

Factors affecting participation in assisted voluntary return programmes and successful reintegration: a review of the evidence

Darren Thiel and Kirsty Gillan

- A migrant's decision whether or not to undertake an assisted voluntary return (AVR) is affected by a number of interacting factors relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the potential returnee, and the conditions in the country of origin and the host country. Understanding and managing these factors is complex and difficult to address through AVR policy alone but key actions that can be taken include:
 - developing asylum seekers' trust in AVR programmes, for example by engaging with community groups and demonstrating the programmes' effectiveness;
 - increasing the efficiency of the asylum and appeal process so that the period in the host country prior to the final decision is kept to a minimum; and
 - developing tailored reintegration assistance to provide effective solutions to returnees' particular barriers to return (see below for more on this point).
- The evidence indicates that increasing the monetary value of reintegration assistance does not on its own necessarily lead to an increase in the numbers taking up AVR or reintegration assistance. Other actions, particularly focusing on programme marketing, play an important role in the process of encouraging AVR take-up, and could be further pursued. However, it should be noted that extraneous factors, particularly the situation in the country of origin, may have more impact on the return decision.
- The evidence suggests that reintegration assistance can be more effective if tailored and targeted to overcome returnees' particular barriers to return. Barriers vary widely and can include uncertainty about accommodation or employment on return, general economic uncertainty, lack of opportunity for education and the personal shame of having to return home. These same factors can also be barriers to successful reintegration; hence effective improvements in this area should benefit returnees (by enhancing the sustainability of return) and host countries (by making AVR more appealing).
- Beyond the bounds of AVR policy, host countries can encourage AVR take-up by continuing to develop effective enforcement systems for immigration removals and by supporting political and economic security in countries of origin.

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Keywords

Assisted voluntary return
 Repatriation
 Return migration
 Reintegration
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Introduction

Aims

The review aimed to map the existing knowledge of Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) in order to answer the following questions.

1. What factors encourage or discourage AVR participation?
2. What are the key factors for the successful reintegration of AVR participants?¹
3. What are the most effective policy and operational prescriptions for successful AVR programmes?²
4. What aspects of AVR require additional research evidence to support their design or application?

Context

The Immigration and Nationality Directorate³ Review, published in July 2006, set ambitious targets to increase removals of persons with unfounded asylum claims in the UK, and AVR programmes are an important element of this strategy. AVR programmes aim to assist asylum seekers, failed asylum seekers, those granted temporary protection,⁴ and irregular migrants to return to their countries of origin⁵ in a cost-effective,⁶ dignified, humane and sustainable manner.

- 1 'Successful reintegration' was taken to refer to that which was sustainable. This could be indicated by: returnees' subjective testimony; returnees remaining, or expressing a desire to remain, in their country of origin; and measures of returnees securing income and housing.
- 2 Successful AVR programmes are viewed in this report as programmes that return large proportions of potential participants in a humane, equitable, sustainable and cost-effective manner.
- 3 In April 2007 the Immigration and Nationality Directorate within the Home Office became the Border and Immigration Agency. In April 2008 the Border and Immigration Agency became the UK Border Agency (UKBA).
- 4 Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR), Humanitarian Protection (HP) or Discretionary Leave to remain (DL).
- 5 In this report 'country of origin' is understood to refer to the country to which an AVR participant would return. This would normally, though not necessarily, be their country of nationality and the country in which they resided before coming to the host country.
- 6 Consideration of cost-effectiveness of AVR has been provided by the National Audit Office (2005).

The UK Border Agency (UKBA) funds three AVR programmes: the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP), Assisted Voluntary Return of Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) and Return to Afghanistan Programme (RAP)⁷. These are all operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The UK's AVR programmes provide information and assistance with travel documentation and costs, and some provide reintegration assistance.

Method

This report is based on a literature review, collated between June and December 2006, and an analysis of quantitative data. Most of the literature and statistics relate to UK AVR programmes but, where possible, international literature and statistics were included. Only 21 research papers were found relating to AVR specifically, of which nine were based on primary research studies and only four had appropriate sample designs. No research was uncovered relating to the AVR of irregular migrants. This evidence was supplemented using literature about the general return of economic migrants and refugees.

Findings

Factors encouraging and discouraging return

The quantitative analysis shows that UK AVR programmes have been returning increasing numbers of people, both asylum seekers and irregular migrants, and that at least in the case of asylum AVR, this is despite an overall reduction in the number of people eligible for the programme.

The review found that the key factors encouraging or discouraging AVR participants to return are broadly similar to those affecting the general return of refugees

- 7 The Return to Afghanistan Programme (RAP) ended on the 1 April 2008.

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and economic migrants. The AVR-specific literature, which was supported by the general literature, indicated the key factors that encourage AVR participants to return are:

- improved political, economic and social conditions in the country of origin;
- family (desire to reunite with or head families in the country of origin);
- a desire to reclaim property in the country of origin;
- poor conditions and/or limited options in the host country (e.g. prevention of employment);
- effective enforcement systems in the host country;
- political commitment or a desire to help rebuild the country of origin;
- tailored AVR programmes (e.g. specific to the country of origin and/or individual);
- the involvement of community groups to provide country of origin information and/or organise AVR programmes; and
- provision of appropriate reintegration assistance incentives communicated through targeted marketing campaigns.

In contrast, the key factors found to act against return are:

- a lack of political and/or economic security in the country of origin;
- poor social conditions in the country of origin;
- having children in the host country and/or no family in the country of origin;
- a distrust of AVR programmes and/or formal country of origin information;
- a long period of stay in the host country;
- the shame of return; and
- being unable to return to the home area or reclaim property.

The wider literature about refugees and economic migrants additionally suggests that the decision on when and why to return is strongly related to the original reason for migration, and that gender equality issues in countries of origin can act against return.

One of the most important overarching barriers to return identified by the literature review is that those eligible for AVR programmes often do not wish to return to their countries of origin. The literature suggests that some migrants express a desire to return to their countries of origin when they have been granted permanent status to reside in host countries, and many will experience nostalgia for 'home'; however, this is often only temporary and does not necessarily lead to actual departure.

Conditions for successful reintegration

The quantitative analysis, relating to reintegration assistance (available through the UK AVR programme for asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers to facilitate sustainable return), indicates that the take-up of assistance is increasing. Factors which may affect take-up include the value of assistance; programme marketing and information; and circumstances in the countries of origin.

The review highlighted that successful reintegration in countries with poor political, economic and social infrastructures is a problematic process. Consequently, much of the literature focuses on the barriers to, rather than conditions for, successful reintegration. The key factors found to hinder the successful reintegration of AVR participants, as well as refugees and economic migrants, are:

- economic instability and unemployment;
- the loss of social networks;
- a destabilisation of the local area due to the large-scale return of unskilled young men;
- exclusion by members of the community who had not migrated and returned;
- poor housing and/or the inability to reclaim property; and
- security problems and discrimination, including having no safe area to return to.

Additionally, the literature relating to the return of refugees and economic migrants highlighted the following factors which are also likely to be relevant to some AVR returnees:

- long duration of stay away from the country of origin leading to changes in the returnee and/or the home area;
- poor infrastructure in the country of origin, including health care and/or the education system;
- feelings of guilt associated with having survived or escaped the difficulties in the country of origin; and
- specific issues for women, such as experiencing greater gender equality in the host country.

Factors found to promote successful reintegration are essentially converse to some of the factors outlined above. That is, to increase the likelihood of successful reintegration returnees should return to politically secure areas where they can obtain secure employment, reclaim property and be accepted by the non-migrant local community.

Conclusions

- The evidence revealed that decisions to return under AVR are influenced by a range of factors, particularly those relating to personal circumstances, and to the situations in the host and return country.
- Reintegration assistance was found to potentially motivate return but is more significant as a facilitator for sustainable return.
- Evidence concerning the long-term sustainability of return under AVR was limited but several key inhibitory factors to sustainable return were identified, including the socio-economic characteristics and availability of support to returnees in the country of origin. The evidence did, however, suggest that tailored reintegration assistance, appropriate to individual needs and local conditions, may increase the likelihood of successful return.
- Rises in the value of the reintegration package alone may not lead to an increase in uptake of AVR or reintegration assistance.