw as deliberate attempts by migrants to not have to work on return. As Marie (DT&V) said:

*I think there are a few important obstacles, and those are the procedures. You can apply for asylum again, you can apply for asylum again, up until you are on the steps of the airplane.*

Stakeholders gave several reasons why return generally became harder for people when they had been in the Netherlands for a longer time, which were also touched upon during the interviews with migrants. First, migrants might get used to life in the Netherlands, build a network and integrate in local communities. At the same time, there were large differences between migrants regarding the extent to which they had been able to integrate into local communities. As evidenced by the large number of interviews conducted with the help of a translator, most migrants spoke very little Dutch or English. Often, these migrants had little contact with people outside the family location.

However, some migrants had been able to integrate remarkably well into local, often church-based communities. For example, Mariam (Armenia) had been able to build some relationships in the local church because she already spoke English when she arrived in the Netherlands. In this way, she had been able to learn Dutch, which further stimulated her local integration, to the extent that some of her Dutch friends would join her during the periodic conversations with DT&V.

Second, at the family locations, the children of migrants go to school and gradually become very “Dutch”. For all these migrants, what was most important was the extent to which their children had become integrated into Dutch society. Stakeholders noticed this too, emphasizing that the children sometimes played an important role in pressuring their parents not to leave the Netherlands. As Jeroen (DT&V) explained:

*I now have an Armenian family; all three children are born in the Netherlands. I have families with teenage children, going to high school. They say to Mum and Dad: “You can say you want to go back and maybe you do want that, but I don’t.” I have had Iraqi families with children of 16, 17 years old. They see the images of North Iraq, Mosul, completely destroyed. And then we have to tell them they can go back there, to help building up their country. That might be a nice ideal for Dad, but these children are never going with all their friends in school here.*

Many children were either born in the Netherlands or came at very young age, and they generally go to school with their friends. As Jeroen (DT&V) said, there is this strange situation in the Netherlands where parents are not allowed to integrate, but children have the obligation to go to school. As a result, they generally interact a lot with Dutch children. At some family locations, the primary school is located on site, which means there are generally only migrant children attending the school. At other locations, however, the children attend a regular primary school outside the family locations. Moreover, all secondary school children attend regular schools outside the family locations. At all schools, the children are taught in Dutch, and therefore they generally speak the language fluently. Indeed, the main language spoken among the children at the family locations is Dutch. In many ways these children can be seen as Dutch, having little to no attachment to their parents’ country of origin. For many migrants, this was an important reason for wanting to stay in the Netherlands. As Ella (Eritrea) explained:

*My children are used to living here, and they have learned the language. In Sudan, they have never been to school. (Paraphrased, translated from Dutch translation)*

This was a common sentiment among migrants, especially when they had been in the Netherlands for many years. Amir (Afghanistan) spoke about how his oldest daughter now even calculated

and thought in Dutch in her head. Aaden and Ayaan (Somalia) said their children mainly played with Dutch children outside school. And Mariam (Armenia), who had been in the Netherlands since 2009 and spoke Dutch, even used the term “rooting”, commonly used in political debates about children of rejected asylum seekers, to explain how Dutch her children had become:

*They have been raised here; they are truly rooted. They think like Dutch people; they speak Dutch with each other. When I tell them they need to speak Armenian, they say: “But, Mum, Dutch is easier for us.” [...] They only speak Armenian with their mother and father. Everywhere, there are children who speak Dutch. They came here when they were six months and 2.5 years old, so they began speaking in the Netherlands. (Translated from Dutch)*

Several migrants linked integration in the Netherlands to the future of their children. For example, Sami (Iraq) had four children who were all doing very well at school. He was particularly worried about his two older children, who were asking many questions about their current situation and their future. He said that his children want to stay in the Netherlands and build their life here, and that he hoped he would be able to make this happen for them. Some migrants furthermore found it particularly hard that the children had to carry the consequences of decisions made by the parents. As Aaden (Somalia) said:

*We as parents have applied for asylum in the Netherlands, but the children are born here. They did not ask for asylum. This makes it hard for us to explain the situation to them. (Paraphrased, translated from Dutch translation)*

For most parents, the future of their children was their single biggest concern, and many parents simply wanted their children to have a better life than they had had. Despite their complicated legal situation, they were convinced this future was better in the Netherlands than in their country of origin. Several migrants said that they would already have returned if they had been alone, but that they were staying for the future of their children. Particularly when the children were already older and had been in the Netherlands since a long time, going back to the parents’ country of origin is seen as a considerable strain on their future.

### **6.2.3. Disagreeing with rejected asylum application**

All migrants had their asylum application rejected, although some still had an appeal procedure going on. The legal consequence of this is that migrants are not allowed to stay in the Netherlands and have to leave the country. However, many migrants felt that the decision to reject their asylum application had been incorrect, and therefore they were not ready to accept these consequences. Crucial differences existed between the lived or perceived reality of migrants and the legal reality established by the IND. For example, Erfan and Ada (Islamic Republic of Iran) explained that they could not live

in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as they were Christian and converting to Christianity is illegal there. However, the IND had indicated they did not believe they truly had converted, and therefore they could return to the Islamic Republic of Iran without problems. As the couple did not agree with this assessment, they felt the required consequences were not acceptable. Other migrants said that many people in the same situation had received a residence permit, making it seemingly unfair that they did not receive a permit and would have to return.

One particular group of migrants who did not accept the rejection of their asylum application came from Eritrea. Linda (VWN) said there were several Eritrean women at the family location with whom it was simply not feasible to talk about return. As she explained:

*There is a group of Eritrean women; nothing is happening with them. They have not been able to prove that they are Eritrean, which is why they have not received a permit. But they can also not be deported, so they are stuck in a sort of no-man's-land.*

Two Eritrean women who were interviewed at different family locations told this exact story. As they believed they were genuine asylum seekers, and merely rejected because of problems with their paperwork, they were convinced they would receive a residence permit someday. Wendy (COA) said there was another reason why Eritrean migrants could not accept the rejection

of their asylum application. She knew a woman who arrived in the Netherlands 10 years ago, but her asylum application was rejected. At the same time, she currently saw how nearly all migrants from Eritrea were granted asylum, while she fled from the exact same regime 10 years ago. Moreover, she argued there was no logic about the fact that she had to return to a regime that the Government of the Netherlands said was engaged in such serious human rights violations that basically everyone from Eritrea was granted asylum. As Wendy said, if you accept this line of argumentation, it would be impossible to convince this woman to return to Eritrea.

#### **6.2.4. Previously held legal status**

Two migrants had previously had a residence permit in the Netherlands, but it had subsequently been withdrawn. Amir (Afghanistan) arrived in the Netherlands in 2009, where many of his family members had already been staying since 2001. Initially, his asylum application was accepted, and he had started to build a life in the Netherlands. He met his wife – who was born in Belarus and with whom he had two children – while he also accepted to be the legal father of her child from an earlier relationship. However, in 2012, his residence permit had been withdrawn – the exact reason for this decision did not become entirely clear during the interview. Amir explained that by that time, he had a house, a job and a family in the Netherlands. This made it particularly hard for him to have to leave the country, especially



because this would mean his family could not stay together. As he explained:

*It feels like you have climbed a ladder, but are thrown back to the bottom again. (Translated from Dutch)*

Blessing (Nigeria) had been living in Belgium and the Netherlands for more than 17 years. Although most of this time she had been without a legal status, for a few years, she did have a temporary residence permit. During this time, she had even studied and received benefits from the Government to support her studies. Now that her residence permit had not been extended, it was hard to accept her situation as an irregular migrant again.

#### **6.2.5. Hoping to receive a residence permit**

As noted above, many stakeholders saw the fact that migrants could start new procedures again as an important obstacle to their return. This was often linked to the long duration of their stay in the Netherlands and the integration of their children especially. Strongly related to this was the most common obstacle identified by stakeholders: the hope of migrants to receive a residence permit after all. Stakeholders from all four organizations believed that many migrants decided to stay in the Netherlands, because they believed there might still be a chance for them to receive a legal status someday. Various factors were said to be feeding into this hope, especially the child amnesty provision several years ago and the

relatively high number of people around them who received a residence permit after many years at the family location. As Renate (DT&V) said:

*There has been a general amnesty, a child amnesty, a transitional arrangement that many people were eligible for. People who are now applying for the final child amnesty are not eligible for this arrangement. But they always hope there will be a minister who says: "Let's give this mother a permit", and that they will receive a residence permit after all, because that has happened throughout the last years. So basically, that keeps many people here and does not stimulate them to return.*

Stakeholders identified three important sources of hope for migrants. First, the various amnesties of the last years. There were persistent rumours about a new child amnesty or changes with a new government. René (DT&V) observed that before the new coalition government came into power and made clear that there was not going to be a new amnesty, nobody left the family location. Moreover, at the time of the interviews, a new campaign had started, collecting more than 75,000 signatures calling on the Government to allow these families to stay in the Netherlands. Second, migrants regularly see other migrants at the family location who are in a similar situation and receive a residence permit after all. Chris (IOM) knew an Armenian family who had received a residence permit after six years

and were assigned a house close to the family location they had been staying at. This had led to renewed hope among other Armenian families at the family location. Third, Dutch people in their environment might actively lobby for specific migrant families to be allowed to stay in the Netherlands. At some family locations, local churches, organizations and politicians were actively trying to influence decision makers to grant residence permits to migrants at the family location. In other cases, parents of school friends tried to help migrants to get a legal stay in the Netherlands, especially when migrants had a lot of contacts and built up a network. A good example of this are Aaden and Ayaan (Somalia) and their five children, who had been staying at the same family location for more than six years. Their children had been going to school with Dutch children, and Aaden volunteered two days per week at a local organization. They explained that the mayor of the municipality of the family location, as well as many schoolchildren, had sent a letter to the IND with a request to grant the family members residence permits. They are now waiting to see what would happen. Meanwhile, they had little worries about being forcefully returned, as they knew that people could not currently return or be returned to Somalia.

When asked whether they still thought they might receive a residence permit someday, many migrants often answered that they did not know, but that they still carried some hope – especially when they were still involved in an ongoing legal procedure. For

example, Sami (Iraq) and his family had appealed the latest decision to reject their asylum application, and he said that he truly hoped that this time, they would be granted asylum. Blessing (Nigeria) had been in the Netherlands for at least 10 years with various legal statuses. Her lawyer had now started a new procedure on the basis of article 8 of ECHR, arguing that she had been in the Netherlands for too long, and that her children were born here. Because of this new procedure, she now dared to hope again that she might receive a residence permit and could stay in the Netherlands.

Even migrants who had exhausted all their legal remedies – meaning their chances of still getting a residence permit were relatively small – frequently still hoped they would receive a residence permit someday in the future. Mariam (Armenia) explained in a very clear manner how she always had a shimmer of hope, despite the fact that her asylum application had already been rejected many years ago:

*You always have hope. The last small thing you have is hope. You think: maybe there will be a miracle. Every time there is a new government or a petition, we have hope. So you always have hope, but it becomes less and less. And if you see how busy for example DT&V is to send people back, this hope becomes smaller and smaller. But people like to look at the bright side of things. On the dark long way, they want to see a little light. In Armenia,*

*they say: hope is with you until death. [...] For example, I saw today on Facebook that all these artists want to give their signature for children. I have sent the news immediately and thought maybe it would help. It is about this hope you have, you want to try everything. The only thing is, DT&V says: You are not allowed to have hope. (Translated from Dutch)*

The fact that migrants hope to receive a residence permit seemed to be an important reason to stay in the Netherlands, especially for those migrants who genuinely believed they qualified for asylum and could not safely return to their country of origin. An important reason this hope could constitute a stay factor was also that for many migrants, forced return was simply not possible.

#### **6.2.6. No fear of forced return**

As was already shown in chapter 5, there are various countries where forced returns are practically impossible. Several stakeholders spoke about migrants who knew very well that the chances of being forcefully returned were very small, because they did not have any valid papers or because forced return to their country of origin is altogether impossible. For migrants who do not want to leave the Netherlands, this could be an extra stay factor. Mariam (Armenia) explained that one of her children was nowhere registered and therefore effectively stateless. Her youngest child had not been registered in Armenia before they left the country. The child had also not been officially registered in the Netherlands

because they did not have his documents with them. Therefore, she was convinced that she could not be forcefully returned to Armenia:

*If they (DT&V, JB) say, "The child will be deported with you", I respond with asking them how. It would be the same when I would take a Dutch child: there is no birth certificate that shows that I might have taken a child from Armenia. Such a situation would then be child smuggling. And then they get angry when I say that. They cannot do anything, and this is why I am a little bit of a difficult asylum seeker for them. (Translated from Dutch)*

Other migrants came from countries where people are generally not sent back to. For example, Sami (Iraq) said that DT&V had informed him that forced returns to Iraq were currently not taking place, and therefore they could not be forced to leave the Netherlands. As has been illustrated in chapter 5, another country to where forced returns from the family locations did not take place in the last five years was Eritrea. For Helen (Eritrea), this situation proved actually rather frustrating, as she was eager to leave the Netherlands. However, when she had asked for help to leave the Netherlands, she had been told that this was not possible because she is Eritrean. Return to Eritrea was very complicated, while possibilities to go to another country were also limited. As a result, the impossibility of forced return constituted an undesired

stay factor for her. She recalled a conversation she recently had with some other migrants from Eritrea:

*Why can there not be a solution for people that really want to go back? When I say I really want to go to back, they are like: "Don't worry, DT&V is not going to come with the cops and scare you." I am not scared; they can actually come with the cops and take me! I am not scared, I really want to go back.*

As Helen was an exception, for most migrants, the fact that they knew they would not be forced to return meant there was little pressure to reconsider their unwillingness to return.

### 6.2.7. The family location

Some stakeholders believed that life at the family location was simply too good for migrants to want to return to their country of origin. Henk (DT&V) was particularly outspoken about this, claiming that these migrants had it financially better than the average Dutch person, while all their needs are provided for. Migrants generally did not mention this, but there was one migrant who agreed to a certain extent with Henk. Helen (Eritrea) felt that conditions at the family location were actually too good to motivate people to start working on their own future.

*I also think it has got to do with [...] Your bills are being paid for, you are not working and get money every week, your kids are taken care of. Why would you go back? [...] If I did not have options, I would be happy to live here. I have nothing to*

*lose. I am not paying for my bills, for water, for school. I would be more than happy to stay here.*

Other stakeholders were less convinced that migrants had such a good time at the family locations, but did notice that all basic needs are taken care of, and that this is often already a stark improvement compared to circumstances in countries of origin. Jeroen (DT&V) expressed a common sentiment, when he said he fully understood people did not want to leave:

*Imagine you are a Somalian woman, who is staying here with three children. Why would she go back to Somalia? If you see everything that is arranged for here and the things she might be able to have there. [...] I think as a parent, you are absolutely right when you say: "You can tell me I have to leave, but I will stay here." [...] Health care is taken care of, all children receive an education until they are 18. I can imagine they do not leave. This makes it only harder to convince people to go.*

In line with previous studies, most migrants had few positive things to say about the family locations during the interviews. At the same time, several migrants did emphasize that life at a family location is certainly better than having to live on the streets and explicitly expressed gratitude for this. Furthermore, the fact that children are able to go to school was important for parents. Thus, Ayaan (Somalia) was similar to many other migrants when she

said that although she found life at the family location very hard, it was still preferable over life in Somalia.

Some respondents suggested there was another way the family location could act as a stay factor, already illustrated by the previous quote from Helen (see section 6.2.6): peer pressure to stay. As Ruud (IOM) explained:

*I think they might also prevent each other from leaving. Like, if one of our group leaves, it signals that it is safe. And we say collectively: "It is not safe there." So it is also parting with the group.*

For migrants who do not want to return because they believe it is too dangerous in their country of origin, other migrants who do voluntarily return can undermine this argument. However, besides Helen and a few stakeholders, not many respondents brought this up.

### 6.3. Pull factors

Very few pull factors came forward during the interviews with migrants and stakeholders. For many migrants, the initial reasons to leave the country are still relevant today, meaning there are few factors that made them want to return. Nonetheless, some migrants did mention reasons related to the country of origin that made them think about going back. This was primarily the case for migrants who were actively considering returning to their country of origin. In other cases, it was made clear that there were no reasons for wanting to return.

#### 6.3.1. Family or friends in country of origin

The presence of family or friends in the country of origin can constitute an important pull factor, although of course most migrants at the family location are not separated from their most direct family. Nonetheless, for some migrants, contacts with relatives or good friends made return seem less daunting, especially after a long period abroad. A good example of this is Zhang, who after many years in the Netherlands was now thinking about returning to China. She did not have a clearly defined plan for what she wanted to do after returning. Because she had left China such a long time ago, she first wanted to return and then figure out what she could do. One of the reasons why she could do so was because she still had some good contacts in China, including her mother. This meant she would not be left all by herself after returning. In combination with improved economic possibilities – one of the initial reasons for her to leave China – this meant she felt ready to return to China. At the same time, good contacts in the country of origin were not cited as the primary reason to return. Rather, once the decision to leave the Netherlands has been made, it could help migrants to feel more confident when they return.

#### 6.3.2. Possibilities for onward migration

Possibilities for onwards migration were brought up by two migrants as a reason why they considered returning to their country of origin. However, the contexts for

these two migrants were very different. Mariam (Armenia) was struggling to get one of her children officially registered, an important requirement for her to consider returning to Armenia. Besides the fact that such registration is essential for schooling and other rights, she explained that there was another reason this was important to her:

*If it works out, I will go to Armenia with the children in a legal way. I can pass through border security; I can enter Armenia. I can arrange some things then, and as I will have a passport with me, I can always leave again. For example, if I do not manage to live in Armenia, I can always go to a neighbouring country or the Russian Federation. (Translated from Dutch)*

Thus, for Mariam, proper registration for her and her family – including passports – was not only a way to make sure all conditions for reintegration in Armenia were met, but also to have a backup plan. If life in Armenia turned out to be too complicated, she wanted to be able to move to another country again.

The possibility to migrate onwards after return was also an important pull factor for Fatimah (Afghanistan), although in a different way. At the time of the interview, she was staying with her four children in a family location, where she had only recently arrived. On their way to Europe from Afghanistan, she had lost her husband, and for more than a year, she did not know what happened to him. After she

arrived in the Netherlands and applied for asylum, her son found her husband again on Facebook, and he was found to be staying in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As their asylum application was still under consideration by that time, she told her husband it was better to wait until they knew more. After their asylum application was rejected, she appealed the decision and again informed her husband to wait until the decision. By the time of the interview, they had been in the Netherlands for two and a half years, and her husband had recently told her that he was sure things would not work out anymore. As the common migration routes have all been blocked by now, he was sure he could never come to Europe anymore. Therefore, he had told her he was going to marry another woman. Fatimah explained that she had felt very bad since that time, as she was stuck where she was, she had no status, and had more or less lost her life. She explained that for an Afghan woman, a man is incredibly important, that without a man, a woman is nothing. It is for this reason she wanted to go to the Islamic Republic of Iran, but in order to realize this, she would first have to go to Afghanistan. This example demonstrates the highly individualized motivations underlying return.

#### 6.4. Deter factors

Deter factors were most commonly invoked by migrants to explain why they could not return to their country of origin. As all migrants were rejected asylum seekers, these were primarily

related to the security situation in the country of origin. Problems with registration in the country of origin and concerns about the quality of education were other deter factors hampering return. Finally, for some migrants, it was practically impossible to return because their country of origin did not recognize them as citizens.

#### **6.4.1. Security situation in the country of origin**

For many migrants, the original reasons to leave their country had remained unchanged. Given the fact that all migrants were rejected asylum seekers, it is therefore not surprising that concerns about the security situation in the country of origin was perhaps the most common reason cited why people felt they could not return. Only two migrants, Alida (Burundi) and Zhang (China), explicitly mentioned economic circumstances as part of their reason for wanting to leave their country of origin; both were currently actively considering returning with IOM. In all other cases, security issues featured prominently among the reasons not to return – either for migrants themselves or for their children.

The exact reasons why migrants feared return were diverse and differed depending on the country of origin and individual circumstances. For example, Nadia (Somalia) said she would never return to Somalia with her daughters, because of the position of girls and women there: they would be treated terribly there and risk female genital mutilation. Her oldest daughter would certainly face life-threatening

risks, as she would not be able to receive adequate and necessary medical care. She explicitly said her daughters were an important reason not to return to Somalia. For Aaden and Ayaan (Somalia), the safety of the wife and their children was the reason they said they could not go back to Somalia. They said their sons risked being abducted by armed groups or otherwise face serious violence.

On the other hand, Erfan and Ada (Islamic Republic of Iran) had both converted to Christianity, an illegal act in the Islamic Republic of Iran. They feared being arrested and possibly even being sentenced to death when they would go back. They emphasized that they had good jobs, a small business, a house and a car in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In other words, they had no financial reasons to leave the country. Mariam (Armenia) said she had serious problems with specific people in the government in Armenia. She regularly looked on the Internet to see if these people were still in the same positions. And as high levels of corruption meant that very little changed in Armenia's political landscape, all these people were still there or had even been promoted. Moreover, she felt an extra responsibility now that she had children, and she did not want them to go through the same things as she had herself.

Sami (Iraq) had worked with the Americans in Iraq, which meant he faced serious death threats before he fled to the Netherlands with his family. He believed his name was on a list, and there were people waiting there to kill him. He emphasized

that he would have never fled otherwise, as staying in your own country is much better than having to start all over again. Finally, some stakeholders also knew about cases where people had debts to criminal actors in their country of origin or fled from family. However, people were generally reluctant to talk about these issues, as this is usually not a reason to be granted asylum.

As various stakeholders pointed out, such security concerns do not need to be objectively realistic to outsiders; what matters is how these matters are perceived by migrants. Chris (IOM) explained that particularly when people have left their country a long time ago, the way the situation in the country of origin is perceived depends on the sources people get their current information from. Fear is a subjective feeling, making it particularly complicated to address. Their fear might not be recognized as credible in an asylum procedure, but that does not mean that people are not genuinely afraid. As Jeroen (DT&V) saw it:

*In essence, it always comes down to the asylum motives again. And when you read the story of their first interview with IND, it is often rejected because of a lack of credibility, which is not convincing enough. But the story they tell is definitely poignant. And if it would be me, I would also say: "I am not going."*

As such, this deter factor strongly relates to the above described stay factor that many migrants did not accept the rejection of their asylum

application. Most stakeholders believed that whereas people who were reluctant to return because of primarily economic factors might benefit from return assistance, those who did not return for security-related reasons were generally not susceptible to any form of voluntary return support.

#### 6.4.2. Future of the children

Migrants were often particularly concerned about the future of the children, in terms of security, and also education and future employment. The future of their children is generally the number one priority for most parents, and thus they found it particularly important they received a good education. As Renate (DT&V) indicated, this makes it complicated to tell parents that they need to return to Eritrea or Ethiopia, especially when they know they might not be able to have such a nice life there. But even when the education system in the country of origin is considered to be good enough, it might be challenging to be able to fully enjoy the opportunities. For example, Marie (DT&V) knew about a family who was considering returning to the country of origin, but was hesitant because although the children spoke the language in the country of origin, they did not know how to write. Because they were among the best students in their school, it would mean a considerable deterioration if they went to school there. The mother of the family had told Marie that there was no point in her trying to teach her teenage children how to write, as she was not their teacher and they barely listened to her.



### 6.4.3. Health and well-being

According to several stakeholders, the availability of health care in the Netherlands was an important reason for some migrants to stay in the Netherlands. Of course, this could just as easily be seen as a deter factor, when conceptualized as the lack of available health care in the country of origin. Many Armenian migrants often stayed in the Netherlands for medical reasons, as the lack of affordable health insurance often meant that access to health care in Armenia was limited.

Tigran and Anahit (Armenia) had travelled to the Netherlands with a travel agent and subsequently applied for asylum. As their asylum application had been rejected and they feared they would be forcefully returned to Armenia, they had started to prepare their return with IOM. However, one of their children had a serious medical condition, for which she had had surgery in the Netherlands. Without specific medication, her life would be in serious danger, but following an inquest by DT&V and IOM, it had become clear that they would not be able to obtain these medicines in Armenia. Therefore, they had now been allowed to stay for the time being on the basis of a so-called Article 64-procedure, which allows for temporary postponement of departure on medical grounds. They had now started a new procedure with the hope of receiving a residence permit.

### 6.4.4. Complicated migration history

The lack of any family or relatives in the country of origin was

mentioned several times by migrants as an important factor making return more challenging. Several stakeholders also pointed out that many migrants had often left everything behind or sold all their possessions. In other cases, family members had borrowed considerable amounts of money to people in order to make the trip. The investments made to come to Europe could be considerably higher than the amount of money they can receive for reintegration. According to Louise (IOM), it therefore sometimes helped that she could explain that IOM also had people in the country of origin, so that someone is not all alone after return. In some cases, migrants also asked whether IOM could support them with housing, at least during the first period after their return.

In other cases, the lack of any meaningful contacts in the country of origin made return seem virtually impossible. This was especially the case for migrants who had left their country of origin a long time ago and sometimes had complicated migration histories. Whereas some migrants had come directly to the Netherlands from their country of origin, others had made long journeys through multiple countries, including sometimes long periods of staying in other countries than their country of birth. Ella (Eritrea) was 35 years old and had four children. Although she was born in Eritrea, she already left that country 16 years ago. For a long period, she had lived in Sudan, where she worked as a housemaid. It was telling that when she talked about return, she talked primarily about Sudan, even though her country of origin was Eritrea.

Something similar was the case for Nurah (Eritrea). She was born in Ethiopia, but following the Eritrean war of independence, she moved to Eritrea with her father. Because of religious persecution and a lack of fundamental freedoms, she left that country in 2002. She subsequently spent six months in Sudan and two years in Turkey, before staying illegally in Greece for more than six years. This is where she met an Ethiopian man, with whom she has two children. She said that Greece was probably the best time of her life, as she felt free there, despite the fact that she did not have any papers. However, by the time she was pregnant with her second child, this man got arrested and ended up in immigration detention. Because of the economic crisis, it had become increasingly hard to earn money, while the general situation in the country became more chaotic. Therefore, she decided to leave Greece, and it was only because of a travel agent that she ended up in the Netherlands. Much like Ella, she did not even consider Eritrea when asked about return. Instead, she said that returning to Greece was currently impossible, because she had never had any papers there. Such examples show that the concept of a country of origin is not always straightforward, and that for many migrants, return could mean going back to a number of different places.

Such complexities regarding the notion of return can also involve partners with different national backgrounds. This was the case for Amir (Afghanistan), who was born in Afghanistan while his wife was born in Belarus. At the

moment, DT&V had informed them that he would have to return to Afghanistan, while his wife and their three children would need to go to Belarus. Besides the fact that he did not have any close relatives or friends in Afghanistan anymore, it was the potential breakup of his family and the uncertainties regarding future reunion that made him hesitant to leave the Netherlands. As he explained:

*It is now all about looking, looking, looking for a possibility to keep my family intact. That is the most important thing to me at the moment. (Translated from Dutch)*

He had tried to get a visa for Belarus, but this was not possible because he did not have an Afghan passport. And in order to get a passport, he would have to go to Afghanistan to get a stamp. However, he was afraid that if he would go to Afghanistan, he would not be able to move to Belarus afterwards. Thus, many of the issues making Amir reluctant to return came down to trying to stay together with his family.

#### **6.4.5. Legal registration in the country of origin**

Several migrants who were considering voluntary return said they had issues with legal registration of themselves or their children in their country of origin. Alida (Burundi) said that she had decided she wanted to return, but that she had encountered problems at the embassy of Burundi. Her daughter could not be registered there, while this was very important to her. She did not want her daughter to

be unregistered in Burundi, also because she might want to move to another country later. China was another country where migrants who were willing to return often struggled with the registration of children who were born in the Netherlands. Tom (IOM) said that he knew a number of Chinese women who had children while staying illegally in the Netherlands. Once pregnant, they would apply for asylum under a false name, to be able to receive health care and give birth at a relatively safe location. However, if they then registered their child under this name, this would create problems in case they would want to return to China. The Chinese embassy might not provide a *laissez-passer*, because the name on the birth certificate of the child does not match the official name of the mother. And as Tom explained, changing a birth certificate is a long legal procedure involving municipalities and courts, especially in the case of multiple children.

Zhang did not categorically oppose return, but struggled to get her children registered in China. Because her children were born in the Netherlands and there were some problems with the spelling of their last names on their birth certificate, this was a complicated matter. If they would not be registered in China, it would mean they are effectively without rights. And because one of the main aims of her return was ensuring the future of her children, this was a crucial matter to her. This was not exclusively a Chinese issue though. As already touched upon above, one of the children of Mariam (Armenia) was also not registered

in Armenia. This made her hesitant about returning to Armenia.

*My child does not exist in Armenia. He is not registered in Armenia; he is actually stateless. He also does not have a registration here in the Netherlands. He is born in Armenia, but by that time, we had big problems. We could not register him, because we did not have his documents with us. With that I mean a passport, we had nothing. [...] If I go to the embassy, they say: "Yes, okay, you three are welcome." With that I mean me, my husband and my oldest son, we can go. "But who is this child?" He does not exist in Armenia. There is no birth certificate that states that he is my son. (Translated from Dutch)*

Some migrants made clear that they needed assistance from IOM in contacting the authorities or embassy of their country of origin or another country. Helen was originally from Eritrea and desperate to leave the family location. As return to Eritrea was rather problematic, she had indicated that she would also be willing to go to Ethiopia. However, both DT&V and IOM had not been able to help her.

*I was like: "You could just ask for a permit." And they were like: "You have to do that yourself." How am I going to do that myself? You have to ask for permission from a government. Who am I to ask for permission from a government? IOM is an organization that could actually ask permission for us.*

For many migrants, organizing their departure can be a complicated bureaucratic issue. For those who have decided they want to return, any help with this can be useful.

#### 6.4.6. Impossible to return

Strongly related to the problems with registration in the country of origin was the fact that for some migrants, it appeared to be virtually impossible to return to their country of origin. This could be either because the general security situation in the country of origin prohibited return of migrants altogether or because of specific individualized circumstances. For example, Wazir was born in Dubai, but his parents were ethnic Rohingya<sup>15</sup> people who had fled from Myanmar. A severely persecuted minority in Myanmar, Rohingya people are practically always stateless. And because Dubai does not grant citizenship to foreigners or their children, this also applied to him. Something similar was the case for Hamed (Iraq/Palestinian Territories), who said he did not have a country anymore. Born in Iraq with the Palestinian nationality, he had stayed in Iraq until all Palestinians were forced to leave in 2006. He stayed in the Syrian Arab Republic for a few years, but when the war broke out, he moved to the United Arab Emirates; but after his work contract was not extended, he had to leave the country. He went to the embassies of Iraq and the Palestinian Territories, but to no avail. In 2017, he eventually left

the United Arab Emirates and came to Europe with his wife and newborn son.

*I want to leave the Netherlands, but where to? I wouldn't know where to go, because no country will accept us. Palestinians can't go anywhere. I have been in contact with several embassies, like the United Arab Emirates, but they won't accept my family.*

In order to return to their country of origin, either voluntary or forced, migrants need valid travel documents. In many cases, the impossibility of obtaining such documents was an important reason why migrants could not leave. Thus, Nurah (Eritrea) initially had regular meetings with a departure supervisor from DT&V, but they had now indicated that her file had been closed for the time being, as return was not realistic anyway. Asked about IOM, she said she encountered the same problem everywhere:

*It is the same everywhere, IOM, DT&V, the embassy. They all say: Who are you? What is your identity? That is the biggest problem. (Paraphrased, translated from Dutch translation)*

A considerable group of migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia found themselves in this situation, not being recognized by either, but also not receiving a residence permit in the Netherlands. As a result, as Marieke (VWN) said, they were stuck at the family locations with

<sup>15</sup> Note that the term *Rohingya* as used to describe the Muslim peoples of Rakhine State, Myanmar, is not accepted by the Government of the Union of Myanmar, which in June 2016 issued an order directing State-owned media to use the term "Muslim community in Rakhine State".

no opportunities to go anywhere else, even if they wanted to. For other migrants, it was their children who effectively made return seem impossible, even if they had wanted to. For a certain period, Blessing (Nigeria) had had a temporary residence permit and lived together with her former partner, who was from Sierra Leone. By now, they had been separated, but her children had the Sierra Leonean nationality. At the Nigerian embassy, they had told her that they could give her a travel document but could not give a passport for the children, because they were from Sierra Leone. In order to do so, the father of the children needed to give his formal approval, but he did not want to do that, as he was scared he might not see his children anymore. Blessing's example shows how complicated return can get when there are children involved, especially when the parents are separated and have different nationalities.

#### **6.4.7. Expectations from family and friends**

Various stakeholders mentioned that it was hard for migrants from certain countries to return to their country of origin because of shame they felt towards their family members who stayed behind. Most stakeholders who mentioned this as a deter factor said this particularly played a role for migrants from African countries. Whereas this could involve money, it could also simply be the perception of failure that makes it hard for people to return to where they came from and see their family again. Linda (VWN) was one of the stakeholders who

said this sometimes made migrants reluctant to go back.

*Particularly in African countries, a certain amount of pride also plays a role. As in, you came here to stay and now you need to return empty-handed.*

Migrants themselves did not mention this as a factor hampering their return, as most indicated they did not have any family left in their country of origin. However, Helen (Eritrea) spoke more broadly about the factors she believed hindered the return of many migrants, especially those from African countries. She said one particularly important issue when you come from Africa is the expectation of family members. Family members might brag about the presence of a relative in Europe, making it hard to go back. Migrants might also send money to their family members, no matter how dire their situation in Europe. If these people would return, their relatives would no longer receive this money. According to her, many returnees face a stigma that they could not make it in Europe and are therefore perceived as a failure.

*There are so many people in this place that are scared of their own family members. Even if you give them a ticket and give them money and say go, they would rather sit here and waste their life than go back home.*

Although she did not have close relatives that had such expectations of her, Helen did have an uncle in Sudan who had instructed her not to return. He had helped her trying

to get some documents from Eritrea, such as her birth certificate. When she told him she wanted to return, he responded that this was not an option, because she would bring shame on them. She had then said that she could not care less, because she had not seen this man in a very long time and had never given him any money. Therefore, she suggested that there should be a workshop or training to give people a boost or motivation to make them feel that it is alright to go back. She also believed more generally that just giving people money to go back would not help too much. Instead, teaching people some skills that can help them to make life easier upon return could be better. This might also help to give people something to look forward to if they decided to return.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study is to identify possible obstacles with regard to voluntary return faced by migrants residing at family locations in the Netherlands. These family locations came into existence following the Dutch High Court case *Ferreira*, when the court decided that the Government of the Netherlands was obliged to provide shelter for migrant families with children under the age of 18. At the time of research, there were six of these family locations located throughout the country. Migrant families currently residing at one of the family locations have generally exhausted all legal remedies and are therefore obliged to leave the Netherlands. Conditions at family locations are meant to be relatively sober, as the aim of the locations is to facilitate return to the country of origin. Adults are not allowed to study or work. Children, on the other hand, go to school. This can either be a school at the family location or a regular school nearby.

In the same year as the ruling in the *Ferreira* case, the Government of the Netherlands introduced the Rooting law or Mauro law, which was followed by a child amnesty provision in 2013, legalizing a group of asylum children and their direct family. These developments were intended to make a clear distinction between the right to stay in the Netherlands and the obligation to leave. Despite this, actual return rates from the family

locations are relatively low. This report therefore sought to provide more insight into the obstacles these migrants face in terms of return to their country of origin. To that end, population data and departure figures were analysed, and interviews were conducted with migrants and various stakeholders working at the family locations. This concluding chapter will answer the main research question of this study.

Chapter 4 provided an overview of the available literature on factors determining return migration. A number of factors on both macro and micro levels have been found to influence the willingness of migrants to return. These factors can be distinguished between push, pull, stay and deter factors. Push factors make someone want to leave the country where he/she is staying, whereas stay factor make someone want to stay. Pull factors make someone want to return to his/her country, while deter factors achieve the opposite and make migrants reluctant to return.

Important push factors found in the literature are policies in the host country to deter irregular stay, the availability of voluntary return support, tiredness and a lack of family or other valuable relationships in the host country. Pull factors that have previously been identified are improvements in the economics of security

situation in the country of origin and homesickness, especially when someone still has family members in his/her country of origin. Factors that make migrants want to stay in the host country are often related to life opportunities in this country, such as security, economic possibilities and educational opportunities for children. The presence of family or a large social network, as a result of sociocultural integration, are also seen as stay factors. Migrants can also believe they might still receive a residence permit in the future and therefore want to stay. Finally, relevant deterrent factors found in the literature are a bad or declining economic, political or security situation in the country of origin and the lack of social ties or attachment to the country of origin.

Since 2013, the number of migrants residing at the various family locations has remained relatively stable, with about 1,500–2,000 migrants staying at the family locations at any given time. The people in these locations have, on average, spent about 2.5–3 years at the family location. Of the population, 55 per cent is female due to a relatively high number of single mothers. In November 2017, the most common nationalities were Armenians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans. The annual number of people leaving the family locations has gradually decreased over the last five years, from more than 1,000 in 2013 to around 500 in 2017. One reason for this is a sharp decrease in voluntary departures in 2017, which seems to be largely the result of the exclusion of a large number of

nationalities from AVRR services. Since these policy changes, migrants with nationalities that frequently leave voluntarily arrive less often at the family locations, causing a decrease in the overall number of voluntary returnees. The number of people leaving the family locations because they have received a residence permit decreases each year, although it actually increased again in 2017. Forced returns, meanwhile, are relatively rare throughout the whole period, and the figures showed that some nationalities are not forcefully returned at all from the family locations. An analysis of the average time spent at the family location shows that people who receive a residence permit have generally spent a relatively long period at the family location, whereas people returning with IOM do so after less than a year. The exception to the latter is 2017, when many nationalities were no longer eligible for return assistance and only migrants from more “complicated” countries of origin returned voluntarily.

The interviews with migrants and stakeholders brought up a range of factors influencing voluntary return. Following the conceptual model outlined in chapter 4, these were divided in push, pull, stay and deter factors. In light of the main research question of this report, the focus in this concluding chapter will be on stay and deter factors. Assessing exactly what factors makes migrants stay in the Netherlands is a complicated exercise. In most cases, various factors on different levels in both the host and the home State interact



with each other to determine migrants' willingness and ability to return. Moreover, these factors are often highly individualized and therefore not generalizable to the overall population. The qualitative nature of the data also does not allow for firm statements about the most common and decisive factors among the entire population. Nonetheless, the interviews provided important insights in some of the factors hampering voluntary return among migrants residing at the various family locations. As some of these factors were repeatedly mentioned, and sometimes supported by the population and departure figures described above, it becomes possible to identify at least a number of factors that seem to play a role in the lack of voluntary returns from the family locations.

Most interviewed migrants did not want to return to their country of origin. A relatively wide range of factors were brought forward by both migrants and stakeholders to explain this. The most important ones were the long time spent in the Netherlands, the security situation in the country of origin and the hope of receiving a residence permit. The future of migrants' children, in particular their education, featured prominently throughout these three different factors. Past research has shown that migrants with children and/or partners are less likely to return to their country of origin (Kox, 2011; Van Wijk, 2008). This was confirmed during the interviews for this study: the fact that there are children involved makes return

considerably more complicated. Despite their precarious legal situation, many parents did not want to return because they were convinced that their children had a better future in the Netherlands than in their country of origin.

The longer migrants have been staying in the Netherlands, the harder it becomes to return. This is pretty much in line with previous studies (Van Wijk, 2008). Although many parents had a limited social network beyond the family location, in some cases, they did have a network built up through local churches, organizations or parents of their children's school friends. However, the integration of children made return become more complicated over time. Once the children have started going to school, parents become hesitant to leave the Netherlands again; many children go to regular schools and primarily speak Dutch in their daily life. As many children were very young when they left their country of origin or were even born in the Netherlands, they had little to no attachment to the country where they had to return to. Generally, the only migrants who were considering return had very young children who had not yet started going to school and/or saw good possibilities for their children in the country of origin.

As all interviewed migrants had applied for asylum and were rejected, it is not surprising that for most respondents, the security situation in the country of origin was an important reason for not returning. For some nationalities, such as Afghans and Iraqis, this was

based on the general lack of security in the country. In other cases, migrants had more individualized reasons why they believed it was unsafe for them to return to their country of origin. Migrants were particularly concerned about the future of their children in their country of origin, both in terms of security and educational prospects. Many migrants felt the children cannot receive the same quality education in their country of origin. Coupled with the assessment of the security situation, many migrants fundamentally disagreed with the rejection of their asylum application. Asylum applications are often rejected because the story is assessed to be not credible enough, but for many migrants, these stories constitute their perceived reality. This also means that many respondents believed they should receive a residence permit.

The analysis of interviews further suggests that many migrants still hoped they would receive a residence permit someday. Even migrants who had exhausted all legal remedies – meaning their chances of still getting a residence permit were relatively small – frequently still hoped they would eventually receive a residence permit. Given the relatively high number of migrants who do indeed receive a residence permit after staying for several years at a family location, this hope can be considered well grounded. Migrants inevitably see other residents at the family locations receiving residence permits, giving people hope they will eventually be allowed to stay as well. According to various stakeholders, this hope

is further fuelled by the child amnesty provision and the many procedures migrants can start again to try to get a residence permit. Moreover, in many cases, it is nearly impossible to forcefully return migrant families, while this is an important reason for many migrants to decide to return with IOM. This in turn also increases the time people live in the Netherlands, thus contributing to another stay factor. After all, as noted above, the longer people stay in the Netherlands, the more complicated return becomes.

### 7.1. Recommendations

This final section of the report discusses the possible incentives that could be considered by relevant Dutch agencies to reduce or even remove the most important obstacles hampering voluntary return of migrants residing at the family locations. The three most common factors influencing migrants' unwillingness to leave the Netherlands and return to the country of origin have been previously outlined. Most of these are hard to address by relevant agencies, and it is important to be realistic about the change that can be achieved through incentives aimed at stimulating voluntary return. Nonetheless, based on the available data and the interviews, it is possible to identify several actions that could be undertaken to improve the assistance offered to migrants at the family location.

In general, for migrants at the family locations, return becomes more complicated when they stay longer in the Netherlands. An important

reason for this is the sociocultural integration of children, especially when they start going to school. As many children were very young when they left their country of origin or were even born in the Netherlands, they had little to no attachment to the country where they had to return to. Better preparing children for return – for example through language classes or other forms of schooling – could therefore make a difference. Concrete forms of reintegration support could also incentivize some migrants to return to their country of origin, as long as it specifically takes into account the needs of children. In particular, it could help to ensure children will receive a quality education in the country of origin.

The presence of children meant most migrants were generally unwilling to take any risks when it comes to return. In this regard, concerns about education was not the only obstacle related to the future of children. Several other obstacles that could be addressed with reintegration support appeared repeatedly and are worth taking into consideration, although ultimately the needs of migrants will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. These include help with legal registration of the children in the country of origin, access to adequate and affordable health care and guaranteed housing for at least the initial period after return. Another way to address this issue is to ensure there is continued support available long after a family has returned. For migrants who have been away from their country of origin for a long time, this can

help to overcome fears that are hard to address through one-time financial support.

The second most important reason for migrants not to return was the situation in the country of origin. This primarily concerned the security situation, and to a lesser extent, economic possibilities. This obstacle might be particularly hard to reduce through incentives or support offered by relevant Dutch agencies. After all, there is little these agencies can do about the situation in countries of origin. Nonetheless, as already noted before, any assessment of the situation in the country of origin is inherently subjective. Whereas financial or in-kind support alone might not change the position of migrants regarding return, in combination with information provision about the country of origin and counselling, it might help in moving the dialogue about return forward. It is crucial that such information is as objective and neutral as possible. For example, it could be beneficial to invite someone from the country of origin – perhaps even a former returnee – to talk about daily life and the challenges and opportunities that he/she encounters. Another option could be the creation of brochures with both general information about return assistance and country-specific information that are readily available at various places at the family location.

Related to this, but on a more general note, the information provision to migrants about available AVRR services could

be improved. Notwithstanding migrants for whom return is impossible, the decision to return is a trade-off between the anticipated future in the Netherlands and the anticipated future in the country of origin. Return and reintegration assistance is meant to make the return scenario more attractive, but in order to achieve that, it is crucial that migrants are well aware of the various possibilities for support in case of return. Most interviewed migrants knew about the possibilities regarding voluntary return assistance, but had very little knowledge about the exact scope and nature of the assistance that is available. Clear information about all available return services – including support specifically aimed at ensuring the well-being of children – should be readily accessible by migrants at all times. The threshold to obtain such information should be kept as low as possible, preferably even without having to consult DT&V or IOM.

The hope of receiving a residence permit was a third important reason for migrants at the family locations to stay in the Netherlands. This hope was pertinent despite the fact that migrants are made well aware that they have exhausted all legal remedies, and it is very unlikely that they will receive a residence permit in the future. However, seeing other migrants receive a residence permit – sometimes after long periods of

time and various rejections – made it hard to accept this reality. This is an issue that can only be addressed by providing adequate information, although it is clear that in many cases, this makes little difference. It is important that migrants are adequately informed about the legal reality of their situation, but there does not seem to be much else that can be done by relevant Dutch agencies to address this issue.

On a final note, it is worthwhile to stress again that the obstacles migrants face are highly individualized. The range of factors in both the Netherlands and the country of origin that play a role in the return decision makes the situation of these migrants both complex and difficult. The exclusion of many nationalities from return assistance furthermore means that organizing voluntary return from the family locations has increasingly become a matter of being tailor made. It likely requires a considerable amount of time on counselling to understand the individual obstacles each migrant face. This has to start with simply getting in touch with migrants; investing in ways to become acquainted with migrants and their situation could therefore be the first step in the long path towards return. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that quick-fix solutions for this population are simply not available.

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