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Investment on return

Training programmes could encourage failed asylum seekers to return home

In 2016, almost one million third country nationals were found to be illegally residing in the EU. Around 500,000 migrants were ordered to leave the EU following a failed asylum claim or other residence permit denial. Less than half of them – 226,150 – were actually returned to their country of origin. These numbers cast light on a familiar problem: how to deal with people who have risked their lives to reach Europe, only to find that they have no right to stay and are thus subject to deportation. These unfortunate souls are reluctant to return home empty-handed and often come from countries that do not want them back either. How should the EU respond to such a dilemma?

Several so-called Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes have been launched in recent years to facilitate returns by providing logistical, social and financial support to those who agree to return to their country of origin voluntarily. Such programmes vary greatly in duration and scope: some are akin to a specialised travel agency while others provide long-term assistance including vocational training and entrepreneurship courses in the returnee's country of origin.

These services seek to discourage new attempts to migrate elsewhere by securing the returnee's livelihood back home. They also aim to increase cooperation from governments reluctant to take back their own citizens due to concerns they will overburden weak economies and social security systems. In fact, AVRR programmes are increasingly being framed as a development tool in and of themselves, as successful returnees could boost local economies.

Returning home should become more attractive

While this approach goes in the right direction, it is unlikely to flourish. Both migrants and their countries of origin have shown themselves reluctant to cooperate. The promise of support for reintegration into the

migrant's home country is simply too vague and insufficiently attractive. A migrant's biggest fear – returning home empty-handed, in shameful failure – is hard to assuage. A developing country's interest in helping wealthy Europeans kick out poor undesirables is equally limited.

Making returns more attractive may simply be a question of timing. Most AVRR programmes that include vocational training and entrepreneurship courses currently offer them in the country of return, after their arrival. While this has the advantage of keeping costs down and empowering local stakeholders, the benefits of providing this assistance in advance are potentially far greater. Due to the typically long time it takes for returns to be processed, returnees spend months, sometimes years, awaiting their fate in a psychological limbo that can only bring out the worst in anyone. This time could be spent more productively, by learning a trade, language or even basic literacy for those who need it, within the framework of pre-departure education and vocational training.

Many 'economic' migrants will cite a second, equally important reason to migrate besides the pursuit of a better income: education. Unskilled migrants are particularly keen to learn, and this energetic motivation should be harnessed. Returnees needn't be treated like criminals ahead of their departure, but rather as students on a sort of Erasmus semester.

The education and training received in Europe would be highly regarded back home, and would give the returnee the feeling of having accomplished at least one objective of his or her migratory journey. If programmes such as these were offered right at the start of the asylum process, they could also help integrate migrants whose asylum claims are successful.

Back to basics

The cost of providing education and training to all returnees, let alone all asylum-seekers, is certainly an issue. However, the level of education and training offered to migrants can and should be basic (and thus affordable). Considering the low-skilled background of most asylum-seekers, and the lack of higher-skilled professional opportunities in their countries of origin, even basic craftsmanship, mechanical and farming skills would be helpful. Similarly, local language classes will not work for someone who can barely write their own name. Basic literacy classes would be far more useful. Various levels of courses and classes could be offered, to correspond with migrants' actual abilities.

A crucial component of this approach is accreditation. The 'students'

attending these programmes should be evaluated regularly and granted a 'diploma' upon the successful completion of their 'studies'. While this certificate might not be worth much in Europe, it could be a ticket to a job back home. It could also help persuade hesitant governments that returned citizens will actually bring a 'brain gain' to their country.

Returning better educated, higher skilled potential entrepreneurs is arguably a more effective form of development assistance than existing initiatives, and this may help EU governments justify the extra cost of providing education and vocational training for migrants in Europe. The EU would need to make an honest cost-benefit analysis of the effectiveness of more traditional development efforts versus investing in returnee qualifications.

Creating large-scale education and training programmes for returnees and possibly also asylum-seekers is no easy task. EU funding could help offset the cost for poorer member states or those countries with exceptionally large numbers of returnees and/or asylum seekers. Nevertheless, it may come down to national governments to implement such an ambitious plan individually. Fears of migrants 'shopping' for the best return package may complicate such efforts politically, but the vastly differing reception conditions among member states are arguably a more important factor in determining asylum-seekers' movements.

The political will to invest large sums in irregular migrants will certainly play a role in the degree to which such programmes gain traction, but perhaps the focus on returns would convince more conservative-leaning politicians and electorates. Pilot projects could already give an indication of how effective such a strategy could be. Whether the changes proposed here are achievable at the EU level or are best left to national governments will remain to be seen, but the case for exploring such an approach can already be made.

Migrant re-admission and return is climbing high up the EU's agenda, yet the number of actual returns remains disappointingly low. The time is ripe for a rethink.



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