

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR): an Opportunity for Development?

Overview

This briefing explores whether assisted return migration programmes can have a positive impact on development in returnees' countries of origin. It reviews the history of assisted return migration from Western European countries, and discusses the recent expansion of assisted voluntary return (AVR) schemes in EU member states. Subsequently, the briefing presents the findings of a recent study carried out by the Migration DRC in Sri Lanka, which focused on returnees who had used the UK's Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP). Although many of these returnees had received reintegration funding upon their return, the majority of returnees were in precarious situations, as their small business ventures were failing to provide for themselves and their families.

Introduction

Assisted voluntary return programmes are designed to help migrants return to their country of origin, and a number of country schemes are targeted specifically at failed asylum seekers or 'irregular' migrants who are resident in European countries. AVR programmes have increasingly strived to create beneficial outcomes for all parties involved in return. For migrants, their trip home is paid for, and they typically are provided with cash payment or reintegration assistance upon their arrival in their country of origin. For host countries, AVR is seen as a politically acceptable way to return migrants to their countries of origin, relative to deportation – and is also more cost-effective than forced removals. For home countries, there is the possibility that return migrants may benefit development. However, the success, or

'sustainability', of return under AVR programmes is difficult to judge. Migration DRC work on the 'sustainability of return' has argued that this must be evaluated for migrants in at least three areas: physical, socio-economic and political – each of which seen both according to migrants' own subjective feelings about their situation, and the broader objective context in their country of origin. Unfortunately, the monitoring of migrants who have returned home under AVR programmes has been patchy, making it difficult to assess the sustainability of these programmes.

A brief history of assisted return from Europe

European return programmes emerged for the first time in the 1970s, as the era of guest-worker migration to Europe ground to a halt due to economic recession in many European countries prompted by the 1973 oil crisis. Early return programmes were established in the Netherlands, France and Germany. In the Netherlands, REMPLOD – Reintegration of Emigrant Manpower and Promotion of Local Opportunities for Development – was introduced in 1974 and was targeted at guest-workers from Turkey, Tunisia and Morocco, who were encouraged to return home and start entrepreneurial ventures in their country of origin with support from the Dutch government. The *aide au retour* programme, meanwhile, was established by the French in 1977, and offered migrants cash payment to return to their home countries. Similarly, in Germany the Act to Promote the Preparedness of Foreign Workers to Return, which was passed in late 1983,

Promoting AVR

An IOM London leaflet highlighting the UK's Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP), which offers failed asylum seekers a chance to return home free of charge. Image © IOM.



and offered migrants DM 10,000 to voluntarily return to their countries of origin.

Despite optimism that these programmes would encourage large numbers of guest-workers to return home, the initiatives failed to live up to the expectations of policymakers. REMPLD was disbanded in the mid-1980s after reviews of the costly programme revealed that the success of its reintegration efforts had been minimal. While *aide au retour* was used by some Portuguese and Spanish migrants in France, uptake from migrants from North and West African countries, who were the main targets of the programme, was minimal. Out of 1 million aimed for, the take up for France was only 60,000 for the period 1977 — 1981. Moreover, only 2,400 Algerians (4% of the total) took up the programme, despite these being the key target group. These outcomes were mirrored by the German programme, which persuaded only a small number of the country's large foreign-born population to return home, and was eventually discontinued in the early 1990s.

Current scope of AVR programmes

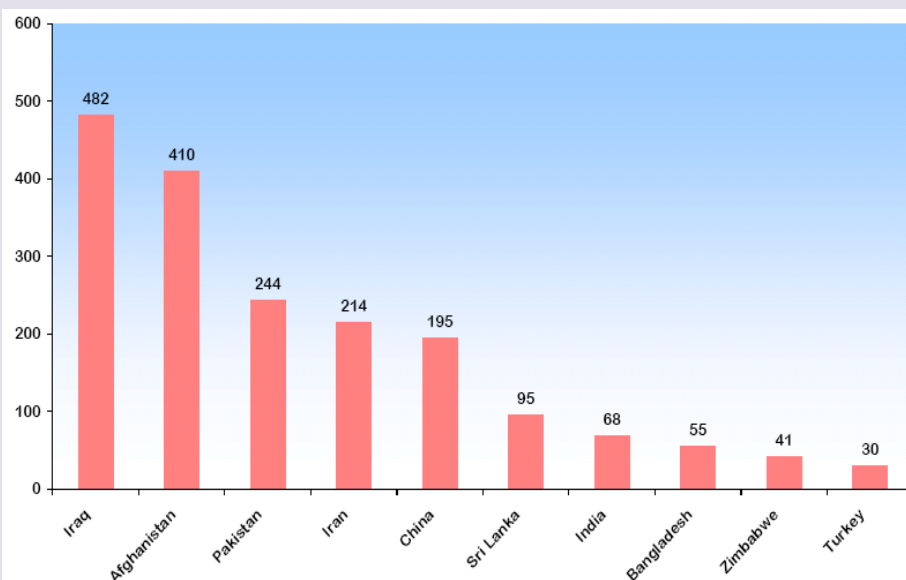
The limited success of these early programmes notwithstanding, assisted return policies have hardly been abandoned by European governments. At present, 11 European countries — Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway,

Portugal, Switzerland and the UK — have assisted voluntary return programmes, which are run on behalf of these governments by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). These programmes are typically offered to failed asylum seekers or 'irregular' migrants, and cover the costs of the migrant's journey home and usually include a cash payment or in-kind reintegration assistance. Recently, AVR schemes have been introduced in migrant transit countries, with financial support from European governments and European Commission. For example, IOM has facilitated an AVR programme in Libya since 2006, offering stranded migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa the opportunity to return home with added benefit of in-kind reintegration assistance to start small businesses. Over 2,000 migrants have been returned to their countries of origin via the AVR programme in Libya, and there are plans to expand the programme to Morocco under the TRIM plus programme.

It is important to stress, however, that very little is known about the 'sustainability' of AVR programmes, in terms of the medium-term and long-term outcomes for migrants who return home under these schemes. IOM has not been able to conduct comprehensive monitoring of the programmes it facilitates, as this is extremely costly. Historically, most government schemes to promote return that are linked with investment in small business have been viewed as failures, and while there is no comprehensive data to confirm that this is the case under

Box 1: A profile of the UK's Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP)

The pilot programme for VARRP was launched in 1999, and the permanent programme was initiated in 2002, when a reintegration component was added to VARRP. VARRP was initially available only to failed asylum seekers in the UK, but in 2004 Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) was established, which is open to all migrants with no legal right to remain in the UK, including persons who have been trafficked, migrants who overstayed their visas, etc. Returnees typically receive in-kind assistance via IOM to allow them to set up their own small business when they return home. For more information, see <www.iomlondon.org>. Since October 2007, 2444 people have benefited from reintegration assistance upon return. The graph refers to the 'new approach' of targeted assistance which covers 75% of these returns.



current AVR programmes, there is certainly cause to be cautious about AVR's potential to contribute to development in countries of origin. Moreover, the current upsurge in AVR has taken place in an era marked by the increasingly rigid migration guidelines in European countries. Indeed, the spread of AVR programmes to transit countries with support from European governments can be seen as one dimension of efforts by EU countries to combat 'upstream' migration flows, in order to stop migrants reaching Europe in the first place. Other approaches in this same policy vein include the strengthening of transit country border controls, information campaigns to warn potential migrants in countries of origin about the dangers of undocumented migration to Europe, and 'co-development' programmes.

Sri Lanka case study

A Migration DRC study conducted in 2008 in Sri Lanka consisted of interviews with 48 migrants who had returned from the UK under the VARRP programme, after failing in their asylum claims. The sample included migrants who re-settled in different regions in Sri Lanka, with ten percent of the returnees from each accessible region interviewed as part of the study. The survey sample was made up of 29 Tamil, 17 Muslims and two Sinhalese.

The results of the study provide an analysis of return to Sri Lanka under VARRP. In terms of political or security considerations, four returnees reported that they had experienced human rights abuses at the hands of Sri Lankan authorities since they had returned home. In addition, virtually all of the Tamil returnees reported incidents of racial harassment, typically at the hands of Sri Lankan law enforcement or other government officials. A total of 44 of the 48 returnees interviewed had opened businesses and this reflects the common pattern amongst VARRP returnees to Sri Lanka of significant business investment. At the time of interview, only four business owners reported that businesses generated a profit above subsistence levels and 20 businesses had closed completely. The remaining 20 businesses continued to operate at or below subsistence levels with only five business owners expressing optimism about the future of their businesses — pointing to the socio-economic difficulties that many returnees faced. AVR returnees' physical living conditions were varied. 26 of the returnees were living in a house they owned or a secure rental, while 18 were living with family or friends.

Four returnees had no security of accommodation and were dependent on nightly rented accommodation or other arrangements. A total of 45 returnees, meanwhile, indicated that they hoped to emigrate again.

However, these results must be considered within the context of the deteriorating security situation which has affected Sri Lanka since the end of the ceasefire between the government and Tamil rebels in 2006. While the situation of VARRP returnees was precarious, these migrants were perhaps no worse off than other people in their communities. In this context, supporting successful development efforts becomes extremely difficult, and a one-time reintegration payment given to migrants clearly does little to calm tumultuous political situations. This is an important point, as many of the people who return under VARRP are failed asylum seekers returning to countries where the political situation is unstable.

Policy suggestions

While few would argue with the notion that AVR is a more humane way of returning failed asylum seekers or irregular migrants to their country of origin than forced removals, there is still room for improving schemes such as VARRP. This is particularly so in terms of combining AVR with development efforts. Although the image of the migrant as entrepreneur has become increasingly widespread, there are often significant limitations of migrants' agency when they return home, particularly if the country they return to is unstable or they are discriminated against because of their status as returnees. In cases such as Sri Lanka, the assistance provided by VARRP may not be sufficient to yield meaningful development. In order to improve AVR outcomes, several steps could be taken:

- More wide-ranging and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of those who return under AVR schemes is needed in order to better understand the risks and challenges faced by returnees. M&E currently takes place mostly through voluntary communication from returnees, but this likely does not capture those who have had difficult experiences after they return home.
- Partnerships between civil society groups — including migrants' rights organisations — and returnees could play a vital role in providing additional protection for returnees. IOM and EU governments could play an enabling role in this

process.

- The option for returnees to emigrate again is important – and may help to increase uptake on AVR schemes.

Key readings

Ammassari, S. and R. Black (2001). 'Harnessing the Potential of Migration and Return to Promote Development: Applying Concepts to West Africa'. IOM Migration Research Series No. 5. Geneva: IOM. Available online: <http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/serial_publications/mrs_5_2001.pdf>.

Black, R. and S. Gent (2004) 'Defining, measuring and influencing sustainable return: the case of the Balkans'. Migration DRC Working Paper T-7. Brighton: Migration DRC, University of Sussex. Available online: <www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working_papers/WP-T7.pdf>.

Black, R., Koser, K., Munk, K., Atfield, G., D'Onofrio, L., and R. Tiemoko (2004) *Understanding Voluntary Return*. Home Office Online Report 50/04. Available online: <www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/rdsolr5004.pdf>.

Blitz, B.K., Sales, R., and L. Marzano (2005) 'Non-voluntary return? The politics of return to Afghanistan'. In: *Political Studies* 53(1): 182-200.

Byron, M. (2005). 'Exploring narratives of emigration and return'. In: Besson, J. and Olwig K.F. (eds), *Caribbean Narratives of Belonging*. London: Macmillian: 206-221.

IOM (2005) 'Development potential of return migration'. In: *World Migration 2005: Costs and Benefits of International Migration*. Geneva: IOM, 288-296. Available online: <www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/1674?entryId=932>.

Koser, K. (2001) *The Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants: An Analysis of Government Assisted Return Programmes in Selected Countries*. IOM Migration

Research Series No. 4. Geneva: IOM. Available online: <www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/mainsite/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/serial_publications/mrs_3.pdf>.

Migration DRC Event Report. 'Return Migration: Policy Options and Policy Effects'. All the resources from this event, including a summary of the event, speaker slideshows and key readings are available online: <www.migrationdrc.org/news/reports/return_migration/index.html>.

Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

The Migration DRC aims to promote policy approaches that will help to maximise the potential benefits of migration for poor people, whilst minimising its risks and costs. Since 2003, the Migration DRC has undertaken a programme of research, capacity-building, training and promotion of dialogue to provide the strong evidential and conceptual bases needed for such policy approaches. This knowledge has also been shared with poor migrants, with the aim of contributing both directly and indirectly to the elimination of poverty. The Migration DRC is funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development, although the views expressed in this policy briefing do not express DFID's official policy.

How to Contact Us

This briefing was written by Jon Sward with input from Mike Collyer. For further information on this work please contact Saskia Gent (s.e.gent@sussex.ac.uk), Communications Manager for the Migration DRC.

For more information on the Migration DRC, please contact:

Sussex Centre for Migration Research
Arts C, University of Sussex
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, United Kingdom
tel: +44 1273 873394
fax: +44 1273 873158
email: migration@sussex.ac.uk
web: www.migrationdrc.org