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Making it work: AVRR programmes and Ghanaian returnees

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Policy recommendations

\ Raise beneficiaries' awareness of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes in destination countries

Fear of detention and deportation prevents many migrants in Europe (especially the undocumented) from asking for advice on their options to return. State-based Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes should disseminate information on return programmes to a broader spectrum of third sector organisations (e.g. churches, diaspora organisations) to inform potential returnees of their options.

\ Adapt AVRR strategies to domestic political realities

Migration management policies have to reflect domestic politics in destination and return countries. National policies relating to migration need to be unified to synergise and streamline AVRR programmes efficiently. A holistic and participatory approach that includes community-based and civil society organisations would help to better adapt (multi)national policies to the realities of domestic politics concerning return and reintegration.

\ Adjust reintegration assistance to the Ghanaian context

The lengthy bureaucratic processes involved in AVRR programmes is one of the biggest challenges for beneficiaries, that lead to frustrations and push people into additional expenses. The high level of formality involved in these programmes disregards that the Ghanaian context is in many ways fundamentally different from the European Union. Reintegration assistance should be coordinated with local non-governmental and civil society organisations to ensure that the assistance being offered does not multiply red tape.

Making it work: AVRR programmes and Ghanaian returnees

Introduction

Migration (both internal and international) has been and continues to be a deeply rooted socio-economic and cultural practice in Ghana. Today, Ghana's economic and political performance is better than that of other countries in Africa. Yet, now as before, a large number of primarily young Ghanaians keep migrating in search of better opportunities. It is estimated that by the time of writing, around 1.5 million Ghanaians out of 31 million live outside Ghana, of whom about 70 per cent live in the Economic Community of West African States zone and Libya, followed by OECD countries on a much smaller scale. Migration is, nevertheless, not a one-way-street: Remittances, investments, visits, circular migration and return to Ghana have considerable social and economic impacts.

The different and ever-changing political and socio-economic contexts in the receiving countries together with the specific socio-economic characteristics of the migrants shape not only their out-migration but also their return and reintegration trajectories. Under its headings of return, readmission and reintegration, Objective 21 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) highlights a series of commitments: Facilitate safe and dignified return, duly readmit states' nationals and support their sustainable reintegration, including personal safety, economic empowerment and social inclusion. Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRRs) were designed to incentivise the return of migrants, especially of those without a legal residence permit (e.g. undocumented migrants and rejected asylum seekers) and support their reintegration in the country of origin. AVRRs are mostly devised by European states (European Return and Reintegration Network - ERRIN, European Border and Coast Guard Agency - EBCGA / FRONTEX). In countries of origin, many operations are implemented in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The main goal is to enable and improve return and reintegration through joint contracting of service providers.

At the national level, Germany has implemented a series of projects to support the voluntary return of migrants such as the REAG/GARP-programme (Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum-Seekers in Germany/Government Assisted Repatriation Program), and the BMZ's 'Returning to New Opportunities' initiative (since 2017). In cooperation with advice centres and several civil society groups in Germany and partner countries, (potential) returnees are supported through preparatory reintegration training activities, advice on employment opportunities (e.g. start-ups), or information campaigns about the dangers of irregular migration. As part of the 'Returning to New Opportunities', the 'Migration for Development Programme' (2017-2020) provides individual advice—from preparation in Germany to a new start in the country of origin. In Germany, the programme works closely with communities and supports the return and reintegration services provided by charities, governmental return advisory structures and social agencies. In Ghana, the Ghanaian-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration (GGC), in cooperation with civil society organisations, international organisations, the private sector and other projects supported by the German development cooperation GIZ, is in charge of implementing the 'Returning to New Opportunities'. Moreover, the GCC also provides on-site counselling for jobs and entrepreneurship, individual profiling, referral advice, vocational training and psychosocial counselling for returnees and members of the host population.

External researchers have criticised existing self-monitoring measures of national and European AVRR programmes for neglecting reintegration and focusing on means to ensure that rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants leave the national territory, regardless of what happens next. To date, there is a need for independent research providing an in-depth understanding of whether such aid is effective in supporting migrants' lives after their return or not. This *Policy Brief* addresses this point by presenting recommendations that are based on the results of fieldwork conducted in Ghana between January and

February 2020. The authors conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with returnees (with and without AVRR support), local communities, with practitioners and experts in Greater Accra, Ashanti Region and Central Region. Based on the findings, the following issues are paramount to improve administrative efficiency, heighten political sustainability, foster human rights, increase social cohesion and progress economic self-reliance in current AVRR programmes:

Raise beneficiaries' awareness of AVRR programmes in destination countries

Support from family members, friends, colleagues, social organisations and networks is crucial for the ability of migrants to surmount the difficulties linked to return. Moreover, the conditions of return—i.e. whether return was voluntary (with or without formal assistance) or involuntary—determine its success. Our fieldwork findings indicate that very few voluntary returnees who had a regular migration status but did not receive AVRR support knew of the existence or the characteristics of AVRR programmes. They had only heard of the programmes and their entitlement to support once they had returned to Ghana. Those few who claimed to be aware of the AVRR programmes already in Europe did not apply for fear of being forcefully deported or banned from returning to Europe.

Of those who did benefit from AVRR support, the majority knew about the possibility to receive support once they had entered the asylum process. In this regard, it is important to point out that none of the interviewed recipients of AVRR support in Ghana had arrived in Europe as asylum seekers but rather as undocumented labour migrants. After facing the need for legal documents necessary to stay and work in Europe (often related to pressing healthcare needs), many had been directed to the asylum path by friends or Ghanaian churches. Only after entering the asylum system were they informed of the possibility of being supported by the AVRR programmes.

State-based programmes on AVRR should, therefore, work together more closely with a broader spectrum of the third sector (e.g. churches, diaspora organisations, etc.) for a wider range of channels to inform potential returnees about their options of a more coordinated return.

Adapt AVRR strategies to respective domestic political realities

Public debate, domestic politics and policies on return and reintegration in the receiving countries (e.g. in Germany) either focus on the loss of cheap unskilled labour or on reducing the number of welfare recipients. In Ghana, on the contrary, those who went abroad are mostly seen as successful entrepreneurs and income providers. There is a substantial interest to keep remittances flowing, which are up to four times higher than direct investment and development aid combined. Returnees are deemed to be investors who bring in skills, resources, innovations—and networks that help to establish permanent relations with the Ghanaian diaspora. This is shown e.g. by the 2019 Ghanaian Year of Return initiative that addressed the African diaspora. The aim was to attract them to Ghana including the offer of Ghanaian nationality—without requiring anyone to abandon their current place of work, or residence or citizenship.

While the relevance of remittances has been increasing, the leverage of international aid in comparison has been decreasing. According to the World Bank, remittances in lower and middle-income countries have overtaken official development assistance (ODA) since the 1990s. In 2019, the sum of officially counted remittances was three times higher than ODA and even surpassed foreign direct investment (FDI). Remittances, according to the World Bank, have become a lifeline. This means that national governments of remittances-dependent countries, such as Ghana, cannot justify unpopular compliance policies by pointing at increased aid funds. Their constituencies, on the contrary, increasingly expect their leaders to advocate in the interest of their fellow countrymen abroad.

The tension between domestic and foreign affairs is compounded by the fact that the multitude of Ghanaian ministries, government departments and agencies that manage migration issues do not possess a clear, unified migration policy. This has resulted in the emergence of multiple initiatives in Ghana, such as returnee-based NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) to fill the void and provide information and support to returnees. Despite existing efforts to interconnect national NGOs on platforms like the CSO Platform on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many of these initiatives function independently and without prioritising coordination. This results in overlapping efforts and sometimes inaccurate information for each specific case, especially for those who were not aware of or did not receive any AVRR support in the receiving country.

AVRR strategies must take the domestic political reality on both sides into account through independent assessments, participatory bottom-up dialogues, extensive bilateral consultations, establish common ground—and must be adapted accordingly. The ‘Migration for Development Programme’, with its connections to CSOs could be well suited to support these endeavours. It is crucial to communicate diverging interests, compromises, resulting constraints, and respective benefits openly to manage expectations and rumours better, avoid misunderstandings and enable all participants to make informed decisions.

Adjust reintegration assistance to the Ghanaian context

All the beneficiaries of AVRR programmes interviewed complained about the almost unsustainable length of the bureaucratic process involved. To receive assistance, for example when wanting to acquire a small stall and a sewing machine to start their own business, returnees are requested to provide official receipts of the materials or a bill for the premises that they need. Such a high level of formality is not common in Ghana, and this is why such issues not only lengthen the process but also make some people incur additional expenses (e.g. transport, notarial fees, etc.). Numerous cases have shown that the frustration of beneficiaries and the chances of dropping out increased the longer they were left in limbo.

Reintegration assistance should, therefore, be better adjusted to the Ghanaian context. The support in cash given upon return, for example, seems to be insufficient in many cases. Whereas many returnees we talked to stayed with some relative upon return, some people had to find a place to stay. Considering that in Ghana, rent is often paid two years in advance, the amount provided upon return can easily be fully spent on accommodation. Adding to this, several respondents required expensive medical attention for their health upon their return. In a context where accommodation, food, or healthcare are pressing and competing needs, beneficiaries of AVRR programmes must often give priority to one of them, and it is frequently their health that suffers. In some cases, however, local implementing partners helped reach ‘creative’ solutions (Box 1).

Despite this constraint, the interviewed voluntary returnees with AVRR appreciated the support they had received, and none of them intended to attempt migration again, even though they were stretched for money. Many voluntary returnees (with or without formal assistance) reported that being mentally

Box 1**The example of Greta**

Greta (59) returned from Germany to Ghana in September 2019. She was a beneficiary of the AVRR support programme, which granted her euro 1,000 cash when she left Germany and around euro 2,500 in kind to start up her business. Although her business idea had been approved, five months later she was still waiting for her in-kind support. Greta had returned from Germany suffering from a condition that required medical treatment. Even though she was able to stay with her son (who was also unemployed), the euro 1,000 soon ran out. Aware of the slow process, the social worker at the local NGO implementing partner advanced the costs for Greta's insurance from her own money until Greta was able to repay her.

prepared to return was equally or even more important than being financially prepared. In this regard, the counselling and training sessions provided before and/after arrival seemed to play a big role in managing returnees' expectations and help them set up a plan. None of the respondents had gone through training in Germany before returning. Practitioners in Ghana, however, explained that in their experience, such training was rather counterproductive because it took place abroad, that is in an environment and under conditions (e.g. tools, materials, etc.) that were either not replicable in Ghana or did not match the Ghanaian market, which led to frustration and waste of resources.

It is therefore important to offer modules that provide a basis for return, to manage expectations prior to return, to interlink pre- and post-return support, to readjust the type of aid and the ways of providing it to the local context by tapping even more into the knowledge of local NGOs, CSOs and other returnees, and to finally invest even more in making such a policy transparent for all. Cooperation that heightens interconnections and synergies in this way will help to improve how the available resources can be put to a more effective use.

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