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Corruption and migrant returns

Managing risk in assisted return programmes

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To incentivise the return of rejected asylum-seekers and irregular migrants, most European states support Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes. Corruption impacts these programmes' performance. However, corruption control measures can lead to unintended outcomes. Certain efforts are likely to improve the quality and uptake of these return programmes. They include more realistic design of corruption prevention measures combined with stronger complaints mechanisms and monitoring processes.

Main points

- Anti-corruption controls can complicate service delivery and increase migrants' perceptions of corruption within return and reintegration programmes. Donors should monitor not only whether implementing partners deliver the promised assistance but also how efficient and transparent the process is for returning migrants.
- In-kind support, for example to start a business, typically involves multiple bids, contracts, licenses and other documents that returnees often struggle to produce. While these requirements may reduce opportunities for corruption and fraud, the resulting delays undermine programme credibility and uptake.
- Corruption control measures should be sensitive to migrant vulnerabilities, particularly when it comes to documentation and travel demands.
- An effective complaints mechanism for beneficiaries of return assistance is essential not only to curb corruption but also to establish trust in the programme and its implementers.

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Erlend Paasche works at the University of Oslo, and specialises in Migration Studies. He holds a doctorate in Sociology. His 2016 doctoral thesis– *Return Migration and Corruption: Experiences of Iraqi Kurds* – analyses the role of corruption for migrants’ return decision-making and the reintegration of return migrants. Next to this doctoral research, he has coauthored several governmentally commissioned evaluation studies of assisted return programmes, from Norway to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Nigeria and Ethiopia.

Staff profile on University of Oslo’s website¹

1. <http://www.jus.uio.no/ikrs/english/people/aca/erlenp/>

Asylum seekers arriving in Europe tend to come from states where governance structures are weak or non-existent and corruption is rife. Those whose applications are rejected have invested much in their journey to Europe and often resist host states' efforts to remove them. Increasingly, host states engage in a carrot and stick strategy. These combine the threat of forcible deportation with the promise of reintegration assistance for those who sign up for return. Programmes that do so are labelled Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) – but the term 'voluntary' is contestable. They have become a popular tool in migration management since inception in the 1970s. Although NGOs may be involved, the biggest implementing partner for funding states is the International Organization for Migration² (IOM).

Next to free transport and eventually some counselling, these programmes usually offer cash, in-kind assistance, or both. IOM estimates its reintegration-related expenditures in 2016 at US\$ 32.7 million, of which 62% were cash transfers and 31% were in-kind (non-cash) support for setting up micro-businesses (IOM 2017³). Other types of assistance, like housing support, medical support and educational courses, are comparatively rare. However, the scope and type of assistance vary significantly depending on programme design and eligibility criteria.

In 2016, IOM offered return assistance to more than 98,000 migrants – the highest number during the last 15 years. That is a 40% increase from 2015, which already had a significant rise from previous years (IOM 2017⁴). Roughly two thirds of returnees were male and one third female. More than 80% returned from Europe, where Germany accounted for 54% of the total caseload (IOM 2017⁵).

AVRR returnees are often cast as 'beneficiaries' whose reintegration is 'facilitated' in a way that is 'good for development'. Empirical research tends to question such notions, though outcomes vary across and within countries of origin. A rarely noted characteristic of AVRRs, however, is the fact that the

2. <https://www.iom.int/>

3. <https://www.iom.int/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration>

4. <https://www.iom.int/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration>

5. <https://www.iom.int/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration>

promise of reintegration assistance is mostly made *by* and *in* relatively transparent liberal democracies, whereas corruption is often endemic in the states of origin.

There is a myriad of linkages between corruption and AVRRs affecting migrants, implementing agencies and funding states. Below are some suggestions for approaching them pragmatically.

Corruption colors return: Observations from major countries of origin

The following discussion draws from general reflections on the corruption-migration nexus from my doctoral research on return migration from Europe to Iraqi Kurdistan (Paasche 2016⁶). Insights from a series of consultancy projects evaluating AVRRs in Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Ethiopia have also informed this discussion⁷ 186 semi-structured interviews with AVRR returnees from Norway form the primary empirical basis of these government-commissioned evaluations.

The role of trust

Official jargon often refers to AVRRs are often referred to in official jargon as ‘an offer.’ From a marginalised migrant’s perspective, the incentives that immigration authorities talk about may very well seem more like ‘a promise.’ To the extent that migrants place weight on the promise of reintegration assistance in their decision to return – they have to also *trust* this promise before signing up AVRR. Many migrants come from countries where citizens usually distrust institutions. Still, they must trust that host states will deliver on their promise – by proxy – to them, who are undesired non-citizen removed from the host’s territory and jurisdiction. Upon return, the long journey ‘home’ cannot easily be reversed and appropriate complaint mechanisms are rarely in place. Even when there is trust – for instance by NGOs operating as partners in immigration control – it remains fragile. Rumours from disgruntled returnees

6. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1139445>

7. Listed in references. Fieldworks in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kosovo and Nigeria were conducted by the author.

saying that assistance is poor can easily reach the target population for AVRRs. This can undermine programme credibility and uptake.

Contrary to intentions, controls resulted in local fixers forging documents so returnees could monetise their in-kind support.

The unintended consequences of anti-corruption controls

In order to offer in-kind assistance transparently, the IOM has introduced a number of mechanisms to prevent AVRR returnees from engaging in fraudulent practices. Returnees entitled to in-kind assistance to establish a business, for instance, need to produce substantial paperwork. This may include business plans, tenancy agreements, contracts with eventual business partners, licenses, certificates, as well as three quotes from suppliers invited into a competitive bidding process. In theory, such measures reduce the risk of fraud. In practice, return migrants with little business experience, limited motivation and low education who try to navigate in an informal economy are easily confused and frustrated by formalistic procedures. In Iraq, some returnees reported that they did not understand the bureaucratic requirements or why their documents were not accepted (Strand et al. 2011). Ironically, this appeared to give rise to suspicions of in-house corruption. Others reported long processing times, described as costly and intensely frustrating. Several had made multiple expensive travels to the IOM office to provide the requested paperwork and seek further instructions. Contrary to programme intentions, controls resulted in an informal 'rescue industry' consisting of local fixers who understood the bureaucracy, forged the requested documents, and allowed returnees to monetise their in-kind support.

Anti-corruption controls and cash grants

Cash grants require less bureaucratic safeguards and documentation than in-kind support. Nonetheless, anti-corruption mechanisms may complicate cash transfers in unintended ways. For instance, if sums are set in host state currency, exchange rate variations mean that sums paid out in local currencies will vary. This can cause returnees to suspect corruption as they discover that others received a different amount than them (Strand et al. 2011⁸).⁹

Bureaucratic cash transfer procedures can be overwhelming. In Nigeria, handling cash at the airport was not considered safe due to corrupt airport officials and insecurity. Therefore, returnees needed an official ID, a bank account, and – as a general rule – visit IOM’s office to sign off for the cash transfer. This sounds legitimate until one considers the slow pace of the Nigerian public bureaucracy. Less than a third of the population has a bank account. Also, IOM has only two regional offices in Nigeria – a country larger than Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom combined.

It would be more efficient to give prospective returnees a prepaid visa card at the airport in Norway (Paasche et al. 2016¹⁰).

8. https://www.udi.no/globalassets/global/forskning-fou_i/retur/between-two-societies.pdf

9. Similarly, returnees may misattribute diversified levels of assistance to corrupt implementing officials. In Germany, for instance, individual Bundesländer grant differing amounts of cash to returnees even though they return from the same country – making it hard for returnees to understand who gets what and why.

10. <http://www.jus.uio.no/ikrs/forskning/publikasjoner/boker/2016/skilbreiassistertretur.html>

The risk of corruption at the implementation end

As any organisation operating in endemically corrupt settings, the IOM faces the challenge of ensuring transparency within its own ranks. The team evaluating AVRR in Afghanistan observed a mismatch between market prices and the prices cited by returnees for the IOM in-kind support they said they received for housing allowances and vocational training (Strand et al. 2016¹¹). In one case, IOM had cited the cost of an educational course ten times higher than the cost cited by a returnee who took it. The Norwegian authorities hired Deloitte – the consultancy company – to make further investigations. It concluded: “[T]here is a clear risk that some sort of fraudulent and/or corrupt scheme has been established, at least in parts.” It recommended: “[M]ore detailed controls of the financial reports from IOM (...)” (Deloitte 2016: 5-6¹²). The Norwegian authorities stress that corruption has not been documented and express “great confidence that the measures implemented by IOM will have the desired effect on the implementation of the programme.” Nonetheless, they halted their collaboration with IOM Afghanistan for more than a year following the Deloitte report, awaiting improved IOM procedures.¹³ The IOM responded to our findings and the Deloitte report stating that it has a zero-tolerance policy on corruption.

Conclusions: towards intelligent risk management

Corruption risk management invites trade-offs that donors and implementing partners need to consider. The challenge for IOM and others tasked with facilitating reintegration, is to balance the risk of malpractice against programme effectiveness. Anti-corruption mechanisms, while laudable in theory, may hamper the delivery of services and further frustrate returnees who are eager to move on with their lives. When assistance is more difficult to

11. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/5801-programmes-for-assisted-return-to-afghanistan>

12. https://www.blankspotproject.se/content/uploads/2017/02/Deloitte_Report_IRRANA_OFF_SI_120216.pdf

13. Personal correspondence with the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), 20.02.2017. My translation. See also IOM. *Updated Press Statement About the IRRANA Programme*, 2016.

access than expected, trust and programme effectiveness is compromised and vulnerabilities may be exacerbated. Key points to consider include:

Efficiency vs bureaucracy

There is a complex trade-off between swift service delivery and meticulous verification procedures. Zero tolerance policies on corruption prevent adaption to individual needs, especially when it comes to in-kind assistance (De Simone and Taxell 2014¹⁴). Using bureaucratic checks and controls to try to eliminate the risk that migrants cheat the system, consumes scarce resources, increases transaction costs, and detracts from the quality of service. To maintain optimal uptake in AVRR programmes, return migrants need to perceive implementers as friendly facilitators rather than controllers.

Exposure to risk vs tolerating risk outcomes

Accepting exposure to risk is not the same as tolerating risk outcomes (OECD 2012¹⁵). IOM's strong brand and status worldwide should not prevent host states from diligently controlling programme performance. AVRRs are implemented outside the jurisdiction of funding host states at the discretion of an organisation with a near-monopoly in the field. This organisation targets a marginalised group that lacks public voice. However, host states need to ensure *not only that returnees receive their entitlements, but that they do so as swiftly and easily as possible*. A step in this direction is more external evaluation, including detailed audits and interviews with returnees.

In-kind vs cash assistance

Implementers tend to speak warmly of in-kind assistance, though there is little evidence that it is more effective in supporting reintegration than cash. Context matters. While in-kind support may be superior in theory to a simple cash transfer, it is exceedingly challenging to make in-kind support work well in states with weak governance. In these contexts, cash grants are easier to carry

14. <http://www.u4.no/publications/donors-and-zero-tolerance-for-corruption-from-principle-to-practice/>

15. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/managing%20risks.pdf>

out well. Funding states are wary of the possibility that cash can finance re-migration, but cash can also serve the purpose of reintegration by flexibly accommodating needs, requiring less paperwork, and lowering transaction costs. Moreover, in-kind support that generates income can also finance re-migration. In any case, specific amounts of cash should be offered and given in the local currency at origin for the sake of predictability and clarity.

Vulnerability vs bureaucracy

It is especially important to manage risk intelligently when it comes to vulnerable groups, such as victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors. In some host states, returnees designated as vulnerable are singled out for additional in-kind and/or cash support upon return. While female returnees represent approximately a third of AVRR returnees, they appear more highly represented among those designated as vulnerable, e.g. on grounds of being victims of human trafficking. These returnees may struggle to comply with bureaucratic demands, and the risk of malpractice in such cases needs to be carefully weighed against the risk of exacerbating vulnerabilities.

Informed consent vs frustration

Prospective returnees must be thoroughly informed and prepared for the bureaucracy that awaits them upon return, orally and in writing. This is not only a matter of ethics and informed consent, but also effective reintegration. If returnees are better able to understand their individual AVRR entitlements and the requirements associated with them prior to signing up for return, they are less likely to experience frustrating delays in obtaining paperwork and accessing assistance after return. Ideally, prospective returnees should communicate directly with implementers of AVRR programmes in countries of origin.

Accountability to funders vs accountability to returnees

The implementing organisation needs to be accountable not only to funding states but also to the returnees it is tasked to help. Well-intentioned bureaucratic controls to prevent malpractice may not only prevent smooth service delivery

but may also undermine programme uptake. A realistically designed and effectively delivered AVRR programme is more likely to gain migrants' trust over time. A complaints mechanism whereby returnees can report their grievances upon return should be incorporated into such a design. This could help to improve services and earn trust. The local embassy could serve this function, provided that it is perceived as impartial, accessible and can provide some kind of follow-up and redress to complainants.

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