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**Assisted return.  
A review of existing research**

## Assisted return. A review of existing research

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In this report I review existing research on assisted return. Assisted return (previously called ‘voluntary return’) is an application-based scheme that grants support to people who wish to return home and re-establish in their home country. There is a broad consensus among researchers and practitioners that assisted return is the preferred return option. Assisted return is considered to be more humane, less controversial and more cost-effective when compared to forcible return.

As this report goes to print, two country-specific programmes are in operation – Afghanistan and Somalia. For returnees of other nationalities graded reintegration support is provided as a cash benefit (FSR, Financial Support to Return). Special arrangements apply to vulnerable groups and unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Any review of research, however, will necessarily have a time lag, and the research presented here also includes schemes that are no longer operative and issues that may no longer be as relevant. At the time of printing, the situation in Norway is that few new asylum seekers are arriving, and hence there are fewer people whose applications for asylum are rejected. There are quite simply fewer people under expulsion orders and fewer residents in reception centres than has been the case for a long time. The key challenge in this context nevertheless remains unchanged: how can people without legal residency be motivated to choose assisted return?

### **What has been the focus of studies on assisted return?**

The majority of the studies on assisted return have focused on what also constitutes the greatest challenge for the authorities: what motivates people to apply for assisted return? The guiding principle seems to have been to elucidate the effectiveness of the various programmes. In other words: can the return programmes (that the authorities have at their disposal) explain the willingness/motivation to apply for assisted return? Moreover, can these programmes be changed/adjusted in order to increase the number/proportion that return home with support?

Research shows that a number of factors have an effect on the number of assisted returns, and thus the likelihood that people who are under an expulsion order choose this option. There is considerable consistency regarding the nature of these factors, but only a small number of them are amenable to simple quantification and hence to rigorous statistical analysis.

Independent variables that explain the willingness to choose assisted return can be categorised into four groups: i) factors associated with the host country

(the situation in Norway and the prospects for a good life here), ii) factors associated with the country of origin to which the person in question will return (such as the security situation and the prospects for a good life there), iii) personal characteristics of the person in question (such as gender, age, health condition), and iv) the opportunities that are available in third countries (opportunities for residence and work in other European countries).

These conditions have been investigated quantitatively and qualitatively. Some effect evaluations have primarily sought to elucidate whether or not the grant schemes are effective, i.e. whether they lead to more returns. Other evaluations, on the other hand, have not primarily been concerned with documenting results, but rather focused on processes, meaning insight into and understanding of how the assisted returns have been implemented in practice and the kinds of experiences undergone by assisted returnees or those in the target group for such returns.

Insights from results-oriented and process-oriented studies supplement each other, and the availability of contributions with both types of focus is a strength for this research area. However, both these forms of evaluation are fraught with methodological weaknesses, and it is essential to keep this in mind when reading and interpreting such research.

Results-oriented studies with the aid of multivariate analysis permit us to study and control for a number of variables, and thus isolate the effect of a single variable by keeping all others constant. However, controlling statistically for all factors that may have an effect on returns within a group is not always feasible. Such return programmes are not implemented in a vacuum. The introduction of a return programme may coincide with a number of changes that may influence the willingness and ability to accept an assisted return, in a positive as well as a negative direction. Such changes may include an increase in the number of forcible returns, changes in the security situation in the country of origin or changes in the rights and entitlements of people without legal residency, to mention only a few. Documenting the effects of grant schemes is therefore a complicated exercise, which has been addressed in various ways by different research contributions. The strength of effect studies lies in their ability to indicate the magnitude of isolated and measurable effects, but these studies will by no means always provide insight into the underlying mechanisms or why effects occur or not. For example, it can be a challenge to distinguish between the effect of the introduction of a programme and the content and structure of the same programme.

Process-oriented studies are best suited to provide insight into processes and specific implementation: what happens when such-and-such is enacted. This method cannot assess effects. As regards the question of whether grant schemes help increase the number of assisted returns, there are some obvious limitations inherent in relying on the assessments made by those who are under an expulsion order. It is difficult to establish conditions for good and honest interviews on the issue of return with people who are in an undetermined situation. Across studies, researchers find that respondents who have received a final rejection tend to feel that they remain within an application process or are still fighting to be granted residence in Norway, and are thus unwilling to reflect on the matter of

return. Choosing to apply for voluntary return may be perceived as relinquishing their personal asylum narrative. Applying for voluntary return may be felt as a blow to their credibility and as an indirect admission that they had no real need for protection to begin with. It would thus be unreasonable to assume that many would acknowledge the importance of financial support for their decision to return, since this would imply that financial concerns, rather than the need for protection, formed the basis for their migration project. On the other hand, process-oriented case studies are essential to describe and bring to light the ways in which the scheme is implemented and the experiences of the various stakeholders.

In general, the research on assisted return provides important insights into the ways in which the authorities can best design such schemes.

### **Do grant schemes increase the number of returns?**

Two Norwegian contributions investigate effects of the introduction of return programmes with the aid of quantitative analyses that are linked to a number of background variables retrieved from the Directorate of Immigration's database. Both studies identify an increase in the number of assisted returns during the period after the introduction of these programmes. The number of returnees and the likelihood of return have both increased. The studies are cautious in drawing conclusions about causality, but point to strong indications that the introduction of support to return has been a factor in this development.

Looking at the same correlations broken down by countries, major differences can be identified. The contributions that investigate assisted returns to Afghanistan find a decrease in the number of assisted returns after the introduction of the return programme, and they fail to find any increase in the likelihood of assisted return. Thus, support for return does not appear to have had any impact on the number of assisted returns, nor on the likelihood that people who are under an expulsion order will return home if offered assistance. Quantitative and qualitative studies both emphasise that the worsening security situation in Afghanistan is a key explanation for why financial support apparently has failed to make assisted return a more relevant option.

The contributions that investigate assisted returns to Iraq identify an increase in the number of assisted returnees, and the likelihood of an assisted return increased after the introduction of the programme. Research that investigates support for assisted return to Kosovo indicates that this support has been crucial, both to motivate those who are under an expulsion order to decide to return and upon arrival in the country of origin. Studies of Kosovo also illustrate the risks involved in developing such support schemes. Due to strong suspicions of abuse (people would apply for asylum in Norway to obtain such support), the programme was withdrawn in 2013.

Studies that investigate assisted returns to Ethiopia show that the support scheme has been little used. Only a modest increase in the number of assisted returns was registered after support was made available through the FSR scheme to people from Ethiopia who were under an expulsion order. No increase in the

number of assisted returns was identified in the period following the introduction of a country-specific programme some years later.

The literature review has not identified any statistical analyses of assisted returns to other countries. Today, a country-specific programme for Somalia is available, but very few have yet returned, and statistical analyses are therefore of limited interest. Research on this country-specific programme has been of a qualitative nature and provides insight into the complexities and challenges involved in establishing a new life after return, especially in light of the expectations the returnees encounter from their network and family. Insights into the challenges encountered after return are also well documented in the case of Nigeria, but no quantitative studies have yet sought to investigate the effect of support schemes on assisted returns.

Research investigating the effectiveness of support schemes for assisted returns has also been undertaken in other countries. On the whole, the findings mirror the Norwegian findings – financial support is a contributory factor for decisions to choose assisted return. In general, across studies from Norway and other countries, this review finds that quantitative analyses attempting to measure the effect of return support programmes tend to conclude that such support appears to influence the decision to return. Still, country-specific differences (such as those between Afghanistan and Iraq) nevertheless clearly illustrate the complexities involved in a decision to return. Process-oriented studies in which the returnees themselves are consulted generally conclude that the support scheme is not perceived or described as crucial. As argued above, it would be unreasonable to assume that people who are under an expulsion order would acknowledge that financial support is a decisive factor in their decision to return, since this would imply that financial concerns, rather than a need for protection, formed the basis for their migration project. This issue is discussed to a varying extent in the contributions that we have reviewed.

### **What other factors influence the decision to return?**

As noted in the introduction, there is considerable consistency across the studies when it comes to the independent variables that affect the willingness to engage in an assisted return. These can be categorised into four groups. The following is a brief summary of what the research notes about the different variables.

First, it is emphasised that the situation in the country of origin is pivotal for the decision to return. All contributions seem to point in the same direction – the security situation in the country of origin affects the use of the assisted return scheme. The security situation that affects individual perceptions of fear is nevertheless multifaceted and not exclusively a result of measurable security indicators, but also of personal networks, resources and opportunities.

Second, the situation in the host country is relevant to whether people will apply for assisted return or not. The reviewed literature finds some support for the notion that that limited rights in the host country may help explain why people apply for assisted return, but experiences from attempts to aggravate the situation in Norway for those who are under an expulsion order show that this may produce serious unintended consequences. Furthermore, research shows

that the execution of forcible returns increases the likelihood that others who are resident in the same reception centre will apply for assisted return.

In addition, research shows that the decision to return also needs to be interpreted in light of individual characteristics. The review shows that gender differences in attitudes to return have been little explored, the findings are partly contradictory, and the lack of data does not allow for any firm conclusions. Age appears to have an effect, in the sense that young people have a lower likelihood of choosing assisted return. International studies find a curvilinear effect of age, in that the oldest and the youngest have a lower likelihood of choosing assisted return, but this correlation is not found in the Norwegian studies. Families with children have other needs and concerns in the decision-making process regarding assisted return when compared with single persons, but the research points in different directions when it comes to how this affects the willingness and probability of choosing assisted return. Research also shows that the amount of time that the person under an expulsion order has spent in Norway has an effect: the longer the time spent in Norway, the less likelihood of choosing assisted return.

### **Effective return programmes depend on adequate information work**

The research emphasises the importance of adequate information work, and the quality of this information work is deemed an essential factor for persuading asylum seekers to choose assisted return. There is consensus across the research contributions that reaching out with understandable and accessible information to those under an expulsion order is a demanding task. Across the contributions, four key elements are discussed as decisive for succeeding in this effort: understanding, timing, credibility and access.

**Understanding:** The research that we have reviewed describes return as one of the topics with which the asylum seekers are least familiar, and the information among people who do not live in reception centres is even more deficient. Although most of them have heard of this concept and are aware of their entitlement to support for returning home, contributions describe the level of knowledge as superficial. The various contributions point to a number of possible explanations for this dearth of knowledge. First, it is pointed out that the staff of reception centres feel that their knowledge of the return programmes is insufficient, and they have little insight into the experiences of people who have returned home. Second, it is pointed out that people who are under an expulsion order are bombarded with information through a variety of channels, and that there are numerous sources of error when it comes to information on assisted return. For example, it is reported that not only reception centre staff, but also other agencies with responsibility for disseminating information are insufficiently trained and possess inadequate knowledge about the schemes in question. In turn, this may partly be because the information on assisted return is hard to understand, a fact which is highlighted in a number of contributions.

**Timing:** A key dilemma in the efforts to disseminate information on assisted returns relates to the timing chosen to provide this information. Several contributions point out that asylum seekers in general tend to have little interest

in information about return and the associated programmes for as long as their application has not been rejected; they feel it does not affect them. Once a rejection has been received, they often resist the information and continue to nurture the hope of being permitted to stay; they are unreceptive. The conclusions differ regarding what would be the optimal time to provide the information. In general, however, it seems that information on assisted return ought to be repeated through different stages and included in a continuous dialogue with those under an expulsion order, rather than being delivered as a well-timed information programme at a specific time.

**Credibility:** Information on assisted returns must not only be understood and communicated at the right time. Research in this field highlights the importance of trust in the person who communicates the information and a perception of this information as credible on the part of the potential returnees. The role of the IOM is highlighted and discussed in particular, but also that of other agencies. The responsibility for providing information, especially to persons who live outside reception centres, lies with a complex set of agencies that have a somewhat unclear understanding of their own role and varying familiarity with the return programmes. This challenge undermines the credibility of these programmes. A further challenge is that organisations and agencies that today enjoy the trust of the target group risk losing it if this trust is used actively to reach out to the target group.

**Access:** Research in this area makes it clear that a key challenge when it comes to information work lies in reaching out to those living outside reception centres who are under expulsion orders. These persons appear to have less understanding of the return schemes and place less credibility and trust in the authorities, and those agencies who have a role in the information work are more diverse and less transparent. In essence, this is a question of access. Good, understandable information which is well timed and comes from a credible source is of little help if one fails to reach those who will be affected.

### **After the decision is taken – the journey and its aftermath**

Some studies investigate country-specific implementation of the programmes for assisted return by letting people who have applied for or undertaken an assisted return come forward. A general finding seems to be that the processing from the submission of an application to the implementation of assisted return is effective, and that the follow-up provided by IOM in Oslo functions well across national backgrounds. Experiences are more varied when it comes to the follow-up provided by the authorities' cooperation partners in the countries of origin. Countries vary significantly in terms of the complications involved in working there, and variable security challenges and degrees of corruption have a decisive impact on the effectiveness of implementation.

Another general finding across countries is that cash payment of support on arrival is very useful, and this is what the returnees themselves want. This notwithstanding, no research contributions argue clearly in favour of exclusive offering cash-support.

Finally, this review of research makes it clear that an implemented assisted return does not equal successful reintegration. Those who have returned home tend to assess the support schemes as important, with some country-specific differences, but certain points for improvement are pointed out across the studies. On the basis of available research there is little to indicate that support schemes for return prevent secondary migration. The research portfolio on assisted return criticises the ability of the programmes to ensure so-called 'sustainable returns'. However, this is not a stated goal for the introduction of assisted return, and it must be emphasised that this would be a highly ambitious objective for such programmes, as well as unlikely to be realistic. Return support schemes in host countries cannot be expected to eliminate the willingness to remigrate after return, and evaluating support schemes in light of such a parameter appears to be inappropriate.