

The Challenges of Safe Return: Supporting Civil Society Actors After Temporary Relocation

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Forschungsbericht / research report

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Seiden, S. (2020). *The Challenges of Safe Return: Supporting Civil Society Actors After Temporary Relocation*. (ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy). Stuttgart: ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen). <https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.10.2020>

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ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy
a Martin Roth-Initiative Publication

The Challenges of Safe Return

Supporting Civil Society Actors
After Temporary Relocation

Stanley Seiden

Martin
Roth
Initiative

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ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy – a Martin Roth-Initiative Publication

The Challenges of Safe Return

Supporting Civil Society Actors After Temporary Relocation

Stanley Seiden



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ifa Institut für
Auslandsbeziehungen



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Foreword by ifa's Research Program "Culture and Foreign Policy"

Social reintegration of vulnerable individuals removed from their home communities has a long history in the practice of humanitarian support. In environments where human rights defenders, artists, and civil society actors working for the betterment of their communities are at risk, a "safe return", however, is often rather an aspiration – but sadly not a goal that can be granted. Nevertheless, the author of this study, Stanley Seiden, shows that at least "with sufficient knowledge, dedication, and collaboration, organizations providing temporary relocation and their supporters can establish safer conditions for their participants."

ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) is committed to peaceful and enriching coexistence between people and cultures worldwide. We promote art and cultural exchange through exhibitions, dialogue, and conference programs. As a competence center for international cultural relations, ifa connects civil societies, cultural practices, art, media, and science.

This study here from the Martin Roth-Initiative forms part of the research at ifa and the ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, in which experts address relevant issues relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim to provide expert advice for policy-makers and practitioners. With the participatory approach presented here, a returnee is seen as a community member returning to his or her place within a community. Through this approach, host programs can try to incorporate questions of collective security and capacity in their training tools.

Dr. Odila Triebel

Head of Dialogue and Research "Culture and Foreign Policy", ifa

Foreword by Martin Roth-Initiative

One of the most constitutive features of temporary international relocation for at-risk civil society actors is illustrated by the very first word of the term – it is always just a temporary solution. This also represents one of relocation initiatives' biggest challenges. First and foremost, to the participants who need to decide how to go on with life after relocation, while the threat which made them leave their place of origin or residence might not have disappeared. But also to the people who design and manage relocation programs, since they work with limited resources and capacities to best meet the individual needs of each participant. This publication aims to stimulate further discussion on the conditions for safe return, well aware of the fact that return does not always turn out to be an option.

This study is published within the research program of the Martin Roth-Initiative (MRI). In 2018, this temporary international relocation initiative was started by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and the Goethe-Institut to enable at-risk artists to continue their work in Germany or in another safe country.

MRI's research aims to foster knowledge and contribute examples of good practice for the enhancement of existing relocation initiatives. For instance, the results of this study will be discussed at a digital workshop on 17 September 2020, which aims to identify key points for a follow-up cartoon that will serve as an illustrated guideline to sensitize for the challenges of safe return.

Prior MRI publications examined worldwide existing shelter initiatives in a general view (Jones et al. 2019), potentials for improved collaboration between initiatives (van Schagen 2020), their impact on human rights defenders' home communities in the case of Kenya (Mutahi/Nduta 2020), and collected best practices on wellbeing (Bartley 2020). Upcoming studies will deal with regional shelters for artists in African countries and with at-risk artists in Latin America and the Caribbean (see www.ifa.de/en/research/research-programme-martin-roth-initiative/).

Many thanks go to Johanna Grotendorst, Maik Müller, and my colleagues from the ifa research department for their contribution to editing this report.

Dr. Lisa Bogerts
(MRI Research Coordinator)

Abstract

Abstract

The temporary nature of international relocation programs makes it inevitable for participating at-risk civil society actors to think of what comes after relocation. This report identifies challenges and best practices for planning and implementing safe return after temporary relocation for human rights defenders, artists, and other civil society actors, and their effective reintegration thereafter. The author first provides an overview of existing policy frameworks on return in different fields of humanitarian support. Based on interviews with actors involved in relocation processes, he then elaborates on the role of host programs in supporting participants in planning and implementing return and reintegration, before, during, and after the relocation stay. These measures include monitoring the conditions for return, risk assessment, skill-building, expectation management, and support for decision-making on whether return is a safe option, and what could be alternatives. The report concludes with an overview of the most challenging obstacles to return and reintegration, and provides recommendations for host programs of how to proceed towards establishing more formal return policies and procedures.

1 Introduction

1 Introduction

Civil society actors participate in temporary international relocation programs because they are threatened and unable to continue their work in their countries of origin or residence. Most of the relocated human rights defenders (HRDs), artists, writers and other at-risk actors wish to be able to return to their original work place after having taken the opportunity of temporary rest from threats to physical security, employment, and psychosocial wellbeing. However, the conditions at the place of departure do not always improve significantly during the – often only short – relocation stays abroad. Participants must therefore carefully assess the conditions for return and reintegration, and come to an informed decision of whether they will be able to return safely, or if return is not an option.

The process of safe return is immensely complex. For some participants in relocation, unfortunately, the very concept of “safe” return to their place of origin is only a myth. However, by establishing clear policies and procedures, designed to gather all relevant information and work within a network of actors to anticipate and mitigate risks to returning participants, relocation programs can take critical steps to improving their participants’ likelihood of returning home safely.

This report aims to identify challenges and best practices for planning and implementing safe return after temporary relocation for at-risk HRDs, artists, journalists, and other civil society actors, and their effective reintegration thereafter. In doing so, this report addresses various audiences: first, as it aims to contribute to enhancing existing procedures in host programs, it reflects on the experiences of the community of practice and provides food of thought for professionals involved in the design and implementation of relocation programs. This group involves managers, administrators and donors of host programs, as well as other professionals working with relocated and/or returned civil society actors. At the same time, this report assumes program participants themselves to have the most expertise and responsibility for how they plan to continue life after relocation. Therefore, this publication also addresses former, current and future program participants, encouraging them to actively contribute to the discussion of how to tailor relocation initiatives better to the needs of the people they are intended to support.

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As temporary relocation programs grow in prevalence, and threats to civil society actors continue unabated, the hosts of these programs are increasingly faced with questions of how to guarantee the safety of program participants following program conclusion. Host programs, and more acutely, relocation participants, face a challenging dilemma: relocation programs seek to empower and strengthen the work of program participants through providing a place of rest, imparting skills, and building networks of support. However, when individuals returning from relocation exhibit difficulty resuming their work, host programs may question whether the model is working as intended. These questions are compounded when relocation participants choose to leave their work, movements, or artistry entirely. And in light of the terrible acts of violent reprisal against HRDs around the world, relocation hosts remain intensely alert to the prospect of physical, judicial, and other attacks against returning program participants.

In general, managers and administrators working in host programs face four questions relevant to a participant's safe return, integration, or onward movement:

- Can participants return safely to their place of origin or residence, is that return appropriate and timely, and on what basis should these decisions be made?
- If participants will return, how can host programs effect safe conditions for this return?
- Once return is complete, what obligations remain for effective reintegration and follow-up?
- What other priorities exist for temporary relocation programs that can contribute to participants' safe return and resumption of work?

The following report uses existing policy frameworks and primary information gathered through interviews and surveys to provide a framework to answer these questions. Among the interviewed persons were (current and former/returned) participants of relocation initiatives, administrators and managers of several global and regional host programs (covering Europe, Latin America and

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the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, inter alia), and other actors working with threatened or returned civil society actors (e.g., human rights trainers).

The report is structured as follows: To learn about existing frameworks and terminology, Chapter 2 looks at some of the existing policy documents on safe return in the field of humanitarian action, focusing on the return of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and survivors of trafficking. Chapter 3 deals with the question of how to integrate planning safe return from the beginning of a relocation process, including risk assessment, stakeholder analysis and expectation management, as well as decision-making for or against return, and alternatives in case return is not an option. Similarly focusing on the role of host programs in the return and reintegration process, Chapter 4 elaborates on how to prepare and implement return and reintegration as well as post-return expectation management. Chapter 5 summarizes key challenges for safe return and reintegration as reported by interview respondents. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by providing host programs with best practices and recommendations for how to proceed towards establishing clearer policies and procedures for increasing their participants' likelihood of returning safely.

According to one interview respondent, there is "no such thing as safe return." In the dangerous work of human rights defenders and other civil society actors, this is likely true. However, with sufficient knowledge, dedication, and collaboration, organizations providing temporary relocation and their supporters can establish safer conditions for their participants.

2 State of the art in existing policy frameworks

The topic of safe return for vulnerable individuals removed from their places of origin has a long history in the world of humanitarian support. From refugees, to survivors of trafficking, to enemy combatants, states and societies have grappled with the challenges of effecting safe return of select populations throughout history. Like participants in temporary relocation programs, returning refugees, IDPs and survivors of human trafficking also face challenges of social reintegration, resumption of previous activities, and lingering dangers or threats. With the rise of contemporary international law and modern approaches to supporting other displaced or vulnerable groups, research, guidelines, and policies on the question of safe return have also proliferated.

It is worth looking at this literature because existing guidelines provide frameworks of thought and terminology that may be useful for the analysis of the empirical information collected through the interviews later on in this publication. Building on the practical experience of the organizations and individuals who were involved in drafting and giving feedback on these publications, they allow insights into how other fields of action deal with existing challenges around safe return. In particular, this section will focus on existing policy in two areas: the United Nations' evolving policies on repatriation for refugees and IDPs (Chapter 2.1) as well as other organizations' lessons learned in supporting safe return for survivors of trafficking (SoTs) (Chapter 2.2).

The HRDs, artists, and civil society actors that participate in temporary relocation programs comprise a unique group of activists and humanitarians working for the betterment of their communities, and they differ in numerous ways from refugees and survivors of trafficking. However, it would be irresponsible to neglect the abundance of analysis, research, and empirical findings on safe return completed in recent decades. The following section will highlight those aspects that most directly apply to civil society actors and the organizations that support their temporary relocation in case of threats in their home country. Demonstrating the relevance of these experiences for the context of international relocation will offer entry points for a more detailed insight into these programs' practice of planning and implementing safe return later on in this report.

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2.1 UNHCR and voluntary repatriation of refugees and IDPs

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the UN's dedicated agency for protecting and empowering refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons. Over the past 70 years of its existence, the Agency has produced copious reports, recommendations, and guidelines on best practices with regard to refugee and displaced communities.¹

To some extent, the scale and nature of the work of the UNHCR limits the applicability of its practices to the work of temporary relocation programs. The UNHCR enjoys immense financial and human resources, as well as the global access and authority afforded to UN member agencies. Temporary relocation programs, even those with direct links or funding support from national governments, generally operate with smaller budgets, operation scope, and contact networks. It is also important to acknowledge that UNHCR's work is strengthened by their ability and mandate to work directly on improving living conditions in places of return, and key UNHCR activities include facilitating access to livelihood opportunities and fundamental infrastructure for returnees. In contrast, temporary relocation programs possess extremely limited time and financial capacity for the issue of return, and most programs view the return process simply as a step in the overall relocation process. The time factor is also critical in terms of the feasible period for action: projects facilitating and protecting return for displaced persons are implemented over years or decades; temporary relocation programs are often bound by visa policy to resolve questions of safe return over the span of weeks or months.

Although these distinctions are significant, there is still a great deal that temporary relocation programs stand to learn from UNHCR practices, in terms of frameworks, approaches, and established criteria for safe return. Many of the operational concerns that temporary relocation programs currently grapple with form central topics of UNHCR research reports. In 2008, the Agency published a

¹ For the return and reintegration of displaced persons within the broad spectrum of UNHCR operations, see UNHCR's website on voluntary repatriation: <https://www.unhcr.org/voluntary-repatriation-49c364cfe.html> [25 Aug 2020].

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“Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy” on its “role in support of the return and reintegration of displaced populations”. This document finds that the Agency’s role lies in providing “[...] timely, targeted, time-limited, predictable and clearly defined support to the reintegration process,” which draws on

“[...] extensive field presence, close links with and knowledge of refugee and IDP communities, close working relations with government and non-governmental partners, its understanding of history and dynamics of displacement in a given context, its expertise in key sectors such as protection and shelter, and presence in refugee and IDP [...] communities [...]” (UNHCR 2008: item 30).

With a small substitution of “human rights defenders” or other target community for “refugees and IDPs” in the quotation above, the operational similarities become very clear. The objectives for UNHCR’s return support (timely, targeted, time-limited, and clearly defined) as well as the resources behind that support (partnerships, knowledge, understanding of local context) fall closely in line with those of temporary relocation programs.

In 2003, the UNHCR first proposed a “4 R’s approach” to sustainable return, defining the most crucial aspects of return support to be repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. The following sections will summarize UNHCR research and policy on the first two “R’s”, since they most likely fall in the scope of relocation programs’ feasible intervention and support: repatriation and reintegration.

2.1.1 The first R: repatriation (and its prerequisites)

Before turning to UNHCR guidelines on the methods of the return, or “repatriation” process, it is important to understand the Agency’s approach to assessing conditions of return. Most organizations providing temporary relocation services have faced at least one instance in which a participant was either unlikely to be able to return in safety to their place of origin or unwilling to return at all. Despite the commonality of this scenario, few organizations have created clear policies or rubrics to navigate decision-making in such circumstances.

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To address these questions, the UNHCR places high significance on establishing baseline conditions for return, guaranteeing that all repatriation be voluntary, and clearly defining relevant terms. Drawing on years of experience in numerous, worldwide repatriation efforts, the Agency described in a 1992 Discussion Note that “in all cases [...] certain fundamental prerequisites are a sine qua non for the success of any voluntary repatriation program” (UNHCR 1992). The Note outlines several prerequisites, of which four will be highlighted here:

1. “Conditions must be propitious for return;
2. The decision to return must be voluntary;
3. Dialogue between the major parties must be established at the earliest possible stage;
4. Return must be orderly and conducted in safety and dignity [...]”²

Regarding the first prerequisite, *propitious conditions for return*, the Agency focuses primarily on the concept of “ceased circumstances,” originally established as a condition for return of refugees in the 1951 Geneva Convention on Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Agency asserts that refugees should not be expected to return in the absence of “improved conditions” in their place of origin. In cases where certain local circumstances forced an individual to flee, or a HRD to seek temporary relocation, those improved conditions should involve a cessation of the threat situation necessitating departure. Or, according to UNHCR, “ideally, the circumstances which led to departure should have been removed through social and political changes of a profound and enduring nature” (UNHCR 1992).

Many temporary relocation programs, either for logistical reasons or due to restrictive visa policies, invite their participants for stays of three to six months. When compared with the periods of years or decades for which refugees or IDPs

² UNHCR includes two more prerequisites to safe return: 5. “The basic terms and conditions of the return should be the subject of formal agreement; 6. The responsibilities of the major concerned parties must be understood and agreed upon to the extent possible in the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] [established under prerequisite 5]” (UNHCR 1992). Both of these prerequisites presume a capacity for negotiation with foreign governments unavailable to most relocation programs.

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may find themselves displaced, a duration of less than one year is clearly insufficient for the completion of a profound or enduring social and political change in a participant's place of origin. Nevertheless, several experienced temporary relocation programs make this a core tenet of their return practice, guaranteeing that the specific threats necessitating temporary relocation have abated or undergone some degree of amelioration before the participant returns to their³ place of origin. Furthermore, while six months may be insufficient for substantial change in a state's practice of oppression or insufficient protection of HRDs, this period may be sufficient for some substantial change to a more localized threat source.

The second requirement, *voluntary decision to return*, is a central topic in much of UNHCR's work. Research and writing on the concept of voluntary return explore the concept from several perspectives. One of them comes from the 1996 UNHCR "Handbook Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection". It involves a two-part criterion of the notion of 'voluntariness,' namely that voluntariness "[...] must be viewed in relation to both: conditions in the country of origin (calling for an informed decision); and the situation in the country of asylum (permitting a free choice)" (UNHCR 1996: chapter 2.3).

This interpretation of voluntary decision-making suggests that, while it is clearly incorrect to identify a decision to return as voluntary in the absence of a free choice to do so, it is similarly incorrect to ascribe voluntariness to a decision made without proper information. To apply this logic to the work of temporary relocation, those host programs who wish to ensure voluntary return for their participants may also face an obligation to guarantee and facilitate for their participants as complete an understanding as possible of the conditions in their place of return.

Another useful perspective on voluntary return comes from the UNHCR "Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities" (UNHCR 2004). In its module on voluntary repatriation, the Handbook defines four core components

³ To promote inclusive language, this publication uses the gender-neutral plural form of pronouns whenever a sentence does not refer to a particular person or the gender identity of the person is unknown or non-binary.

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of voluntary repatriation: physical safety, legal safety, material safety, and reconciliation (see Table 1). Each component can be broken down further into specific areas of assessment whereby the place of return can be measured for its ability to meet the standard of each component.

Table 1: UNHCR core components of voluntary repatriation (UNHCR 2004, module 1: 4) (abridged by the author)

Physical safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Ebb of violence and intimidation; ▪ Steps taken towards re-establishment of police, judiciary and human rights agencies; [...]” and ▪ “Improved overall security.”
Legal safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Removal of legal and administrative barriers to return; ▪ Legislation related to enabling legal framework to ensure, <i>inter alia</i>, citizenship, amnesty, property, registration, documentation and return; ▪ and existence of mechanisms to redress human rights abuses, including independent judiciary.”
Material safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Access to means of survival and basic services in early stages of return (shelter, water, health and education) and access to employment opportunities; [...]” and ▪ “Promotion of economic self-reliance and income-generating activities.”
Reconciliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “[...] Structures and mechanisms to promote confidence building and co-existence.”

It is worthwhile to consider each of these components as they apply to the work of temporary relocation programs. *Physical safety* is clearly of paramount concern for the protection of HRDs, and in the case of temporary relocation programs, threats to physical safety are a common factor in participants’ decision to apply to these programs. Some host programs have developed useful tools to measure whether acts of violence and intimidation have ebbed in a participant’s place of origin, and in particular, acts of violence against the participants’ community or colleagues.

UNHCR often works on voluntary repatriation in contexts where most state and security institutions have collapsed, which is usually not the case for

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returning relocation participants. However, effective context analysis precipitating participant return should include monitoring of any significant changes in these bodies. Even small events, such as the removal of a particularly aggressive police officer from a certain town or region, could have substantial impact on a participant's ability to return safely.

In relocation programs, the *legal safety* of returning participants can also pose severe challenges to program participants and their hosts, particularly if participants already hold criminal records or currently face criminal charges in their place of origin. Again, with little direct influence on countries of origin, temporary relocation programs may feel powerless to take effective action in improving a participant's legal status or addressing legal or administrative barriers to return. One solution involves joining and maintaining robust networks of civil society and legal actors willing to provide necessary support to returning participants. Host programs will generally have even weaker capacity to impact legislation protecting citizenship and amnesty or local mechanisms to redress human rights abuses. However, program hosts can take care to understand the relevant local laws and mechanisms pertinent to their participants' circumstances, and they can also ensure that local networks exist to help returning participants avail of any such laws and mechanisms.

While much of the composition of *material safety* as presented in the 2004 UNHCR Handbook relates to returnees' access to vital infrastructure and survival needs, material safety also pertains to access to employment opportunities and economic self-reliance. For some activist participants in temporary relocation, the work they do in support of human rights often provides little remuneration and, in some cases, precludes them from finding other gainful employment due to community or government restrictions. Particularly for these individuals, host programs may consider a duty of ensuring that returning participants have a clear pathway to economic self-sufficiency. Some existing programs are already taking steps to provide skill-based trainings to program participants, with the aim of rendering participants better able to find employment upon their return to their place of origin.

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Finally, *reconciliation* in a refugee and IDP context often refers to a displaced group's ability to establish stable, harmonious relations with current residents in the place of return, often in spite of religious, cultural, religious, class, or other distinctions. The reconciliation concept remains completely relevant for temporary relocation participants. In their security trainings for relocation participants, many programs include topics focused on adjusting behavior to be less "provocative" of certain threat actors, or to devise strategies so that civil society work can be carried on more sustainably and suffer less reprisal.

Returning to the "fundamental prerequisites of repatriation" (UNHCR 1992), the UNHCR's third such pre-requisite calls for *dialogue between major parties* to be established at the earliest possible stage, to explore the feasibility of return and to plan accordingly. For the UNHCR, this prerequisite is usually considered incumbent upon states, linked through a tripartite mechanism involving the governments of host and return countries as well as the UNHCR itself.

At this stage in the work of temporary relocation programs, few programs have the capacity or legal standing to enter into a formal mechanism with foreign governments. Nevertheless, this requirement of dialogue between parties as a prerequisite for return remains extremely relevant for relocation programs. Some programs have already adopted progressive practices of establishing dialogue with select civil society organizations well-positioned to support return and reintegration processes for participants.

The final UNHCR prerequisite to be discussed here requires that return must be orderly and undergone *in safety and dignity*. Factors contributing to this prerequisite include the existence of arrangements made to protect vulnerable returnees, possibilities for guaranteeing humane reception in the home country, and reintegration assistance. Depending on the country of origin and the current circumstances in that country, as well as the status of the returning participant, these factors may be unrealistic to expect, but there are many steps that host programs can take to support some elements of safe, dignified return. Even a simple practice of guaranteeing that some local colleague or organization can take on

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the role of “receiver” for a returning participant can enhance the safety and dignity of a return process.

In the case of program participants unable or unwilling to return, host programs may apply the same standards of order, safety, and dignity to a participant’s integration process into their new local community or to their process of onward movement to a third destination. In many cases, the practical steps to ensuring that return meet these criteria can be similarly implemented to integration or onward movement.

2.1.2 The second R: reintegration (and its principles)

Many temporary relocation programs have recognized the importance of supporting not just a process of safe return, but also that of effective reintegration for relocation participants. While programs should pursue similar outcomes for their returnees as those aspired by UNHCR – namely, the exercise of a full array of rights and the pursuant enjoyment of peaceful, productive, and dignified lives (see UNHCR 2008: item 6) – many also pursue as an official or unofficial objective the continuation of a participant’s work prior to their relocation. Balancing these two objectives, in the context of safe return, may require that the participants seek new methods of work that remove them from public spotlight, or otherwise delegate responsibilities to other members of their movement or organization. In some severe cases, relocation participants may only be able to return safely and reintegrate effectively if they fully remove themselves from their activism. As part of the process of preparing for reintegration, host programs should be prepared for such possibilities and be prepared to frankly discuss these scenarios with relocation participants.

Another challenge pertains to ongoing threats from the governments of home countries or of threat actors in the relocated person’s home region. According to the UNHCR, sustainable reintegration should be linked to a home state’s willingness to take responsibility for returnees’ rights and wellbeing (UNHCR 2008: item 6). In the case of many individuals seeking relocation, state actors have played the opposite role, standing as the primary aggressors in the vio-

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lation of the individual's rights. While individual temporary relocation programs often have little influence with foreign governments or foreign state-linked threat actors, sustainable reintegration will always be impossible for individuals who remain targets of state-sponsored harassment following their return from relocation.

Indeed, of the UNHCR's principles of reintegration established in the 2008 "Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy", *national responsibility and ownership* is the first. Other principles of reintegration laid out in the Policy Framework include:

- Early preparation and planning;
- Participatory and community-based approaches;
- Situational analysis; and
- Pragmatism and flexibility (UNHCR 2008: part VI).⁴

As presented in the 2008 Policy Framework, the *participatory approach* espouses viewing a returnee not only as an individual returning to a place of origin, but as a community member returning to their place within a community.⁵ To directly apply this community approach to the work of relocation programs, host programs could consider incorporating greater focus on collective security and capacity in their training and security planning for relocation participants. For example, in addition to training courses on useful individual skills for a relocation participant, organizations might consider training in areas that will make an individual best able to support the collective needs of their community.

Training opportunities are also central to the UNHCR conception of *early preparation and planning*. During the period of relocation, the Policy Framework

⁴ This report focuses on these principles since they are most relevant for the context of temporary relocation programs (compared to the remaining two principles of "rights, justice and reconciliation" and "recovery programmes and funding").

⁵ For the impact of relocation initiatives on their participants' home communities with the example of Kenya, see Salome Nduta's and Patrick Mutahi's recent publication within the MRI research program (Mutahi/Nduta 2020).

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recommends that “every effort should be made to ensure that [returnees] are provided with education, skills, training, and livelihood opportunities that will support their eventual return and reintegration” (UNHCR 2008: item 46). Many relocation participants have returned home without any promise of employment and, in some cases, no clear prospect for finding new work. In line with the objective of host programs to empower and sustain the work of relocation participants, there is a great deal that host programs can do to safeguard participants’ ability to provide for themselves following their return home.

Even, or especially, in those cases where participants may be unable to return to their place of origin, host programs can provide an immense support to participants by equipping them with skills that may be useful in their new place of integration or onward movement. Certain training topics, primarily in areas of language skills and security awareness, are already very common across relocation organizations. Less common are training opportunities in other marketable skills that can help relocation participants better protect their livelihoods during return or onward movement. Examples given in the Policy Framework include “leadership, advocacy, human rights, peace education, mediation, and conflict resolution skills” (UNHCR 2008: item 46).

Most relocation host programs are familiar with some form of *situational analysis*, but not all programs collect the necessary information and analyze the local conditions and actors constellation when planning for participant return and reintegration. The Policy Framework offers key factors to consider in this analysis, which can be easily adapted to the work of relocation, such as the length and time of displacement, the nature of the issue leading to displacement, and the general conditions for activists, artists or HRDs in the place of return. Other factors are the capacity of local authorities to create safe conditions or the likelihood of these authorities to create harmful conditions, the presence or absence of other supportive institutions, and the presence or absence of other threat actors (UNHCR 2008: item 42). Similar to the process of return, the process of reintegration can benefit immensely from accurate, timely, and up-to-date information from local actors in a participant’s place of return. While host programs likely do not have staff or employees working in those areas, it may be

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considered the responsibility of these organizations to take all possible steps to secure those information channels on behalf of relocation participants, and thus to safeguard an effective reintegration process for the participant.

The final UNHCR principle of reintegration relevant to this discussion, *pragmatism and flexibility* (UNHCR 2008: items 46-52), goes beyond requiring host institutions to respond malleably to unforeseen challenges. Rather, it espouses looking beyond obvious partners and processes to those stakeholders that may not be directly involved in the process of return, but nevertheless play critical roles in establishing a holistic environment for sustainable reintegration. Of course, host programs face certain limitations in the partnerships they establish in places of return, particularly when such partnerships could draw unwanted attention to relocation participants or their relationships with foreign organizations. Nevertheless, sustainable reintegration for certain threatened HRDs and civil society actors will always require a balance between visibility and obscurity: relocation participants must be sufficiently known that they can enjoy the protection of their communities and other actors, but sufficiently unknown that they do not draw unwanted attention or retaliation.

Employing these principles, the UNCHR further expounds on strategy development and program design for reintegration of displaced persons. The UNCHR reintegration process is often resource-intensive, involving expenditures by the Agency and partner stakeholders on food, housing, infrastructure, and livelihood provisions well outside the financial and operational capacity of most relocation organizations. Nevertheless, the 2004 UNHCR “Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities” outlines a number of strategies applicable to the reintegration objectives of relocation programs, including:

- Defining operational linkages with government and non-governmental stakeholders in the place of return;
- Anchoring returnees with a local community to ensure cohesion;
- Facilitating application of skills acquired during relocation to the context of return;

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- Socially, economically, and politically empower all sectors of the returnee population (in this case, the general corpus of human rights defenders, civil society actors, and threatened artists); and
- Build governance capacity of local authorities (UNHCR 2004, module 5: 13-14).

From the perspective of temporary relocation for threatened HRDs, artists, and activists, some of the UNHCR's prerequisites for repatriation and principles for reintegration sound like impossible idealisms. For many participants of relocation, and for many regions of the world, some of the above practices may be completely infeasible. Lack of time, resources, local partners and accurate information can defy fact-finding and coordination efforts, and the unforgiving practices of hostile governments may sharply curtail organizations' options in return and reintegration planning.

Nevertheless, these guidelines provide a very useful framework of analysis moving into the next sections of this report. Concepts such as voluntary repatriation based on informed decisions and free choice; return under propitious conditions of ceased circumstances, and reintegration conducted with a participatory approach and pragmatic flexibility, all will prove useful to keep in mind in the sections that follow.

To summarize those concepts into a series of six points employing the UNHCR framework to temporary relocation host programs:

- Host programs have an obligation to support their participants in two ways following program completion: during repatriation and reintegration.
- Return should be characterized by improved conditions in the place of return or onward movement, a voluntary decision to return, dialogue between as many parties as possible relevant to return, and safety and dignity of the return process.

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- Return should be predicated on the existence of certain physical, legal, and material safeties, as well as reconciliation efforts, in the place of return.
- A voluntary decision for return or onward movement requires a free choice by the returnee, made with all relevant information able to be obtained.
- Reintegration should support the process of securing the living conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood, and dignity.
- Reintegration efforts should be conducted with support of participatory and community-based approaches, early preparation and planning, situation analysis, and pragmatism and flexibility.

The UNHCR Policy Framework notes that, “[...] return and reintegration are not a simple reversal of displacement [...]” (UNHCR 2008: item 4). For at-risk HRDs, the process of return, or local integration, or onward movement, are far more than just the reflection of their outbound voyage. For many, return may constitute the next step forward in their work as activists and champions of societal change. The UNHCR provides a robust toolkit for planning and protecting that forward step, and those tools are available to all institutions that would employ them.

2.2 Documents on the return of trafficked persons

Turning from the work of UNHCR, “safe return” appears most prominently in the context of survivors of trafficking.⁶ Two particularly useful resources are the 2014 Guiding Principles by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) (OSCE ODIHR 2014), and the Intervention Center for Trafficked Women’s study on risk assessment, safe return, and reintegration (LEFÖ-IBF 2016).

The 2014 “Guiding Principles on Human Rights in the Return of Trafficked Persons” were written in response to needs for return policies discovered during

⁶ For another potentially relevant area, namely return in the context of support for formerly incarcerated persons, see the 2016 report of the “Safe Return Project” (Abarra et al. 2016).

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expert meetings on human trafficking held by European agencies between 2000 and 2010. In the Guiding Principles, ODIHR establishes and describes the international legal standards supporting seven principles for return of trafficked persons. The consultation process used to create the principles involved several UN agencies, such as the UNHCR, as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and non-governmental organizations from across Europe.

The seven principles are as follows:

1. **“Returns must be safe”**: The return of trafficked persons should be voluntary (constituting a “free and informed choice, including through the availability of complete, accurate and objective information on the situation in the country of origin”; OSCE ODIHR 2014: 18).
2. **“Due process”**: The process of returning trafficked persons should not result in a violation of their rights, including the right to due process of law.
3. **“Protection measures when return is not an option”**: Owing to ongoing safety and security concerns, host countries are obliged to consider granting temporary or permanent residence.
4. **“Special protection measures in returning child victims”**.
5. **“Durable solution without further harm”**: “If trafficked victims are at risk of re-victimization, including prosecution, retaliation against them and/or re-trafficking upon return, then it may not be possible to ensure their safe return” (OSCE ODIHR 2014: 27). Reintegration measures that address risks of re-victimization are therefore a critical aspect of safe return. The Guiding Principles also emphasize the importance of the family and community environment to which an individual is returning, and the fact that effective support provided upon return can render a returnee less vulnerable to intimidation and retaliation.
6. **“Access to effective remedies”**: Returnees should have the right and the means to receive remedies for harm committed against them.

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7. **“Co-operation and monitoring”**: Safe and voluntary return requires co-operation between returning and receiving states, as well as strategic partnerships involving national and transnational referral mechanisms and strategic partnerships between government agencies, civil society, and other actors protecting and promoting human rights.

In 2016, building on the Guiding Principles and 18 years of experience providing support to survivors of trafficking, the Intervention Center for Trafficked Women updated its “Risk Assessment and the Safe Return and Reintegration of Trafficked Persons” (LEFÖ-IBF 2016) that was first published in 2011. The paper’s primary contribution to the body of work on safe return processes is its focus on risk assessment as a key step in the safe return process.

According to various parts of the document, once the possible risks in the case of return have been identified from the returnee and other sources, the organizations conducting the risk assessment can develop security scenarios and a safe return plan addressing each of the identified threat sources. These plans may include, but are not limited to the analysis of:

- Safe transport and transfer, examining border crossings with or without a passport or visa, physical security measures in high-risk areas, the availability of safe escorts;
- Safe resources for the returnee at the place of return, including local individuals, organizations, or others who can support a return process, as well as whether return to another location in the country should be considered;
- Persistent threat actors in the place of return, and how those actors can be avoided, and to what extent safety can be maintained despite the existence of those actors;
- Data protection, considering what data should be communicated about the returnee’s situation and how their data should be protected before, during, and after the return process;

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- Community and economic reintegration, anticipating any potential obstacles to social integration or finding a source of income and measures to address these obstacles;⁷
- Sources of psychological support in the place of return, primarily for those returnees with a stated or clear need for such services, and in the absence of any such sources, strategizing what psychological support can be obtained prior to return in the host country or after return through remote service provision;
- Other options for integration in the host country or in a place of onward movement if safe return to the place of origin cannot be guaranteed based on analysis of the above components.⁸

Similar to the presented guidelines for supporting safe return of displaced persons, suggested practices and policies for return of victims of trafficking often assume a baseline capacity to work with, or with the support of, intergovernmental bodies designed to combat trafficking and protect its victims. Many countries have no such institution for human rights defenders or other participants of temporary relocation, although this situation is improving. Perhaps the greatest limitation to hosts of relocation programs in fully implementing the measures promoted in the ODIHR Guiding Principles or the LEFÖ-IBF Risk Assessment is the lack of coordination between relocation programs and local government authorities. The analysis frameworks and implementation guidelines presented above were selected for inclusion here on the basis that the relocation programs can adopt them even without return country government coordination. Nevertheless, lacking cooperation with the return country government is a crucial operational challenge for relocation programs, and it will be addressed later in this report.

⁷ Regarding post-return reintegration, the study identified 14 indicators to be considered: motivation and participation in the reintegration process; safe and adequate accommodation; social situation and state of legal proceedings; options on the labor market; options to vocational and skills training; safety; supportive social environment (no discrimination and/or marginalization); positive relationships; economic situation; physical wellbeing; psychological wellbeing; access to counselling and support centers; judicial needs of the court procedure; and availability of counselling for secondary affected persons (e.g. family members, partners, etc.) (LEFÖ-IBF 2016: 29-32).

⁸ For an overview of cases in which return is not possible, see LEFÖ-IBF (2016: 19).

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The content of this section is based on information collected during interviews with administrators and officers of temporary relocation programs and other actors working with threatened civil society actors, human rights defenders, and other targeted populations whose members take part in relocation programs.

While all surveyed organizations had some system in place for preparing for and then supporting the return or other onward movement of their participants, few have established official guidelines of defining the process. Only one of the organizations interviewed in the course of this research project possessed an official policy for participant return. While all organizations surveyed do have some communication with relocation participants about return planning, there exists a wide variety of practices across organizations. Some organizations had formal safe return plan documents that informed structured conversations with all participants, while others did not raise the idea of a return plan with any participant. Some organizations initiate safe return conversations with potential applicants as early as the application stage, while other programs do not raise the question of safe return until the program participant has reached their place of relocation. During the relocation stay, some organizations incorporate the safe return conversation into an ongoing dialogue over weeks or months, while others only discuss safe return in the period leading up to the individual's departure from the place of relocation.

In general, most organizations recognized the difficulty of applying any uniform or standardized approach to supporting the diverse participants of their programs. One reason that organizations display such a variety of practices for safe return is that the need for safe return planning – both actual and perceived by participants – also varies widely. Most of the program participants surveyed for this research did not complete an official return plan with their host program or did not remember doing so. Of those participants that did complete a safe return plan, most stated that they did not need to consult that plan during their return process.

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While this is positive news for returning program participants and the organizations that host them, there is still a great deal that can be done to enhance the processes of return planning and support for returned participants. Establishing well-defined systems and procedures can assist host programs in taking minimum steps to safeguard the wellbeing of relocation participants after they have left the care of their program. The information that follows aims to lay out the important elements that might inform organizational policy guidelines on preparing for, and implementing, supported return for program participants.

3.1 Laying the groundwork for safe return prior to relocation

The full process of safe return must start months before any return journey is actually made. The action of return – and its likelihood of success – is all dependent on preparations made long before a relocation participant begins their return voyage. Relocation programs that are willing to adopt this mentality can use this fact to their advantage. Unlike refugees, displaced persons, and survivors of human trafficking (see Chapter 2), participants of relocation programs and their hosts enjoy the crucial benefit of foresight. From the very initiation of most temporary relocation experiences, hosts and participants know that the participant will (most likely) undertake a return trip or some other onward movement transition at the end of the program.

Foreknowledge of a subsequent return movement offers an important advantage: hosts and participants enjoy a sufficient duration of time to prepare for return, including all of the information gathering, risk analysis, decision-making, and logistical planning that accompany return in safety. In some cases, relocation support is initiated after an individual has already fled or otherwise departed their place of origin. While host programs can no longer incorporate safe return planning into the departure process at that point, they can still take advantage of the duration of the relocation process to begin safe return planning. Prior to a participant's departure from their place of origin, there are several steps relocation programs can take to improve the chances of an advantageous outcome with regard to the participant's anticipated return. Based on the experiences shared in the interviews, Table 2 provides an overview of most beneficial activities, which will be explained in more detail below.

Table 2: Steps to be realized *prior to departure* from the country of residence/origin

<p>1) Initiating safe return discussion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inquiring participant as primary resource of information on risks and challenges they will face ▪ Asking, “will you be able to return in safety?”
<p>2) Connecting with local support network</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying organizations and/or individuals to monitor the situation in the place of origin and be sources of information ▪ Identifying key watch points
<p>3) Arranging for smooth transition at place of departure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouraging delegation of work tasks ▪ Appointing interim leaders and delegating responsibilities ▪ Ensuring that family needs are addressed
<p>4) Preparing for foreseeable travel challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explaining reasons for departure ▪ Preparing for expected questions ▪ Making arrangements for alternative routes (in and out)

1) Initiating safe return discussion: Increasingly, host programs are inquiring relocation participants, prior to their departure from their place of residence, to anticipate the return process and any expected challenges therein. Relocation participants are the best resource of information on the threats they face and how those threats may develop over the duration of a relocation program. In an interview, a representative of a long-term relocation program explained:

“In normal cases, we start [the conversation about future movement] very early. We say to participants, ‘[the program] will assist as much as possible, but you are responsible for your own life and situation.’”

When a participant decides they wish to or need to relocate, it is important to discuss challenges for return. Engaging in a frank conversation about what obstacles may impede a return process creates an opportunity to prepare for those obstacles, and, more importantly, to arrange a departure in ways that might minimize those obstacles. These challenges can be security related, such as questioning by authorities upon a participant’s return to their country of residence, logistical, if they live in a remote or heavily controlled area, or financial, if leaving their place of origin could result in loss of employment or other financial

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burdens. Regardless of the class or magnitude of an obstacle to return, it is useful to know about them in advance. Host programs can arrange for a departure under innocuous conditions, such as arranging non-sensitive justification for a participant's departure, in hopes of preventing any flags raised on the individual's profile at the time of departure. They can make arrangements with local partners to facilitate departure and return in controlled or remote areas, and they can advise on financial arrangements to be made before a participant's departure. None of these remedies can be implemented if the host and participant are not anticipating return even prior to departure.

2) Connecting with local support network: Host programs can identify a primary local support body at some point prior to the participant's departure. Local support bodies are intended to serve as sources of information and reference during a relocation process and return and reintegration support following a participant's return. This way, host programs can benefit from additional local knowledge and expertise in planning the participant's departure. In cases of HRDs with no institution or support network of their own, this local body can be an important resource both for hosts and for participants. Of course, any sharing of information regarding a relocation participant must be conducted over secure channels and with trusted partners.

3) Arranging for smooth transition at the place of departure: Relocation organizations can take steps to prevent professional or financial return challenges. Numerous surveyed organizations reported that departing and returning relocation participants face workplace challenges during the relocation process. These challenges can include sudden departure disrupting workflow, improper or lack of task delegation creating unbalanced workloads and dropped tasks (both for relocation participants and for coworkers remaining in the place of residence), and strained workplace return, when returning participants attempt to fit themselves back into their old workplace. With proper anticipation of these issues, host programs can advise participants on strategies to delegate tasks and temporarily restructure organizations, thus preserving the effectiveness of an organization's work in the participant's absence and diminishing the likelihood of work-related stress degrading the participant's relocation experience. Ideally, these strategies will work both forwards and backwards: forwards, asking "how

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can my organization transition smoothly to my absence?," and backwards, asking "what preparations can be made such that my organization will be ready to incorporate me back at the end of my relocation process?"

4) Preparing for foreseeable travel challenges: If host programs know to anticipate difficulties in a participant's return, they can take early action to better facilitate a safer two-way trip. To avoid obstacles, some international relocation organizations coordinate with other local institutions *not* involved in the field of human rights. These institutions then provide invitation letters for relocation participants, so that relocation participants have a complete cover story for their relocation process that is not linked to potentially sensitive human rights or advocacy organizations.

According to the interview respondents, when initiating a conversation with a relocation participant about a future safe return process, two important considerations should be made. *First*, individuals seeking relocation support are likely under extreme levels of stress, exhaustion, or burnout. In some cases, they may be facing imminent or ongoing threat to their physical safety as well. Assuming there is sufficient time for a conversation on safe return, host programs cannot expect an individual to objectively or rationally analyze their ability to return safely or reintegrate sustainably post-relocation. For some relocation participants working under extreme stress levels, weeks of relocation may elapse before they feel able to calmly and coherently visualize and plan for their return. As two representatives of relocation programs elaborated on the questions of planning an eventual return:

"Many defenders have no way to answer that question. They cannot predict what the situation will be after three months or six months; even more they are not ready to think about that if they are currently in a dangerous circumstance."

"It is hard to have a conversation about safety when people are feeling stressed and maybe even feeling unsafe or lost. Conversations are more rational when [participants feel] more settled. We have seen it at least three times: in the first

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two weeks after participants arrive, they are unable to have a conversation without jumping from one topic to another. Their conversation is limited. People need to feel safe and settled, to start thinking more rationally.”

Stress, however, is not the only factor impeding return forecasts by individuals seeking relocation support. In many cases, particularly in conflict areas or high-risk working environments, it may be impossible to predict the living or working conditions of some future date. Even when circumstances might be predictable, an individual in need of relocation may feel inclined to exaggerate the ease or feasibility of return out of concern that perceived impossibility of return might jeopardize their chances for relocation support.

While valid, concerns that an individual may not be able or willing to present a perfectly accurate depiction of the likelihood of safe return does not invalidate their perspectives on this topic. An individual seeking relocation remains the best authority on the risks that they face. However, host programs can also consult local organizations, other actors working in nearby areas or similar contexts, or others with regional expertise on what threats might exist to safe return for someone of the relocation participant’s profile.

Wherever and whenever a relocation participant is first able to discuss return or onward movement, this conversation is essential to successfully preparing for a safe return. The risks and obstacles to safe return and sustainable reintegration identified during this conversation will frame future return discussion and planning, providing metrics by which subsequent developments in the participant’s home community and region can be assessed. If it should become clear during the pre-departure phase that a relocation participant will not be able to have this conversation safely or effectively prior to departure, host programs should make sure to schedule and hold the conversation as soon as the participant is ready following their arrival in the place of relocation.

The *second* consideration is that host programs should take care not to let return challenges outweigh an individual’s need for relocation. For application-based relocation programs, program administrators should attempt to guarantee

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that applications are “return-blind” to the utmost extent possible. For those host programs that do consider the feasibility of safe return in the decision process of allocating relocation support, application adjudicators should employ open-minded approaches to secure return solutions in order to not unduly bias those applicants for whom safe return poses obvious challenges.

3.2 Planning safe return during relocation: situation monitoring, skill-building, and expectation management

In most cases, neither host programs nor relocation participants make “safe return” a primary focus during the period of relocation. Appropriately, this time is more often dedicated to the spectrum of activities available to participants in these programs; relaxation and recuperation activities, skill training, network building, working on personal and professional projects, and other activities offered or supported by host programs. During this period, however, there are certain actions that host programs can take to maintain preparedness for safe return planning as the end of the program draws closer. After providing an overview in Table 3, some of the most important actions will be elaborated in more detail. Of course, when and how to initiate these steps depends on the individual needs of the participant and their readiness for starting to imagine return. Program officers responsible for overseeing return preparations should respect these needs while also being sure to reserve sufficient time for comprehensive planning prior to the expected date of return.

Table 3: Actions to be taken *during the relocation period*

1) Monitoring situation in place of return/for onward movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Three-way or two-way correspondence with local support network▪ Preparing and updating return scenarios▪ Exploring options for onward motion, if necessary
2) Early and regular discussion of safe return	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Establishing open communication on safe return concerns▪ Maintaining security training and discussion throughout program

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3) Targeted skill-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Security skills relevant for return ▪ Marketable skills for participants who may face challenges
4) Expectation management and mental preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouraging follow-up with colleagues at former work place ▪ Regular discussions about mental preparation for returning home and anticipated challenges
5) Awareness for professional activities and public visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training on relevant digital security and social media topics ▪ Incorporation of social media profile maintenance into security planning

1) Monitoring situation in place of return/onward movement: First, and simplest, host programs can work with and without the participant to monitor the local situation at the place of departure for conditions of return. Because most relocation programs do not have staff based in every participant’s country of origin, it will usually be necessary to rely on external stakeholders to perform this monitoring. Those external stakeholders may be local organizations, colleagues of the participant, or other trusted contacts in the region. During the monitoring process, the conditions most relevant to the relocation participant potentially may include any of the following:

- Prevalence of conflict activity, violence, or acts of reprisal in the participant’s home city, town, neighborhood, or community;
- Prevalence of violence, oppression, threats, or harassment against local
 - staff of the participant’s workplace or organization;
 - members of the participant’s profession or movement;
 - other members of the participant’s race, religion, gender, sexual or political orientation;
 - human rights defenders or civil society actors in general;
- If the participant is facing legal charges, ongoing or new legal action against others on the same legal grounds;
- Harassment, threats or surveillance of the participant’s family or friends.

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Ideally, the participant will take responsibility for monitoring this information. Monthly or biweekly check-ins can provide useful opportunities for program administrators to solicit feedback about the participant's experience in relocation and in the same session check in on the conditions in the participant's place of return. These discussions can be framed around the challenges to return identified in previous conversations to assess whether the feasibility of safe return has changed due to local or other factors.

Most organizations surveyed in this research described experiences with relocation participants who opted not to pursue more discussion of safe return with their hosts. In case participants are unwilling or uninterested in either monitoring or discussing conditions of return, host programs may find it useful to undertake some monitoring activity themselves, in order to ensure that some information is available to inform the individual's process of return. In such cases, it falls to the discretion of host program administrators whether to require that such a conversation took place. While relocation program staff are right to respect the preferences of their participants, relocation organizations should still prioritize at least some discussion of return expectations and planning.

Some relocation programs frequently host at-risk artists and activists escaping conditions of severe threat and violence. For these and other individuals, "safe" return may prove an absolute impossibility. Host programs specialized in providing relocation support to such individuals often follow a workflow quite distinct from those of other relocation programs, dedicating much of the relocation period to securing arrangements for the participant's onward movement to a new host country, an asylum arrangement, or acceptance into other, frequently longer-term, relocation programs.

It is impossible to predict when conditions in a participant's country of return or onward movement may suddenly change, requiring a new plan to support continued residence outside of their country of origin. In addition to standard contingency plans for such circumstances, host programs should prepare at least the outline of personalized contingency plans for their participants. These

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plans should be tailored to a participant's specific risks or challenges and the anticipated likelihood that a contingency plan should be needed.

As many relocation programs know, arranging for a participant of relocation to extend a visa, overstay a visa, or rectify a visa overstay can be extremely challenging. Any violation of visa or immigration policy can be dangerous to a participant and damaging to an organization, placing the former at risk of deportation or other penalties and the latter at risk of losing their ability to host relocation participants at all. These risks are all the more reasons to take advance action in contingency planning for relocation participants who decide, or are forced by circumstances outside of their control, not to return to their country of origin.

2) Early and regular discussion of safe return: Several interviewed relocation programs and participants commented on the importance of holding discussion of safe return early and often. Once the participant has begun their stay in the place of relocation the fact of their safety and comfort takes on a significant role. As a program administrator stated:

"It is important to start envisioning return from the day they arrive, and to keep it in mind each month, because people become desensitized. They arrive in a safe environment and their security mindfulness decreases; they are no longer in fight or flight mode and lose sensitivity to risk. This is good for the relaxation and resilience process, but it can be an obstacle for return, because when they return after three months, they are no longer used to hostile or repressive environment, and their perception of risk has changed."

This quote demonstrates that, after spending months in a place of safety, removed from the threats and dangers of their place of work, participants may begin to desensitize to the dangers of their typical daily lives. For this reason, some respondents highlighted the importance of initiating discussions regarding security and safe return early in the relocation period, in order to build a comprehensive picture of the risks a returning participant may face while those risks are still clear in the participant's mind.

However, many participants will be unwilling or unable to rationally consider their risks or effective security strategies immediately upon arrival in their place of relocation. Ultimately, it falls to the staff of the relocation program, in communication with the participant and in consideration of their risk profile, to decide how early security discussions can take place. This timing should balance to the greatest extent possible the mental health and security needs of the participant, the expressed concerns and interests of the participant, and the time and staffing resources of the host program. Host programs may find it useful to establish standardized plans or policies for when security conversations should take place. Based on these plans, host program staff can make adjustments for participants requiring earlier or later initiation of security dialogue.

3) Targeted skill-building: Relocation organizations can make skill- and capacity-building opportunities available to participants. For some participants of relocation, particularly those from regions where human rights and civil society actors cannot freely work in their areas of activism or interest, one of the greatest challenges to sustainable reintegration and secure livelihood in general is the challenge of finding steady employment and income. In cases of participants who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin, employment may be difficult to find in their country of onward movement or asylum.

Whenever relocation programs find themselves supporting such an individual, or any participant who seems at risk of unemployment or other financial hardship upon return or onward movement, one of the most useful services that a host program can provide is facilitation of useful or marketable skills that can serve the participant after their return or onward movement. Though easily written and read, marketable, context-appropriate skill training is an extremely difficult target to achieve, especially given the extreme temporal and financial limitations on temporary relocation programs. Indeed, support for marketable skill acquisition is far more suitable for organizations able to provide long-term relocation support in countries that accept open-ended residency for foreign nationals. Even for shorter-term stays, however, host programs can work with participants facing potential financial hardship to identify appropriate skill and

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learning objectives and facilitate early educational steps to achieve them. An interviewee working for a host organization notes:

“After welcoming a participant and developing a set of ground rules for the relocation period with the participant, we then start a discussion about ‘how to go back,’ ‘how to continue.’ It is part of our process to reveal the life plan, that means the next steps. It is not possible to consider that you will come back with no change. You have rebuilt your new life in a new sense. You can’t go back and continue with the same behavior... you have more tools now for your security. We start this discussion in the workshops, in the very first weeks.”

4) Expectation management and mental preparation: Host programs can take care to manage the expectations of relocation participants in anticipation of their return or onward movement. In discussion of obstacles to successful reintegration or integration in places of asylum or onward movement, several surveyed organizations referenced the “status shock” that relocation participants may experience upon leaving the comfort of their relocation program.

This status shock can occur in any, or any combination, of aspects. Relocation participants returning to low and middle-income countries from relocation in upper middle-income economies have reported immense frustration in dealing with slow internet, unreliable systems, and ineffective governments. Participants returning from countries embracing certain civic and social freedoms to countries ruled by authoritarian regimes or characterized by stricter social norms have reported frustration and anxiety at their loss of freedom. Regardless of country of relocation and country of return, asylum, or onward motion, participants concluding their stay with a relocation program have reported difficulty returning to the responsibilities of industry, financial self-reliance, and other responsibilities to work, community, and family.

Some relocation programs have already initiated measures to address these status shocks, and the methods they have implemented have shown success in addressing certain concerns raised by program participants. One organization

now provides a small living stipend to returning participants, intended to support a month of living expenses to carry the returnee through the first phase of reintegration. Other organizations have adopted various measures to mentally prepare their participants for the return home, including encouraging participants to stay in touch with local colleagues and workplaces so as to avoid fully “disconnecting” from the experience in their place of residence.

5) Awareness for professional activities and public visibility:

Finally, throughout the relocation process, participants and host programs should be mindful of the impact that a participant’s personal or professional activities while in their place of relocation may have on their prospects for safe return. A number of relocation organizations supporting targeted human rights defenders advise their participants as a matter of principle not to seek out or associate with unknown compatriots in their place of relocation, out of concern that those compatriots may be providing information to threat actors. For writers, journalists, and others engaged in outward-facing rights, activism, or artistic work, it may be necessary to request that these participants alter, reduce, or temporarily cease from all publication activity. According to one organization providing long-term relocation support to exiled artists and writers:

“The more a journalist engages in supporting imprisoned colleagues in some country, the more persecuted she or he will be upon return, or the higher the risk of persecution. If safe return is the main goal, then one of the logical outcomes will be to tell the resident that ‘you have to be quiet in exile because that will increase your chance of safe return,’ and that would be totally absurd.”

Similarly, for participants using relocation as an opportunity to escape from threats in their place of residence, social media use can easily reveal sensitive information about a participant’s whereabouts and daily activity. Even if a participant’s online or offline activities fail to impact their life or security in the place of relocation, social media content can threaten security in a number of other ways, potentially raising a participant’s risk level in their country of residence (particularly if the social media profile displays activities prohibited or discouraged by

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government or society). As authoritarian governments continue to grow more adept at using tools for digital surveillance, targeted individuals and the organizations that support them should take extra precautions to avoid providing easily accessible fodder for future government harassment or reprisal. This holds true particularly when a participant's pending return to their country of residence will involve a border-crossing or other actions susceptible to observation or interrogation by government actors. As an interviewee stated:

"It's a challenge for some hosts to bring up [safe social media practices,] because they want participants to be outspoken, but as soon as their defenders started to speak up in cities of relocation, it becomes more difficult to return. There is a paradox in expecting them to speak out and to return. I think we are very much interested in stimulating the interest for as many... residents to return home safely as possible, but we have to develop programs, and we are very interested in working with relocation organizations and others to see how it can be done in a secure and sustainable way."

Host programs should take early steps to assess the risk profile of participants in terms of social media presence, risks of social media exposure, and risks of compatriots in the place of relocation. On the basis of this profile, host programs can then work with participants to create a "safe operations" plan defining a scope of behaviors in public and online, seeking a balance between encouraging full exercise of societal freedom in the place of relocation with the safety of future return.

3.3 Security plans and risk assessments

For participants or programs interested in formalizing a procedure for planning safe return, the basic components of such a plan are quite straightforward. An effective safe return plan will follow the structure of general security plans, such as those demonstrated in manuals created for example by Front Line Defenders (2005) and Protection International (2009), and the Tactical Technology Collective (2016). As described by Protection International in its 2009 "New Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders," a security plan should exhibit the following characteristics:

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- Security plans aim at reduce risk, usually focusing on the following three objectives for the individual or group developing the plan:
 - Reducing the level of threat that the subject is facing;
 - Reducing the subject’s vulnerability to that threat; and
 - Improving the subject’s capacities to counter threats and protect themselves (Protection International 2009: 75).
- Security plans should be informed by other security-related factors, including a map of stakeholders, risk assessment, and existing security strategies and objectives (Protection International 2009: 20-25).
- Security plans should blend policies, measures, and protocols. In the context of return planning for relocation participants, a plan may both recommend a policy of blended honesty and discretion when communicating with officials as well as a protocol of special measures to be taken if a returnee believes they are about to be detained by those officials (Protection International 2009: 75-76).

The key priorities of a plan for safe return can be identified through an assessment of the risks involved with the participant’s return journey. In some cases, return planners may find it helpful to segment the return itinerary into multiple stages, distinguished by the threat actors and risk profiles of those stages. For example, the threat sources facing a returning participant in the airport in their country of return are likely different from those awaiting them in their hometown; thus, for the purposes of return planning, airport transit and hometown return should be treated separately. In contrast, the potential threats in two consecutive transit airports between the country of relocation and the country of return/origin may be the same or closely similar, and therefore not require discrete treatment.

While safety plans will vary in size and scope depending on each returnee’s unique circumstances, a plan in general should cover the following core questions, for each stage of the return trip:

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- Which stakeholders have responsibilities in each stage, and what are those responsibilities?
- What is the route of travel, and what backup routes are available if primary routes fail?⁹
- What are the key threats (no more than two or three) facing the returnee during that stage, and what are the planned measures to reduce the threat, reduce the returnee's vulnerability, or improve their capacity relative to that threat?
- What are the predictable events (i.e. passport confiscation, arrest) that require contingency plans, and what are those plans?
- According to the communication protocols, who is responsible for communicating what information to whom at what time? What contingencies will be enacted if that communication does not take place?¹⁰

A comprehensive plan should also include a section for the reintegration process, taking into account different kinds of threats. These threats to sustainable reintegration may be physical, economic, psychological, or fall into some other category. Reintegration plans are even less commonly employed by relocation programs than return plans. However, they are also critical tools in assisting relocation participants to visualize and anticipate obstacles to successful return. Sections on reintegration in safety plans should include at least the following elements:

- What are the key threats (no more than two or three) to the participant's sustainable reintegration process, and what are the planned measures to reduce or mitigate those threats?

⁹ In some cases, it could even be advantageous to add a stage to the return itinerary, supporting a returning participant to travel first to a third country or location while en route to their place of return. This route deviation can support the general safe return and reintegration process in a number of ways, including: obscuring the participant's itinerary for any authorities watching them upon return; adding a buffer reintegration period potentially in a country with greater cultural ties to the country of origin; and to delay the return process slightly for any reason.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of these aspects, see Front Line Defenders (2005), Protection International (2009), and Tactical Technology Collective (2016).

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Stakeholder mapping, risk assessment, and safe return planning can all be implemented in a variety of ways. Depending on the participant and host program's circumstances, capacities, and needs, these exercises can be carried out in person or remotely; in a single setting or over a series of meetings; digitally, on paper, or using other visual media.¹¹ Whichever arrangement proves most appropriate, host programs may find it useful to make clear time and personnel appointments to these processes, in order to make sure that each participant is provided adequate time, attention, and guidance to think through their safe return.

3.4 Stakeholders and local agents in safe return planning

The most important actors in any return process are the participant and – depending on the degree of involvement – the host program facilitating the process of return. However, when possible, and as necessary in complex return situations, other stakeholders may also be involved in the return process. The most useful third party to any safe return is a local agent in the place of return. This agent could be a participant's colleague or organization or a third-party organization with knowledge of the participant's situation. If the host program has been able to appoint a local organization or network for information gathering as described previously, this organization or individual is ideally suited for this role.

Ideally, a host program will identify this local agent early in the return planning process. If no such agent can be found, or no local actors or organizations are suitable or willing to take on this role, local organizations' and non-governmental organizations' (NGO) offices are still crucial allies in the process of safe return planning, whether for information gathering prior to return or to facilitate networking to other key stakeholders in the place of return should the need arise. Connecting with other potential stakeholders can provide information on the local situation or, potentially, offer fallback measures in the event of security incidents during the return process. This also includes governmental actors both in the country of origin/return and in the host country:

¹¹ If safe return planning is completed in a physical or digital record belonging to the participant, this document should also be factored into the security planning process. Being discovered by authorities with a "safe return" document could create new risks or difficulties for a returning individual.

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- *Government officials of the origin/return country:* In some cases, in which the government of the country of return/origin has taken steps to recognize or protect human rights defenders AND where the central government has not contributed to the risk to the participant, government officials may be useful allies in the safe return process. If nothing else, these stakeholders can serve as an emergency contact for participants or host programs if a problem arises during the return process.
- *Foreign embassies operating in the place of return:* Staff of diplomatic missions from countries supporting the work of human rights defenders and civil society actors may be able to provide some support to returning and reintegrating relocation participants. While a host program of one country may find it easiest to reach out to their respective diplomatic mission in the country of return, it may be the case that no such mission exists, or that the head of that mission is not interested in the plight of local civil society actors. In these cases, host programs should consider working through their network or other local organizations to identify other supportive missions operating in the country of return.
- *Government officials of the host country:* Supportive contacts in the host country government, particularly in foreign affairs agencies, are useful for any organization hosting foreign relocation participants. In the context of safe return, members of these agencies play less of a role, but can be useful in identifying diplomatic officers in countries of origin or return.

3.5 Decision point: whether or not to (encourage) return

Organizations supporting relocation programs each offer a distinct set of support services in their relocation programs, ranging from solely financial support to cover relocation expenses to long-term hosting, medical services, and capacity-building and networking support. They also engage with the objective and process of return quite differently. Long-term relocation programs for artists and

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writers at risk often have no expectation of participants returning in the near future, while short-term relocation programs accept participants with the stated expectation that participants will return at the completion of a three- or six-month period.

For many organizations, the question of whether or not a participant should, or can, return may not be revisited during the relocation period. That is, for traditional short-term relocation programs, return is often taken as an assumed point of fact. For long-term relocation programs, or programs supporting individuals from conflict regions or those under extreme threat, safe return is often assumed to be impossible. Nothing in the research contributing to this report has suggested any critical flaw in any of these approaches. In general, open communication between participants and host programs, and program flexibility in response to exigent conditions, have proven reasonable effective tools to resolve occasional challenges in return planning.

Nevertheless, relocation programs may wish to consider adopting more formalized systems for assessing suitability of return, either in consultation with participants or as an internal assessment. This system could take the form of a loosely standardized return-focused meeting held with each participant of temporary relocation, during which host programs open a conversation about safe return and reintegration with the question of whether the participant feels they can return safely.

Allowing space for examination of the suitability of return can empower relocation organization to identify innovative strategies best suited to the relocated individual. Opening the question on suitability of return also protects the right of relocation participants to conduct return as a voluntary decision, and not as a foregone conclusion preconditional to their ability to participate in a relocation experience. Granting some agency to participants in discussing the question of the feasibility of return may also improve a participant's ability to complete a plan for safe return, by removing the perceived imposition that return is mandatory despite the risks.

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The reasons not to institutionalize such a conversation are also clear. Many temporary relocation programs operate under an ethical obligation to avoid enervating civil society communities by removing their most active or committed members. Relocation programs also operate under a practical obligation not to appear to their national governments as lenient or susceptible to relocated persons' requests to violate the terms of their visas. Furthermore, if a conversation on return alternatives should result in a participant expressing a need to seek asylum or travel onward to a third country, honoring such a request places extreme resource and reputational burdens on the host program. In light of these obligations and worst-case scenarios, officers of relocation host programs may wish to avoid encouraging, or worse, implanting, in participants' minds the concept of not returning.

Nevertheless, given the ultimate goal of most relocation programs to support and empower the work of their participants, neither government policy nor established relocation duration can justify an insistence on, or even a bias toward, return to a place of origin if return cannot be made safely. Ultimately, host programs and their staff must decide where to strike a balance between extreme openness to the best post-relocation strategy for each participant and adherence to expected operational procedure.

In most cases where safe return, or any return, is impossible, participants and host programs will often be aware of this fact well in advance of the end of the relocation period. Even in these cases, host programs should undertake a decision of whether a participant can remain in the place of relocation and, if infeasible or impossible, to determine the location of onward movement.¹²

Consideration of the question on whether or not to return should be based first on the conditions in the participant's place of anticipated return. Few organizations surveyed reported any formal process for making such an assessment, in-

¹² For case referrals from one relocation program to another one, if return is not an option, see Nathalie van Schagen's study on "Collaboration Between Temporary Relocation Initiatives" (van Schagen 2020).

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cluding either established criteria on which to base a return decision, or established systems for assessing those criteria. The absence of such processes is, in part, a testament to the commonly reported challenge to relocation organizations of obtaining reliable information about return conditions. However, establishing and adhering to internal policies for defining and assessing criteria may be a useful step in securing reliable information pathways. Equally importantly, only through thorough data collection can organizations uphold the right of relocation participants to making a return decision that is informed as well as voluntary.

Organizations interested in establishing criteria to assess the safety of return have numerous resources to turn to. First and foremost, many organizations should consult participants themselves on reliable safety criteria, coupled with host programs' own experience in conducting safe movement for their participants. Host programs may also wish to use established metrics for assessing safe return, such as the UNHCR's physical/legal/material safety framework, or the OSCE's 14 indicators of effective reintegration (see Chapter 2). The same guidelines apply to any consideration of forward movement instead of return to a former place of residence, in that host programs should still engage their networks – and in particular, other host programs – to fill in any knowledge gaps about potentially viable destination countries.

Organizations supporting region-specific relocation enjoy a strong advantage in that the set of relevant information for their participants is more limited in scope. Their knowledge could benefit relocation programs on the global scale as well. As the representative of an organization supporting relocation for individuals from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) described:

“We know which countries can obtain visas in advance or in the airport and which can stay for three months with renewal as soon as they leave. We have a list of locations where individuals can stay following their relocation here, all according to visa requirements. A Yemeni participant can go to the Maldives, Malaysia, or Seychelles, for example, stay for three to four days, and then return here.”

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Once armed with as much relevant knowledge as possible, organizations still must weigh several factors when deciding how to support relocation participants facing threat to their prospects of safe return. Organizations often have the most control or flexibility within their countries of operation, so it is critical for any organization to possess both clear understanding of national immigration and residence policy as well as allies in relevant government departments to assist in addressing, and consulting on, challenging or emergency situations. National policies on visitors, asylum seekers, and immigrants all vary widely, and many programs have worked diligently to employ those policies in providing the best possible support for relocated persons in need. Two quotes by administrators of relocation programs illustrate their approach to asylum applications:

“In terms of asylum applications, it comes down to when we have no other choice. We know the defender has no other option. We will have already tried to identify whether there is any other country they could go to for a few months to see if the situation changes before they can get a scholarship to go somewhere else.”

“[Regarding asylum], it will also depend on how many asylum cases we have in the previous year or two, and whether we can afford to take on another. After taking one, if we really have to, we might take a second, but we will probably try everything else before we would take a third.”

In cases where asylum is under consideration for a relocation participant, host programs should also take care to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges and responsibilities of the asylum process, particularly when this process directly follows the nurtured and supported environment of temporary relocation. Commenting on the surprises and challenges of adopting to a new lifestyle in the place of relocation, a community organizer and HRD training expert observed:

“Compared to life with the host program that had taken them in, [asylum seekers] are now living in a totally different world, where they have to find a job or a way to sustain themselves. Before, they had their own room; now they’re sharing housing. They are also trying to connect and engage with

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their country community in this new place, whereas before they were asked not to because of risks.”

The following passage from a discussion with host programs present unique circumstances that strongly influenced how the organizations were able to consider the safe return process:

“Sometimes, the question of return is not even the right question. We hosted a national of Country A. This person was born and lived in Country B, but she never received citizenship. Country B expelled her and would not renew her documents. The idea of going back to Country A is absurd – she has never been there. But she also cannot stay in the country where she has lived for her entire life.”

Most organizations and participants balance return decisions between priorities of a participant’s safety (and that of their family and community) and the participant’s ability to continue their work. In other cases, decision frameworks may be limited by the capacity of the host program and the nationality of the participant. In many cases, a participant’s passport, or in dire cases, lack of a passport, may place severe limitations on the options for return or onward movement. A representative of a long-term relocation program explains:

“Our first conversation about return is one that outlines all the options for the person with a ranking of preferences. The top priority, and the hoped-for outcome, is that people will be able to go back to their countries. The second-best option [is onward movement;] and they will initiate a visa request to a third country, usually to Europe. This is a long process, most suitable when they are unsafe in their home country. [Our host country] is not only a safe haven, but it’s also a safe location to wait until their visa is fully issued. The third option is for those with no plans at all, who need to use their time in [the host country] to decide whether they can return safely.”

By defining clear success criteria or decision processes like those presented in the passage above, as well as clear practices for engaging with, informing, and resolving questions of return, host programs can provide order and process to a

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challenging situation. Furthermore, once these procedures and criteria have been established, both can be continuously reevaluated each time that these procedures are implemented. While the initial work to establish return decision guidelines may be challenging, the work of relocation programs will benefit from the presence of such guidelines once they become necessary.

3.6 Alternatives to return: remaining in the place of relocation and onward movement

In case relocated persons are unable or unwilling to return, it is necessary to find a sustainable alternative for return and to negotiate continued protection and assistance for those persons. Most relocation organizations have established basic correspondence with their local government, and in particular, state immigration agencies, to facilitate the approval of visas for relocation participants. One host program has worked to secure further agreements with these agencies, securing special immigration status for program participants as temporary residence under a “Temporary Protection Mechanism.” Other programs have reached agreements with government agencies allowing them to extend residency by three months for necessary cases.

If extended temporary location will still be insufficient for a participant’s needs, they will likely require either a subsequent, long-term relocation opportunity or to initiate an asylum request. The first can be challenging for host programs unfamiliar with how to find such opportunities, and the latter can be challenging particularly in countries that will not support such requests from host programs.¹³

This plan should be informed first by the legal and operational capacities of the country, organization, and participant, such as whether the participant can apply for asylum in their current location and whether there exist appropriate longer-term host programs that they are eligible to apply for. With this information, program hosts can hold a series of discussions with the participant about some of their future options and the challenges and realities of each.

¹³ For UNHCR’s recommendations on “protection and assistance in the country of asylum”, see the 2004 UNHCR Handbook (UNHCR 2004: module 5, p. 15).

Finally, if and when an appropriate solution has been identified, host programs should take measures to implement the agreed actions. Ideally, host programs will have established relationships in supporting agencies or with such channels that the implementation process of an asylum request or application for participation in another relocation program should be smooth (see van Schagen 2020).

3.7 Degrees of host program involvement in safe return planning

Based on interviews conducted with host programs, it can be summarized that the process of return planning is inconsistent both between and within organizations supporting relocation. This inconsistency can be ascribed to the various factors, such as the variation in risk and needs of relocation participants, the variation in regional and strategic focus of host programs, and host programs' general lack of formalized safe return policies or procedures. The result is that host programs fall along a spectrum of degree of involvement in the return planning process, from those organizations where return planning is deliberately left to participants to those where organizations take primary responsibility in structuring and implementing the return plan. The surveyed organizations in this study generally fall into four categories along this spectrum, as presented in the following:

A) Activities in programs exercising *minimal involvement*:

- *Program participants* bear the primary responsibility for logistical and security planning for return. Participants are expected, and encouraged, to make use of their own personal networks in their place of return to plan the details of their return.
- *Host or support organizations* may provide basic resources or guidance for the planning process.
- *This degree of involvement may be suitable* for relocation organizations supporting very high numbers of relocations, or when return can be expected to be reasonably safe even without direct host program support. According to some practitioners, this approach can encourage participants to take ownership and autonomy over their relocation experience and securing their safe return.

B) Activities in programs practicing *some planning facilitation*:

- *Participants* are largely responsible for creating and implementing their plan of return, with some advisory, logistical, and/or networking support from host programs as needed.
- *Host programs* frequently provide security training for their participants, including training modules on risk assessment and risk management and addressing risks particular to travel. Organization staff may encourage participants to create a safe return plan, but staff might not follow up on this suggestion. These organizations may also provide materials and support when requested.
- *This degree of involvement may be suitable* for organizations supporting low-risk persons or individuals already trained in designing and implementing safety plans.

C) Activities in programs that engage in *planning oversight and guidance*:

- *Participants* will, with the support of a security trainer or other program staff, complete a viable plan for safe return. Depending on the participant's degree of risk or other case of need, this plan may or may not be referred to during the actual return process.
- *Host programs* take a more involved role in the planning process, working with participants either during general safety training sessions or during a special discussion focused on safe return. Host programs may present a template or framework for participants to use.
- *This approach may be suitable* and is common in organizations that include standardized security training for all participants, not all of whom face significant risks during return.

D) Activities in programs committed to *detailed planning and monitoring*:

- *Participants* will work with host program staff to ensure the plan is tailored to the participant's risks and specific location of return.
- *Host programs* are directly involved in planning out each component of the return plan. Organization staff may apply their own experience and expertise in the region of return in crafting the plan. Organization staff will likely include specific check-in points to be observed during the plan's implementation and will monitor those points during the return process.
- *This approach may be suitable* and is common with organizations or programs working in areas of high risk for participants or in countries where international travel can greatly elevate a participant's risk level. Organizations using such an approach are usually focused on supporting individuals from a single country or region and are highly familiar with the risks and challenges therein.

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At some point in the final weeks of the relocation stay, participants who decided to return to their place of residence or origin should begin preparing a plan for this return journey. When a returning participant of relocation anticipates a smooth, unchallenged return, or when there are no sources of physical or judicial threat to a returning participant, the return process may be as simple as following a return itinerary and checking in with a host program upon return. Indeed, for such participants, the greatest challenge to planning for safe return may be convincing the returning individual that such a plan is necessary or worthwhile.

For more complex return processes, particularly those where multiple stakeholders are involved in the return journey, planning, executing, and monitoring safe return and reintegration can present an immense challenge. Creating and following a defined procedure may prove useful, particularly when dealing with complex return and reintegration cases.

Without a sustainable return and reintegration, the value of temporary relocation can be called into question. Although the health and liberty of returning at-risk defenders may be the topmost priority in planning a safe return, failure to meet the criteria for reintegration may jeopardize the broader objectives of many relocation programs: empowering defenders and activists and the movements they support.

Many temporary relocation programs are unable to provide significant attention or support to returnee's reintegration process, largely due to material constraints. In general, currently existing activities to support participant reintegration can be divided into two areas: those activities that are conducted during the relocation period to prepare for effective reintegration (mid-program preparations), and those conducted during and after the return process to strengthen its chances for success (post-program measures).

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4.1 Mid-program reintegration preparations

Mid-program activities supporting successful return have been presented earlier in this report (see Chapter 3.2), but they will again be summarized here in the context of a participant's reintegration after having returned (see Table 4). Program and participant respondents to research interviews mentioned legal services, training programs, mental planning ahead for reintegration, maintenance of a participant's ties to their home community, and enlisting the support of local actors in the place of return as supportive of a reintegration process. These measures are all practiced by at least one or two relocation programs, though none of them enjoy universal adoption.

Table 4: Measures to prepare reintegration during the relocation period

1) Providing legal services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Providing legal support through partner attorneys in place of origin▪ Objective is to resolve or close pending legal charges
2) Providing training activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Trainings on personal, digital, organizational, collective security▪ Trainings on useful livelihood skills
3) Mentally preparing for reintegration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Encouraging participant to visualize and anticipate expected challenges of daily life after return▪ Developing sustainable wellbeing practices
4) Maintaining social and professional networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Encouraging follow-up with local colleagues and networks in home community▪ Must be balanced against threat of participant's occasional or regular correspondence with these colleagues
5) Engaging local actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Local HRD supporters, NGOs, and government authorities▪ Can receive the returnee and monitor reintegration

1) Legal services: One of the simplest, technical strategies to prepare for sustainable reintegration is the provision of legal services for participants facing legal charges in their place of origin. Even if a relocation participant is able to return safely to their place of origin, pending legal charges can leave them unable to work, speak publicly, or move freely in their country or city. Some host programs reserve funding and maintain ties with origin country lawyers to support

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legal services for relocation participants during the relocation process, with the goal of resolving or advancing the legal issue while the participant is safely outside the country. If this goal can be achieved, the participant may return to their place of origin both rested from their relocation experience and free from the burden of judicial action during their reintegration process.¹⁴

2) Training activities: Training activities have long formed a central component of many relocation programs, including training in security awareness, digital security, risk analysis, and language skills. Three to six months, the standard duration of relocation programs, leaves little time to complete most formal academic or training programs, and many participants may not be interested in undertaking such a challenge during a period of rest and recuperation. However, for participants concerned about their ability to support themselves economically after their return, and particularly for participants who may be in a place of relocation for longer than six months, learning a new skill or obtaining a professional qualification may prove advantageous upon return. As an interviewee explained: "For many relocated artists, they lack financial support to reestablish themselves. It is already very difficult to make a living as an artist, and many go back without savings."

3) Mentally preparing for reintegration: During the interview process, a number of host programs and participants referenced the challenge participants face in leaving the support system of the host program and returning to the autonomy, stress, and in many cases, hostility, of their working and living community. Taking steps to mentally and emotionally prepare for this return transition may make reintegration easier for returning program participants. Moreover, relocation participants are often leaving behind more than a peaceful haven; they

¹⁴ Even before return, when the conditions for safe return and reintegration are still being monitored, this strategy can provide concrete benefit to the participant: First, the involvement of a dedicated attorney attending to the participant's case ensures that the participant has more accurate and comprehensive information about their legal status throughout the relocation process. Particularly at the time of decision whether return is feasible, this attorney can provide critical updates to inform this decision. Second, if the participant is unable to return, up-to-date legal documents may prove useful in their subsequent asylum application or visa application for onward movement.

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are also leaving new friends and colleagues made in the place of relocation. Especially for relocation participants living in countries or circumstances where visas are difficult to obtain, these goodbyes can feel abruptly final. Upon return, these feelings can compound the emotional burden and stress of the return and reintegration process, hindering the participant's ability to resume their work and re-immense themselves with family and friends.

While host program staff likely will have already discussed with the participant threats expected during the return process, it may be beneficial to open a second conversation about reintegration concerns that are not security-related. These concerns may include anticipated frustrations in the reintegration process (having to return to daily work and responsibilities, sub-par internet and transportation infrastructure, the challenge of catching up on months of work) as well as feelings of sadness at the prospect of saying goodbye to new friends, leaving what many come to consider a second home.

This mental preparation process should also include imparting of specific strategies to safeguard wellbeing and mental health. Many organizations responding to this study noted that participants were quick to dive back into their stressful work routines, high-risk activities, and challenging operating environments, jeopardizing mental wellness gains made while participating in relocation.¹⁵

4) Maintaining social and professional networks: Some host programs also strongly encourage their participants to maintain regular contact with their own organizations and networks in the place of origin, on the basis that returning home may then feel like less of a shock. This strategy may not be appropriate for high-risk participants who need to be particularly careful about the government in their place of origin monitoring the communications of the participant's colleagues, but this determination can be made on a case-by-case basis.

¹⁵ For recommendations of how best to support relocation participants' wellbeing (including psychosocial, physical and other forms of wellbeing), see the 2019 "Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk" (<https://www.hrdhub.org/wellbeing>) [2 Sept 2020]. For a collection of case studies and best practices for the implementation of the Barcelona Guidelines, see Bartley (2020).

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5) Engaging local actors: Finally, this report has repeatedly referred to the benefit of working with local actors to support multiple aspects of the safe return process. Host programs, often located thousands of miles from participants' places of origin, can do little to directly intervene on behalf of relocation participants during their reintegration process. For this reason, it is crucial that host programs work during the relocation period to ensure that the participant has as strong a support network as possible to welcome them and receive them upon their return. As a relocation program administrator illustrates:

“We need a trusted network of peer organizations. This helps fill any knowledge gap. This also helps to reconnect people – finding out there is a small organization in Sudan that is able to provide follow-up on issues or where person can download an encrypted app for emergencies. Alone we could never know that. This network should be robust, flexible, not bureaucratic, but effective for staying in touch. [Whether stakeholders are in] France, Stockholm, Rome – the system only works well in a new location if there is a way to keep that person connected to a network of collaborators for talking and follow up.”

4.2 Post-relocation reintegration measures

Following participants' return to their place of residence or origin, there are additional steps that host programs can take to support the reintegration process. In an effort to directly address reintegration challenges, one host program offers a *return stipend* to all returning participants, calculated to cover one month of expenses for the returnee and their family. This stipend, a response to concerns expressed by former participants experiencing financial hardship after their return, intends to ease the returning participant's pressure to immediately return to work or find new employment when necessary. According to this organization and surveyed former participants, this value has proven useful to returning participants facing economic hardship.

According to several returnees, one of the most impactful actions host programs can take is to maintain some *check-in procedure* with returned participants, both to confirm a participant's continued safety and liberty and to inquire about

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the return and reintegration process. For most relocation organizations, who may already be hosting a new group of HRDs or artists by the time a participant returns to their place of origin, these procedures can be difficult to maintain for extended periods of time.

4.3 Expectation management for the post-return phase

Based on conversations with host programs and (former) program participants, there remains a disconnect between participants' hopes and expectations of relocation organizations and the will and capacity of those organizations in the post-return context. Namely, some relocation participants hope to continue a close relationship with the relocation organization in support of their rights work and, occasionally, as a channel of support in light of new or renewed threats in their place of return.

Some host programs do support second applications from previous participants, but many programs do not. Furthermore, while many programs continue to work to identify measures to provide a smooth reintegration process – such as the granting of return stipends – most relocation programs are unable to provide any substantial support after a participant has returned to their place of origin. Moreover, due to the constraints on their time, many organizations are extremely limited in their ability to follow up with former participants for more than one to two months. Some former interviewed participants expressed frustration at what they suggested was a lack of attention from their host program. One former program participant noted: “They check in on me in this way – by putting me in touch with researchers who interview me!”

Host programs also make requests of their participants. One of the organizations interviewed described its practice of using returning participants to develop new networks and collect information in their places of origin. A program representative described the advantage of having former participants living in countries where their organization is initiating new, non-relocation activities as follows:

“When we are focusing on a country, we will work closely with [relocation participants from that country] who have gone back, and they help us make

4 The role of host programs in preparing for reintegration

inroads. Some have been trained under our programs, and we utilize that expertise of those in exile for translating content into local languages and doing outreach. [Those former participants] know about the UN and advocacy systems, and they can share this expertise with their colleagues.”

Many relocation programs have already begun taking steps to guarantee that participants fully comprehend the limit of the host program’s capacity to support participants after the conclusion of the relocation program. And both participants and hosts are recognizing that the greatest need is for increased support for HRDs in their local communities, whether that support comes from relocation organizations or, more appropriately, local or regional organizations (see Mutahi/Nduta 2020).

Host programs should continue to strengthen communication with participants to appropriately manage expectations for the post-return context. In the meantime, hosts, participants, and the broader HRD support network should continue to support the development of local and regional bodies able to take on key support and monitoring roles for both returning relocation participants and local HRD actors who have not participated in relocation.

5 Challenges for safe return and reintegration of civil society actors

The following challenges and obstacles to safe return (Chapter 5.1) and reintegration (Chapter 5.2) have been collected and compiled from host programs and their current and former participants. This list does not intend to provide an exhaustive tally of the impediments to return or reintegration, but rather a reflection of the most important issues complicating safe return from the perspective of program representatives and at-risk civil society actors.

5.1 Obstacles to safe return

- *Unchanged conditions of return:*
For many participants in relocation programs, three to six months is simply an insufficient duration for any significant decrease in their risk profile. For these relocation participants, including those most targeted by violent actors and individuals from active war zones, “safe” return may be factually impossible at the end of their stay in relocation.

- *Lack of on-the-ground knowledge:*
The second most commonly cited challenge was lack of timely, comprehensive information from the participant’s place of origin or residence. While a strong network of local organizations and other actors can help fill this knowledge gap, in some contexts – particularly for participants traveling from or through remote or disconnected areas – these knowledge gaps can remain difficult to fill.

- *Authorities and threat of arrest:*
For some respondents, the foremost obstacle to safe return were governmental actors primarily responsible for making return unsafe, due to their resentment for HRDs and other critical voices. Government authorities were referenced most commonly in this capacity. In particular, the measure of arrest was noted as a particular concern for returning relocation participants.

5 Challenges for safe return and reintegration of civil society actors

- *Dependency on host programs:*

One host program mentioned the challenge of relocation participants growing dependent on their host programs, to the extent that return to their place of residence – or onward movement to a new circumstance outside the control of the host program – can feel very challenging.
- *Human error in digital security:*

Some organizations pointed out the challenge of human error in protecting a safe return process. Many of the steps of an effective digital security plan involve small, but necessary actions conducted to protect the security of devices. If participants fail to understand or carry out such steps (for example, clearing sensitive phone numbers from a phone's contact list), the consequences could be high.
- *Lack of commitment to security planning:*

Most of the participants interviewed in this study confessed that they either did not complete a formal safe return plan or did not consult it during their return process. Likewise, many surveyed host programs reported that they do not complete a formal return plan with participants as part of the offered security training or when preparing for a participant's departure.
- *Balancing profile and security:*

Some participants and host programs mentioned the challenge of balancing the profile of the participant – which some participants wish to keep elevated for the sake of their work – and security, which in many cases may require that a participant has no public presence at all.
- *Lack of coordination and communication:*

As a final obstacle to safe return, one host program noted the challenge to guaranteeing smooth communication between all individuals responsible for supporting relocation participants. While this challenge may be somewhat unique to larger host programs, this issue can also be applied to communication between a host program and partners in the place of return as well as other stakeholders.

5.2 Obstacles to reintegration

- *Individualism of relocation support:*
Most relocation programs operate admissions on the basis of individuals; receiving and processing applications for individuals and receiving participants as individuals. This practice can make it difficult for local organizations headed by relocation applicants in their home communities when they abruptly lose their leaders for three to six months, or when those leaders return after completing the relocation period and must fit themselves back into their workplace.

- *Stigma and lack of support community:*
Even when a returning participant is able to return home with no challenge from border authorities, police, or other common threats, they may face attack or violence at home from families, neighbors, or the near community. If a host program is aware of such threats, they should identify an alternative, safer destination for a returning participant, but other measures may be necessary to help the participant identify a stronger community of support.

- *Unemployment and economic hardship:*
A number of respondents raised the issue of economic hardship and difficulties to resume paid work as a primary obstacle to participants' smooth and effective reintegration.

- *Mental health, depression, and stress:*
Many participants in relocation programs arrive in their place of relocation stressed and exhausted. While the relocation experience can help to alleviate some of these symptoms, particularly when the host program offers psychosocial support, this can provide an immense benefit to the participant. However, few programs work to provide participants with strategies to preserve their mental wellbeing once they have returned to the stresses of their daily life. Burnout, or repeated burnout, as the case may be for returning participants, can degrade an otherwise smooth reintegration process. In other cases, participants may feel guilty for leaving their

5 Challenges for safe return and reintegration of civil society actors

workplace or movement as long as they did, and thus feel compelled to work harder or work overtime upon their return, which in turn can continue to raise stress levels even higher.

- *Lack of rehabilitation opportunities for victims of extreme abuses:*
As one host program staff pointed out, relocation participants who have been subject to extreme human rights violations will be unlikely to receive the psychological treatment they need in the limited period of a relocation program. Without this treatment, however, they are unlikely to achieve a healthy, sustainable return to their full operating potential and (re-)integration in their home community or new place of residence.

6 Best practices and recommendations

The working contexts of human rights defenders, civil society actors, and artists at risk vary widely. From subject to subject and region to region, the risks and challenges that two defenders face may share no similarities. But while it is impossible to create a single safe return plan for all relocation participants, there are certain steps that all organizations may be able to take to enhance the security of their participants.

Based on the experiences of host programs, (current and former) relocated at-risk civil society actors, and other actors involved in temporary relocation processes, included below are nine recommendations for host programs, intended to improve their capacity to safeguard their participants' safe return and effective reintegration:

1) **Make plans and follow them:**

At the operational level, host programs can best fulfill their responsibility to the safe return of participants by establishing formal policies, guidelines, and procedures for those safe return processes. This will include identifying clear support roles for all aspects of the safe return process, timelines for key steps of that process, and contingency plans for foreseeable outcomes. These plans should also include contingencies for if and when a participant needs to seek asylum or onward movement to a third place or country.

2) **Employ flexible thinking and operation:**

Relocation programs must exhibit flexibility in their response to the needs and wellbeing of relocation participants, whose personal situations can change as quickly as political situations in their place of origin. As participants commonly have most knowledge of both their local context and their own personal readiness to engage in planning for return and reintegration, host programs should adapt their activities accordingly.

3) Support mental and emotional preparation for returnees:

Preparing participants for the mental and emotional challenges of leaving their relocation program and returning to their place of origin can mitigate the shock of this transition. For instance, host programs may encourage participants to stay in touch with their local networks at the place of return and regularly discuss the anticipated challenges.

4) Develop collaborative and information networks at the local, regional, and global level:

The most common suggestion for host programs both by relocation participants and hosts was for the growth of networks among relocation programs and other stakeholders, including governmental and non-governmental actors. These networks can serve many functions, including providing contextual information to assess the feasibility of safe return; supporting participants' reintegration; joining advocacy calls to raise the profile of HRDs and civil society actors; and promoting more regional relocation initiatives. Collaboration with government agencies may also strengthen ties with the aim of securing special immigration status for program participants.

5) Increase pressure on states and companies at the international level:

Former relocation participants recommended that relocation programs do more work to pressure those actors threatening HRDs, artists, and activists. Recognizing that relocation programs are themselves a treatment of a symptom, they can take a more active role in encouraging the international community and state governments to adopt a more accepting and protective role of human rights defenders.

6) Actively encourage security planning and maintain sensitization to risk:

On a related note, many respondents emphasized that host programs have an important role in encouraging participants to make and follow safety plans and conduct risk assessments. Even security-conscious relocation participants may find themselves too busy or distracted to create a safe

return plan, at which point it may be the organization's responsibility to strongly encourage the participant to complete a plan, as well as to follow up with the participant to ensure the plan is adhered to. It is similarly important to maintain the participants' sensitization to risk throughout the whole relocation stay. This may be necessary both at the time of return, to ensure that they are staying vigilant about their safety during the return process, as well as during the return planning discussions, when host programs will rely on the participant to define and classify the risks they may face.

7) Special support: legal aid, mental health, and wellbeing:

If host programs have the resources to do so, certain critical services can drastically increase participants' prospects for safe return and effective reintegration. Two of the most significant are legal services and mental health. Some relocation programs employ attorneys to follow up on legal cases pending against participants. Another valuable practice is to provide mental health services, counselling, and other forms of psychosocial support for the participants. Other organizations attempt to extend these services, even temporarily after a participant's return to their place of origin.

8) Collectivize the work of temporary relocation:

Rather than emphasize the individual human rights defender as the unit of relocation support, some respondents encouraged adopting a more collectivist approach to temporary relocation. By supporting relocation for colleagues, co-members of a local movement, or members of linked organizations, relocation programs may be able to empower a unit of like-minded actors in a more sustainable way. The risk of each individual can be more evenly distributed throughout the group at the time of relocation and return, and skills gained during the relocation period can be more easily disseminated to the community by a team of relocation participants than they could be by single individuals.

9) Improve collaboration between relocation programs and support the creation of new ones:

Host programs should develop a stronger network across relocation organizations for joint security monitoring and risk assessment, for information sharing and information referral. In order to diversify the options for at-risk civil society actors and to improve conditions for safe return and reintegration, existing programs and cooperating institutions should also support the creation of new relocation programs and new relocation hubs at the local and regional level.

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List of abbreviations

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HRD	Human Rights Defender
IDP	Internally displaced persons
ifa	Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRI	Martin Roth-Initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SoTs	Survivors of trafficking
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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This study was commissioned within the framework of the Martin Roth-Initiative and is published in the ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy.

The Martin Roth-Initiative is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ifa or MRI.

Published by:
ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e. V.), Charlottenplatz 17,
70173 Stuttgart, P.O. Box 10 24 63,
D-70020 Stuttgart, info@ifa.de,
www.ifa.de
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Author: Stanley Seiden

Editing: MRI Research Program

Photo credits: Alessandra Onisor

Design: Eberhard Wolf, Munich

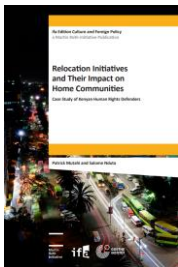
ISBN: 978-3-948205-25-6

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.10.2020>

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The Challenges of Safe Return

Supporting Civil Society Actors After Temporary Relocation

For participants in temporary international relocation programs, safe return is a key challenge. How can threatened civil society actors make an informed decision on whether return to their home countries or prior work locations can be safe? Which mechanisms can host programs include from the beginning to plan for return, and to assess the conditions for return? How can post-return follow-up and reintegration be supported? This study identifies challenges and best practices for planning safe return, and gives recommendations for program managers of how to support civil society actors in their decision-making and planning life after relocation.