European Dialogue on Return and Sustainable Reintegration of Migrants
Opening

How can we better cooperate to facilitate a safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration? This was the central question at the heart of the second “European Dialogue on Return and Sustainable Reintegration of Migrants” which took place in Berlin on 18 October 2019. At the invitation of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (BMI) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), this second European Dialogue brought together 160 experts to identify how cooperation on return and sustainable reintegration can be improved, in accordance with Article 21 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The participants comprised representatives of the EU Commission, OECD, IOM, UNICEF, NGOs, development agencies, research institutions and political foundations as well as delegates of different ministerial departments – mainly home affairs, foreign affairs and development departments – from European countries and countries of origin.

The conference was opened by representatives of the three host organisations: Stefan Oswald, Director General for Marshall Plan with Africa, Displacement and Migration in the BMZ; Ulrich Weinbrenner, Director General for Migration, Refugees and Return Policy at BMI; and Eugenio Ambrosi, Chief of Staff for the IOM. In his introduction, Oswald underlined that, since 2015, the German government has intensified its efforts to build a ‘whole-of-government approach’ to migration, which has involved substantially deepening cooperation between the BMI and BMZ. For his part, Weinbrenner expressed concerns about the current status of migration, with the numbers of migrants increasing on the eastern Mediterranean routes via Greece and the Balkans. Finally, Ambrosi’s contribution reflected on the fact that return policies have the potential to change the lives of millions of people – for the better or the worse. Achieving a positive outcome therefore depends on whether governments, the IOM, civil society organisations and other actors manage to successfully address these people’s needs and interests.
The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM): an international framework for return and sustainable reintegration

Representatives from international and regional organisations (African Union, European Union, IOM, UNICEF) brought together international, national and intergovernmental perspectives on return and sustainable reintegration policies and the GCM.

Ambrosi outlined the UN Network on Migration’s role in ensuring that Member States receive system-wide support that is effective, coordinated and target group oriented. As he sees it, the GCM represents a new and constructive cooperation mechanism that includes amongst many things enabling sustainable reintegration of returnees. Nevertheless, he also observed that there are different understandings of what return means and involves. For Ambrosi, ‘return is not only an issue of administration’ but also a governance issue at both the national and international levels that must respect fundamental human rights. Furthermore, the process should not be burdensome for the countries of origin. Stakeholders should concentrate more on the reasons and conditions underlying migration.

Philip Bob Jusu, Socio-Economist at the AU’s Permanent Mission to the EU, agreed that living conditions in the communities of origin must be taken into account in the process of return and reintegration. He named youth unemployment, job uncertainty and the impossibility of pursuing a continuous career not only as the main reasons motivating young Africans to migrate but also as the obstacles hindering the reintegration of returnees. For Jusu, tackling poverty and promoting job opportunities are key for both relocating returnees and preventing irregular migration.

Camilla Hagström, Head of the Unit Migration and Employment at the EU Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, is optimistic that cooperation between countries of origin and destination will continue to develop in a positive direction. ‘Migration is going to be high on the political agenda of the new EU Commission’, she said. Like the previous speakers, Hagström highlighted the importance of supporting the reintegration process at the local level and doing so in a way that includes both local authorities and civil society and that builds the required capacities. To achieve these goals, support for returning migrants should be provided as part of mainstream development work. ‘Return and sustainable reintegration is development’, Hagström pointed out.

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Verena Knaus, Global Coordinator for Children on the Move at UNICEF, agreed on the need to take a broader perspective and, in addition, emphasised the special needs of vulnerable groups among the returnees. As someone working to promote children’s interests, Knaus focused in particular on the challenges faced by minors in the reintegration process. ‘The window of childhood is very short’ and ‘staying out of school for one year after return is a large gap’, she said. A UNICEF survey showed that 40% of the children who had returned to the Balkans from Germany in 2010 and 2011 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Knaus therefore called for better transnational case management when families are on the point of returning. Consular officials should receive training in child protection, and social workers should assist children being moved from one country to another. ‘A good indicator of successful reintegration is whether the children are doing well’, Knaus concluded.

At the end of this first panel session, the speakers agreed that all parties should pay closer attention to people’s motivations to migrate and that reintegration programmes should look more closely at what is needed by the communities receiving returnees. There was also agreement that programmes run by different donors and different countries should be better coordinated. While the return and sustainable reintegration of migrants is a political and legal necessity, its success also depends on recognising that it always involves individuals and their hope for a better life. Finally, donors should not forget the needs of internally displaced persons, who are much greater in number than international migrants.
The context for the first working group was set out by Stefanie Barratt who leads the Standards and Analytics Pillar of the think-tank Samuel Hall. Barratt highlighted the importance of definitions and indicators for measuring sustainable reintegration and for analysing whether reintegration programmes have succeeded. Using the example of Afghanistan, she illustrated a number of practical challenges that arise due to the institutional fragmentation of return and reintegration policies, the multitude of donors and implementing agencies, and the multidimensional character of reintegration.

Nicola Graviano from the IOM added to this background information by detailing the application of IOM’s reintegration sustainability survey, which measures the economic, social and psychosocial dimensions of reintegration based on a set number of field-tested indicators. This scoring system facilitates the comparison of trends across dimensions and country contexts and over time. Furthermore, the collected data are useful for analysis, evaluation and reporting, which can then be used to inform the adaptation of reintegration assistance to the needs of returnees and communities.

While participants agreed that tracing returnees over the course of a year would provide tailored information for reintegration programmes, they also felt that the process would be difficult to manage because many projects’ terms are too short and their mandates limited. Some participants criticised the precedence given to quantifying reintegration over consideration of reintegration quality and development outcomes.
Five success factors for improving evidence-based reintegration programmes were identified:

1. European countries and countries of origin need to improve the availability and comparability of data by sharing knowledge and data, maintaining and developing comparable indicators, and agreeing on benchmarks.

2. Implementing agencies who work in countries of destination and origin should link pre-departure and post-return activities and actors by creating a database on project beneficiaries and by conducting longitudinal studies.

3. Together with their institutional partners in countries of origin, donors should define the time frame and objectives of reintegration programmes and should measure short-, medium- and long-term reintegration outcomes.

4. Stakeholders involved in reintegration programmes should consider the contexts of the locations of return and should adjust their objectives and monitoring tools to the specific needs of receiving communities (e.g. by collecting qualitative data on the community’s preparedness to reintegrate returnees).

5. All stakeholders must consider ethical issues when collecting data at the individual level. The collection and storage of data on a marginalised population is a sensitive matter and should be guided by an explicit mandate.
HOW TO STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR RETURN AND SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION?

At the international level, the GCM is one of several frameworks that outline the importance of managed return and sustainable reintegration. However, as Kathleen Newland, Senior Fellow and Co-Founder of the Washington-based think-tank the Migration Policy Institute, emphasised in her statement, the GCM does not provide any institutional structure or any guidance for institutions involved in the return and reintegration process. Newland also pointed out that institutional stability may be lacking, particularly in countries with new governments that are having to push through democratic reforms. In such contexts, migrants’ hopes for a well-managed reintegration are at risk of being dashed.

Placido Silipigni, Programme Manager of IOM Iraq’s Migration Management Unit, gave a presentation on how the IOM’s work to facilitate dialogue within government achieved substantial improvements and ultimately led to a whole-of-government approach to reintegration. A national migration strategy will be developed for Iraq, based, among other things, on a Migration Governance Indicators Assessment, focusing on 90 indicators and six thematic areas, being validated in the intra-governmental dialogue process.

In the subsequent working group discussion, when the countries of origin were asked by the donor institution representatives to specify what assistance they needed, they responded by requesting better donor coordination. Furthermore, the NGOs working with the receiving communities sought to emphasise the social obstacles to reintegration faced by returnees, and participants agreed that ownership for reintegration support and processes is often lacking in countries of origin.

Three success factors for strengthening institutional frameworks were identified:
1. Stakeholders should take a broader approach to reintegration by mainstreaming reintegration support within appropriate, existing development programmes.
2. Reintegration needs a whole-of-society approach. Various state and non-state actors at the community level should therefore set up dialogue mechanisms to foster cooperation and facilitate local reintegration.
3. Countries of origin need to take responsibility. Public officials from different government departments as well as inter-ministerial committees should improve their cooperation with both the private sector and civil society actors.
Working Group 3:

**HOW TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF RETURNEES AND COMMUNITIES OF RETURN?**

Returning migrants as well as receiving communities have manifold needs that are part and parcel of the return and reintegration process. Vladimir Petronijević, Executive Director of the NGO Group 484, shared the experiences he has gained from his work in Serbia. Group 484 supports the implementation of comprehensive capacity and needs assessments of returnees and of the main communities to which migrants return. The knowledge gathered is then used to design flexible, tailor-made programmes that take into account the different return contexts.

Nataša Tomić, Return and Reintegration Counsellor at the German NGO Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI), spoke about her organisation’s work to support the social and vocational reintegration of women in their countries of origin. SOLWODI works with vulnerable women, specifically victims of forced prostitution or other forms of violence, and builds in-depth knowledge of these women’s personal stories. It uses this knowledge to design personalised assistance, including both pre-departure counselling and post-return support, which is delivered in cooperation with local NGOs.

Participants agreed that, particularly in cases where return is not fully voluntary, it is essential to first build trust with returnees and, as soon as they have been returned, to provide immediate support and orientation. Several participants shared their experiences of supporting returnees who had been marginalised and poor before emigration and who faced the same challenges after return.

“Providers of reintegration support should empower migrants as agents in the return process.”

Vladimir Petronijević
Executive Director of the NGO Group 484, Serbia

Nataša Tomić
Return and Reintegration Counsellor at the German NGO Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI)

Dr Claudia Olivier-Mensah
Research Assistant at the Institute of Pedagogy, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, moderator
Five success factors were identified to address the needs of returnees and communities of return:

1. Providers of reintegration support should profile the returnees, their families and the communities to which they return in order to provide tailor-made assistance. This work should take into account the vulnerabilities and capabilities of the returnees.

2. Transnational cooperation between service providers should ensure that pre-departure counselling dovetails with post-return support.

3. Providers of reintegration support should empower migrants as agents in the return process whose testimonials can be used to determine what does and does not work for them.

4. A comprehensive whole-of-government approach in the countries of origin is needed to coordinate state and non-state actors. In some contexts, coordination mechanisms involving the UN or other donors can play a role.

5. Mobility after return should be part of the concept of sustainable reintegration. The provision of advice on legal migration is therefore vital.
Working Group 4:

HOW TO PROMOTE THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION?

Economic reintegration is a key factor in the overall reintegration process. In her contribution, Aida Awel, Chief Technical Advisor for Labour Migration at the International Labour Organization (ILO) country office for Ethiopia, gave an account of Saudi Arabia’s mass extradition in 2013–14 of some 170,000 undocumented Ethiopian migrants. Crucial to the successful economic reintegration of these returnees was the involvement of diverse stakeholders – trade unions, employers, the private sector, civil society organisations, development actors, government authorities and migrant workers – which were closely coordinated and held accountable.

The next contribution came from Soran Jawher, Coordinator of BMZ’s Returning to New Opportunities programme in Iraq, who reported on the advisory services of the German Centres for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration in Baghdad and Erbil. The key factors for successful economic reintegration that he has identified in his work are (a) having sufficient project funding in place, (b) the commitment of the returnee, (c) vocational or soft-skills training directly linked to an income-generating service, (d) access to dedicated and case-specific advice, (e) the stability of the returnee who is clear about his situation and options, (f) service providers’ ability to manage returnees’ expectations and (e) managing the implementation timeline according to the needs of the returnee.

“A development actors should promote the portability of social benefits and the recognition of skills and certificates.”
The working group participants identified overarching principles for economic reintegration. They agreed that the need of the individual must be the starting point for any measure. Moreover, basic political and socio-economic stability in the country of return is seen as a precondition for successful economic reintegration and for trust building and close coordination between the various partners on site. Finally, individual reintegration needs to be backed up with structural development interventions that specifically target the areas and communities involved in return and reintegration.

Five success factors were identified to promote the economic dimension of sustainable reintegration:

1. Bilateral and multilateral development actors should provide countries of origin with institutional capacity-building activities that incentivise these countries to take ownership of reintegration.

2. Project implementers should provide returnees with access to finance in the form of seed funding delivered through microfinance institutions and other private sector actors.

3. Working jointly with bilateral and multilateral development actors, the countries of origin's relevant ministerial departments (labour and employment, migration, etc.) should conduct market analyses to enhance their understanding of labour market needs and absorption capacities as they relate to reintegration.

4. Bilateral and multilateral development actors should cooperate with the private sector to improve working conditions through tailored skills development and structural interventions.

5. Development actors should promote the portability of social benefits and the recognition of skills and certificates through bilateral agreements between countries of destination and return.
Pathways for the future:

PARTNERSHIPS AND COOPERATION FOR RETURN AND SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION

In the final panel discussion, stakeholders with different backgrounds outlined their expectations regarding future cooperation. Presenting the perspectives of countries of origin were Youssef Fennira, Director General of the National Agency for Work and Self-Employment in Tunisia, and Ibrahima Koita, Youth Focal Point of the Guinean municipality of Matoto. Both shared the view that a lot of exemplary initiatives are on track, which illustrates that progress is being made on collaboration between countries of destination and origin. However, they also outlined diverging interests: While return and reintegration are prominent topics within the EU, the readmission and reintegretion of nationals might not always be a priority in countries of origin. Both speakers advocated for approaches that are sensitive to the specific contexts of individual countries and regions. ‘There is no universal solution for return and reintegration,’ Fennira pointed out.

One conclusion of the 2019 Dialogue was that capacities are an important issue – not only in countries of origin but also in countries of destination. This fact was picked up on by Mari Helenius, Senior Specialist in the Migration Department of the Finnish Ministry of the Interior, who praised the importance of, on the one hand, coordination within the EU and, on the other, partnership with the UN network. Since the Finnish administration, of which she is a part, is relatively small, the experiences
gained by the administrations of bigger countries of destination provide particularly useful learning. For Helenius, the IOM’s Return Experts Group and the European Return and Reintegration Network both offer excellent opportunities for knowledge exchange. A particular aim of the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU is to make progress on the relaunch of the EU asylum reform, making returns more effective and promoting partnerships with countries of origin and transit.

The panellists were united in the view that civil society organisations are key actors in the reintegration process. Speaking on behalf of civil society, Alketa Lasku, Country Director of Terre des Hommes in Albania, emphasised that programmes need a strong participatory design and that, as every returnee has specific competencies and capacities, they should be encouraged to realise their own potential. A contributor from the audience supported Lasku’s approach, stating that the most successful programmes are those organised by returnees themselves, as evidenced by the initiatives undertaken by and for returnees coming back to Mexico from the USA.

At the end of the discussion, the panellists, looking through the lens of the GCM, described their vision for the future. There was consensus that the autonomy of returnees should be strengthened during the reintegration process: perceptions need to shift from a concept where the individual is being returned by the government of a European country to one where the individual is returning themselves. Moreover, in the future there should be more funding for the monitoring, research and analysis of return and sustainable reintegration processes, and the sharing - and thus better management – of bad experiences should be as commonplace as the sharing of good outcomes. An objective that the audience was keen to see realised within the next five years is the institution of an ongoing exchange on return and reintegration between the governmental organisations working on development and interior matters. For their part, the representatives of the countries of origin aspire to a situation where migration is no longer seen as a political problem, but rather as a benefit that opens up new opportunities for the countries of destination and of origin and for the migrant alike.