

BRIEFING NOTE No. 161

Building systems for migration, return and reintegration: Lessons learned from employment-related interventions in West Africa

March 2023

By Anna Knoll and Pauline Veron

Summary

Return and reintegration are likely to remain strong political priorities for the European Union (EU) and its member states in the coming years. According to the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, support given to returnees should facilitate certain levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial well-being in their communities and create benefits for locals, potential migrants and returnees alike.

Aligning EU political priorities on migration, local and national development priorities and contextual realities regarding

employment, is demanding, particularly in the fast paced environment of setting up projects with limited time for analysis and in an thematic area with high political stakes. This policy brief documents key lessons of the Belgian development agency Enabel's experience in three countries – Guinea, Niger and The Gambia – where they offered support to returnees and locals as part of employment-related interventions.

All three interventions – funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – adopt a systemic approach to reintegration and improve the attractiveness of the local area with the aim to influence mobility choices and migration strategies. One key lesson is the need to develop a sound and coherent theory of change that clearly defines all objectives, clarifies their relationship and is based on a thorough analysis of the migratory context. Supporting local governance to build resilient and inclusive systems benefitting migrants and locals should be another core element of future interventions, as well as offering attractive and comprehensive reintegration support and enhancing coordination and complementarity with partners working on reintegration.

Introduction

During past years, the European Union (EU) and EU member states have given a high level of political attention and financial support to voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of failed asylum seekers and returning migrants in their countries of origin. In line with the external dimension of the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration (EC 2021),¹ one of the long-term objectives of such support has been for

returnees to reach certain levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial well-being in their communities. Such support to reintegration increasingly takes a holistic approach and aims to contribute to broader development strategies in partner countries so that both returnees and the local host communities benefit from it. The EU's policy is clear that "reintegration needs to be designed with the involvement of national and local authorities, host local communities and civil society to help give tangible future prospects for the returnee and their local community."²

EU member states' development agencies, United Nations (UN) agencies and international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increased their support to the reintegration of migrants with a view to fostering territorial development and economic opportunities in host communities and creating benefits for locals, potential migrants and returnees alike. Yet, these development actors also have to navigate challenges in combining migration-related objectives and demands with their approach to broader development activities while operating in a sensitive thematic area with high political stakes.

This policy brief reflects on lessons learned from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) projects INTEGRA, DURAZINDER and RIEC/"Make it in The Gambia" implemented by Enabel in Guinea, Niger and The Gambia respectively.³ Experiences from these projects provide valuable insights and lessons for activities supporting local employment creation and migration governance with the aim to sustainably reintegrate returning migrants while also targeting locals as well as for EU support to reintegration more broadly. All three interventions aim to facilitate employment and employability (through HIMO,⁴ Chantier-Ecole, Cash for Work and in sectors ranging

from agriculture to value chain development and entrepreneurship) in contexts of migration and return, and aim to adopt a systemic approach to reintegration. They aim to support the reintegration of returning migrants and to improve the attractiveness of the local area with a view to influencing mobility choices and migration strategies of men, women and families.

Developing a coherent theory of change and defining target groups

One of the key lessons of the interventions has been the need for developing a sound and coherent theory of change that clearly defines all objectives, clarifies their relationship and is based on a thorough analysis of the migratory context as part of project formulation. Given their multi-sector focus, the interventions aimed to achieve several strategic objectives simultaneously: reducing irregular migration, improving employability, promoting gender equality, strengthening agricultural development and rural infrastructure, while supporting migration or return governance. Some of these emerged from EU political priorities on migration, others from aligning with local and national priorities and contextual realities regarding employment. Yet, clarity on how all objectives can be achieved simultaneously, where priorities lie and what room there is for prioritising some objectives over others in case of tensions, was missing.

A number of factors led to this situation. The fast pace of setting up projects under the EUTF as an emergency instrument and the speeding up of project formulation meant less time for establishing conceptual clarity, engaging in deeper analysis and working out a strong theory of change from the outset. The political pressure

underlying EUTF spending and the need to show progress on sustainable reintegration for returnees from the EU, as well as the lack of in-depth knowledge and analysis on migration, return and gender dynamics relevant to the target groups, meant that several aspects had to be figured out, adjusted and adapted during implementation.

During implementation, a number of tensions between some of the objectives and the included target groups (which covered young men and women, potential migrants, and male and female returnees – both those returning through IOM and those returning on their own ‘spontaneous’ means from various origins) emerged. This made it challenging to respond to all of the projects’ objectives. For instance, some economic sectors that were chosen as part of activities (for example, in agriculture in The Gambia) were of little interest to the targeted youth and returning migrants, yet helped to address gender-related objectives. Gender targets were introduced alongside those for returning migrants with a political demand to focus on those returning from the EU via IOM. The migratory context was, however, often such that it was predominantly men who would migrate and return and for those women that migrated, it was more often spontaneous returns from the region rather than from Europe. Moreover, their migration experiences differed, leading to different support needs. In some instances, it was impossible to find beneficiaries that would fulfil all envisaged criteria, leading to adaptations and broadening of the type of return migrant targeted.

Targeting predominantly IOM-referred returnees with reintegration support was another challenge. It seemed that this demand by the EU at times clashed with the contextual realities and migratory dynamics in places where interventions took place. A key lesson has

been to go beyond a strict definition of returnees as those assisted in their return by IOM or as those who return from the EU when selecting beneficiaries in order to provide longer-term systemic support and respond to contextual dynamics. A more inclusive approach (including other groups of return migrants as beneficiaries) has allowed the projects to respond to contextual realities and local priorities and to be able to better operationalise the objectives by reaching targets.

Moreover, all projects encountered difficulties – albeit to varying degrees – with establishing a functioning referral system with IOM. Shortcomings were due to mismatches between the projects' geographical focus, criteria, and timeframes and the locations and profiles of young IOM returnees. Yet the projects also found it challenging to obtain reliable and official sources of information on voluntary return migrants to target and include as beneficiaries beyond the IOM referral system. In recruiting returnees, all projects adapted and diversified their partners beyond IOM, for instance through the community channel. A lesson for the future is to reflect at the formulation and start-up stage on different ways to refer returnees to the project and/or to better calibrate projects on the specific needs of returnees. Involving credible (local) organisations from the outset, and thinking about designing reliable mechanisms to identify spontaneous migrants (for example, through border agents, beyond engagement with communities and chiefs) were identified as important avenues to explore in future projects. Ideally, more thought should be given to a strategic vision and the practicalities of how the referral process will work, the resources and technical solutions required (including data sharing and confidentiality and compatibility between the monitoring technologies used by different partners), and the commitment and

willingness of partners to engage in the formulation and start-up phases. Investment in good informal working relationships also seems important.

An alternative and longer-term approach could be to involve local actors (for example, local employment offices or youth counselling services) in organising guidance/referral and to build their capacity. Their role would be to assess the skills and interests of returnees (and other young people) and to refer them to a variety of projects/programmes. This could help create sustainable systems capable of directing young people to existing opportunities according to their profile, aspirations and geographical area. The time-bound programmes of development actors could then build on these systems and would not need to (re)construct referral mechanisms for each programme. However, this will require a careful assessment of existing agencies and their capacities, and a plan to strengthen their role. Overall, the referral strategy for returnees needs to be well thought out and respond to the (return) migration dynamics in the targeted localities, the objectives and corresponding targets of IOM or other partners involved, as well as local and national migration governance structures (which may be involved in referrals through committees).

Box 1: Tailoring projects to the local context and realities

Local context and reality can run counter to the ambitious objectives and timelines set by the projects. For instance, the projects had ambitious objectives to support the creation of sustainable employment. Yet, the timeframe of three years in contexts that are not conducive to employment generation in the first place may not be realistic and may require an adaptation and lowering of ambitions. The project in Niger focused on supporting small enterprises to expand and hire additional staff, which was successful. The intervention in the Gambia aimed at supporting the horticultural sector more structurally (for example, through focusing on value-chain and supply-chain development and supporting traders), yet without direct measurable impact on job creation during the lifetime of the project. Contextual analysis and in-depth understanding of economic sectors remain key in fragile contexts (for example, regarding capacities available, governance structures, systemic weaknesses et cetera). Another important element is to allow for flexible programming/modalities in the face of fast-evolving (human) phenomena and as involved parties are learning from the approach.

Aspiring migrants and those returning may have different needs and resources than those without a migratory trajectory. For returning migrants, the level of competencies when returning from abroad, their ambitions in relation to a possible employment path (such as self-employment and entrepreneurial activities versus employment) and their sectors of interest have to be considered. Those that migrate may also have a higher level of financial and other resources compared to those that stay, yet when returning, they may also face debt challenges and social stigma.

In this context, the interventions grappled with the question of how to formulate actions that can provide relevant support to various target groups of locals (with migration intentions or not), return migrants (from different origins and with different migration histories), and provide differentiated responses to each category, given that they often have different characteristics, needs and priorities concerning their preferred employment or job opportunity path. This is essential to attract targeted beneficiaries and to provide meaningful reintegration support.

For future development interventions of similar nature, it is important to define clearly all objectives in a robust theory of change. Vague notions such as the objective to contribute to return and migration governance in the context of employment creation needs full unpacking in terms of sectors, needs of targeted beneficiaries and overall objectives regarding migration governance. Clarity is also needed about whether providing alternatives to irregular migration is best achieved by re-directing beneficiaries with migration intentions to regular pathways (for example, through referring them to other EU projects in the region on labour mobility such as the ongoing THAMM project) or whether it is about providing local alternatives, as this has implications for project design. To do this well, analysis that can help identify and anticipate tensions between targets and objectives and that is based on information about the characteristics of target groups and the local context dynamics – both in relation to migration and employment – is needed. This can help prevent tensions from arising during the implementation phase.

Still, learning and adaptations will occur in any intervention, especially in the face of fast-evolving (human) phenomena, such as

an unexpected increase in the number of people leaving or returning to a local area. Maintaining flexible modalities and introducing flexibility measures for migration-related projects provides autonomy to adapt to the dynamics on the ground while operating in the context of the overall EU migration objectives. The three projects we analysed learned and adapted while finding new solutions to the above-described challenges. Those with longer implementation periods and larger budgets had the necessary flexibility to adapt approaches.

Supporting systemic and territorial approaches to return and reintegration

The mobility of young people, as well as the reintegration of returnees, has an impact on community development. For authorities at the sub-national level (including regional governors and mayors), governing the local population in terms of service provision as well as reintegrating returnees into existing systems is a challenge.

Rather than providing immediate return support,⁵ development actors' added value is to focus on providing systemic support and strengthening territorial resilience in contexts of migratory and return dynamics. During past years, the interest of European donors to accompany local authorities in integrating return and sustainable reintegration in their plans and strategies has increased. The starting point of development actors, such as Enabel, is to assist local actors to better provide access to socio-economic opportunities and employment for returnees, potential migrants and locals in an integrated way and to build inclusive systems. Targeting return migrants alongside local beneficiaries seems beneficial from a

systemic and development-led perspective. This has longer-term benefits for reintegration and is likely more often in line with the priorities of local authorities. This approach also helps reduce social tensions between returnees and the local population. The experience from Gambia showed that the introduction of an additional allowance for returnees who were not from the area (in order to attract them) was highly beneficial in addressing the debt situation that returnees faced upon return and thus the stigma and pressure they could face from families, and it did not lead to any particular tensions in local communities. However, it required transparency and sensitisation of the village committee members and chiefs involved to explain the reasons for the approach. On the contrary, in Guinea, there was a deliberate decision not to offer "specific treatment" to returnees in order to avoid positive discrimination and thus social tensions. This approach, coupled with awareness raising, has enabled returnees to trust the programme, given their reluctance to be identified by their peers as a returnee.

Longer-term development interventions can add value by focusing on strengthening the resilience of territories so they can adapt to the arrival of returnees in terms of providing services, such as orientation, access to employment-related opportunities and other services. This requires systemic work at the level of national and local governance actors (policy development, planning, budgeting, developing strategies for integration, leveraging the potential of diaspora et cetera) or support to other actors providing such services. However, the level of involvement of local government actors on reintegration management is not always strong. Moreover, the relationship between migration policies and strategies and other sector strategies (for example, job and employment creation) as well as related roles and responsibilities is not always clear.

In the context of Enabel's three interventions, there has been an interest in supporting local authorities to include objectives related to sustainable reintegration in their work and strategies and to build up resilience to govern human mobility. However, the projects have not focused on these aspects to a large extent. A lesson learned from DURAZINDER is that the orientation of objectives regarding local governance of migration (and the link with the national strategy) should be better designed as part of the formulation of the approach.

Supporting local governance to build resilient and inclusive systems benefitting migrants and locals and connecting territorial governance to national policies should be considered as a core element in the formulation of future intervention approaches. Future projects focusing on the economic dimension of reintegration could accompany local authorities more strongly in connecting economic approaches to migration governance and related strategies. This of course depends also on the existence of explicit objectives and provisions to create links between national and local government and community-level programming and the extent to which national migration and reintegration strategies have been devolved.

What type of reintegration support for migrants upon return?

Experience of the three projects has shown that economic (re-)integration remains challenging, especially in contexts that have limited opportunities. The starting point is thus to create a vision of employment and viable trajectories, in economic sectors that offer

opportunities at the community level and are attractive to targeted beneficiaries. In many possible sectors, whether fisheries, agriculture, construction or mining, issues related to job security, decent work, job precarity and social protection persist. These may form part and parcel of factors underlying migratory dynamics. Developing a vision of the opportunities for employment in the targeted communities and local areas will need to take place through the involvement of communes and local enterprises.

A second lesson has been that interventions do well to offer a menu of different responses that on the one hand can adapt locally (based on jobs and promising sectors available) as well as to the economic needs and interests of different target groups. Responses that can support economic (re-)integration trajectories need to cover various dimensions, come as part of a package, and offer a menu of differentiated responses while creating longer-term systems of actors that can offer support in the style of a 'treadmill' approach (see Box 2).

Ideally, the creation of treadmill support systems is part of the systemic approach of strengthening local actors. Yet, the reality of the context may be such that actors are not present yet or not strong enough and structures first need to be built. In this case, more sustainable and system-wide approaches may take more time and need to be combined with more insular approaches at first, while such systems are being supported.

Box 2: A 'treadmill approach' to sustainable (re-)integration

Supporting beneficiaries over time with a range of opportunities can help maximise their chances of finding meaningful employment or successfully setting up their own micro-enterprise (for example, because sufficient savings have been made, theoretical and practical skills have been acquired and networks have been developed). This often requires the creation of synergies between implementers and (local) partners and the development of a kind of 'treadmill approach'.

The RIEC and INTEGRA projects in The Gambia and Guinea respectively included the idea of working with partners and guiding beneficiaries in such an approach. The initial idea of RIEC, for example, was to establish a kind of systematic treadmill approach whereby beneficiaries would move from one support to another and development organisations would follow beneficiaries along their pathway in order to maximise their employability and enhance the prospects for sustainable (re)integration and stable employment. For INTEGRA originally, the idea was to create synergies within the overall EU programme, while ensuring the smooth running of the INTEGRA integration pathway internally. Ideally, this approach is rooted in strengthening local systems to offer all services important for managing economic (re-)integration.

Programmes focusing on socio-economic (re-)integration and job creation will need to cover a variety of support elements to be successful. The projects studied, all had to add components in order to provide meaningful support. This included alphabetisation courses, financial and life skills as well as psychosocial support,

which was especially pertinent for specific groups of returnees. Indeed, for returnees, there is a process of de-stigmatization necessary in the framework of reintegration programmes. Beyond the focus on economic reintegration, the psychosocial dimension (including the development of self-confidence and skills) needs to be fully and more strongly integrated into all support programmes, which is not currently the case.

There is also a need for specific psychosocial support for women to help them manage the challenges and vulnerabilities associated with their migration journey. More broadly, it is crucial to integrate a gender approach (both in terms of strategy and capacity) in the design and implementation of the projects as well as an analysis of the place and societal conditions of men and women in the areas of project implementation, in order to define a mainstreaming strategy and to take their realities into account from the formulation phase.

Finally, while the three projects mainly focused on the economic causes of migration – as their core mission – this already presupposes a specific idea of the process and reasons for migration. Focusing only on the economic dimension without having a broader view of the drivers of migration can miss some important aspects. Future projects could aim to better understand the level of governance of migration and return at the community level and how elements of power and cultural aspects play into the drivers of migration. These aspects can then better feature in a more comprehensive support system for returnees and locals.

Coordination and complementarity with partners working on reintegration

Coordination and complementarity between agencies is a key aspect to invest in future projects. In practice, it has been difficult for past projects (for example, INTEGRA) to implement a 'treadmill approach' (see Box 2) and put into practice the envisaged collaboration between partners. A lack of synergies and coordination between actors – even between consortia members for EUTF-funded projects – has hampered effective implementation of envisaged referral mechanisms.

A key challenge remains that implementing agencies have different criteria, timeframes, targets and geographical focus areas as well as different phases of programming and implementation, which makes cooperation and referral difficult. It is key to find ways to incentivise consortium partners to rely on each other and find complementarities rather than focus on their own programme components when supporting beneficiaries, as this can lead to insufficient assistance for young people and missed opportunities to present them with various reintegration opportunities. A common strategy and understanding between partners is often lacking and would need to be drawn up from the outset of project development. The approach to referrals across partners for instance would need to be more concretely determined and formalised during formulation and start-up phases so that the above challenges do not hamper their effectiveness.

The idea of a treadmill approach should be designed and systematised during the formulation of a project. Lessons from the three projects indicate that partners should have an overlapping

vision, possibly previous experience of working together and an existing level of trust, incentives to engage in referrals and jointly create reintegration opportunities over time beyond viewing each other as competitors for funding. Ideally, all this should be pinned down in contractual obligations with clear memoranda of understanding between partners and strong clauses on referrals. Such a system requires strong coordination and systems, as well as dedicated capacity and time to coordinate, monitor and organise referrals (including a functioning shared IT system).

Targets and selection criteria would also need to be somewhat aligned between the different components of a 'treadmill approach' so that it is possible for beneficiaries to access follow-up opportunities. The system should also provide for quick and flexible response and support (as the timeframe for return flights is not always known) and include different referral mechanisms and networks for different types of beneficiaries, which may have different needs and interests (for example, those in rural or urban contexts). Coordination meetings at a central level between all partner organisations involved in the programme can also be useful to develop synergies and plan activities while aligning timelines.

Another aspect is to clearly identify and delineate tasks and responsibilities between implementing agencies. For some of the projects, components and actions were split across agencies while jointly contributing to the same outcomes. This created challenges precisely because visions and approaches were not aligned from the outset. In The Gambia, a key lesson has been not to divide responsibilities for infrastructure development (construction and proposing governance methodologies) and their sustainable management across institutions. Also in Guinea, transferring

responsibility of the entire socio-economic integration chain to one implementing partner through a grant agreement supported coherence. There should thus be a thorough process of deliberation to decide where complementarities between partners can be established and to define which tasks should not be separated.

The EU as a funder could take stronger alignment and complementarity into consideration also during formulation phases and include incentives for implementing actors to seek cooperation as part of contractual arrangements. This also includes taking into account the different starting points, approaches and respective added values of partners, including UN agencies, such as IOM, focusing more strongly on migration management and EU member states' implementing agencies, focusing on a longer-term development approach to return and reintegration. Both are important actors for reintegration covering the spectrum from return management to support to long-term, sustainable and systemic reintegration capacities in origin countries.

There is an added value of development actors approaching reintegration from a structural and community level perspective with a view to strengthening state, business and civil society institutional capacities and infrastructure rather than focusing on individuals only. Planning reintegration efforts together with local actors as part of their development plans or area-based approaches in returnee-prone areas is part of this. This also includes supporting local authorities in providing more inclusive services and building referral systems to build sustainable systems over time. Development actors are well positioned to work on such longer-term strategies, yet initially may also rely on the web of international

actors and local NGOs for service provision to build systemic support systems over time.

A lesson from the three projects has been that while there was a clear expectation for coordination and complementarity to take place, incentives were not sufficiently strong and leadership absent. A key question is thus whose role it is to coordinate a 'treadmill approach' to reintegration support and who should take the lead in building complementarities. Coordination can be incentivised as part of contractual arrangements and promoted by the EU Delegation, yet during the implementation phase implementing agencies will have a responsibility to operationalise referrals and cooperation themselves. At the European level, the Team Europe approach may be a good mechanism to strengthen complementarities also in the area of referrals and reintegration as it aims to bring different member states' implementing agencies together, building on their comparative advantages. It could be used as a mechanism to discuss clear complementarities in offering reintegration support across actors. This does not mean that the EU delegation necessarily has to be in the lead. One implementing agency can also take the lead in coordinating different agencies involved and reporting to the EU.

Conclusion

The EU continues to focus strongly on providing reintegration support to migrants who return to their countries of origin from the EU member states and other countries. The EU Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE) reserves a large amount of funding for the topic of migration and return and reintegration are likely to remain strong

political priorities during the coming years. At the level of partner countries, there has also been an increased interest in supporting returnees, yet most often with a view to strengthening systems of service provision overall and for all citizens. This policy brief documented key lessons of Enabel's experience in three countries in West Africa implementing support to returnees and locals as part of employment-related interventions and provided some food for thought for future interventions of the EU, in terms of finding complementarities and building referrals and organising treadmill approaches benefitting returnees and locals.

Our main recommendations for future projects supporting socio-economic (re-)integration of locals and return migrants:

➤ **Developing a coherent theory of change and defining target groups**

Developing a sound and coherent theory of change that clearly defines all objectives, clarifies their relationship and is based on thorough analysis of the migratory context and gender dynamics but also of capacities available and governance structures as part of project formulation is key.

Maintaining flexible modalities and introducing flexibility measures for migration-related projects provides autonomy to adapt to the dynamics on the ground while operating in the context of the overall EU migration objectives.

➤ **Supporting systemic and territorial approaches to return and reintegration**

Supporting local governance to build resilient and inclusive systems benefitting migrants and locals and connecting territorial

governance to national policies should be considered as a core element in the formulation of future intervention approaches. Future projects focusing on the economic dimension of reintegration could accompany local authorities more strongly in connecting economic approaches to migration governance and related strategies.

➤ **Offering attractive and comprehensive reintegration support for return migrants**

A strong vision of the opportunities for employment in the targeted communities and local areas will need to underpin each intervention and involve communes and local enterprises. Programmes focusing on socio-economic reintegration and job creation will need to cover a variety of support elements to be successful beyond the employment and job-related measures (such as training for a specific trade, HIMO, entrepreneurship, et.). This includes alphabetisation courses, financial and life skills as well as psychosocial support, which is especially pertinent for specific groups of returnees.

➤ **Enhancing coordination and complementarity with partners working on reintegration**

Within the EU framework, there should be clear incentives and leadership structures to facilitate and strengthen cooperation across partners as well as contractual accountability.

There should also be more alignment between different components of a reintegration pathway to ensure that beneficiaries can access follow-up opportunities, for example, as part of a 'treadmill approach'. This requires also determining more concretely and formalising the approach to referrals across partners formalised during formulation and start-up phases. Moreover, and as part of

this, there should thus be a thorough process of deliberation to decide where complementarities between partners can be established and to define which tasks should not be separated.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief has been elaborated in the framework of a multi-country comparative study, led by Enabel, the Belgian development agency, on three projects (INTEGRA, RIEC, DURAZINDER) on reintegration, and financed by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF).



Endnotes

1. EC. 2021. [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration](#). Brussels: European Commission.
2. EC. 2021. [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration](#). P.2. Brussels: European Commission.
3. It is based on qualitative research carried out between February and December 2022 in Guinea, Niger and The Gambia as part of a capitalisation exercise organised by Enabel and carried out by ECDPM.
4. Haute Intensité de la Main d'Oeuvre (HIMO)/High Labour Intensive Works.
5. Such immediate support is usually provided by actors directly involved in return procedures, such as Frontex or IOM.