



International Organization for Migration (IOM)
Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM)
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RETURN MIGRATION

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Introduction – return migration as part of the migration cycle

1. Rather than as an isolated phenomenon, return migration needs to be seen in the larger contexts of the international migration cycle of individual migrants and of migration management instruments applied by governments. The migration cycle, which includes regional and global flows between countries of origin, transit and destination, leads either to the migrants' integration in a host country, to onward migration or to the voluntary or non-voluntary return to the country of origin or habitual residence. Except in the case of the spontaneous return of regular migrants, the voluntary return of specific categories often requiring assistance, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers or persons under temporary protection, generally takes place once whatever prompted them to leave their country of origin in the first place – a natural disaster or conflict, for example – no longer exists. Voluntary forms of return comprise:

- spontaneous return
- assisted voluntary return (and reintegration)
- individual return of qualified nationals
- large-scale voluntary repatriation movements.

2. Non-voluntary returns from the host country take the form of either evacuations of migrants forced to flee as a result of external circumstances (force majeure), such as a natural disaster or an armed conflict/widespread violence, or be government-induced (deportation or expulsion).

3. In general, migration flows are not homogeneous but of a mixed character. While the term “mixed migration flows” describes large-scale and complex irregular migratory movements that may encompass refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and other migrants,¹ each category has a different degree of vulnerability and thus different needs for assistance. The return of migrants occurs at different stages of the migration cycle, spontaneous return being the most frequent and preferred option. “Successful” return is usually associated with the departure from a host country following a medium- or long-term stay, and includes refugees receiving assistance for voluntary repatriation once a conflict in their country of origin has ended and labour migrants whose assignment in the host country has finished and who return home, with or without assistance. However, return can also pre-empt efforts to reach the final destination, for example when irregular migrants end up stranded in countries of transit. This situation also arises in respect of irregular migrants or asylum-seekers who do not obtain the right to reside in the host country and have to leave without having been able to settle in the first place. Finally, unrest or widespread violence in the host country as a result of an armed conflict or natural disaster can also lead to the sudden and forced return of migrants.

Return migration – the concept

4. Return migration generally refers to the process of a person returning to his or her country of origin or habitual residence from either a host or a transit country,² except in the case of IDP returns, which do not involve crossing international borders. Government-induced

¹ Definition taken from: International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Glossary on Migration*, 2nd edition. International Migration Law, No. 25, IOM, Geneva, 2011 (hereinafter: *Glossary on Migration*).

² Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

forced returns are implemented alongside policies to address irregular migration and bilaterally, sometimes in the framework of readmission agreements. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM finds itself at the centre of the return debate. It is therefore in a privileged position to engage in discussions and facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the countries concerned, but must also meet the challenge of maintaining impartial service delivery in this particularly sensitive field of migration policy.

IOM's work in the field of return migration

5. Return migration is an integral part of IOM's cooperation with Member States and takes place in line with their legislation and national policies. In this context, IOM works with migrants and civil society specifically to address the contemporary challenges of migration and to ensure that returns occur in a safe, orderly, dignified and sustainable manner. IOM acts at all stages of the migration cycle, in cooperation and coordination with governmental and non-governmental partners at the international, national, regional and local levels whose specialized expertise allows for more targeted assistance to both migrants and governments. The various processes related to return migration, and IOM's involvement in them, are discussed below.

- Voluntary returns

6. *Spontaneous returns*³ involve the voluntary and independent return of an individual or group, including refugees, IDPs and asylum-seekers, to the country of origin, usually without the support of States or other international or national assistance. Only governments play a role in spontaneous returns, providing travel documents or processing re-entries; no part is played by either the host government or IOM.

7. *Assisted voluntary return and (where applicable) reintegration (AVR/R)*⁴ involves administrative, logistical and financial support for stranded migrants, rejected asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking in human beings and other migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country who volunteer to return to their countries of origin. To a varying degree, this includes assistance for reintegration, the process by which migrants are reinserted into the economic and social structure of the country of origin and become self-sufficient and able to earn their own living.⁵

8. AVR/R activities include individualized counselling with the provision of up-to-date and objective information on the situation in the country of origin, the facilitation of travel documents, organization of travel, and transit and reception assistance, including, where necessary, escorts. They are contingent on migrants returning of their own volition, in the absence of any physical or psychological coercion and following an informed decision based on accurate and objective information.

9. Apart from the assistance provided prior to departure and in transit, IOM Field Offices in countries of origin provide individual or collective reintegration support to returnees, promoting their self-sufficiency and hence the sustainability of the return process. Reintegration assistance can include specific housing or medical support in the country of origin.

³ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

⁴ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

⁵ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

10. Since the inception of AVR/R activities in 1979, IOM has helped more than 400,000 migrants return from 40 host countries to more than 160 countries of origin on all five continents.

11. The *return of qualified nationals (RQNs)* involves the organized and assisted return of expatriate nationals with specific professional skills in demand in the country or region of origin.⁶ RQN programmes have traditionally been implemented by governments in migrant-sending countries in order to reverse brain drain trends and/or address labour shortages. IOM engages highly qualified nationals to support national development or rehabilitation and reconstruction processes in countries whose economies are in transition on short, repeated or longer-term professional assignments. Its activities in this context include measures to identify gaps in human resource needs that cannot be met locally, to reach out to, recruit and place qualified candidates in sectors that are key to the country's development or reconstruction, and to provide individualized assistance. Good examples are the assignment of qualified nationals in countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jamaica and UNSC resolution 1244-administered Kosovo to support infrastructure development in the governance and health sectors.

12. In cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), IOM has been regularly involved in **large-scale voluntary repatriation movements** of refugees returning to their countries of origin once the conflict that had caused them to flee had ended. From UNHCR's perspective, the core of voluntary repatriation is return in and to conditions of physical, legal and material safety, with full restoration of national protection (...) ⁷ This requires the full involvement and support of governments in countries of origin. IOM's activities in the context of voluntary repatriation often involve organization of return travel and, depending on the circumstances, individual reception/reintegration support.

- Non-voluntary returns

13. IOM has traditionally played an important role in the *evacuation of migrants* forced to flee the host country as a result of a natural disaster or armed conflict. It may provide logistical support or transfer migrants caught in a zone of immediate danger, either to their country of origin or to a safe haven within the borders of the host country. It is the responsibility of governments to organize the evacuation of their nationals whenever their physical safety and integrity are in imminent danger, but IOM can act on behalf of governments requesting its support or that do not have the capacity to conduct such evacuations. Its support generally includes basic medical checks before the migrants are evacuated and the organization of and logistical support for travel. Between February and September 2011 alone, IOM evacuated around 208,000 migrants from Libya and neighbouring countries to 46 different countries of origin within or outside the region, or at least transferred them to a safe place outside the zone of immediate danger.

14. **Government-induced forced returns** (deportation/expulsion) are the act of a State exercising its sovereign right to remove non-nationals from its territory to their country of origin or a third State after refusing to admit them or terminating permission to remain.⁸ Forced

⁶ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

⁷ UNHCR, *Global Consultations on International Protection/Third Track: Voluntary Repatriation*, 25 April 2002, EC/GC/02/5, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3d62695d4.html> [accessed 12 October 2011]; the *Glossary on Migration* refers to voluntary repatriation as the "return of eligible persons to the country of origin on the basis of freely expressed willingness to so return".

⁸ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.

return policies are based on the sovereign right of governments to decide who should be allowed to enter and remain on their territory. Forced returns are usually implemented alongside voluntary returns. Some government-induced forced returns take place in the framework of readmission agreements concluded in the European Union context with individual countries of origin. These agreements lay out the procedures for readmission of nationals on a reciprocal basis, in particular the rights, obligations and responsibilities of host countries, countries of transit and countries of origin. IOM's role in the context of readmission agreements is centred on capacity-building upon request, contributions to the formulation of return policy in the country of origin and strengthening the analysis of data flowing out of the agreement's implementation, with a view to ensuring that the readmission process and its overall impact are evaluated.

15. In line with its Constitution,⁹ IOM does not become involved in the implementation of forced returns. It can, however, at the request of countries of origin, provide *post-arrival reintegration assistance (PARA)* to returnees who have been sent home under the auspices of their host governments, once they have been formally admitted in the country of origin. Depending on the humanitarian needs of forcibly returned migrants, such assistance can involve short-term reception assistance or medium-term socio-economic reintegration support to facilitate the reintegration of individuals into their communities of origin.

16. Apart from its operational involvement along the different stages of the migration cycle, IOM also engages in different types of *capacity-building* and in *research and evaluation* activities linked to both voluntary and non-voluntary return. Capacity-building is generally directed at local authorities and civil society actors in order to increase their knowledge and enhance their skills in the field of return migration. It aims to achieve generally acceptable benchmarks for management practices stemming from national and international norms.¹⁰

Conclusion

17. As clearly demonstrated above, return migration is neither a secondary nor ancillary phenomenon; rather, it is an integral and crucial component of international migration. Over time, this type of migration has increasingly become the subject of analysis and evaluation, particularly in terms of the reasons migrants return, the impact on individuals, groups, families, economies and societies in general, and the sustainability of voluntary return migration vis-à-vis forced return policies. It is absolutely essential to safeguard human rights when devising and implementing any return migration programme or policy.

18. The broad range of activities listed above makes it imperative for IOM to engage in partnerships with other players that have specialized expertise and long-standing experience in specific fields relating to return migration and reintegration. For example, in the context of mixed migration movements, the involvement of UNHCR is essential to ensure that migrants can access procedures for determining claims for international protection. At the same time, the involvement of other partners, such as UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations, is essential to ensure that migrants in need of specific assistance, such as family tracing, legal or medical services, can access them smoothly and directly.

19. Through its experience in implementing AVR/R activities and providing capacity-building in general return policies worldwide, IOM is best placed to foster positive approaches to bilateral and regional return dialogues in the context of migration management challenges.

⁹ Art. 1, para. 1(d), of the IOM Constitution.

¹⁰ Definition taken from *Glossary on Migration*.