

Ousmane Diarra, President of the *Association Malienne des Expulsés*¹

What are AME's objectives?

The *Association Malienne des Expulsés* (AME) was created in 1996 by Malian migrants who were forcibly returned from different countries, including France, Uganda, Saudi Arabia and Liberia. Since then, we have been working on return and expulsion, focusing on migrants' rights and humanitarian emergencies.

Who are you supporting?

At the beginning, we mainly supported forcibly returned migrants, then migrants who had been rejected at the borders, and now also migrants who have returned voluntarily. As an association, we define "expulsés" as migrants who were able to reach their country of destination, but were later forcibly returned from it, or who were not able to reach it because they were not allowed in at the border; and voluntary returnees as migrants who have had unlucky migration experiences and who decide to return to Mali with international support. In practice, in the first semester of 2019, we worked with 6,621 returnees from Africa, Europe, North America and Asia. On 15 January 2020, we supported Mali in receiving 180 citizens forcibly returned from Algeria and the next day in receiving 117 from Libya.

What kind of support do you provide to returnees?

At the beginning, we used to go to the airport of Bamako, to control that the rights of forcibly returned migrants were respected. Since then, we have increasingly focused on supporting them upon their return. Many of them come from rural regions of Mali and don't have family in Bamako. Therefore, we welcome them in a host centre, where we support them with food, clothing and travel assistance to return to their places of origin. In cooperation with Doctors Without Borders France, we also provide psychosocial support to returnees who are traumatized by their migration experiences or by having been expelled, sometimes after having lived for years in their countries of destination, or who are rejected by their families and communities. In this last case, we also try to mediate and to support the returnees' reintegration in their local context of origin. We also have a mutual support group for migrants who were expelled by different countries of destination. In addition to the psychological difficulties I already mentioned, many of them also face health problems or economic difficulties, as employment opportunities and resources are scarce in Mali. Here again, we think that we need to distinguish between persons who have decided to return voluntarily, even if they could have stayed in their countries of destination, perhaps buying their own flights and with the purpose of starting a business, and persons who did not have a choice. For the latter, it is much more difficult. The two groups are also perceived differently by society, as the former are more likely to invest and create jobs for other persons, and the latter often have problems to pay their own expenses. This is a big problem, in fact, due to which many of them decide to emigrate again.

How is the situation now, compared to 10 years ago?

The overall number of returnees has increased. However, 10 years ago, most returnees were persons who had been forcibly returned from their countries of destination, whereas now they are mostly voluntary returnees and migrants rejected at the border. Voluntary return has increased in volume in recent years, particularly after the Valletta Summit in 2015. And while we also have many migrants that were rejected by Algeria, we didn't have them 10 years ago. Of course, there are still Malian migrants who are forcibly returned from different countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, but these are less than 10 years ago.

What would you recommend to researchers and policymakers?

In Africa, development is linked to agriculture, farming and fishing. We think that this is also where we need to start from, to increase the well-being of aspiring migrants and returnees in their local context, and to contrast mystified perceptions of migration. We need to offer them this kind of training. At AME, we have developed a project in this sense, but are still searching for funding.

¹ Interview conducted by Irene Schöfberger, IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.