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Life after deportation and migration crisis: the challenges of involuntary return

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Migrants who return involuntarily and empty-handed from violent conflict or through deportation often face huge challenges in re-establishing their lives in their countries of origin. The local reception of returnees and their personal resources are pertinent aspects of reintegration processes.

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Involuntary return migration has severe consequences for migrants, their families and local communities. While the circumstances of emergency return from violent conflicts or natural disasters differ from deportation following irregular stay, rejection of asylum seeking claims, or termination of residence permit, both groups may encounter problems with reintegration. Returning 'home' involuntarily is thus not necessarily a matter of returning to a familiar and welcoming place.

In contrast to assisted return, discussed in a DIIS report and brief issued earlier this year, involuntary return migrants rarely receive any form of support. The present brief discusses the implications of their situation, arguing that involuntary return may cause impoverishment, marginalization and social unrest, as well as high-risk re-migration. Development organizations, donors and policy-makers should therefore address this issue.

MIGRATION CRISES

Migration crises refer to complex and large-scale population movements caused by political and violent conflict or natural disasters, causing challenges for migration manage-

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Involuntary return has severe consequences for the migrant, his or her family and the local reception community. The prominence of deportation as a migration management tool should therefore be reconsidered. Likewise the legal protection of displaced migrant workers should be upgraded to avoid stranded migrants and unassisted emergency return from migration crises.
- The most important factors in reintegration are a safe and conducive mode of reception and the personal resources and networks of returnees. Tailor-made reintegration support can help returnees in the short term and should be adapted to the local context. In the long run, initiatives focusing on general poverty reduction, equality and security are important.
- Many reintegration programs aim at preventing re-migration, but permanent settlement is not always the most realistic solution in areas of high migration. Promoting safe and legal migration can be useful when there is ample access to such forms of mobility, otherwise campaigns against irregular migration and/or the promotion of legal migration have little or no effect.



ment and the inadequate protection of migrants. There are several mobility scenarios for migrants in such situations: internal displacement, third-country resettlement, onward migration, asylum-seeking, self-organized return, evacuation, or forced repatriation to the country of origin. However, there is no clear institutional responsibility for the protection of displaced migrants internationally. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has recently developed an operational framework for migration crisis, but without introducing any new obligations or new financial commitments for IOM member states.

Displaced migrants are thus caught in a legal protection gap: they do not qualify for protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention and are not specifically included in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, or mentioned in the 1990 UN Migrant Workers Convention. As a result, many displaced migrants (and other migrants as well) end up being stranded, unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin and without the ability to regularize their stay or undertake legal onward migration. Thus the phenomenon of stranded migrants exposes flaws not only in systems of humanitarian assistance and protection, but also in the current mobility regime, where migrants may be stuck in irregular situations with limited or no rights.

DEPORTATION

Deportation constitutes another form of involuntary return. Deportation and detention have become increasingly used and normalized as practices in many migration destination and transit countries, not least in Europe and the US. In Europe, the EU 2008 Return Directive and the various agreements to readmit rejected migrants and asylum-seekers are indications of the growing prominence of deportation as a so-called migration management tool. Deportations – including mass deportations – are also taking place from countries in the global South. There are several reports of overland mass deportations from North African countries, for instance, from Libya or Morocco, where migrants are dumped and left to their own devices without any support. Migrants in this situation are very vulnerable and have a high risk of being stranded. Likewise deportees have died while travelling from the country of expulsion, demonstrating that deportation is a high-risk migration-management tool.

LIVELIHOOD CHALLENGES

While deportation and emergency return from migration crises have very different legal implications, these categories may not necessarily be distinguished in the local reception contexts. The two most important aspects of the reintegration of involuntary returnees are a safe and conducive mode of reception and the skills, resources and social networks of returnees. There are often high expectations of migrants returning from Western and other high-income countries, notwithstanding the mode of return. However, deportees and emergency returnees often return empty-



At least 212,000 Sub-Saharan Africans fled Libya during the uprisings in 2011. Many were evacuated after waiting in camps while others stranded in neighboring countries. © AP Photo/Bernat Armangué

handed, having lost their savings or belongings abroad or never having acquired an opportunity to earn and save money. Other frequent problems are unemployment and difficulties in establishing a viable livelihood. While some migrants may have acquired valuable skills during their migration, others have suffered skills degradation, cannot use their acquired skills in their countries of origin, and may lack contacts with the labor market. The economic challenges of reintegration are thus severe.

Livelihood challenges are further complicated by the fact that migration constitutes an established livelihood strategy in many places, often realized through collective decisions and finance-pooling. The untimely return of a migrant may not only disrupt personal hopes and plans but also those of the migrant's family, especially if migrants or their families have fallen into debt themselves to finance the migration. In addition to possible loss of assets and imprisonment, returning to a situation of debt may involve the risk of violence or even death from violent gangs or loan sharks, as has been reported in some Latin American countries.

Involuntary return also implies the end of remittances. Households in which remittances from migrants constitute the sole or biggest income are particularly vulnerable, especially if the returnee is not able to provide for him- or herself. Migrants' families may end up providing for unemployed returnees, causing additional social strain on scarce resources. Support to address livelihood challenges may include in-kind support, cash grants or access to loans, in combination with skills-upgrading, business plan support, and exposure to potential employers. Likewise support to migrant and returnee households to diversify livelihoods is important.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND MARGINALIZATION

Social isolation and marginalization are frequently other difficulties for involuntary returnees. Return migrants who have lived for many years abroad, especially, those who have maintained little contact with their families and friends in their countries of origin, may find themselves with limited social

AN EXAMPLE OF MIGRATION CRISIS AND RETURN: FROM LIBYA TO GHANA

The political uprisings in Libya in February 2011 resulted in the worst migration crisis in the Middle East since the Gulf War. At the time of the uprisings, there were an estimated 1.8 million migrant workers of 120 different nationalities in the country. 790,000 of them crossed the borders into neighboring countries following the conflict. The risk of violence, lack of protection, insufficient shelter, food, water and health conditions in overcrowded desert camps or airports were the most immediate problems, but migrants also lost their identity papers and their salaries deposited in Libyan banks or not yet paid to them, and many had their belongings confiscated. More than 25% or 212,000 of these migrants were Sub-Saharan Africans who found themselves in particularly vulnerable positions, suspected of being pro-Gadhafi mercenaries. Sub-Saharan migrants mainly originated from Niger and Chad, but also from West African states, such as Mali and Ghana.

18,455 Ghanaian nationals were repatriated to Ghana from Libya with the assistance of the UNHCR and IOM. The majority – young men in their twenties and thirties with relatively little education – came back empty-handed and to unemployment. While extensive support for reintegration was initially promised by the Ghanaian government, actual support has been limited. There have only been two smaller IOM reintegration programs between 2011 and 2013 in the two largest returnee-receiving areas, mainly offering in-kind support to re-establish livelihoods or start businesses. Local partners included different branches of government agencies concerned with employment, farming and business, and the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO). Likewise local migration NGOs, have been involved – most notably Scholars in Transit (SIT) in the Brong Ahafo Region and the African Development Organization for Migration (AFDOM) in Tamale, organizing associational activities, information campaigns about legal and irregular migration, and counseling.

networks and without up-to-date knowledge of how ‘things are done’ locally. The situation of involuntary returnees may be further undermined by rumors about the reasons for their return, including suspicion of criminal or immoral behavior abroad, causing social isolation and stigmatization. The establishment of and participation in associations and other kinds of community activities can be one way of strengthening social networks for returnees in such situations.

In contexts with high expectations regarding the economic outcomes of migration, the shame of returning empty-handed can be almost unbearable. Therefore some involuntary returnees choose to isolate themselves or ‘hide’ in larger cities to avoid gossip and social degradation. Furthermore many deportees and emergency returnees suffer from health problems, post-traumatic stress, depression or other (mental) health issues which may deteriorate further in circumstances of a lack of treatment, social stigma or isolation, or if their families and local community do not understand or believe their experiences. Peer groups within which returnees can share their experiences and possibly convey them to the rest of the community as well as wider communication of returnees’ situations can be useful. Likewise access to psychosocial counseling, health care, and mental health treatment is important.

Finally, while individual involuntary return can be detrimental for both the returnee and his or her family, mass emergency return or mass deportations may have wider

implications for the local community in terms of creating social unrest, reducing purchasing power, and increased competition for employment. Likewise local communities often fear that involuntary return migrants will turn to theft, violence, or other types of crime to secure their livelihoods and in response to marginalization.

DILEMMAS

Studies of different types of return migration unequivocally show that information, preparation, solid social networks, sufficient resources, and not least a safe and conducive mode of reception are the most important factors in ensuring sustainable reintegration. However, these conditions cannot usually be granted in relation to involuntary return, precisely because it is involuntary. Reintegration support – for instance, the type of support offered through assisted return programs – can offer initial help, but it does not usually address structural issues. It is therefore unlikely to ‘solve’ long-term problems related to poverty, violence and inequality. Furthermore, while assisted return programs are increasingly widespread and seen as a human alternative to deportation, support to deportees is controversial. Support to displaced migrant workers does not come high on current political agendas either, with the exception of trafficked persons, especially women and children. Therefore there is often the problem of no or insufficient funds in reintegration efforts. Linking reintegration programs with existing development projects and aligning them with national development goals to ensure political will and avoid the starvation of funds can



be a way forward. International solidarity and burden-sharing are also called for, as is the need to consider the human consequences of the current mobility regime and migration management systems.

LESSONS LEARNT

The most important policy recommendation is to reduce the number of involuntary return migrants by reconsidering current migration management systems and to address the structural problems of poverty, inequality and violence. This is allegedly easier said than done. The second best solution is locally adapted and tailor-made reintegration support to returnees. Below, lessons learnt from reintegration programs are presented. It is emphasized that involuntary returnees have different backgrounds, needs and resources, and critical needs assessments are thus important both prior to and throughout activities.

Local anchorage and collaboration

Reintegration processes are always dependent on the context and should therefore be locally adapted and, if possible, benefit the local community, as well enhance local endorsement and commitment. This can be done through the planning, execution and monitoring of programs in collaboration with local institutions, such as community-based organizations, political, traditional and religious authorities, government agencies, educational institutions, banks and micro-credit institutions, and local businesses. Likewise returnees and returnee associations should be included.

Incorporating local vulnerable community members as beneficiaries in activities or extending services to returnees and non-returnees alike are two other ways of including the local community. In both cases, it is important that the selection

of recipients is transparent and fully explained. Non-inclusion can cause anger and frustrations that may result in social divisions. Likewise rumors or promises of more assistance than can actually be delivered can undermine trust and reinforce feelings of marginalization. Trustworthy and easily accessible information about reintegration projects and the situation of returnees is therefore very important.

Tailor-made support

Support should be tailor-made and based on the returnee's needs, combining economic, social and psychosocial support. Equipment which does not fit returnees' needs or skills, which needs further investment or requires skills the returnee does not possess is a waste of resources and can create frustrations and undermine the perceived legitimacy of projects.

Avoid permanent settlement conditionality

Existing support to reintegration projects tends to emphasize permanent settlement, with the prevention of re-migration as an important goal, for instance, through permanent settlement conditionality for receiving support or through campaigns against irregular migration. However, studies show that re-migration, or the desire to re-migrate, is widespread among emergency returnees and deportees, who are usually well aware of possible migration-related risks. Situations where returnees neither want to stay nor are able to re-migrate can cause significant social tension. Likewise it is important to keep in mind that migration – including re-migration – constitutes important and established livelihood strategies in many places. Rather than aiming to prevent migration, information about and, not least, adequate access to safe and legal migration should be promoted in areas with high-risk irregular migration.

This policy brief is related to the research program 'New geographies of hope and despair: the social effects of migration management for West African migrants'. For more information, see www.diis.dk/hope

FURTHER READING

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