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Ministry of the Interior



Rabat Process
Euro-African Dialogue
on Migration and Development



Ministry of External Relations

Webinar on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Outcome document

Introduction

Objective 10 of the Marrakesh Action Plan calls on Rabat Process partner countries to work together towards “ensuring the safe return and sustainable reintegration of migrants, while respecting their rights and dignity”. It is within this context that the webinar on Voluntary Return and Reintegration (VRR) was organised on 21st January 2021. This virtual event was an alternative to the thematic workshop that was scheduled to be held in Yaoundé (Cameroon) in March 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also the first-ever Rabat Process activity, which was open to all interested policy-makers, practitioners and academics, in addition to the Rabat Process traditional audience, namely its focal points and partner countries’ competent authorities.

In the first panel discussion, speakers from the European Commission, the Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) exchanged views and updates on voluntary return and reintegration in the context of the health crisis and the recent European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum. The second panel brought together speakers from government agencies (Togo and Tunisia) and non-government organisations (Cameroon) alongside experts from the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to share lessons learnt on the socio-economic reintegration of returning migrants.

The present document outlines the webinar’s key takeaways along with identified challenges and good practices for ensuring the successful reintegration of returning migrants.

1. Voluntary return and reintegration: State of play and the way forward

Policy developments in the EU – Return of irregular migrants features prominently in the new Pact and its several legislative and non-legislative proposals aimed at, in particular, swift and fair return procedures, increased efficiency through greater cooperation with third countries,

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and strengthened EU coordination. Concretely, the Pact resolves to increase the effectiveness of the EU's current return infrastructure through reforms including:

- Appointment of an EU Return Coordinator to ensure a well-coordinated return approach throughout the EU, and further highlighting the role of FRONTEX¹ as the implementing agency of EU's return policy.
- Standardising and reinforcing the link between return and asylum processes to reduce inefficiencies.
- Introducing a solidarity system known as return sponsorships, through which the Members States provide technical/financial/logistical assistance to each other on return related matters.

With respect to the approach, the new Pact reiterates that **dignified voluntary returns backed by solid reintegration schemes** continue to be the EU's preferred option. These schemes will be elaborated further in the upcoming EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.

Return and reintegration in the ECOWAS region – Reintegration support in many ECOWAS countries remains scattered, lacking essential components such as appropriate monitoring systems for return migration - particularly by land - as well as socio-economic assistance measures. The region's porous borders with significant numbers of ports of entry and large scale cross-border mobility hinder effective reintegration processes. These are part of the common institutional and coordination issues that the MIDWA Thematic Working Group on Return and Reintegration seeks to address by collecting and analysing data, sharing information and lessons learnt, as well as issuing recommendations for the ECOWAS Member States and the ECOWAS Commission.

Return and reintegration in the COVID-19 context – International travel bans and the various containment measures have disproportionately affected migrant communities, leaving many migrants stranded, exposed to increased risks of violence, abuse, discrimination, stigmatisation, and limiting their access to healthcare and basic services.

For operational actors as IOM, the crisis had significant impacts on their return practices while also allowing them to explore new solutions and approaches. IOM noted that:

- Despite operational challenges and ensuing slowdowns of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), a significant increase was seen in the demand for voluntary returns.
- Innovative digital solutions such as virtual counselling, consent-recording online tools, hotlines, and information sharing applications were introduced to ensure migrants' continued protection and assistance.
- Greater coordination and cooperation were observed between host and home countries despite the practical difficulties. This shows how further efforts are needed to promote or deepen the dialogue between countries and migrants, improve preparedness on health security and ensure the effective respect of migrants' rights.

¹ This new role will see FRONTEX manage networks of return service providers and other operational actors.

As for ERRIN, in response to return disruptions and the challenging delivery of reintegration assistance²:

- It has adjusted its programmes by extending the service delivery period for returnees by one year, and
- Enabled some of its member states to make informed decisions to increase the amount of assistance provided to reflect the new costs of goods.

What role for ERRIN in the context of the new Pact?

- ERRIN will continue to broker cooperation between governments in Europe and countries of origin, strengthening, in particular, its government-to-government approach. This approach sees reintegration as an integral part of return cooperation with third countries.
- The Pact calls for closer coordination between the ministries of justice and interior as well as other policy areas, with a focus on development assistance. Building on learnings from its pilot initiatives in Nigeria and Bangladesh, the ERRIN Working Group on Development and Reintegration will continue to offer member states a platform to collaborate on linking reintegration and development.
- The Pact foresees an establishment of stronger structures within the EU, linked to more effective cooperation with third countries and building on effective operational support. Working towards this goal, a transitional plan is currently under development to transfer a portion of ERRIN activities to FRONTEX in June 2022.

2. Lessons learnt on the critical ingredients for the successful reintegration of returning migrants

The French approach to the socio-economic reintegration of migrants – France uses its national operator - OFII - to provide VRR assistance to foreign nationals in an irregular situation. OFII's return support package may include travel arrangements for beneficiaries and their families, with the possibility of financial assistance. Its reintegration schemes mainly focus on the social and employment dimensions, including support in business creation. Based on its experience in Cameroon, OFII identified the following critical factors for the success of a returnee's reintegration:

- **Motivation of the returnee entrepreneur (beneficiary)** – It is a central element in the dynamic of entrepreneurship. The evaluation of the beneficiary's motivation, external influencing factors, and the coach's guidance are decisive.
- **Family environment** – It is important to ensure that the beneficiary is surrounded and supported by his/her family and community.
- **Choice of the sector of activity** – The operator has an advisory role thanks to his/her knowledge of the market or additional feasibility studies. Leading markets should be analysed, and re-orientation made possible in case of high-risk sectors.

² For more details, see <https://returnnetwork.eu/2020/09/15/return-and-reintegration-in-times-of-covid-19-global-challenges/>.

- **The beneficiary's prior experience in the same profession** – Most returnees resume the professional activity they once had before leaving their home country. The financial support of OFII enables returnees to invest in equipment to which they would not have had access through the local banking system.
- **Initial training of the beneficiary** – The more training a returnee has, the easier it will be to realise his/her project. To compensate for capacity shortfalls, training courses, particularly in management and trade training, can be financed. It is common and may be surprising that returning students wish to invest in projects that are far removed from their academic training. This situation is often induced by the difficulty of finding a job in the formal sector or in relation to their training.

The Togolese outlook on reintegration challenges – Togo's National Employment Agency (ANPE) works with international partners such as OFII and dedicated regional initiatives such as Migr'Actions to facilitate returnees' access to the local labour market and income-generating activities. The reintegration services range from reception to onsite/remote consultation, guidance, job search support with entrepreneurship programmes, and monitoring. Based on such experience, ANPE identified the most prominent weakness areas in reintegration efforts as being ***coordination, financial support, private sector involvement and community awareness raising***, and recommended the importance of safeguarding the following:

- National coordination and information-sharing mechanism for all actors and structures working in the field of return and reintegration;
- The incorporation of professional/economic reintegration needs in the design and implementation of national policies and programmes;
- The development and implementation of reintegration projects/programmes;
- The setting up of a psychological support and information system which would reassure returnees, build their confidence, sense of belonging and security at home and avoid possible new departures to other uncertain horizons;
- Increasing the awareness of the population and public actors (parliament, decentralised authorities, non-governmental organisations, etc.) on the reception and social reintegration of migrants;
- Addressing employers' reluctance and mistrust to recruit returning migrants through increased and targeted awareness raising.

Tunisia: Cooperation with civil society under the ProGreS and Lemma projects – The Tunisian authorities work closely with international partners and local civil society associations to find solutions for returning citizens' socio-economic reintegration through various schemes and pilot support initiatives³. Within the framework of the Lemma Project, selected civil society organisations (CSOs) have accompanied returnees to carry out their reintegration projects through support services, including project preparation⁴, launching and monitoring for one year, and offering additional guidance when needed. Under the ProGreS Migration programme, the partner CSOs supported the "national scheme for the socio-economic reintegration of returning migrants" - established within the Office for Tunisians Abroad - to provide local accompaniment for one year through the financial aid granted to eligible returning migrants. Such support included:

1. social assistance: the identification and monitoring of individualised social reintegration measures;

³ For more details, see presentation in the annex.

⁴ Involving personalised assessment of each returnee, entrepreneurship training and administrative support.

2. employment assistance: the elaboration of a professional reintegration plan (through the strengthening of professional skills and capacities);
3. Support for business creation: support for returning migrants during the process of realising their own projects on the basis of a one-year follow-up.

Some of the benefits observed out of this multi-stakeholder collaboration include:

- Acceleration of the reintegration process for returning migrants;
- Adequate local support adapted to the needs of returning migrants;
- Adequate follow-up of beneficiaries' reintegration project for one year with additional assistance and advice to ensure their project's success and sustainability.

Cameroon's key learnings on conditions for the success of voluntary return and reintegration programmes – The main areas of strengths of Cameroon's return and reintegration architecture were reported as being related to the existence of:

- **Inter-ministerial coordination** facilitated through working groups and sub-committees with clearly defined roles based on the priority needs of returning migrants;
- **Dedicated support projects** such as the "Programme for the Return and Integration of Youths from the Diaspora (PARI-JEDI)" of the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education which accompanies the return and reintegration of young diaspora members through support packages including information-sharing, awareness-raising and training, while providing technical support to relevant CSOs.
- **Government financial package**⁵ for returning migrants who applied for assistance and have undergone technical, civic and entrepreneurial training.

The particular strength of Cameroon's state-run reintegration mechanism was found to lie in:

- Early identification of beneficiaries' needs (prior to their return);
- Identification of reintegration actors offering sustainable solutions;
- Coordination among competent structures through the designation of focal points and the creation of synergies;
- Referral of migrants to the structures that best meet their specific needs.

OECD insights on reintegration issues most critical to sustainability – The recent OECD report⁶ on reintegration highlights **coordination and community development** as some of the common issues affecting reintegration programmes' success and sustainability:

- **Coordination** - The multitude of actors involved in the reintegration programmes both in the host and country of origin makes coordination of efforts difficult while creating role confusion. There is a need to better formalise communication and reporting among all actors.
- **The risk of inequality** - Vigilance is required to ensure that reintegration initiatives avoid triggering tensions in the communities hosting returning migrants due to the imbalances between the support received by individual returnees and community members. Building the capacity of local institutions will overcome such risks while maximising the development impact of reintegration efforts.

⁵ Known as "Assistance for the installation and reintegration of migrants in a precarious situation"

⁶ Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants. A better homecoming. (2020). https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/sustainable-reintegration-of-returning-migrants_5fee55b3-en

In conclusion, the following are key factors in the success of VRR programmes:

- **Multi-stakeholder approaches** throughout the VRR cycle and **strong coordination** between host and home countries.
- **Development support for local communities** hosting returning migrants.
- **Effective referral** of migrants to relevant institutions and **socio-economic reintegration support, which is tailored to their capacities and needs and monitored over time.**
- **Awareness-raising and creation of favourable attitudes and conditions** (e.g. among government, future employers, family members) for returning migrants. This is likely to decrease the probability of another migration attempt.
- **Innovativeness and creativity** to ensure the continued assistance of returning migrants (e.g. **digital solutions**: virtual counselling, consent-recording online tools).