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When returning home feels like hell

Migrants returning to their country of origin often face precarious situations. Yet, policymakers cling to ineffective but supposedly quick solutions

Every year, countless people return of their own accord to their country of origin after achieving their migration goals or for personal reasons. Many have supported relatives at home and have laid the basis for a new start after their return. Others return home because they feel their goals are unachievable or family reunification hasn't worked out. Even after many years, state return policy is primarily oriented towards people who have no right to remain in their target country. Increasing the number of those returning home – especially rejected asylum seekers and illegal immigrants – is a priority of German and EU migration policy. Much more often, however, these people migrated with no intention of returning, but couldn't come close to their migration goals because integration proved impossible.

Obstacles to reintegration

Returning under such circumstances exposes people to the same structural pressures which made them emigrate in the first place. Among these aggravating factors they may have sold their homes or accumulated debt, and in some regions, returnees suffer social stigmatisation. According to the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC)'s cross-regional comparative study, lacking a secure livelihood is the biggest barrier to reintegration. Frequent hindrances here include a weak or unevenly distributed production and processing sector, low wages, patchy labour law enforcement and too much informal and temporary employment. Other problems include unsatisfactory or no social insurance, patronage systems that hinder workforce entry even to highly qualified workers and training systems not tailored to labour market needs. In addition to their insecurity during migration and the loss of control often experienced on returning, continuing economic difficulties and unkept promises put a strain on returnees' mental health. In their interviews, some respondents talked of a return 'to hell'.

Immigration and returns policymakers tend to favour supposedly quick solutions, institutional innovations and restrictions on mobility.

Support for reintegration, as provided by many state and non-state actors, is certainly able to meet immediate needs such as homelessness or unemployment, acute health problems or a lack of papers. But availability falls well short of demand. Provisions for return counselling differ starkly in terms of quality, approach and level of transnational networking. Many of those affected also mistrust public institutions because of previous negative experiences or refuse their help because they're afraid of facing up to the problems of returning and reintegration. The level of support varies not only according to the returning country and the country of origin; for deportees, there is only reduced assistance – if any. Measures intended to improve people's prospects of long-term reintegration, whether by helping them to stand on their own feet or labour market integration, usually only work if the beneficiaries are reasonably well situated – for example having previous job experience, training or access to additional capital. The complex problems of families in need (homelessness, low or no income, untreated health or mental problems, high care costs) often get worse when reintegration support runs out.

Empirical surveys show that successful integration in the target country has a positive influence on reintegration back home. Returning of one's own accord, reliable social networks (local and transnational) and continuing mobility options also help. But far from everyone is so well off, and for many, it's just a pipedream. For years, researchers have been calling for comprehensive and coordinated long-term strategies to enhance people's prospects of reintegration and remaining, in response to these issues. Target countries' return policies should consider people's real reintegration prospects, regardless of how asylum procedures turn out, and make more use of integration measures for successful returns. In countries of origin, for example, development policy can boost the establishment of local value chains and structures for fostering SMEs, the reform of institutions for vocational training, and employment services and the improvement of social security systems. But immigration and return policymakers tend to favour supposedly quick solutions, institutional innovations and restrictions on mobilities – as the recent compromise on asylum shows.

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