



Tried and Trusted? The role of NGOs in the Assisted Voluntary Returns of Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants

Research presented today is based on a study conducted by the Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton and COMPAS, University of Oxford.

Brief Overview of AVR in the UK

Voluntary return programmes for the return of irregular migrants, including refused asylum seekers, have expanded in almost all member states across Europe over the last decade. This needs to be understood within a broader context of managed migration and concerns about the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers, global political changes and changes in asylum patterns. Several European instruments now exist to promote voluntary returns. The UNHCR recently issued a paper on its engagement with Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes in the EU with a view to establishing a policy position on the issue highlighting the current and increasing importance of AVR in the EU.

The first AVR programme in the UK was run by the IOM and began in 1999, at which time return assistance was restricted to obtaining travel documents and the provision of transportation (IOM London, 2004). The White Paper *Fairer, Faster, Firmer: A modern approach to immigration and asylum* (1998) called for a focus on voluntary returns. "The experience of other countries has been that a mixture of compulsory and assisted voluntary returns through negotiated agreements, often working through non-governmental organisations, has worked well." IOM literature reports that the initial AVR programme (VARP: Voluntary Assisted Return Programme) began as a pilot scheme in response to the increasing numbers of asylum seekers coming to IOM London for specialist advice,

information and assistance to facilitate their return to their home countries. Initially the programme consisted of travel assistance only. During its first year, three groups – Iranians, Kosovars and Albanians – made up the majority of the participants, with the latter two comprising 67 per cent of the total returnees. In March 2002, the general VARP scheme was expanded to include reintegration assistance and changed its name to VARRP – the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme. When it was established, reintegration assistance consisted of £500 paid in kind through the provision of education, vocational training or support for the establishment of a small business (Strand, Akbari et al. 2008).

There are now currently three general AVR programmes available in the UK. They include:

- **Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP)**
- **Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants (AVRIM)**
- **Assisted Voluntary Return for Families and Children (AVRFC).**

Each programme has specific eligibility criteria and comes with different reintegration and financial assistance packages¹. All AVR returnees sign a disclaimer withdrawing any outstanding asylum claims on departure from the UK and a re-entry ban for five years.



The role of Non-Governmental Organisations²

The IOM is the principle agent of AVR across Europe and implements programmes in more than 40 countries. However, NGO involvement in AVR has been steadily increasing to the extent that in the UK a national refugee charity, Refugee Action took on full implementation of the UK's AVR programmes following a public tender in 2011. As UNHCR's recent report on AVR found, there has been a shift in the standpoint of many NGOs in recent years from a primarily oppositional stance to the current positioning where some NGOs are even directly involved in AVR implementation (UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2013). The reasons NGOs interviewed in the report gave for this attitudinal and organisational change included: "AVR is (a) a more humane option than deportation; (b) enables the individuals concerned to plan and prepare for their return more effectively; (c) enhances the possibility that they will reintegrate successfully in their country of origin; and (d) strengthens public and political support for the institution of asylum" (UNHCR, 2013: 6).

The importance of NGO involvement is recognised by the EU at policy level. The Council of Europe calls upon member states to encourage and promote voluntary return and as such to: 'encourage and support NGOs and diasporas to contribute to the process of assisted voluntary return'; 'develop outreach plans for the communities most concerned; develop awareness raising campaigns promoting assisted voluntary returns involving the communities and diasporas concerned; make full use of publicity materials (translated into all appropriate languages) advertising in national and local papers, radio and television' and favour tailored approaches

to assisted voluntary return programmes with individual or family plans (Council of Europe 2010). It is recognised that in order for an AVR programme to be effective it has to be able to reach out to the community concerned and have the trust and confidence of those considering return. It is therefore essential that independent advisers, such as the IOM and civil society partners, including NGOs, are involved (European Commission 2011:7). As the IOM notes, NGO involvement creates 'much more effective information channels, gaining more trust and reaching the target migrant groups more easily' (IOM, 2010: 17).

The role of Non-Governmental Research Design

This was a 9 month joint research project which consisted of:

- An on-line survey which was completed by 50 Refugee, Asylum, Migrant and Community NGO's.
- Conducting 60 Individual interviews across the UK with international and national NGOs, the Home Office, IOM, UNHCR and welfare officers in three detention centres (Haslar, Harmondsworth and Colnbrook).

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¹Please see www.choices-avr.org.uk

²For a comprehensive account of the roles of NGOs in different European member states see: IOM (2010); EMN (2011)



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