



European cooperation on the sustainable return and reintegration of asylum seekers

Background of the study

In 2009, HIT Foundation carried out an Action Research on European cooperation concerning the sustainable return and reintegration of asylum seekers on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The objective of the research is to develop models of cooperation between EU Member States and formulate recommendations about the possible involvement of governments in the countries of origin. In this respect the research team has:

- analyzed current reintegration activities for failed asylum-seekers in seven EU Member States: The Netherlands, France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom;
- analyzed current reintegration activities for returnees in three countries of return: Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia and Iraq/Kurdistan;
- assessed the potential for increasing EU cooperation in this area.

The current situation: a paradox

Wishes

The European Commission promotes cooperation in organizing reintegration activities for returnees. All individual Member States wish to cooperate more closely, while the three countries of origin are keen to be more closely involved with implementing reintegration projects. All parties believe that increased cooperation could result in more efficient and effective reintegration programmes.

Realities

Joint reintegration activities financed by the EU or the individual Member States are virtually non-existent. When cooperation takes place, it is on an ad-hoc basis and by means of 'pragmatic alliances'. Programmes are often duplicated. Governments of the countries of origin are scarcely involved in the planning and implementation of reintegration programmes and leave this to the executing parties.

Causes

Why is it that although all actors voice a willingness to cooperate, this scarcely ever actually occurs? Joint efforts are made through the European Union, whereby the vast majority of funding is channelled through the Return Fund. 93% of the Return Fund is then transferred back into national programmes to allow Member States to prioritize the implementation of projects that are beneficial to their national interests above cooperation projects with other Member States that are harder to organize. Only the remaining 7% is spent directly by the European Commission. Furthermore, Member States lack a shared understanding and vision of the purpose of organizing reintegration activities and the European Commission's investment in reintegration is not (yet) structural. Motivation oscillates between the need to 'regulate' unwanted migrants from the justice perspective and the aim of adding 'development' to the agenda. Countries of origin are only interested in becoming involved when additional incentives are available for a wider range of returnees than failed asylum seekers from Europe. Most reintegration activities are executed by a limited number of large service providers who are more likely to compete with each other for programmes, than explore ways in which they can cooperate.





Opportunities for the future: efficiency

EU member states

Cooperation between EU Member States could be more efficient when:

- common and agreed upon goals and indicators are formulated;
- common definitions of the most essential terms such as ‘sustainability’, ‘reintegration’ and ‘voluntary return’ are formulated;
- each country appoints one leading agency that is responsible for representing the various governmental actors involved in activities to promote return;
- consortia are not too large and focus on quality of cooperation.

Countries of origin

More involvement from the governments of the countries of origin can lead to more efficiency, on condition that the target group of beneficiaries is extended. In addition to failed asylum seekers from the EU, undocumented migrants returning from the EU, returnees from neighbouring countries and Internally Displaced Persons should also be included.

Opportunities for the future: effectiveness

EU Member States

More efficient programmes do not automatically lead to increased effectiveness. Many EU member states consider their current approach and programmes generally successful. The general view seems to be: “Yes, cooperation could lead to more effectiveness, provided that others do what we are already doing”. There is no data on effectiveness because of the lack of monitoring and evaluation of the programmes currently on offer. It is therefore crucial to establish a comparative monitoring and evaluation system. This is even more important if the current trend of adding “development” to return programmes is to be continued. While the argument for a more developmental approach is valid as a theoretical assumption, it needs facts and figures to underline it. Only this would make it possible to distinguish ‘best practises’ from ‘worst practises’.

Countries of origin

Whether or not involving countries of origin will lead to more effective reintegration activities depends on the perspective. From a ‘justice perspective’ a bare minimum of involvement is necessary, given that governments have to accept the return of failed asylum seekers. Stronger involvement has little added value. From a development perspective, however, effectiveness could be improved by embedding return activities in other policy fields such as labour and education. Making return assistance available to a large number of beneficiaries is likely to create local spin-off.

The way forward

- Member States should take the lead.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation systems through evidence based learning
- Create a one-stop-shop model in one selected country of origin
- Participation of a number of Member States is required
- Extend beneficiaries of reintegration programmes
- Involve the government of the country of origin by creating shared responsibility
- Use opportunities to speed up processes such as Mobility Partnerships