Why Assisted Return Programmes Must Be Evaluated

Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'

Rejected asylum seekers often resist the legal obligation to return. Consequently, European policy makers tasked with migration managament have turned to so-called 'Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes' (AVRRs) to incentivize return to and support reintegration in the country of origin. Such programmes are described as less politically costly, more humane, simpler and cheaper than deportation. But with very limited monitoring and evaluation of AVRRs we know little about how well they work and whether the promised support is given. This policy brief outlines some of the compelling reasons to monitor and evaluate AVRRs.

Brief Points

- Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRRs) is one way to deal with irregular migration.

- While AVRR is an increasing policy priority, developing systematic knowledge of their effects and effectiveness is not.

- There is near consensus in the literature, for more than a decade, that more evaluation of AVRR is needed.

- Neglecting post-return realities is problematic in a number of ways, and does not produce evidence-based policies.

- While comprehensive evaluations are costly and requires much effort, some key questions may be singled out for particular attention in the evalution and monitoring process.

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Properly evaluating AVRR programmes is crucial to ensure that returnees do not simply disappear into obscurity. Photo: Luke Chan, used under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes: A brief history

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRRs) have been operating for close to three decades, initially targeting 'guest workers' in Central Europe and later refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. Currently the main targets are rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants. AVRRs are mostly confined to European states and operated by the intergovernmental body the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which reports to have assisted just over 400, 000 migrants to return to over 160 countries during the last ten years, also including victims of trafficking and other migrants.

With AVRRs operative in almost all EU member states, it is clear that they have become an increasingly prioritized policy for European policy makers tasked with migration management. However, about 75 per cent of the 250,000 irregular migrants estimated to have returned from Europe (EU+) are forced removals (Cherti & Szilard 2013). Forced removals are frequently seen as a means of stimulating AVRR uptake. But what about improving AVRR programmes instead?

More monitoring and evaluation of AVRRs is needed

It is not the case that AVRRs are entirely exempt from monitoring and evaluation, as several EU member states report to have made some kind of efforts in this regard. In 2011, thirteen EU member states reported to undertake steps to monitor and evaluate AVRRs. Much of these 'steps', however, only consist of sporadic on-site visits or phone calls by the organization that normally implements the programmes, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and just what is meant by 'monitoring' is unclear to say the least. IOM's own monitoring has been found to be weak in various evaluations by external researchers.

The near unanimous message from the literature on AVRRs is that more evaluation is urgently needed. This simple message has been made for more than a decade, when the programmes began to flourish, and lately with increased frequency and urgency. It is a message shared by NGOs and refugee advocacies, but also by independent researchers and even EU member states themselves. Since the message by and large has not led to actual evaluations and we still know little about rejected and returned asylum seekers, scepti-

cal cynics have come to view the 'out-of-sight-out-of-mind' approach as strategic neglect.

There is limited political pressure on policy makers to evaluate and monitor, and considerable pressure to ensure that rejected asylum seekers actually comply with the legal obligation to leave national territory, irrespective of what happens next. Rejected asylum seekers themselves rarely constitute a strong lobby. Rather, they are largely invisible from the public debate following their departure, effectively non-citizens outside national territory.

Why then, is neglect *not* a viable option and *not* in the long-term interest of policy makers? A review of the literature points to a number of arguments why more monitoring and evaluation of AVRR is needed.

The effectiveness argument sees AVRRs as any other social policy designed to change outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation are at the heart of evidence based policy making, Whether or not programme outcomes are desirable is a crucial policy question, and properly designed and implemented evaluations provide convincing and comprehensive evidence that can be used to inform policies and avoid squandering of public resources. This can increase the often modest uptake for AVRRs if that is the intended outcome.

It may seem as if return programmes are all about logistics, but a comprehensive evaluation should raise a wide range of analytical questions. Image: radarqnet, and Lauren Manning, used under CC BY 2.0.

The evidence-based argument sees AVRRs as more politicized than most social policies. Since migration is contentious there is a lack of evaluation culture in the migration policy world, as policy makers wish to exude control and fear negative evaluation findings. This is misguided, as proactively evaluating and monitoring AVRRs substantiate polices, insulates decision makers from negative anecdotal information, and prevents ad hoc reactions to media frenzy.

The partnership argument focuses on the authorities' implementing partners. Rejected asylum seekers typically distrust migration authorities and their partners, but may perceive some partners as more legitimate and credible than others, for instance NGOs and refugee advocacies. Such partners facilitate outreach work, but they are often sceptical to get involved in migration management. Monitoring and evaluation is a control mechanism that might change this. Such strategic partners may then – potentially – improve AVRR programmes and be a watchdog for returnees' rights.

The spoiler argument rests on the assumption that potential beneficiaries facing unverified and often distrusted official information about the programme will seek the advice of

actual returnees who they consider more trustworthy. If the latter then communicate that the programme is dysfunctional, it can be safely expected to reduce programme uptake.

The legal argument contends that the legal obligations of returning states do not cease to exist once rejected asylum seekers leave their territorial jurisdiction. Some kind of sporadic monitoring for some limited time period is needed too. If refugee protection is partly based on a legal-bureaucratic system sorting those in need from others, it is equally based on the premise that rejected asylum seekers are not returned to the country of origin if they have a well-founded fear of persecution or ill-treatment or otherwise fulfil the criteria for protection. To protect the asylum institution and to make sure asylum policies are adequate, returnees must occasionally be followed up.

The liberal democratic argument is moral-political rather than legal. From a liberal democratic perspective, states are seen as morally obliged to live up to its normative standards also for non-citizens incised from national territory through AVRR. Forced removals and AVRR combined constitute a stick-and-carrot policy. By promising support to incentivise AVRR uptake, the returning

state is also obliged to undertake evaluation and monitoring to make sure that 'beneficiaries' get the assistance they were promised. A liberal democracy keeps its promises.

The remigration argument is based on the premise that poorly designed and implemented AVRRs will not lead to 'sustainable' return, in the narrow sense that returnees stay in their country of origin. Monitoring and evaluation can both provide tentative data on remigration, improve the ability of returnees to establish a local livelihood, and in turn reduce the likelihood of another asylum migration. If poorly implemented AVRRs leave returnees prone to re-migrate to Europe, this also undermines the alleged reality-check that returnees allegedly can offer to prospective migrants with unrealistically high expectations of life as a migrant in Europe.

Finally, there is a tendency among those tasked with migration management to put a positive spin on AVRRs as being good for local development in the country of origin. This unsubstantiated claim is theoretically plausible but sounds hollow in the absence of facts and figures to back it up. If policy makers wish to portray (and budget) AVRR as developmental work they first need to learn from the evaluation culture of the develop-

ment world. As most professionals in that world will agree, what you monitor is what you get. It stands to reason then, that returnees need follow-up.

Key questions for evidence-based AVRR

The following analytical questions are meant as a guide to policy-makers once the decision to evaluate is made. There is a bewilderingly wide range of the types of information that are required to carry out a comprehensive evaluation. Consequently, some of these questions should be singled out for a more targeted approach, depending on sending and receiving contexts (the latter typically being more decisive for uptake than the AVRR itself).

Pre-return

- How accurate, accessible, trusted and well-timed is the information about AVRR given to target groups?

- Are returnees given realistic expectations or are their expectations inflated to boost programme uptake?

- How well chosen are the partnering organizations involved with outreach activity?

- Do incentives encourage return without attracting prospective asylum migrants?

- Can application processing time be shortened?

- What social processes within the migrant group shape individual return decisions?

Transit

- Are returnees informed about the practicalities of travel and is the journey well organized?

- Are eventual reimbursements for internal travel made as promised?

- Is the safety and dignity of returnees sufficiently monitored during return?

Post-return reintegration assistance

- Is the reintegration assistance easily available to returnees?

- Are the criteria for obtaining reintegration assistance reasonable and understood by the returnees?

- Is reintegration assistance adjusted to local contexts?

- Should assistance be individualized for best fit, or streamlined for efficiency?

- What are the pros and cons of cash grants vs. in-kind reintegration assistance?

- Are the special needs of vulnerable groups accommodated?

- Can returnees make complaints to an authority and be heard, if assistance is not obtained?

- Does the implementing partner sufficiently monitor returnees' medium-term reintegration?

- Is there coordination between implementing partners and local organizations and authorities?

- Can the programme counter eventual negative perceptions of returnees among locals?

- What information about the programme do returnees pass on back to migrants in the host country?

- Does information about returnees' conditions feed back into asylum policies?

While these are three distinct stages, there are many crosscutting linkages. If returnees are well prepared for return before it actually happens and are offered the chance to acquire skills that boost their future employability, this is likely to facilitate their reintegration in the post-return phase. Inversely, if they arrive 'back home' with inflated expectations of post-return life, meant to lure them into the AVRR programme, the resultant frustration and anger will make lives difficult both for themselves and for the partner that provides and supposedly monitors the reintegration assistance.

Next to such *interlinkages*, there are also crosscutting numerical evaluation criteria, including cost-effectiveness as compared with forcible return and non-return. One cost of non-return is the erosion of the asylum institute. Asylum rests on a bedrock of functional and credible return policies, and AVRRs are thus too important to be operated without a watchful eye. While asylum policies will always be politically controversial, AVRRs are here to stay. It is the job of policy makers to make sure that they serve their purpose. ∎

For further reading

Strand, A.; Bendixsen, S., Paasche, E. and Schultz, J. (2011) Between two societies. Review of the information, return and reintegration of Iraqi nationals to Iraq (IRRINI) programme. CMI Report R2011:4. Chr. Michelsen Institute.

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Cherti, M. and Szilard, M. (2013) Returning Irregular Immigrants: How effective is the EU's response? London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

THE AUTHOR

Erlend Paasche does doctoral research at PRIO on Iraqi Kurdish return migration from Europe to Iraqi Kurdistan, including decision-making and reintegration processes. This brief builds on that, and also on his experience from evaluating assisted return programmes to Iraqi Kurdistan, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Nigeria.