

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2004 and 2004 extension: monitoring report

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On the whole, the VARRP 2004 processes worked well, receiving 4,348 applications, delivering 2,599 returns and supporting 723 returnees with reintegration assistance. Through interviews with stakeholders, delivery agencies and returnees the following recommendations emerged.¹

- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the partner agencies should continue efforts to promote VARRP through outreach work with asylum seekers and third-party organisations (for example, places of worship and community centres), utilising informal networks where appropriate.
- A number of returnees interviewed in Sri Lanka had heard about VARRP through advertising in the Tamil media. The approach of using targeted ethnic media should be pursued and the results assessed for other communities where such media channels exist.
- IOM and the partner agencies should continue to develop links to improve communication; IOM should consider facilitating 'skills-sharing' days to help spread good practice and support its partner agencies.
- Innovations implemented by IOM Sri Lanka, such as the launch of orientation programmes for returnees, were examples of good practice. The sharing of such ideas should be encouraged and formalised, for example, by the creation of a best practice checklist for IOM missions.
- The efforts already under way to improve reintegration assistance delivery and enhance its reputation among potential applicants should be continued, focusing on the few return destinations, like Iraq, where the arrangements for assistance delivery are less well established.
- The Home Office and IOM should consider reviewing reintegration assistance in light of the specific needs highlighted in the interviews with returnees to Sri Lanka, such as the seasonality of some returnees' businesses and the potential benefit of providing greater advice and information to those starting a small business.
- Mechanisms should be developed to record systematically returnees' informal feedback. This should help to fill the knowledge gaps caused by the lack of monitoring for those returning without reintegration assistance.

¹ The time elapsed between the programme period and the fieldwork being conducted means that many areas of the programme had developed in the interim period, and hence some of the recommendations may have already been addressed.

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Keywords

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This report, commissioned in April 2006, is the assessment of the 2004 Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP). The report covers the period from 1 March 2004 to 28 February 2005 and the VARRP 2004 Extension (1 March 2005 to 31 July 2005). Under VARRP co-funding arrangements between the UK Home Office and the European Commission's European Refugee Fund (ERF), an independent assessment of the programme is required each year.

While the ERF and the Home Office jointly funded VARRP 2004, the Home Office solely funded the 2004 Extension, which was necessitated by the late receipt of VARRP 2005 funding from the ERF.

The aim of the report is to provide an assessment of the programme's processes, together with the extent and nature of its impact, and to provide recommendations to improve the operation of the programme.

Background to the research

VARRP exists to assist asylum seekers, failed asylum seekers and those with temporary leave to stay in the UK,² who wish to return permanently to their country of origin or permanent residence. It offers a voluntary, dignified and cost-effective³ alternative to enforced removal. In this report 'country of origin' is used to refer to the country to which VARRP participants would return under the programme; this would normally also be their country of nationality and the country from which they departed in order to come to the UK.

² This includes having Exceptional Leave to Remain, Discretionary Leave or Humanitarian Protection.

³ Analysis of removal costs for the period 2003–04 is contained within the report *Returning Failed Asylum Applicants* (National Audit Office, 2005) which calculates the average cost of an assisted voluntary return for a failed asylum seeker to be £1,100 in comparison to £11,000 for an enforced removal.

The assistance provided under VARRP 2004 included travel arrangements, documentation, support at points of departure and arrival (if required) and travel costs. Returnees also benefited from optional reintegration support once they arrived in their country of origin, which included assistance with small business development, vocational training or education. All aspects of VARRP 2004 were administered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Four partner agencies (Refugee Action, North of England Refugee Service (NERS), Safe Haven Yorkshire (SHY) and YMCA Glasgow) and over 30 other UK non-governmental organisations provided referrals to IOM. The four partner agencies were additionally involved with raising awareness of VARRP through outreach activities, as well as providing impartial, confidential advice and support for asylum seekers.

In addition to fulfilling funding requirements, the assessment of VARRP enables those involved in programme operation and policy development to review the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the programme and identify ways by which these can be maximised. The VARRP 2004 assessment is designed as the first stage of a three-year programme. Each year involves quantitative monitoring and analysis of the IOM assisted voluntary return (AVR) database, but additionally includes qualitative case studies of VARRP participants' countries of origin. For the VARRP 2004 report, Sri Lanka was selected as the case study as it was in the top five countries of origin for VARRP returnees and had a high level of reintegration assistance take-up compared to other return countries.

Method

The study included two distinct research phases. The first involved analysis of the IOM AVR database covering the VARRP 2004 period. The IOM database was used in preference to Home Office data sources, as it included a greater range of information and allowed for consistency in the quantitative analysis.⁴

⁴ The resultant statistical overview formed a quantitative report submitted to the ERF in May 2006.

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The second phase of the research was a case study of Sri Lanka as a country of return. This consisted of face-to-face interviews with asylum seekers, returnees and stakeholder organisations (IOM staff and their partner agencies) in both the UK and Sri Lanka, to collect information about the experiences of VARRP 2004 participants and stakeholders. This covered the VARRP 2004 and VARRP 2004 extension periods. In total, 64 interviews were conducted.

Main findings

VARRP 2004 in general

There were 4,348 applicants (including dependants) for VARRP 2004, an increase of 18 per cent on VARRP 2003 (3,687 people).⁵ VARRP 2004 assisted 2,599 participants to return to their countries of origin, representing 60 per cent of VARRP applicants in this period.

The increase in the number applying for VARRP 2004 was attributed by partner agencies and IOM to changes in VARRP processes, namely the increased marketing of the programme and a large increase in outreach activities, as well as non-VARRP factors. The latter included the speeding up of asylum application processing by the Home Office, a reduction in legal aid to asylum seekers and changes to the financial support available to certain groups of asylum seekers.

The analysis of IOM data showed that the destination countries with the largest number of departures were Albania 583 (22%); Iraq 397 (15%); Sri Lanka 217 (8%); Afghanistan 207 (8%); and Iran 172 (7%). The percentage of applications that resulted in departures varied across countries of return. Within the top five return countries for VARRP 2004, Albania had the highest conversion rate (percentage of applications resulting in departures) at 87 per cent; Iraq and Iran had the lowest, at 37 and 65 per cent respectively.

VARRP 2004 returnees were overwhelmingly male (only 13% were female), aged between 20 and 39 (81% of departures) and returned alone (92% of departures). At the time of application to VARRP, the majority of participants had had their asylum claim refused at the initial decision stage or had exhausted their possibilities to stay legally in the UK (1,740 applicants, including dependants (40%) had had their asylum appeals dismissed when they applied for VARRP).

⁵ Figures reflect the time period between 1 March 2004 and 28 February 2005. The VARRP 2004 extension period is not included in the quantitative analysis.

Twenty-three per cent (986) of VARRP 2004 applicants (including dependants) dropped out of the programme. IOM and partner agency staff proposed the following explanations: increased concerns about safety of return; changes in expectations about asylum claims (e.g. obtaining a judicial review); and finding a means of staying illegally in the UK (e.g. finding employment, contrary to the rules governing asylum claims).

The increase in outreach work by the partner agencies and IOM was a positive step in raising awareness of VARRP. Face-to-face contact, with both potential VARRP participants and third-party organisations was an important mechanism for building trust in the programme. In particular, meeting potential applicants at drop-in centres rather than partner agency offices worked well. This outreach work was supported by the use of minority ethnic media. In the interviews with returnees from Sri Lanka, these marketing campaigns were shown to have contributed to raising awareness of VARRP.

Changes were introduced throughout VARRP 2004 to improve partnerships between IOM and its partner agencies. These included quarterly meetings between IOM and partner agencies, a fortnightly email exchange of questions and regular telephone and email contact. Refugee Action also provided training for partner agencies.

During the VARRP 2004 period, 723 returnees received reintegration assistance. This represents 38 per cent of the 1,907 VARRP participants who applied for reintegration assistance. Business support was the most common form of assistance received (87% of the total who received assistance), with the remainder receiving support with training (9%) or education (4%).

The level of take-up of reintegration assistance varied across countries of return. In interviews, research participants attributed this to a combination of:

- low expectations that the assistance would meet their needs, be easily accessible, or even be delivered at all;
- suspicions about the motivations and connections of those delivering the assistance; and
- concerns about the personal consequences of accepting the assistance (relating to, for example, fear of persecution on arrival, corruption of organisations in the country of origin; and having to travel a long way to get the reintegration assistance at the mission in the country of origin).

Sri Lanka case study

The 31 Sri Lankan returnees interviewed had received information about VARRP through diverse channels; two-thirds heard through word of mouth from friends or Tamil associations. A quarter cited Tamil media as a source. They had also received information through official Home Office channels, through voluntary sector organisations, and through legal representatives.

From the qualitative research conducted in the UK and Sri Lanka, it appears that the VARRP 2004 application process worked well and, as evidenced by the interviews with returnees, accessing the programme in the UK and the reintegration assistance in the Sri Lanka case study was a smooth process.

VARRP was shown to have provided effective economic support enabling sustainable returns to Sri Lanka. All 31 returnees interviewed had received reintegration assistance to help start a small business; 18 of them said their business provided enough money for them to live on, and 29 had plans to expand their business. The majority of returnees expressed an optimistic outlook for the future, although this was contingent on the security situation in Sri Lanka.

Although none of the returnees interviewed cited reintegration assistance as the principal motivator to return, 23 of the 31 indicated that their return and reintegration would have been more challenging without VARRP support. Seventeen of the returnees interviewed had received additional support from friends and family to aid their reintegration, and for ten of these respondents this support had played “quite a large part” in their reintegration process.

The majority of returnees described the reintegration assistance as suitable, although a few indicated that additional, or different, support would be beneficial. For example, one respondent wanted support to develop a second income to mitigate the effects of seasonal business. The problems faced by some interviewees as regards the sustainability of their business suggested that greater business advice and information may be beneficial for steering some individuals towards more effective business models.

Apart from the interviews conducted for this research, feedback to the UK from returnees was anecdotal and occasional – evidence was not systematically collated by IOM or its partner agencies, and feedback to partner agencies rarely reached IOM.

Conclusions

VARRP continues to operate as an effective method of returning asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers from the UK to their countries of origin, with more applications in VARRP 2004 than in any previous programme year.

IOM and the partner agencies should continue to develop the marketing of VARRP through outreach work with asylum seekers and third-party organisations, using informal environments and networks where appropriate. The programme should also continue to be advertised through minority ethnic media channels where these exist.

Continuing efforts should be made to develop communication links and the sharing of good practice between IOM and the partner agencies. Innovative good practice developed by IOM missions in particular countries, such as the launch of orientation programmes for returnees in Sri Lanka, should be formally shared across country missions.

The efforts, already under way, to improve the delivery of reintegration assistance and enhance the reputation of IOM reintegration assistance should be continued, focusing on return destinations like Iraq where the arrangements for assistance delivery are less well established.

The Sri Lanka case study showed that, although reintegration assistance was generally effective at enabling returnees to start earning a sustainable income, there were some instances where it could have been improved. Reintegration assistance should be reviewed by the Home Office and IOM to ensure that it provides for returnees’ specific needs, for example seasonal work and appropriate business advice.

Mechanisms should be developed to enable the systematic monitoring of informal feedback received from returnees.