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Taking Stock of Assisted Voluntary Return from
Europe: Decision Making, Reintegration and
Sustainable Return – Time for a paradigm shift

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Abstract

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) is a central component of European Union (EU) member states migration management policies and has grown in popularity over the past two decades. At present, all EU member states have active AVR programmes, however, despite the growing prevalence of these programmes there has been a dearth of research and evaluation on AVR. In addition, a common goal of these AVR programmes is to achieve a sustainable return, but this term lacks a commonly used definition, making sustainable return an ambiguous policy objective. This paper takes stock of the most recent research on AVR focusing on decision making in the uptake of AVR, reintegration, and sustainable return. It is argued that it is time for a fundamental shift in our underlying assumptions regarding sustainable return in the field of AVR policy and practice. The working paper addresses key research gaps in the field and poses recommendations on how to move the agenda forward on AVR.

Keywords

Asylum and Refugees; Migration; Evidence-based policy making;

Introduction

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) is a central component of European countries migration management policies. With the increasing flows of asylum seekers to Europe and the high number of asylum refusals (433,520 rejected cases in first instance decisions in the EU-28 in 2016 (Eurostat, 2017)) facilitating return is becoming an increasingly salient policy issue. The European Agenda on Migration and the new partnership framework focus on the importance of return and readmission, reflecting the importance of this issue. The policy focus in the EU is on both voluntary and forced return, with an EU desire to increase return rates (Mananashvili, 2017), however, as stated in the EU Returns directive voluntary return is preferred to forced removals.

The primary modality of voluntary return is Assisted Voluntary Return programmes (AVR). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2015) defines AVR as:

[T]he administrative, logistical and financial support provided to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country who volunteer to return to their countries of origin and, where possible, supported with reintegration measures.

This definition highlights an important conceptual distinction between AVR and assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR). The former, AVR, tends to refer to assistance in the practicalities of the return process, such as a flight home, whereas the latter, AVRR, refers to an additional assistance that is provided for the purposes of reintegrating into the country of origin. Forms of reintegration assistance vary between programmes, but can include supports such as: assistance to open a new business, vocational training, housing support, or psychosocial care. Of the 69,195 AVRs facilitated by IOM in 2015, only 28,000 received reintegration assistance prior to or post arrival as part of AVRR (IOM, 2016). It is thus important to not assume that all assisted voluntary returnees receive reintegration packages and support post-arrival as the majority in fact do not. Assisted Voluntary Returnees may be left at the airport post-return to find their own way. Schuster (2017) recently described such a situation in Kabul where assisted voluntary returnees were met at the airport by an IOM official and given money to facilitate transport to their home communities, but were not offered a stay for a night in the guesthouse, food, or any other provisions.

AVR has risen in popularity and in flows across the EU over the past two decades. Despite the popularity of AVR in policy circles, academics and civil society organizations have questioned several elements of these programmes including: the voluntariness, the extent to which they provide assistance, and their ability to support post-return reintegration and sustainable return. Further there is little evidence and systemic evaluation in AVR, which has led to gaps in understanding sustainable return and reintegration (Paasche, 2015). Research has demonstrated that return migration is frequently a challenging endeavour for the return migrant and that many returnees are in situations of vulnerability upon their return (Schuster and Majidi, 2013; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Strand et al., 2016). Understanding how to ensure return migrants protection, safety, successful reintegration, and sustainable return are all essential components for return migration policy.

This paper provides an overview of the current research on AVR (studies published between 2014-2017) with a focus on decision making factors in return, and reintegration and sustainable return. The review highlights the dearth of evaluation and research available on AVR, the ambiguity of the term sustainable return, and the need for a new approach to monitoring and evaluating AVR projects in order to provide an evidence base for policy decisions and programming in AVR. The paper is structured into four core sections. The first provides an overview of AVR programmes, including the arguments for and against AVR programmes. The second section discusses migrants' decision making factors for AVR. This is a critical element in discussions of increasing uptake in AVR. The third section examines sustainable return and reintegration including definitions, measurement, and factors influencing sustainable return and reintegration. The final section of the paper explores potential risks

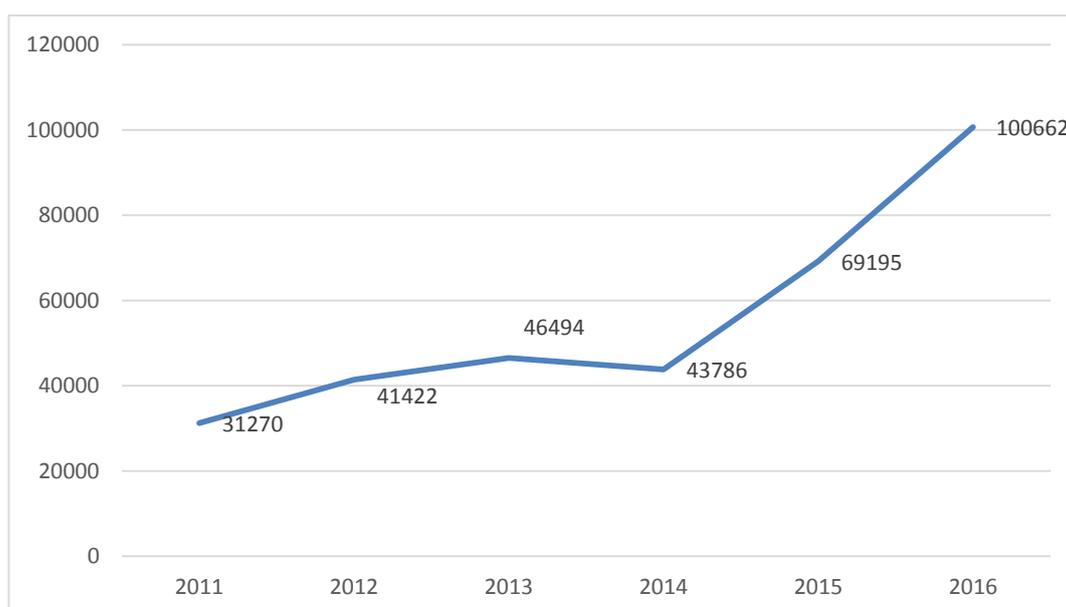
in return migration, an overview of research gaps, suggestions for moving the agenda forward on AVR and a short conclusion.

A Brief Overview of Assisted Voluntary Return

Return migration is a large industry with several actors involved including host states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, diaspora and civil society organizations, and origin countries. The process for return can be instigated by either the migrant themselves or the host state. The host state determines the return options available to the migrant through their policies such as options for AVR. Each EU member state has their own assisted voluntary return (AVR) programme in which they determine which migrants are eligible or not for participating in the programme. This means that in one EU member state an individual may be eligible for AVR, but in a different member state they may not be eligible for a similar programme, due to differences in eligibility requirements for AVR. Furthermore, each EU member state offers different AVRR packages, meaning reintegration assistance is different. This has led to perceptions and policy concerns that asylum seekers AVRR shop- meaning that they purposely apply for asylum in countries that offer the highest AVRR packages. There is no evidence to suggest that this is ever the case and research more commonly demonstrates that return is only viewed as an ultimate last resort of asylum and rejected asylum seekers. These differences, however, highlight the lack of coherence across EU member states AVR policies.

AVR programmes began to grow in popularity in the 1990s and have steadily increased in flows over the past three years. Figure 1 provides an overview of the number of individuals assisted in AVR by IOM over the past six years. IOM is the largest provider of AVR globally, however, there are other smaller providers which would not be captured in this figure. For example, in the United Kingdom up until 2016 all AVR was implemented by Refugee Action. In 2016, the Home Office decided to manage return directly, changing the official name to assisted returns which are coordinated now through the Home Office. There is thus no global estimates of AVR flows as no effort has been made to compile AVR flows for all available sources.

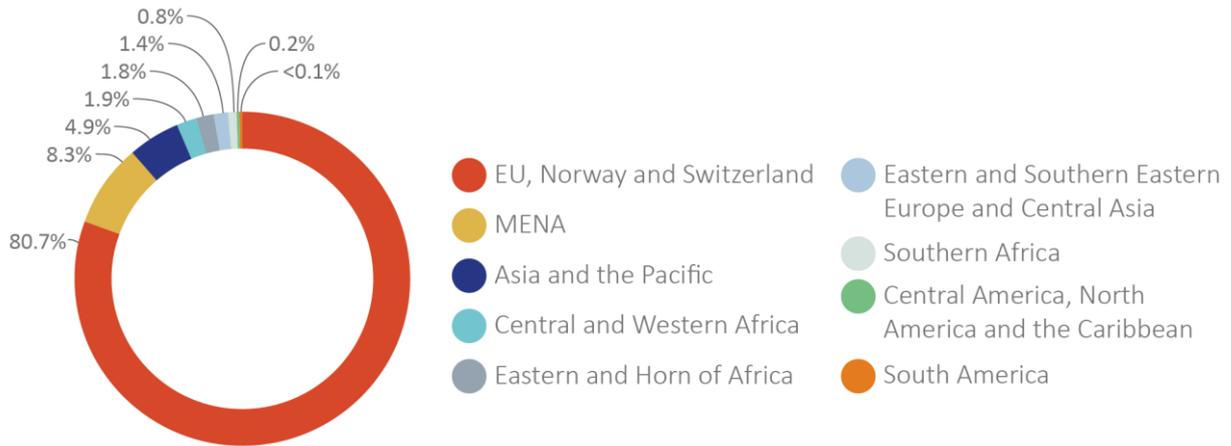
Figure 1: IOM AVR Flows 2011-2016



Source: IOM, 2016- Note: figures for 2016 are estimated

The majority of AVR programmes administered by IOM are from EU Member states, Norway and Switzerland as illustrated in Figure 2. AVR is also operated from so-called transit countries such as Libya, Turkey, Indonesia and Yemen.

Figure 2: AVR Programmes by Host Region of Returnees



Source: IOM, 2015

In 2015, IOM AVR programmes had a global expenditure of approximately USD 158 million (IOM, 2016). AVR thus represents a significant investment of destination countries that fund these programmes for migrants' return, particularly in the European context. Non-governmental organizations may also be involved in the process through return counselling (also commonly provided by IOM) in the destination country. As a whole, the overarching goal of this process is to facilitate a safe and humane return of migrants and to provide an alternative to forced removals.

Why Assisted Voluntary Return? The Policy Arguments for Host Countries

AVR offers four key advantages for host countries over forced removals (Black, Collyer and Sommerville, 2011). First, AVR is more palatable and politically appealing for host country populations as it is considered more humane than forced removals. It is the official policy of the EU that voluntary returns are preferred to forced removals. The use of physical force to remove people that do not want to go back to their countries of origin for safety or other reasons is viewed as morally questionable and has generated substantial public opposition in several European member states (Black, Collyer and Sommerville, 2011). For example, in the United Kingdom is the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC) and in Germany Pro-Asyl, among others. Both of these groups work to document deportation and lobby against them in protection of migrants' rights.

A second core advantage is that AVR is substantially less expensive and complicated than forced removals. Forced removals require that the country of return agrees to the removal in so far as that at a minimum they provide documents for the individual to return. If the embassy refuses to provide such documents than it is not possible for the host country to return the desired individual. This creates many problems for the host country in logistically trying to arrange the return. In terms of cost, AVR ranges between being half or even one-third the cost of a forced removal, depending on the country (Black, Collyer, and Sommerville, 2011). The two main explanatory factors of the lower cost are first, host states do not have to charter specific flights for AVRs (Black, Collyer, and Sommerville, 2011). Due to spontaneous complaints from passengers on commercial airlines towards deportees on the flights, countries moved to more commonly deport people on chartered planes, which is considerably more expensive. Second, most deportees reside in detention facilities while waiting for the removal, which are costly to maintain (Black, Collyer, and Sommerville, 2011).

The third preferable reason for AVR is that it provides for better cooperation with origin countries (Black, Collyer, and Sommerville, 2011). Individuals are themselves responsible for acquiring their documents required to return, which origin countries are far more likely to grant to individuals requesting them voluntarily than the host state. AVR is also viewed more preferably by origin countries as origin countries also come under pressure by their citizens for accepting deportees. The voluntary nature is viewed as a positive gain for all.

Finally, there is an argument that through the AVRR components, AVRR contributes to a more sustainable return of the individual and development (Black, Collyer, and Sommerville, 2011). Although this argument is made by several host countries, there is however little evidence to support this argument. It is noteworthy here that several countries do include costs spent on AVR as part of their in-country refugee costs for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). In a survey conducted by OECD with member states it was reported that only Austria, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland included AVR as part of their ODA expenditures (OECD, 2016). There is a legitimate question here as to if AVR costs to return rejected asylum seekers should be considered as ‘refugee costs’ or ‘development assistance’? Furthermore, Kuschminder (2015) concluded in a report assessing the relationship between AVRR and development that there is no evidence to suggest that AVRR leads to development as this has not been evaluated. Further research is required to substantiate the argument that AVRR leads to development.

The majority of policy arguments for AVR are highly logical. Combined with the rise in asylum seekers to Europe in 2015, and more specifically, rejected asylum seekers in the EU in 2016, it is understandable why AVR is a central component of migration management in the EU.

Criticisms of Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes

There are three primary criticisms of AVR programmes; first, they are not voluntary; second, they return people to countries that are not safe and third, they do not necessarily lead to return and reintegration. The question of the voluntariness of these programmes has been raised by several authors (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Webber, 2011; Van Houte, 2014; Cassarino, 2014). Webber (2011, p. 104) rightly states:

[R]epatriation cannot be termed ‘voluntary’ where the alternative is utter destitution, with denial of accommodation, basic support and the opportunity to work, or the prospect of children being taken into care or months or years in detention.

The lack of alternative options available to these individuals has led Cassarino to consider AVR a ‘compelled return’, meaning an individual ‘who returns to his/her country of origin as a result of unfavourable circumstances and factors which abruptly interrupt the migration cycle’ (Cassarino 2008, p. 113). Furthermore, Gibney (2008) has termed AVR as ‘nominally voluntary return’ and Leerkes, Os and Boersema (2016) have suggested the use of the term ‘soft-deportation’ for AVR programmes to highlight that these individuals most likely would have preferred to stay had they been given the opportunity for a legal status.

An alternative argument is to highlight the agency of migrants in the AVR process and to recognize participation in AVR as a choice. Van Houte (2014) argues that participation in AVR is a choice along a continuum of narrow options. There is increasing research and evidence on migrants’ that choose to reject AVR and thus live in destitution (see for example: Crawley, Hemmings and Price, 2011). The policy expectation is that forcing rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants to live in destination will increase their willingness to participate in AVR. A survey conducted of destitute migrants in the UK suggests that destitution does not increase willingness to participate in AVR (Smart, 2009). This does then return to the argument cited above by Webber (2011) that a choice between destitution or AVR is really no ‘voluntary’ choice.

In response to the phrase ‘Assisted Voluntary Return’, academics have started to use terms such as ‘truly voluntary’ (Majidi, 2012) or ‘genuinely voluntary’ (Oeppen, 2012) return to articulate against the voluntariness of AVR. Cassarino proposes the term ‘decided’ return in reaction to AVR wherein individuals ‘chose on their own initiative to return, without any pressure or coercion’ (Cassarino 2008, p.113). Most academic work highlights these distinctions and terms are carefully selected in reaction to the disputed voluntariness of AVR.

Criticisms regarding the ‘voluntariness’ of assisted return is not only limited to academia and civil society organizations. Policy makers in several European countries have also argued for moving towards the term ‘assisted return’ across the EU. For example, Austria, Norway and the United Kingdom all use the term ‘assisted return’ for their programmes and reject the term ‘Assisted Voluntary Return’. For IOM this is problematic as their programming places strong emphasis on the ‘voluntariness’ component as their charter and organizational mandate- *promoting humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all*- prohibits IOM from working in the area of forced return. The terminology used around these programmes is thus quite important for different actors.

The second key criticism of AVR is that it enables the return of individuals to countries and situations that may not be considered safe (Webber, 2011). It is important to clarify here that AVR is only permitted to countries or parts of countries that are officially deemed safe by the host country government. This information is normally gathered through asylum country reports that determine safety for return. As an example, several European countries return individuals to Afghanistan wherein parts of the country, such as Kabul, are deemed safe for return. Under the EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward Germany planned to send 80,000 people back to Afghanistan, although this is primarily via forced removals and not AVR. However, several *Federal States* in Germany have reacted against this and are refusing to process Afghans for removals. In light of the increasing insecurity in Kabul in May/June 2017, Angela Merkel announced a temporary halt on all deportations to Kabul (DW, 2017). Deportations from other countries such as Norway, Sweden and Turkey have continued despite the rise in violence in Turkey (Schuster, 2017). There is also an important distinction between ‘political safety’ and ‘personal safety’ (Webber, 2011). Afghanistan is a key point of contention where ‘political safety’ is clearly questionable, yet most EU member states consider Kabul safe. Webber (2011) argues that personal safety cannot be ensured in AVR programmes, which is highly logical as the returnee is on their own post-return.

Third, in reference to assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes, there is a question as to the level of reintegration achieved in return through these programmes, and also, if a ‘return’ is actually achieved. That is, there is evidence that individuals participating in AVR or AVRR programmes only re-migrate again once they have been returned to their country of origin. Monitoring of returnees from Switzerland found that 11 percent of all AVR participants had re-migrated at roughly one year since return (IOM, 2011). Due to a lack of systemic tracking of all AVRs it is unknown to what extent re-migration occurs at a larger scale.

The criticisms of AVR are highly valid and raise several questions regarding these programmes. Should the word ‘voluntary’ be removed from the programme? How effective are the programmes in reintegration and sustainable return? The next section will examine decision making factors of individuals for participating in AVR.

Migrants Decision Making Factors for AVR

Within the policy goal of increasing AVR it is central to examine the decision making of migrants to select AVR or not. Research has demonstrated that return decision-making is a complex process influenced by an array of factors including: conditions in the origin and destination country, individual and social factors, and to a limited degree policy interventions (Black et al., 2004; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015).

In assessing decision-making factors for AVR, Koser and Kuschminder (2015) find that conditions in the country of destination were by far the most important, followed by individual factors, social factors, policy interventions and lastly conditions in the origin country. Key variables influencing the decision to return included: the inability to work, insecure legal status, and family-related factors such as a change in the family situation at home or a desire to reunite with family back home.

Strand et al. (2016) find that individuals choosing AVR in Norway can be categorized in one of three ways. First, those who had mixed feelings regarding their return and cited their poor conditions in Norway as the main decision-making factor to take assisted return. Second, were returnees who felt positive about their decision to return. These returnees most frequently cited their conditions in the country of origin as influencing their decision, such as family obligations. Interestingly, and in line with Cassarino's theory on migration cycles and return (2014), some in this group did not have any intentions of migrating permanently and therefore to a certain degree they had achieved their migration aspirations for their return. Finally, there were respondents who viewed their decision very negatively, primarily because they felt the conditions that instigated their initial migration would not have changed in their return (Strand et al, 2016). The majority of these respondents had return strategies such as remigration to another country, or hiding certain family members considered at risk upon return. This classification of decision-making groups highlights the role that different decision-making factors take for different types of returnees. Further, this categorization highlights the importance of viewing return within the entire migration cycle.

In addition to the above, two recent quantitative studies have been conducted that examine uptake in AVR from within the wider eligible population. First, Brekke (2015) examines 90,000 rejected asylum-seekers in Norway to assess characteristics of those more likely to apply for IOM return, and second to be returned via IOM return assistance. Brekke (2015: 9) finds that the odds:

- for a rejected asylum-seeker to choose assisted return were lower for women, for unaccompanied minors and for persons from Afghanistan or Ethiopia.
- of applying for voluntary return were higher if a person had a partner or family, or if she or he was from Russia, Kosovo, or Iraq.
- of actually going back once a person had applied for assisted return were similar for women and men, and lower for unaccompanied minors, families and those that applied while residing in a reception centre.
- of going back for those who applied for assisted return were higher for those from Afghanistan, Russia, Ethiopia, Iraq and Kosovo.

In a somewhat similar study, Leerkes et al. (2014) examine AVR uptake in the Netherlands amongst rejected asylum-seekers. The authors find that "voluntary return is less common towards countries with low levels of freedom and/or safety and/or GDP". This is inclusive in the study of both Afghanistan and Iraq. The results of Brekke and Leerkes highlight that AVR uptake is lower for individuals returning to (post)conflict countries.

There are several variables that can influence uptake in AVR that have received little attention in research. First is the role of return counselling. Different countries in the EU use different models for return counselling in reception centres and there are questions as to which is the most effective. Second, a new model developed in Switzerland to increase assisted return uptake has been a decelerating benefits model. That is the longer an individual is in Switzerland the less money they are entitled to for assisted return. This model was piloted in Zurich in 2014 and after being evaluated as highly effective was implemented in the rest of the country, and has also now been adopted in Germany. There are questions regarding how this model would work in other countries, and the fairness of the model from a human rights perspective. Third, the Netherlands has used a model of 'native counsellors' that in the study conducted by Leerkes et al. (2014) above was found to increase AVR participation. Native counsellors refer to individuals hired by IOM that are from the same country of origin of the target group of returnees who go to relevant neighbourhoods in the

Netherlands and explain options of AVR. This is considered most effective with irregular migrants living outside of state reception facilities who are not engaged in regular return counselling that occurs in the centres. There are questions as to how all of these variables as well as treatment in the asylum system, differences in AVR packages, and other destination country specific variables may influence uptake and decision making for participating in AVR. While on the one hand, policy levers have been found in previous studies to have limited effectiveness on AVR decision making, since that time the policy environment regarding AVR has quickly evolved. Further, it is not just policies that need to be examined, but differences in approaches to return counselling and information sharing of AVR as to how they impact decision making.

Reintegration and Sustainable Return

This section examines the concepts of reintegration and sustainable return by first, discussing definitions, second, measurement and third, influencing factors on sustainable return and reintegration.

Defining Reintegration and Sustainable Return

Reintegration and sustainable return are terms that are somewhat interwoven within the literature and often discussed together, or used interchangeably (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015). This section will highlight the differences in definitions between these terms. It is important to note the different definitions of reintegration in the literature tend to refer to different types of return migrants. This section therefore focuses on the relevant definitions for the AVR context.

IOM defines reintegration quite broadly as: “Re-inclusion or re-incorporation into a group or a process, e.g. of a migrant into the society of his country of origin” (2004: 54). The IOM examines further three dimensions of reintegration: social, economic and cultural reintegration (2004) and more recently includes the psychosocial dimension (2015). In terms of voluntary returns Cassarino (2008) defines reintegration through further dimensions as “...the process through which a return migrant participates in the social, cultural, economic, and political life in the country of origin” (127). Critics of these definitions argue that they are quite broad and present the process of reintegration as one-sided, in that the onus of reintegration is on the returnee, whereas in reality, reintegration is a two-sided process occurring between the return migrant and the society of return (Kuschminder, 2017). That is, returnees can only reintegrate to the degree that the receiving society is willing to accept them and reintegrate them. If however, one takes the definition proposed by IOM for reintegration, successful reintegration of a AVR beneficiary could therefore be considered as occurring when: the assisted voluntary returnee has reincorporated into the economic, social and cultural environment of their society in the country of origin.

Sustainable return has become a clear goal of European return programmes, however, the definition and measurement of sustainable return is ambiguous. The lack of clarity regarding sustainable return has been noted in return reports in European countries (IOM and EMN, 2006). The term sustainable return became popular in academic and policy discourse a little over a decade ago. In the first seminal study on sustainable return commissioned by the UK Home Office Black et al. (2004) examined the sustainability of return in the context of voluntary returns from the UK to Bosnia and Kosovo. Individual sustainable return was defined as occurring when: “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” (Black et al., 2004; 39). This definition considered three different dimensions of sustainability of physical, socio-economic, and political sustainability.

Building on the work of Black et al., Koser and Kuschminder (2015) argued for a slightly new approach to sustainable return in the context of AVR. Koser and Kuschminder defined sustainable return as occurring when: “[t]he individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon

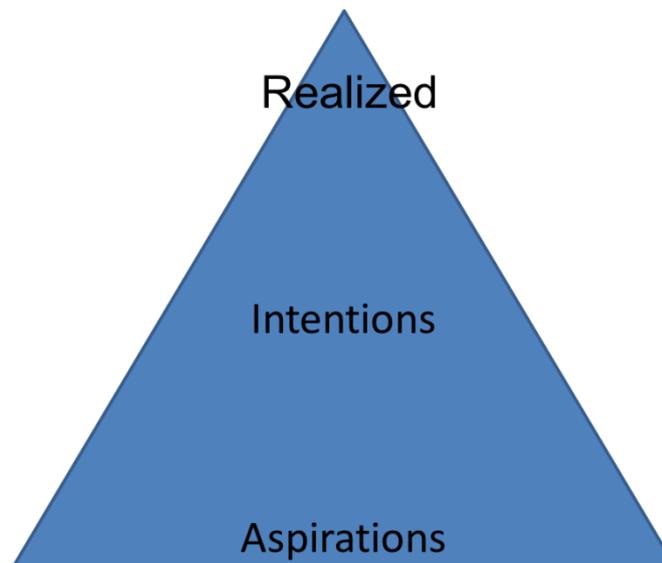
return” (2015, 8). This definition differs from the previous work of Black et al in three primary ways. First, it argues that sustainable return does not necessarily occur within the course of a year and that the process can take longer. Second, the definition focuses on returnees’ own perceptions and feelings regarding their safety and security, versus making a comparison to the wider population in the place of origin. This has both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, the strength of this approach is that it accounts for the returnees’ perceived situation recognizing that this perception is what instigates their migration and decision making. The drawback, however, is that this approach does not account for comparison with the local population, wherein returnees may be on par with the local population. At the same time, however, if returnees are on par with the local population in perceiving a general feeling of insecurity this does suggest instability which may anticipate migration movements and reflect an overall lack of sustainability in the region. From this perspective, it is arguable that whether the returnee is on par with the local population becomes irrelevant if the entire situation is unsustainable. The third distinction is that Koser and Kuschminder (2015) postulate that reintegration is a prerequisite for meaningful sustainable return and state: “the returnee must perceive that they are in conditions of safety and security upon return, which should remove the impetus for re-migration at least in the foreseeable future” (ibid., 49).

A third approach frequently used to measure sustainable return from a policy perspective is to assess if the return migrant remigrates. Most frequently, this is specific to if the return migrant remigrates to the host country from which they were returned. For example, an evaluation of AVR in Canada stated “only three AVRR participants have tried to return to Canada, which suggests that returns are sustainable” (CBSA, 2014). This is clearly problematic as the returnee may have remigrated to another country, implying that the return was unsustainable, but has been captured or measured as being sustainable. Therefore, when using remigration to measure sustainable return it should be clarified if this is: 1) remigration to the same host country; 2) remigration to a specific region (for example remigrating to the European Union but not to the original host country within the EU); 3) legal or illegal remigration; and 4) remigration to any country (that is including neighbouring countries within the region).

Further, Strand et al (2016) highlight that remigration requires a certain capacity of the returnee. Strand et al. (2016) use Carling’s aspiration/ abilities (2002) model to demonstrate the difference between having the capabilities to realize a remigration versus only an aspiration to remigrate. Strand et al. (2016) use the actors perspective meaning sustainable return is defined by the self-perceptions of the returnees at the time of interview. Using an inductive approach, in their analysis Strand et al. (2016) categorize sustainable returnees as “Those who aspire for reintegration and are able to reintegrate” (19). This is one of four categories with the three others being: volatile return meaning those who aspire for reintegration but are unable to reintegrate; unsustainable return referring to those who do not aspire for reintegration, but are unable to re-migrate; and remigration being those who do not aspire for reintegration and are able to re-migrate, either back to the country of previous settlement or elsewhere (19). It should be stressed that here Strand et al. (2016) identify two distinct categories of unsustainable return versus remigration. This follows Carling’s aspiration/ abilities (2002) model to demonstrate the difference between having the capabilities to realize a remigration versus only an aspiration to remigrate. It is essential to stress that returnees can be unsustainably returned wherein they are not successfully reintegrated, but simultaneously do not have the abilities to remigrate.

Considering the migration aspirations literature one step further it is also important to recognize the differences between an aspiration, intention or realized remigration in the return context. Figure 3 follows from the migration aspirations literature and applies a commonly used pyramid to this approach in a remigration context. The pyramid shows at the bottom the largest group of returnees that may have an aspiration to remigrate, versus a smaller group that would have an intention to remigrate, and finally, the smallest group that would have the ability to realize the remigration.

Figure 3: Aspirations, Intentions, and Realized Remigration



Koser and Kuschminder (2015) found in their study that 56 percent of returnees had an aspiration (posed as a wish) to remigrate, whereas only ten percent had a concrete intention to remigrate. This study was regrettably not able to include realized remigration, however, this provides insight into the large differences in remigration measurement depending on how remigration is defined (as an aspiration, intention, or realized) and how the question of remigration is posed to the returnee. This stresses further the ambiguity of using remigration as a definition of sustainable return.

Finally, IOM offers another recent definition of sustainable return in a 2015 report on effective approaches to reintegration. The authors of the IOM report state “Although the concept of sustainable return is largely referred to by international actors on migration, governments and civil societies as the main desired outcome of AVRR programmes, there is no common or formal definition of “sustainable return.”” (IOM, 2015, p. 19). Reflecting the above inadequacies of using remigration as a proxy for sustainable return, the authors suggest that sustainable return should be understood either as: “(a) successful reintegration in the country of origin, which includes the economic, social and psychosocial aspects and the capacity of the individual to cope with push factors, both old and new, on the same level as the local population or (b) eventual legal remigration made possible by skills acquired during the reintegration process.” (IOM, 2015, p. 19). This definition combines elements of both the Black et al. and Koser and Kuschminder definitions above. This definition also states that reintegration is a prerequisite for sustainable return (as done by Koser and Kuschminder) and argues that sustainable return should be benchmarked to the local population (argued by Black et al.).

All of the above definitions have received criticism. The Koser and Kuschminder definition has been challenged as being unachievable for policy makers. At the same time, the use of remigration to measure sustainable return has been criticized as reductionist, not incorporating the different situations of returnees, and has been argued against by IOM itself for the primary reason that remigration may be legal and a positive movement for the individual. It is clear that a consensual definition is needed on sustainable return that can inform research and policy.

Measuring Reintegration and Sustainable Return

Reflecting on the ambiguities in defining sustainable return, it is unsurprising that reintegration and sustainable return have been measured differently in separate studies. It is evident that there is no universal approach to measuring reintegration and sustainable return and as a result there are no

established indicators. A recent evaluation of the EU returns programme found that reintegration and sustainable return were the most difficult to measure because “most sample projects were unable to precisely define in their design the dimensions of reintegration addressed and the indicators of success to be applied” (Te Wildt, Greco Tonegutti, and Heraud, 2015; p. 53). The lack of definitions and established indicators for measurement makes comparisons across studies even more difficult. For this reason, this section will examine three recent studies that have sought to assess sustainable return first separately, and then discuss them comparatively. It is important to first introduce these studies as their methodologies and definitions used to assess sustainable return are all different.

First, Koser and Kuschminder (2015) argue that sustainable return is best measured through a multidimensional return and reintegration index that accounts for both subjective and objective indicators. Through three dimensions of economic, socio-cultural, and safety and security, the authors use 15 different indicators to create an aggregate score of reintegration across each dimension. The 15 indicators are by dimension:

- Economic dimension: employment, income sources, perceived economic situation, debt, ownership of land or house;
- Socio-cultural dimension: networks, transnational networks, participation in local events, self-perception of personal life, membership in organization upon return;
- Safety and Security dimension: perceived safety in home, perceived safety in the community, trust in the government, access to justice, experienced personal harassment since return.

The individual indicator scores are then aggregated across the three dimensions to allow an overall measure of reintegration. The index methodology was tested on 156 returnees in eight different countries of origin. It was found that 56 per cent of returnees had re-integrated economically; 64 per cent socio-culturally; and 71 per cent in terms of safety and security. Overall 37 per cent of the respondents were reintegrated across all three dimensions.

Reiterating from the discussion on definitions above, this index incorporates both objective and subjective measures of reintegration. That is, it takes into account both the actual and perceived situation of the returnee. Further, the index is designed to include measures of vulnerability that are widely accepted and used in the poverty and vulnerability literature. Finally, this index stresses that reintegration needs to occur across all three dimensions of economic, socio-cultural and safety and security, stressing the importance of each dimension in the overall reintegration and sustainable return process. The study also provides for a baseline of indicators that can be used to multi-dimensionally assess sustainable return and reintegration.

Second, Strand et al. (2016) measure sustainable return based on the returnees’ own perceptions to assess their level of sustainability post-return. In this study of assisted voluntary returnees from Norway to Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Kosovo, the authors conducted personal interviews with 79 returnees across the four countries. Based on the findings from the study they assess forms of returnees as having either a sustainable return, volatile return, unsustainable return, or remigration (as discussed in the previous section). A key question asked in this evaluation was “whether the assisted return programme has allowed for a sustained stay in returnees’ countries of origin. Here as many as 61 stated “no,” only 13 said “yes” and 7 did not respond or were uncertain” (Strand et al., 2016: 174). As stated in the report, this finding is quite alarming that a strong majority self-assess that they are not sustainably returned. In terms of indicators, the approach here is a self-assessment of sustainable return. It is also worth mentioning that Norway has one of the most generous AVR packages in the European Union.

A third study is an evaluation of AVR to Kosovo from Austria conducted by ICMPD (2015). ICMPD (2015) measures sustainable return based on ‘subjective physical sustainability to return’ meaning intentions to leave the country. That is, the definition of sustainable return here is essentially measured through remigration intentions. The results find that 44% of respondents have a “clear

intention or concrete plans to leave the country again” (ICMPD, 2015: 18). This is primarily attributed to the reason that a high number of respondents are unemployed and without sufficient income (ICMPD, 2015).

These three studies represent the most recent publicly available independent research and evaluation conducted on sustainable return. It is important to again stress that each study measures sustainable return in a different way: through a multidimensional index, returnees’ self-assessment, and remigration intentions. ICMPD takes a policy-oriented approach by using remigration as a proxy for sustainable return, however Koser and Kuschminder (2015) strongly argue against this approach stating that remigration is not a valid proxy for sustainable return as individuals can be successfully reintegrated but still seek to re-migrate, and vice versa. In reflecting on the Koser and Kuschminder definition, Strand et al. (2016: 179) find in their study that:

“Few of the returnees to Afghanistan and Iraqi Kurdistan would agree that they live in an environment of safety and security, even if they to a varying degree might have reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes. Many returnees argued that the worsened economic conditions had not allowed them to take part in the economic process and that their returns were thus unsustainable for the time being. Ethiopians and Kosovars, in general, were to a larger degree able to fulfil these sustainability criteria, but were in varying degrees able to become reintegrated in the economic, social and cultural processes of their communities of return. Applying the Koser and Kuschminder definition for sustainable return supports the returnees’ self-assessment of an unsustainable return, while it recognises that the return assistance was just one factor among several that influenced whether or not a return was sustainable.”

The final sentence of this statement is quite essential in highlighting that reintegration assistance can only play so much of a role in determining reintegration and sustainable return. The conditions in the country of origin are often beyond the reach of return migration policy interventions. This raises the question posed by Strand et al. (2016) as to whether sustainable return can be limited to only certain geographical contexts. Researchers on Afghanistan would argue this is the case as research evidence from Afghanistan has repeatedly demonstrated the unsustainability of return and the high levels of remigration of both assisted voluntary returnees and deportees (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Schuster and Majidi, 2013; Strand et al., 2016).

Factors Influencing Reintegration and Sustainable Return

Research has highlighted that there are several factors that influence reintegration and sustainable return. An important part of understanding this process is recognizing the role of the entire migration cycle and experience in sustainable return (Cassarino, 2014). That is, the initial impetus for migration, the migration experience, the return experience, and post-return conditions can all influence the sustainability of return.

Koser and Kuschminder (2015) found that having a sense of belonging to the community prior to migration, perceiving a threat to personal security prior to migration, and the initial reason for migration were all significantly correlated to reintegration and sustainable return¹. This highlights the need to understand the pre-migration conditions when considering reintegration upon return. Koser and Kuschminder (2015) also find that destination country experiences such as the country of destination itself and living situations in the destination country correlate significantly with reintegration. During the migration phase, and in particular in the current context of fragmented irregular migration journeys such as in Libya or across the Mediterranean Sea, can be even more

¹ The definition of sustainable return used in this case is: “[t]he individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon return” (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015).

traumatizing for migrants than the situations they initially fled. These experiences need to be considered when conceptualizing the challenges of their safe return and sustainability of return.

Upon return several factors have been found to influence reintegration and sustainable return. Strand et al. (2016), found that strong kinship networks were a key element in a sustained reintegration. This relates to one of the findings from Koser and Kuschminder that individuals that returned to their communities of origin were more likely to be reintegrated. Schuster and Majidi (2013) find that in Afghanistan deportees report high levels of ‘shame and contamination’ that strain their ability to reintegrate. Schuster and Majidi (2013) also stress the importance of familial networks for reintegration in Afghanistan and how vulnerable deportees become when their families shame them for not having succeeded in their migration. The role of the family and social networks in the home country are a pivotal element in reintegration and sustainable return.

A second key element in the post-return conditions for reintegration include the economic situation and the ability of returnees to establish a livelihood. ICMPD (2015) found that the poor economic environment in Kosovo left the majority of returnees without long-term employment and livelihoods. The ability to establish a secure livelihood, even after having received assistance, is a critical factor in a sustainable return. Strand et al. (2015) note that a key element in this regard is not just the post-return conditions, but also the professional skills and management abilities of the returnees. Too often returnees select for entrepreneurial forms of assistance in their reintegration, but fail to have the skills to manage the business.

These studies have started to unveil conditions that are necessary to create a sustainable return, however, it is recognized that reintegration and sustainable return is a highly subjective and individual process. Further research is required in understanding factors that lead to a sustainable return for different types of return migrants.

Risks in Return Migration

Risks that exist in return migration include the inability of the return migrant to reintegrate, either economically, socio-culturally, or through safety and security, and an unsustainable return. A potential risk of host countries supporting AVR is the remigration of the individual back to the host country, thus arguably negating the purpose of the return support. From a migrant perspective, remigration is often only pursued when the risks of return (such as debt and shame) are assessed as too high to stay.

The risk factors that contribute to an irregular remigration are mentioned in the previous section, but primarily include lack of economic opportunities, excessive debt that demands a remigration, shame at a failed migration, and familial or community pressures to try again. One area that has received little research, but is a potential risk, is that of recruitment or participation in violent extremist of terrorist organizations upon return (Schuster cited in the Guardian, 2016). The key question is whether the most vulnerable returnees, like other vulnerable groups, are more susceptible to joining these organizations upon return.

For the communities and families of return, there can also be several risks in reintegrating the returnee. Increasing research is bringing to light the mental health and trauma experienced by irregular migrants in first, their journeys to Europe, second, during the asylum process, and third and often most critically, in the asylum refusal process where in there is a critical loss of hope. Returnees that accept to participate in AVR often have improved mental health versus those that refuse AVR and may be deported. Yet, managing the mental health and trauma faced by migrants when they return can be challenging for families and communities in the reintegration process, particularly in countries where there is little recognition, acceptance nor support for mental health issues. This is an area where there is little research conducted and we lack understandings of how assisted voluntary returnees impact communities and families’ social fabrics.

Research Gaps

It is first important to again stress that for the number of return programmes currently operating globally there is a dearth of comparative research and evaluation on return. The majority of research on return is funded from host country governments to evaluate their own programmes. While this has produced some very rich studies (such as the contribution by Strand et al) the findings are limited in that they only examine returnees from one host country. The comparative study by Koser and Kuschminder is limited by its scope of conducting 156 interviews with returnees across eight countries- the result being that the number of interviews conducted in each country are too small for an in-depth comparison across the study countries. This exemplifies the point that when it comes to return there is a significant lack of evidence and no existing databases or sources that systemically assess sustainable return. IOM is aware of this issue and has been advocating to improve monitoring and evaluation on AVR programmes. In addition, a key recommendation of the EU funded return evaluation conducted in 2015 is that resources for monitoring, evaluation and research should be considerably increased, particularly in regards to sustainability of return and reintegration (Te Wildt, Greco Tonegutti, and Heraud, 2015). In January 2016, the European Migration Network (EMN) released guidelines for the monitoring and evaluation of AVR(R) programmes that provides a list of questions and indicators to be included in post-return monitoring (EMN, 2016). However, these guidelines are also limited in terms of sustainable return, recognizing the challenges associated with post-return monitoring.

The review of current research has highlighted that there are several considerations that need further exploration in view of moving forward understandings of sustainable return. These include:

- Uncoupling the relationship between reintegration and sustainable return. Are these processes one in the same or distinct processes?
- After what period of time should an individual be considered to be sustainably returned? For example, does sustainable return occur after one, two, or three years? Does sustainable return mean the individual should never migrate again? Alternatively, does a time limit need to be placed on sustainable return?
- The research evidence highlights that there is a need to view conflict, post-conflict and non-conflict countries differently in discussions of reintegration and sustainable return. Is sustainable return an achievable goal in conflict and post-conflict countries?
- Further exploration is required on the differences in sustainable return between Assisted Voluntary Returnees and forced returnees. Are there differences in reintegration processes and sustainable return outcomes for these two groups?
- Are there differences in reintegration and sustainable return outcomes for returnees coming from different EU countries, receiving different AVR packages, or having different experiences in the host country (in terms of asylum processes, return counselling, employment, and durations abroad)?
- What are the differences between men and women, people of different sexual orientations, families and singles, individuals with disabilities, and unaccompanied minors in their reintegration processes and sustainable return outcomes? Are families, unaccompanied minors, and/or women more vulnerable in return?
- What happens to vulnerable returnees' post-return? What are the risks they face? How can the most vulnerable returnees be assisted further?
- How do assisted voluntary returnees compare to locals in terms of vulnerability and well-being in the long term? Does the process of return contribute to vulnerability? If so, for which groups and why?
- How do assisted voluntary returnees impact their families and communities of return? How is the mental health and trauma of returnees addressed in home communities?

Moving the Agenda Forward

The field of AVR is currently growing and changing as European countries manage large asylum flows. This section offers recommendations for moving forward the conceptual approaches to AVR and sustainable return.

- **‘Voluntary’ Return** – Several countries in Europe have taken a lead to change their language to Assisted Return versus Assisted Voluntary Return. It would be beneficial for EU and all EU member states to also follow this approach. Assisted Return encapsulates the situation more accurately as migrants have limited decision making power in their choice for return.
- **Remigration is not a valid indicator to measure or define sustainable return** – Remigration measures an aspiration, intention, or realized remigration after return, but does not address the holistic conditions of the returnee and the extent to which they feel sustainably returned. As shown by Strand et al (2016) an individual can be unsustainably returned and simultaneously not able to remigrate, stressing that sustainable return and remigration are not one and the same. A new approach to sustainable return must go beyond the limited view of remigration.
- **Establishing cross-cutting definitions of sustainable return or change terminology to be ‘successful reintegration’** – This working paper has stressed that the term sustainable return has multiple definitions and applications. There is a strong need for a cross-cutting definitions to be agreed upon that can be used across policy and research. Due to the problems associated with the term sustainable return one option is to move towards the terminology of ‘successful reintegration’. This can be more clearly defined and represents a clearer policy target and goal.
- **Build in monitoring of returnees to all AVR programmes to develop a database on AVR** – Host countries that fund AVR should invest in further monitoring of returnees in order to understand returnees’ conditions and experiences post-return and how this impacts on the sustainability of their return. The funded AVR provider post-return in the origin countries could track returnees after their return for a period of six months or longer (depending on the host countries programming). A best practice is in the case of Switzerland, where the Swiss Government funds monitoring for one year post return of all assisted voluntary returnees. Tracking is conducted by IOM in each country to the degree that if they cannot find or get in touch with the return migrant they visit their place of last location and discuss with their family or neighbours to try and find them. The result is that they gather information on if the returnees’ current employment, use of the reintegration assistance, self-perceptions, and if the returnee has remigrated and where they went.
- **Comprehensive comparative research study on return** – There is a clear need for a cross-cutting multi-country comparable research study on sustainable return or successful reintegration from Europe. Such a study would need to include both assisted voluntary returnees and forced returnees, a variety of origin countries (conflict, post-conflict, and non-conflict countries) across different geographical areas, different types of returnees (men, women, families, and unaccompanied minors), and returnees from different host countries that have received different packages in their return. The study would be of the most use if it was longitudinal and started with a cohort of people from when they first returned and then continued to track them over the next three years. Such a study should aim for representation across 8–10 countries with 100 respondents per country and specific quotas for forced returnees, families, women, and unaccompanied minors. The respondents should be tracked from their immediate return, and again at 6, 12, 24, and 36 months post return. This type of longitudinal assessment would allow for understandings of how returnees’ situations change over time and the specific factors or triggers that may lead to changes in their return situations and decisions for remigration, stay, or improved reintegration statuses. The results of such a study could lead to much further understanding of the specific triggers leading to sustainable or unsustainable returns/ successful or inhibited reintegration in different country contexts. The benefits for Member States would be an improved understanding of how AVR programmes do or do not achieve sustainable

return/successful reintegration and the specific components of these programmes that could be replicated across Member States to improve sustainable return.

Conclusion

This working paper has sought to take stock of the most recent research conducted on AVR in terms of decision making for return, reintegration and sustainable return in an effort to identify research gaps and make recommendations for moving the agenda forward. Return is a central issue in EU migration policy that receives little attention in monitoring, evaluation and research, yet is a growing investment. Over the next three years, Germany alone has committed 150 million euros to return migration. The current European Agenda on Migration and partnerships approach places return and readmission and the goal of increasing returns of individuals with the right to stay at the centre of the policy. Yet, it must be recognized that we do not have sufficient evidence to understand the impacts of return on migrants and their communities upon return in the case of AVR.

There are three points that are worth reiterating in concluding this paper. First, there is a lack of sufficient existing evidence to understand processes of sustainable return and reintegration. Further research is required in this area to inform policy and programming that aims to increasing sustainable returns. Governments also need to increase monitoring within their return programmes in order to collect data on the long-term reintegration of assisted voluntary returnees. This information would be pivotal in understanding how assisted voluntary returnees reintegrate over the longer term.

Second, there is a need for a paradigm shift away from the terminology of ‘assisted voluntary return’. Academics have long been calling for a revision of this language and terminology, which has now been taken on by some states in the EU. This is a good example and it is time to move towards the terminology ‘assisted return’ across the EU and respect the limited agency available to migrants in their return decision making factors.

Third, our language also needs to be adjusted in terms of ‘sustainable return’ and ‘remigration’ towards terminology such as ‘successful reintegration’ or ‘sustainable reintegration’. A term such as sustainable reintegration allows for an understanding of a holistic process of reintegration that is sustainable over the long term. This articulates a clear and sound policy goal, versus one of rooting people unsustainably in one place.

These relatively small changes in language and increases in monitoring, research and evaluation would enable a significant turning point in EU AVR policy that reflects the human rights and agency of migrants and returnees.

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