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Changing reintegration in a meaningful way

Reintegration assistance for migrants going home is important for the EU. And yet, it is ineffective — involving returnee initiatives can reverse that

Reintegration assistance for migrants returning to their countries of origin is becoming increasingly salient. Germany and the EU cooperate closely with countries of origin to support local reintegration. Here, assistance goes beyond purely monetary support and can also include additional assistance, such as vocational training and psychological support. Still, such efforts encounter criticism and limitations: short-term and individualised support cannot address the root causes of migration and displacement, such as poverty, insecurity and a lack of opportunities, which are among the factors leading to migration in the first place.

One way to increase the effectiveness of this assistance can be the involvement of initiatives and groups led by returnees themselves. This not only makes it possible to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of the projects, but also to implement sustainable structures beyond project cycles.

Diverse and transregional networks

The so-called 'returnee networks' are varied and active in a multitude of regions around the world. For instance, returnees in Nigeria have formed informal social media groups, and in Bangladesh, with the help of a local NGO, formalised networks of returnees emerged in various parts of the country. These groups are sometimes made up exclusively of persons who recently returned but can also be led by those who do not, or no longer, struggle with the problems of reintegration.

Although the emergence of such networks is not a regional phenomenon, they cannot be found in all countries. There are different factors to explain this. On the one hand, it can be observed that returnee networks develop in contexts in which a large number of migrants return in the

same time period. They then get to know one another in registration processes or reintegration programmes and remain in contact. Another factor is an already existing returnee network, which can serve as a role model. Common challenges, such as coping with trauma and stigmatisation, play just as much a role as a lack of reintegration support and family support systems. Both these challenges make meeting like-minded peers a more urgent need. Support from external actors and an active civil society also contribute to the emergence of networks.

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Regardless of how they developed and their level of formalisation, these networks can effectively support the reintegration of new returnees. They offer practical help with regard to housing, employment and bureaucratic hurdles. They also act as trustworthy intermediaries, informing newcomers about the available support and acting as advocates for returnees' interests. They can therefore play an important role in shaping reintegration policies and educating their communities about the realities of migrants' lives during and upon return to their country of origin.

However, in addition to these indispensable strengths, returnee networks also harbour risks. Competition for resources, such as funds raised through projects with international organisations, and the lack of women participation can limit the representativeness of some networks. Moreover, most networks have a very low degree of professionalisation, which is not negative in itself, but can lead to the groups duplicating existing support services and providing these only in a moderate quality. Finally, involvement in the networks could result in members further distancing themselves from the rest of society due to their solid and longstanding identification as a 'returnee', thus delaying or even preventing their reintegration.

The notion of returnee networks being an exclusively positive force, which can and should be engaged under all circumstances, is therefore incorrect. Yet, this does not mean that cooperation should be ruled out either. In spite of the risks, the integration of networks is long overdue and is possible in compliance with safeguards. The perspective of returnees should always form a part of reintegration programmes. The question is not whether to cooperate with returnee networks, but how to involve them in a meaningful way.

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