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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes in the African context

Introduction

Return and reintegration are intrinsic to international mobility, as migrants may choose or be obliged to return to their country of origin for a variety of reasons. Consequently, adequate return and reintegration systems are essential components of a comprehensive migration management and contribute to the integrity and credibility of national migration and asylum systems.

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes support migrants, including those who are unable or unwilling to stay in the host country, to return in a safe, dignified and informed manner and sustainably reintegrate into their communities, through a range of individual, community and structural interventions. They ensure that migrants who might face limited options can make meaningful choices about their future. When following a Route-Based Approach, they offer critical operational responses along the whole migratory routes. Initially conceived in Europe, from where most assisted voluntary returns originated, the approach has expanded both geographically and programmatically, as a critical component of European migration policy priorities. This expansion has been supported by a broader EU legal and policy framework that places increasing emphasis on return and reintegration. The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and

Reintegration¹ promotes voluntary return as a humane, effective and sustainable component of migration management. It also puts a strong emphasis on building countries' ownership and capacities in reintegration. Overall, the Strategy supports the implementation of key components of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,² which provides for a more effective and coordinated approach to returns.

In March 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for a Regulation on a Common European System for Returns,³ aiming to create a more efficient return system, streamline procedures, enhance cooperation with partner countries, and strengthen the credibility of the EU's return system. Together, these instruments provide the strategic and legal foundation for sustaining and expanding support to return and sustainable reintegration along key migratory routes, which have been supported through various EU financial instruments.

AVRR activities have steadily grown in recent years. Overall, the number and share of assisted voluntary returns supported by various implementing partners⁴ from EU Member States increased in 2024 compared to 2023, from 17 to 27% of the total number of returns.⁵ The increased support to AVRR earlier along the migratory routes is visible in IOM's assisted return data through the years,⁶ which shows the increasing number and share of returns assisted from and to Africa, mostly through EU and EU Member States funding.⁷ Frontex-coordinated or supported return operations also reflect this upward trend. Between 2019 and 2023, Frontex facilitated the return of over 15,000 individuals to African countries.

¹ [The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration European Commission \(2021\)](#)

² [Pact on Migration and Asylum - European Commission](#)

³ [Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC](#)

⁴ Such as EU Member States national authorities, Frontex, and IOM, among others.

⁵ Eurostat, Third-country nationals returned following an order to leave, by type of return, citizenship, country of destination, age and sex - quarterly data, [MIGR_EIRTN1](#). Voluntary returns include both assisted returns and non-assisted returns where migrants departed without receiving any assistance from state or third-party organizations.

⁶ Based on the data presented in the yearly IOM Return and Reintegration Key Highlights report.

⁷ IOM assisted returns **from** Africa increased from more than 16,500 (23% of the global caseload) in 2017 to close to 63,800 (70%) in 2024; IOM assisted returns **to** Africa increased from more than 24,400 (40% of the global caseload) in 2017 to close to 64,400 (78%) in 2024.

In addition, IOM data shows that of the total 81,100 migrants assisted by IOM with voluntary return in 2024, 70% were departing from or returning to Africa. In 2024, Libya, Niger, Algeria, and Tunisia were the top four countries of departure for IOM assisted returns, collectively facilitating the voluntary return of over 40,000 migrants, primarily to other African nations. IOM also flagged a significant increase in the number of requests received from migrants in North Africa seeking return and reintegration assistance, from close to 27,300 in 2023 to more than 52,300 in 2024 (a 92% increase), reflecting the demand for this assistance which has only grown further in 2025.⁸ This upward trend, and particularly the high level of requests for returns from North Africa and countries in the Sahel, can be linked to the intensified controls and anti-smuggling operations implemented in several of these transit countries coupled with the deteriorating situation along the route, with increasing anti-migrant sentiment and campaigns⁹ and inadequate migration management practices¹⁰ resulting in increased vulnerabilities.

The above-mentioned tendencies speak to the effectiveness of the EU's initial investment in a route-based approach to migration management, which prioritize return and reintegration support in key transit and host countries, thus potentially reducing the number of returns from Europe by addressing return and reintegration needs earlier along the migration route, notably in Africa.

⁸ Data presented during the EU-IOM 2nd MPRR Coordination Committee in March 2025.

⁹ UNSMIL (March 2025), "Statement by the United Nations in Libya warns against misinformation and hate speech",

<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/statement-united-nations-libya-warns-against-misinformation-and-hate-speech>; OHCHR (May 2024) "Tunisia – Concern at increased targeting of migrants" <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/05/tunisia-concern-increased-targeting-migrants>; Arabic Facts Hub (December 2024) "Egypt: Asylum Bill Sparks Coordinated Digital Hostility Against Refugees", <https://zawia3.com/en/hate-speech/>

¹⁰ There have been repeated reports of Algerian, Libyan and Tunisian authorities engaging in collective expulsions, abandoning individuals in desert border regions without adequate provisions – including, Euronews (April 2025), "More than 1,800 migrants expelled from Algeria into Niger" <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/25/more-than-1800-migrants-expelled-from-algeria-into-niger-says-rights-group>; Researchers X (2024), "State trafficking, Expulsion and sale of migrants from Tunisia to Libya" <https://statetrafficking.net/>; the Guardian (January 2025), "Libya expels 600 Nigeriens in 'dangerous and traumatising' desert journey" <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/10/libya-expels-600-nigeriens-migrant-workers-eu>.

EU engagement with AVRR interventions in Africa

The landscape of EU and EU Member States' funded programmes supporting the voluntary return and reintegration of migrants in countries of origin in Africa is diverse. The overview provided in this section and the Annex is not exhaustive but seeks to show the variety of programmatic approaches.

The increase in AVRR support to migrants originates from the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration and its Action Plan, and the set-up of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa. This led to the launch of comprehensive programmes along the migratory routes, notably the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in 2016¹¹ (MPR), funded by the European Commission (DG DEVCO/INTPA in Sub-Saharan Africa and by DG NEAR in North Africa) with funding contributions from other donors including EU Member States; and numerous programmes supported by the EU Trust Fund for Africa, supporting the reintegration of returning migrants, often implemented by EU Member States' development and cooperation agencies. Following the end of engagement of the EU Trust Fund for Africa in new programmes and since the start of the current EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027), this has been increasingly inscribed into the Team Europe approach for migration cooperation. The regional Migration Team Europe Initiatives for the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean and the Central Mediterranean migration routes represent key concerted efforts to enhance coordination and cooperation between the EU, its Member States, and African countries along these migration corridors and include return, readmission and reintegration as one of their five components.

¹¹ <https://www.migrationjointinitiative.org/>

Between 2016 and 2022, the EU Trust Fund for Africa supported the implementation of the MPR programme in Africa, implemented across North Africa, the Sahel and Lake Chad region, and the Horn of Africa. It was the first comprehensive EU-funded programme aiming at saving lives, protecting and assisting migrants along key migration routes in Africa. The programme was built on interlinked pillars including capacity building to governments and support to migration governance; protection and voluntary return assistance; reintegration support, including at the community level; migration data collection and analysis; information and awareness-raising; and community stabilization in communities affected by migration.

The programme's final evaluation¹² showed that it allowed to break new ground in migration governance by engaging with African countries, ensuring their buy-in for voluntary return, and placing the reintegration of returnees on the national agenda for the first time, leading to the direct involvement of governments in the provision of support. The programme showed important results from individual level and community-based reintegration projects addressing key drivers of irregular migration. The evaluation also pointed to challenges in terms of sustainability as well as to foster referrals and partnerships and for the delivery of community-driven activities and accordingly highlighted the continued need for capacity-building, and broader socio-economic development in the region.

From 2022, the Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration (MPRR) programmes in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, funded by the European Commission (DG MENA, DG INTPA) and co-financed by Denmark, Italy, Norway and Sweden, replaced the EU-IOM Joint Initiative and continue to provide protection and assistance in transit, assisted voluntary return and reintegration services in 21 African countries. The two programmes fund 80 to 90 % of IOM's AVRR support in Africa and already supported the return of more than 88,900 migrants and the reintegration of 73,600.¹³ In parallel, in line with the call of the 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration to enhance national ownership in reintegration, new programmes across Sub-Saharan Africa (as well as in Asia), funded through the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, focus on developing country of origins' capacity to manage reintegration to take over the reintegration of their own nationals over the medium/long term.

¹² <https://www.migrationjointinitiative.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1261/files/files/articles/regional-final-evaluation-final.pdf>

¹³ From 2022, as per IOM latest figures available confirmed to the EC.

These new programmes support the development of an ecosystem/‘whole-of-government approach’ to reintegration, with better planning and increased synergies with national and local development strategies, increased financial sustainability with government funding, increased responsiveness of public and civil society’s services to the specific needs of returnees, while respecting social cohesion needs. A number of programmes addressing these new structural interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa (see the Annex for a description of these programmes).

In parallel to these comprehensive programmes, other AVRR direct assistance programmes support African migrants returning from the EU, such as the European Reintegration Programme (EURP)¹⁴ run by Frontex, as well as various additional programmes funded by the European Commission or Member States.

Challenges and Way Forward

Return and reintegration of migrants in Africa is shaped by a complex set of challenges and opportunities. While a wide array of stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, and civil society, can address diverse needs, this diversity also results in fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and gaps in support. These issues are compounded by limited coordination between programmes and actors as well as insufficient capacities and limited ownership in countries of origin, which undermines the efficiency and sustainability of migration governance.

Migration management would benefit from a more holistic, coordinated and ecosystem approach, particularly because many African countries simultaneously serve as destination, origin, and transit points. Although there is a much-needed and growing shift toward national-level initiatives, enhancing ownership and tailoring interventions to specific contexts, there is a pressing need to maintain cross-country and cross-regional coordination, ensuring that flexibility, responsiveness, and synergies across regions are not lost. This flexibility remains crucial to ensure timely and effective EU response to evolving challenges along the migratory routes.

¹⁴ <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/reintegration-assistance/>

Applying a Route-Based Approach has been a priority for the external dimension of the EU migration policy for the past years as it offers a promising solution to streamline resources and address root causes of irregular migration. This also requires stronger dialogue and cooperation with origin, transit and destination countries, pooling expertise and aligning under frameworks like the Team Europe initiatives to ensure comprehensive migration governance.

Complicating matters further is the worsening situation of migrants in transit countries, especially in North Africa and the Sahel. This calls for the EU's continued engagement to promote rights-based migration management, protective frameworks and migrants' access to essential services, alongside support for AVRR.

Sustainable reintegration is also an essential priority for the long-term credibility of the EU and Member States' return strategies. While increasing return rates is a key political concern, meaningful reintegration support could contribute to limiting the risk of irregular re-migration. IOM data confirms that such support significantly improves reintegration outcomes and reduces irregular re-migration intentions. Among returnees receiving assistance under MPRR, 82% reported the ability to remain in their country, up from 68% who reported so at the time of return. Only 16% said they were likely to re-migrate, and 79% of those who started a microbusiness with the reintegration support were still in business after a year.¹⁵ Further analysis of IOM's reintegration data and the IMPACT Evaluation of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative in the Horn of Africa¹⁶ confirmed that economic satisfaction, including business success and ability to meet their household needs; social cohesion, including the lack of family conflicts; and psychosocial wellbeing, were key predictors of successful reintegration and lower intention to remigrate.

In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, community-based recovery and reintegration efforts have also proven essential in promoting social cohesion and tackling the broader drivers of irregular migration.¹⁷ This integrated model complements individual support and enhances the community's resilience to future migration pressures.

¹⁵ As presented during the March 2025 EU-IOM MPRR Coordination Committee.

¹⁶ <https://www.migrationjointinitiative.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1261/files/files/articles/regional-final-evaluation-final.pdf>

¹⁷ IOM (2020), EU-IOM Joint Initiative Evaluation of reintegration activities in the Sahel and Lake Chad region, <https://www.migrationjointinitiative.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1261/files/files/articles/regional-reintegration-evaluation-report-final.pdf>; Revitalizing Economy and Enhancing Social Cohesion through Community-Based Planning and Community-Prioritized Infrastructure

However, many countries of origin, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, lack the resources and institutional capacities to readmit, receive and reintegrate returning nationals effectively. There is a critical need to enhance these capacities, including consular services for travel documentation, and reinforce institutions responsible for medical, psychosocial, vocational, and social support, among others. In fact, receiving large numbers of returnees presents immense challenges to countries and communities of origin, many of which are already overburdened or lack basic infrastructure. The imbalance between the support provided to transit/host countries and that provided to origin countries must be corrected.

Migration also plays an important economic role along migratory routes, as remittances support origin communities, and transit economies rely on the flow of migrants. This means that a comprehensive approach needs to be adopted as programmes focused solely on reducing migration or promoting returns without simultaneously supporting employment opportunities, legal pathways, and reintegration will face resistance from both local authorities and communities.

For EU Member States, this underscores the importance of sustained, coordinated reintegration programming and mutually beneficial partnerships with countries of origin. Reintegration support should be seen as an integral component of return strategies - linked not just to migration management, but also to broader EU priorities like regional stability, and economic development.

The resource gap remains a major challenge. The March 2025 EU-IOM MPRR Coordination Committee flagged that current programmes in North and Sub-Saharan Africa are underfunded to meet growing needs through 2027, with a call to EU MS to financially contribute to sustain this programme. This shortfall has been exacerbated by the end of new commitment for the EU Trust Fund for Africa and a corresponding drop in development and community-level support and capacity building to governments provided at regional level. However, it is important to recall that significant funds – over EUR 730 million under the NDICI-Global Europe – have already been mobilised to support return and reintegration in Sub-Saharan Africa and more are in the pipeline.

Works: the Construction of a Bridge in Somalia, <https://migrantprotection.iom.int/en/resources/good-practice-factsheet/reintegration-good-practices-8-revitalizing-economy-and-enhancing> ; IOM (2022) Creating Livelihoods through Environmental Rehabilitation in Ethiopia, <https://migrantprotection.iom.int/en/resources/kmh-good-and-innovative-practice-series/reintegration-good-practices-11-creating>.

A successful transition toward local ownership of reintegration processes will require a staged approach that includes institutional capacity-building, technical assistance, and long-term predictable funding. National and local governments must progressively take the lead, with international partners continuing to support operational continuity until these structures are firmly in place. In the course of 2027, it is expected that four countries in West Africa – namely Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal – will fulfil their responsibility to reintegrate their own nationals. In the following years, additional countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are also expected to take over these responsibilities.

Moving forward, coordinated action across EU mechanisms and Member States is necessary to prevent fragmentation and ensure complementarity. AVRR programmes and related development efforts must align with partner countries’ national strategies, capacities, and policy frameworks.¹⁸ Developing integrated AVRR programming, addressing both direct assistance needs and long-term migration governance, is required especially when governments are directly involved in assistance and migration data collection, gaining ownership of the systems, laws and policies. Finally, route-based programming should be reinforced as it offers a strategic advantage by enabling responses that reflect the full complexity of migration dynamics across regions. This approach fosters cross-border cooperation, strengthens links between diverse actors, and enables more responsive, effective, and sustainable return and reintegration systems.

¹⁸ The ALTAI (2021), Learning Lessons from the EUTF Phase II report highlighted the need to “Take into account the partner countries’ limitations and absorption capacity – project ambitions need to be adjusted, and technical support increased in some countries. Project phasing and milestones should take the capacity of partner countries’ governments, regional organizations and local partners into account in a realistic manner. While systems should be put in place relatively quickly to generate change, they must be accompanied by adequate capacity building, mentoring and handover phases.”

https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/practices-repository-files/exec_summary_learning_lessons_from_the_eutf_final.pdf

Guiding questions

In view of the above, the Danish Presidency invites the Delegations to consider the following questions:

- How can we further enhance the capacity and ownership of national and local government structures, and other relevant partners in countries of transit and origin, to address the above identified gaps and challenges?
- In light of the current constraints and possible NDICI-funding shortage for voluntary returns and associated reintegration in Sub-Saharan Africa, should this thematic remain a priority for the EU and its Member States, and what should be expected regarding support and involvement from Member States? Should there be a limitation to the funding we support?
- How can the optimal balance be struck on providing reintegration support through implementing partners, and a more structural approach, through supporting third countries in strengthening their own reintegration systems?
- How can we streamline the various EU funding mechanisms and those of Member States to avoid fragmentation and ensure complementarity and effective coordination amongst key reintegration implementing stakeholders at receiving countries?

**PRORAMMES FOCUSING ON CAPACITY BUILDING OF NATIONAL AUTHORITIES
TO MANAGE REINTEGRATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:**

- Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and The Gambia: with the Individual Measure for West Africa “Managing migration better in Western Africa”, currently under contractualization.
- Guinea, with the “Support, Mobility, Integration, and Awareness-Raising” (AMIS)¹⁹ project recently launched by Enabel and Expertise France, which aims to refer returnees to existing economic opportunities and psychosocial services, while supporting the local governance of reintegration.
- Côte d’Ivoire, with the “Sustainable Reintegration of returning migrants in Ivory Coast and fight against trafficking” (MIGRET)²⁰ project implemented jointly by Expertise France, Enabel, and IOM, and which will be complemented by an upcoming action funded under the Flexible Mechanism.
- Ghana, with the “A Ghanaian-European safe and prosperous people’s mobility project on migration governance” (ATUU) Programme, implemented by IOM, which aims to finalize the national referral mechanism and strengthen the stakeholders' capacities, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and the decentralization of return and reintegration.
- Nigeria, with the “Support to Migration Governance in Nigeria” project implemented by IOM.
- Cameroon, with the “Improving Cameroon’s Migration Management Capacity and Cooperation” project implemented by IOM and complemented by a GIZ initiative.

¹⁹ <https://open.enabel.be/fr/GIN/2682/p/accompagnement-mobilite-insertion-et-sensibilisation.html>

²⁰ <https://open.enabel.be/fr/CIV/2669/p/reintegration-durable-des-personnes-migrantes-de-retour-en-cote-d-ivoire-et-lutte-contre-la-traite.html>