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# **Migrant Return and Reintegration Policy: A Key Component of Migration Governance**



International Organization for Migration (IOM)

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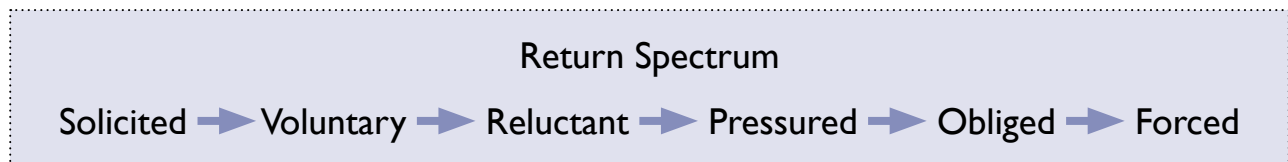
# Migrant Return and Reintegration Policy: A Key Component of Migration Governance

Kathleen Newland

## Introduction

The sharply increased movements of people across the Mediterranean starting in 2014 generated heightened interest in return migration. The arrivals included many people who would not be considered refugees, from countries such as Cote D'Ivoire, Senegal and Nigeria (few of the Nigerian migrants come from the conflict-affected region in the Northeast of the country, according to IOM) and even as far away as Bangladesh. While the epicenter of return and reintegration *policy debate* was in Europe and international policy forums, actual mass returns were taking place from Iran and Pakistan to Afghanistan and from the Dominican Republic to Haiti, and were threatened from Kenya to Somalia. These large-scale returns were not the primary focus of debate about return and reintegration policy in international institutions and forums, and for this reason they will not be the primary focus of this paper.

Return migration takes place along a spectrum from voluntary to involuntary movement, with at least six identifiable points.



- At one extreme is return that is not only wholly voluntary but solicited by the country of origin. Many countries, including China, Ireland and South Korea actively court emigrants and members of the diaspora—especially highly skilled and talented migrants or potential investors—and may offer incentives for them to repatriate.
- Other migrants are not necessarily asked to return but do so voluntarily, some to retire or reunite with family, others because they believe their prospects in the country of origin have improved or they have achieved their migration goal of, for example, acquiring a skill or a nest egg.
- A third group of migrants decide to return voluntarily but reluctantly, even though they have not lost their legal right to remain. They may feel that going home is the best of a suboptimal set of options; perhaps the political and social climate in the country of destination has become inhospitable, they have not succeeded in pursuing their goals, or they are simply homesick.
- A fourth point on the spectrum holds migrants who are strongly pressured by the countries of destination to return, with some governments offering voluntary returnees a cash payment which may be available only for a limited time; this often occurs in times of economic crisis with high unemployment.
- A fifth category is obligatory return, for migrants who have not secured the right to remain legally in the country of destination and are ordered to leave. Return and repatriation assistance is often made available to those who comply with the obligation to return while those who do not comply, and continue to stay as unauthorized migrants, face legal sanctions.

- Finally, the other extreme of the spectrum is forced return, in which migrants who are legally required to leave the country of destination and have avoided doing so are physically detained and forcibly deported.

The acute policy conundrums surrounding return migration on the second half of this spectrum are the focus of this brief policy paper.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand a) states have the right to return migrants who have no legal authorization to remain, b) removal of unauthorized immigrants is understood to be an essential element of effective management of orderly migration c) states are determined to remove unauthorized migrants and many governments believe that they must do so in order to retain credibility with their citizens and legally resident non-citizens. On the other hand, states find it extremely difficult to remove unwilling migrants in an orderly and humane way. This is one conundrum.

A second conundrum is that when return takes place, whether voluntary or compelled, sustainability is often difficult to achieve. Reintegration in the country of origin will obviously be easier for migrants who return voluntarily, but all returnees must go through some kind of reintegration process. Governments who wish to encourage return migration, either as countries of origin or destination, have reason to consider what policies can help to make return migration sustainable. The timing of return is critical: if the same conditions that motivated migration in the first place—violence (of a criminal or political nature), corruption, high unemployment, dysfunctional public services, poor infrastructure, widespread poverty and lack of opportunity—are still pervasive, reintegration is likely to be difficult and returned migrants may try to leave again. Voluntary returnees may find that social and psychological reintegration into the country of origin is more difficult than they had imagined, or that they are unable to make a living.

A third conundrum arises from the reality that countries of origin and destination may have different views and interests in the return of migrants. While some states may welcome migrants back to the home country, and in some cases have actively encouraged return, others have little motivation to cooperate in the return of their nationals. Emigration may be seen as a crucial safety valve for poverty and unemployment (and in some cases, for political discontent). Migrants' remittances are an important proportion of gross national income in many countries, and may overbalance any threat of sanctions<sup>2</sup> for failure to cooperate in the return of migrants. Countries of origin may simply be unable to reintegrate the migrants satisfactorily, and in case of large-scale returns, the human costs of repatriation may be very high. Long-settled emigrants may retain little practical connection with their countries of origin.

## Background

The governments of many countries of destination today want to encourage return migration, particularly of unauthorized migrants, failed asylum seekers, people whose visas have expired, or those whose period of temporary protection has come to an end—in other words, migrants who do not have legal permission to remain. Some governments, such as that of the United Kingdom, have also articulated a desire to have lower “net migration,” which implies lower immigration, higher rates of return, or some combination of the two. Some governments want to encourage return migration of refugees when the conflicts that produced refugee flows have wound down (or even before, as with current returns to Afghanistan from a number of countries, and Turkey's interest in creating “safe zones” within Syria to which refugees could return even as fighting continues in parts of Syria). Some governments act unilaterally to return people, motivated by domestic political pressures or geopolitical strategic concerns.

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1 Countries of origin face a very different set of policy conundrums in trying to attract back their emigrant nationals. For example, special incentives offered to returning migrants may generate resentment among citizens who never left. One of the most difficult challenges is generational. The return of children and youth to a “home” country they do not know well fosters alienation. These challenges faced by countries of origin in the front half of the return spectrum often overlap with those on the second half, but are appropriately the subject for another paper.

2 The United States has curtailed visa issuance to nationals of Cambodia, Eritrea, Guinea and Sierra Leone because of lack of cooperation in receiving migrants returned to those countries.

Among Western democracies, the United States has been relatively successful at removing unauthorized immigrants, with 3.7 million formal returns carried out in 2003-13. This rate of return has risen in 2017, as the Trump administration gives priority to deportation of unauthorized migrants and could rise even more sharply if the administration removes protection from deportation from several groups. These include the roughly 800,00 beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and some nationalities benefitting from Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which now covers nearly 300,000 people.

Among European liberal democracies, return has proven to be quite difficult. This is in part because so many unauthorized immigrants apply for asylum, and asylum determination systems work very slowly. In many countries their capacity has been overwhelmed by the high number of applications from 2014 onwards (although arrivals have slowed considerably in Europe and the United States in 2017). The 28 EU members plus Norway and Switzerland received about 2.5 million asylum applications in 2015 and 2016. At the end of 2016, more than half were still waiting for their cases to be resolved, 40 percent had been approved, and about 3 percent (approximately 75,000 people) had been returned. A residual 5 percent, mostly composed of rejected asylum seekers, could not be located.<sup>3</sup> Even when decisions are concluded, they are difficult to execute. To illustrate, only 60 percent of the return decisions issued by EU countries in 2015 were actually carried out.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the United States, despite high rates of removal, the backlog of asylum adjudications exceeded 617,000 cases in 2017, and the wait for most asylum seekers extended more than two years.

For countries of destination in Europe, the attraction of voluntary return has increased with the volume of asylum seekers and the growth of backlogs. (The United States does not offer reintegration assistance to many returned migrants.<sup>5</sup>) Offerings of payments and other kinds of assistance have grown more common. They serve two purposes, addressing both the first and second conundrums described above: to encourage migrants to return voluntarily to their countries of origin and to increase the sustainability of return.

Many governments work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which has managed Assisted Voluntary Return Programs (AVRR) since 1979. IOM provided AVRR assistance to 98,403 migrants in 2016, compared to 69,540 in 2015 and an average of 34,000 a year from 2005-2014. Some 83 percent of the returning migrants among these beneficiaries were returned from Europe; 54 percent from Germany alone (chiefly to Albania, Iraq and Serbia).<sup>6</sup>

IOM's AVRR programs provided US\$32.7 million in support to 39,000 returnees, in cash or in kind, in 2016—an average of \$838 per person. About 62 percent of the total was disbursed as small cash payments and about 31 percent consisted of in-kind support for micro-business start-up. Smaller proportions were made available for health care and housing, and less than one percent each for services such as education, vocational training, social protection, job placement and legal services.

Most research on the subject seems to suggest, however, that the success of return incentives offered directly or indirectly by countries of destination is generally modest. Few assisted voluntary return programs have large uptake among rejected asylum seekers, in part because they are not well known or understood. Many migrants who take up return assistance were planning to return in any case. Return incentives are not usually large enough to make a big difference in the success of the individual's post-return plans. The efficiency and effectiveness of return payments and programs have not been rigorously evaluated in very many cases.

3 Phillip Connor, "Still in Limbo: About a Million Asylum Seekers Await Word on Whether They Can Call Europe Home," Pew Research Center, September 2017, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

4 Demetri Papademetriou, "Maintaining Public Trust in the Governance of Migration," Transatlantic Council on Migration, Migration Policy Institute, May, 2016.

5 There are some exceptions, such as \$50,000 grant to an Salvadoran non-profit intended to help facilitate reintegration and support business start-ups with technical advice and financial education.

6 IOM, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: 2016 Key Highlights*, [www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our\\_work/DMM/AVRR/AVRR-2016-Key-Highlights.pdf](http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/AVRR-2016-Key-Highlights.pdf)

Some countries of origin have very limited ability to absorb returning citizens or to offer them meaningful reintegration assistance. Afghanistan is one of the most extreme examples. About 10,000 Afghans returned from Europe in 2016, almost 70 percent of them through IOM (although only about 1100 received reintegration assistance). In the same year, well over one million Afghans were returned under duress from Pakistan and Iran, even as the country experienced an increase in attacks on civilians. With one of the lowest per capita incomes and human development indexes in the world, along with rising insecurity, reintegration in Afghanistan poses an enormous challenge.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said of Haiti, where more than 202,000 people have been deported or returned under pressure from the Dominican Republic since mid-2015.<sup>8</sup> Other countries of origin have greater capabilities to reintegrate returnees. Mexico's "Somos Mexicanos" program, for example, welcomes returnees at ports of entry and provides assistance and counselling.

## Analysis

Data on the return experience and the viability of reintegration is remarkably thin. Few reintegration programs have been systematically evaluated or their participants followed-up for more than a short period; therefore, the opportunity to learn from experience has been limited.<sup>9</sup> Four areas of weakness emerge from the academic and policy literature:

- Most reintegration programs are focused on the individual migrant rather than the household or community, which leads to a tendency to overlook gendered aspects of return and may exacerbate social integration problems.
- An over-reliance on entrepreneurship as the answer to economic self-sufficiency is the dominant approach, which recognizes the weakness of labor markets in countries of origin but does not appear to have a good record for sustainability.
- Most programs are confined to the economic aspects of sustainability while excluding social and psychological needs.
- Consultation and cooperation between countries of destination and countries of origin is more the exception than the rule. This is of particular concern when the host country prioritizes the return of criminals. Return is something that is done *to* countries of origin, although there seems to be some shift toward greater cooperation, for example in the joint EU-Afghan agreement on return of 2016.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the best examples of sustainability can be found in projects that are generated by migrants themselves, and are carried out by a self-formed group. The groups are often based on common place of origin. Moroccan returnees from France established rural electrification projects to sustain small businesses and producer coops in the intra-Atlas region. Turkish returnees from Germany, inspired by an expatriate engineer, established a workers' cooperative wallpaper factory, while a successful hydraulic equipment factory was started by Slovenian returnees.<sup>11</sup>

7 Nassim Majidi, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Assessing the Impact of Forced Returns to Afghanistan," Transatlantic Council on Migration, Migration Policy Institute, forthcoming, 2017.

8 In June, 2017, IOM opened a Border Resource Center in cooperation with the Haitian government to assist migrants returning from the Dominican Republic. "UN Migration Agency Opens Haiti's First Border Resource Center to Help Returning Haitians," IOM June 20, 2017, [www.iom.int/news/](http://www.iom.int/news/)

9 Germany's development agency GIZ has commissioned an evaluation of the government's return programs, which is expected to be completed in 2018.

10 Nassim Majidi, op. cit.

11 Rosemarie Rogers, "Return Migration, Migrants' Savings and Sending Countries' Economic Development: Lesson from Europe," Working Paper No. 30, Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development, Washington, DC, May 1990.

## Conclusion

There is little agreement on what sustainable return means. To IOM, reintegration is sustainable when returnees are economically self-sufficient, socially accepted and enjoy psychosocial well-being.<sup>12</sup> Richard Black and Russel King set a lower bar: “Return migration is sustainable for individuals if returnees’ socio-economic status and fear of violence or persecution is no worse, relative to the population in the place of origin, one year after their return.”<sup>13</sup>

Certain preconditions for successful and sustainable return can be identified based on experience. At the top of the list is a basic level of physical security. Without that, and a conducive socio-economic environment, return and reintegration assistance is not likely to produce durable settlement. A secure and stable environment includes access to resources, adequate infrastructure, available health care, accessible education, and institutions capable of enforcing respect for basic rights. Conflict affects all of these factors negatively.

Cooperation among states is a key to resolving these issues, both to fostering conditions conducive to sustainable return and to resolving their different priorities about the timing and conditions of return.

## Recommendations

The UN Secretary-General’s first Special Representative for Migration, Peter Sutherland, in his 2017 Report,<sup>14</sup> called on states ‘to start a dialogue among countries of origin, transit and destination on return practices and standards, with a view to establishing a common understanding and, ultimately, shared principles to govern cooperation on return and reintegration in all world regions.’ This recommendation is echoed in the list of possible topics for the Global Compact on Migration set out in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, Annex II, “Toward a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.”<sup>15</sup> It is a crucial first step to bring consistency, transparency and order to the return and reintegration of migrants.

The standards called for in the Sutherland Report could address issues like the portability of earned social benefits, reintegration programs that benefit the community of return as a whole rather than migrants only, and the involvement of local authorities and other community-level actors in reintegration planning and practice. One principle that could be recognized is that flexible rules governing mobility can promote return and reintegration. People are more likely to take the risks involved with return migration if they know they have an option to go back to the country of origin under prescribed conditions—to visit family, conduct business, undergo additional education or training, and so forth. This kind of circular migration recognizes the ties that people build up over long periods of expatriation, and can activate these ties as assets for development.

12 International Organization for Migration, *Enhancing Migrant Well-Being upon Return through an Integrated Approach to Reintegration*, Global compact Thematic Paper: Reintegration, 2017.

13 Richard Black and Russel King, “Editorial Introduction: Migration, Return and Development in West Africa,” *Population, Space and Place*, 10 (2), pp. 75-82, 2004.

14 Recommendation 7, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Migration, UN A/71/728, February 3, 2017.

15 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 September 2016 as the outcome document of the High-Level Plenary Meeting on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, “The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants,” A/Res/71/1, Annex II, paragraph 8(s).



Kathleen Newland is a Senior Fellow and Co-Founder of the Migration Policy Institute. Her focus is on the relationship between migration and development, the governance of international migration, and refugee protection. She is also the Founding Director of the International diaspora Engagement Alliance (IdEA) during its incubation phase at MPI from 2011-13; IdEA was established as a partnership among MPI, the State Department, and U.S. Agency for International Development. She is a Member of the MPI Board of Trustees. Previously, at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, she was a Senior Associate and then Co-Director of the International Migration Policy Program (1994-01). She

sits on the Board of Overseers of the International Rescue Committee and the boards of directors of USA for UNHCR, the Stimson Center, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), and the Foundation for The Hague Process on Migrants and Refugees. She also is a Chair Emerita of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Prior to joining the Migration Program at the Carnegie Endowment in 1994, Ms. Newland worked as an independent consultant for such clients as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank, and the office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. From 1988-92, Ms. Newland was on the faculty of the London School of Economics. During that time, she also co-founded (with Lord David Owen) and directed Humanitas, an educational trust dedicated to increasing awareness of international humanitarian issues. From 1982 to 1988, she worked at the United Nations University in Tokyo as Special Assistant to the Rector. She began her career as a researcher at Worldwatch Institute in 1974. Ms. Newland is author or editor of eight books, including *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries* (MPI and International Organization for Migration, 2012); *Diasporas: New Partners in Global Development Policy* (MPI, 2010); *No Refuge: The Challenge of Internal Displacement* (United Nations, 2003); and *The State of the World's Refugees* (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1993). She has also written 17 shorter monographs as well as numerous policy papers, articles, and book chapters. Ms. Newland is a graduate of Harvard University and the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. She did additional graduate work at the London School of Economics.