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Return in Dignity, Return to What? Review of the Voluntary Return Programme to Afghanistan

Arne Strand (team leader)
Arghawan Akbari, Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary,
Kristian Berg Harpviken, Akbar Sarwari, Astri Suhrke

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Abbreviations

AGEF	Arbeitsgruppe Entwicklung und Fachkräfte im Bereich der Migration und der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit
AREU	Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
BIP	Business Innovation Programme
CMI	Chr. Michelsen Institute
DK	Danish Kroner
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
INCOR	Information and Counselling on Return and Repatriation
IRRANA	Information, Return and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan
MESBAH	Afghan NGO. AGEF partner
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NOAS	Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers
NOK	Norwegian Kroner
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PRIO	International Peace Research Institute, Oslo
RANA	The Return, Reception and Integration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan
RAP	Return to Afghanistan Programme
ToR	Terms of Reference
UDI	Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, <i>Utlendingsdirektoratet</i>
UK	United Kingdom
UNE	Immigration Appeals Board (<i>Utlendingsnemda</i>)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	US Dollar
VARP	Voluntary Assisted Return Programme
VARRP	Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme

Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, *Utlendingsdirektoratet* (UDI), to assess the programme for voluntary return to Afghanistan. The programme is open to Afghan nationals whose asylum applications in Norway are pending or have been rejected, or Afghans who have been granted the right to stay in Norway but wish to return to Afghanistan. The report focuses on the return programme established in 2006 by the Norwegian government in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Norwegian NGOs. The programme includes information and counselling in Norway, as well as cash payments and reintegration assistance upon return to Afghanistan.

The report is based on a document review, semi-structured interviews with Afghan returnees, as well as interviews with staff involved in preparing or implementing the programme in Norway and Afghanistan, and with other relevant officials and organisations. Fieldwork in Afghanistan was for the most part conducted in two rounds (October 2007 and February 2008). A comparative review of similar programmes in Denmark and the United Kingdom is included.

The team consisted of Arne Strand (team leader), Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary and Astri Suhrke, all from the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI); Kristian Berg Harpviken from the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO); and Akbar Sarwari and Arghawan Akbari, independent Afghan consultants.

1. Background

In April 2006, the Norwegian government launched an extended return programme for Afghan nationals, in line with the tripartite agreement between Norway, UNHCR and the Afghan government to regulate the return of Afghans from Norway to Afghanistan. Central to the return programme was IRRANA: Information, Return and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan, implemented by IOM missions in Norway and Afghanistan. IOM's generic assisted voluntary return programme (VARP) had provided travel assistance to all nationalities returning from Norway since 2002. However, IRRANA, available only to Afghans, had additional components: a cash grant of 15,000 NOK, extended information and counselling both in Norway and in Afghanistan, as well as reintegration assistance upon return. In addition, a further information component was established through a project run by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). NRC staff, under the organisation's Information and Counselling for Return and Repatriation (INCOR) programme, travelled to asylum centres with Afghan residents in order to provide information and counselling about the situation in Afghanistan and returning through IRRANA.

The launch of the return programme coincided with the decision of the Norwegian authorities to start forced removals of failed Afghan asylum seekers to Afghanistan. It was hoped that the return programme would go some way towards encouraging voluntary return. However, the number of forced returns proved to be considerably higher than the number of voluntary returns. By mid-March 2008, 69 adults had returned through IRRANA, whereas at least three times as many had been forcibly returned by the police.

2. Findings

During fieldwork, the research team interviewed 29 of the 64 adult IRRANA participants who had by then returned to Afghanistan. The remaining returnees could not be interviewed for various reasons. A few were living in areas that could not be accessed for security reasons, or were confirmed as having left the country. Around half could not be reached by IOM, which contacted returnees on behalf of the research team. The team collected data on the functioning and impact of the reintegration programme, as well as the broader outline of the returnees' migration biographies (flight, exile, return and reintegration). The study focused on two sets of issues: (i) the decision of the IRRANA participants to return through the programme, and (ii) the short-term reintegration process after return.

Whilst the return programme offered a dignified way of returning to Afghanistan, there was no evidence that the additional components offered by IRRANA – the cash payment and the reintegration support – had encouraged the respondents to return. The decision to return was made on other grounds. The majority of the respondents wanted to avoid forced deportation, often stressing its indignity, or expressed a wish to respect Norwegian law. Others had friends who had been forcibly removed and were certain that they would be deported unless they left on their own volition. A minority (around one in five of the respondents) chose to return through IRRANA before receiving the final decision on their asylum application. This group stated that the uncertainty and passivity of prolonged waiting in asylum centres was the main reason for returning.

The choice of voluntary return was therefore shaped by factors other than the IRRANA components. When prompted, none of the informants said that the cash payment or reintegration support had been a factor in the decision to return. This is consistent with findings from similar programmes elsewhere. However, none of the respondents appeared destitute. Most had been able to accommodate themselves with their families, at least for the short term. Most had funded their initial travel to Norway through support from family and friends, and seemed able to access support networks after they returned as well.

The returnees that the team succeeded in locating in Afghanistan through IOM may not be representative of the larger group of IRRANA participants or its wider target group (i.e. all rejected asylum seekers). For the latter there are no data, but it is noteworthy that the 29 persons that the team succeeded in reaching in Afghanistan were comparatively older, more educated and had a larger share of married persons than the total group of IRRANA participants. It is likely that many of the IRRANA returnees who could not be reached had already left Afghanistan again, possibly being younger, unmarried and less integrated in local support networks, and therefore more likely to re-migrate.

The information work in Norway was only partially successful in conveying the content of the IRRANA programme. Only a small minority of the participants interviewed had reasonably complete knowledge of the programme. The impact of INCOR's Afghanistan project likewise was slight - only two respondents said they recalled hearing about this project, or NRC/INCOR as an organisation, from their time in Norway. The limited impact could well reflect lack of interest among the asylum seekers. Information programmes about return would not seem very relevant in a situation where their main concern was to explore possibilities to remain in Norway or to escape from the uncertainty and passivity of life in the asylum centre.

The travel component of the programme was found to function well, and returnees were able to claim their cash grant from IOM without difficulty when arriving in Afghanistan. Upon arrival, returnees were also entitled to reintegration support. Implemented by IOM's missions in Afghanistan, the reintegration programme was built on similar IOM programmes elsewhere and in

principle included three options: training, job referral or a small business start-up grant. All IRRANA participants chose the business option, which was the only formalised alternative of the three. Several respondents told the team, however, that they would have preferred job referral or training as they had no experience and no inclination to start up a business. Yet they were recommended to start a business by programme staff, who seemed to have focused on this option.

The business programme itself had several shortcomings. In a few cases, moderately successful small business enterprises were set up with the support of the programme, but the majority of businesses seemed to exist only on paper, had been running for less than a couple of months, or had closed down shortly after being established. One reason was that the support was quite small (10,000 NOK in kind), which the respondents stressed was insufficient for starting a sustainable business. Moreover, several returnees had no business experience and the programme provided little advice or training.

For many participants, the business option was mainly a mechanism for converting the business grant into cash. Whilst support was given in the form of goods or equipment for a given business, many returnees appeared to have sold this quickly to partners or other businesses before closing down or exiting the business. While observed in other return programmes as well, such practices – where the business is only a detour to a cash contribution – represent significant transaction costs and waste for both the programme and the returnees. The process also gives a false picture of how the returnees are faring, hence distorts the basis for formulating effective aid programmes for reintegration.

An overarching theme that emerged from both the respondents' experience while in Norway and their reintegration situation was the potential benefits of a training or skills development scheme during their stay in Norway. Educational programmes would help focus and structure the daily lives of the asylum seekers, thus reducing stress and helping many to cope with a difficult situation. Enhanced skills would help the Afghans reintegrate more easily if they return, and likewise help them adapt in Norway if granted asylum. For those who return, the skills and qualifications acquired would generate a sense of achievement likely to boost confidence in their ability to reintegrate. In a broader development perspective, training would also benefit Afghanistan as a society, equipping those returning with skills to contribute towards the reconstruction of the country.

Denmark has an extensive training programme for asylum seekers that seems to work well. The programme provides skills that are relevant in Denmark as well as in the countries of origin. Similarly, the time the asylum seekers spend in Norway could be used productively for education, specific skills improvement or language training (primarily English).

The report also examined some broader aspects of the returnees' situation. Two points emerged as the main challenges faced by the returnees: security and a lack of economic opportunities. While most of the respondents had cited insecurity as a main reason for leaving Afghanistan a smaller number (one out of every six) said they were worried about their personal security upon return. However, almost all respondents expressed a strong concern with the general security situation in Afghanistan, saying that they did not feel safe. The lack of economic opportunity was another major worry. Only one respondent had been able to secure some kind of employment, and while some were running a business and were able to make some profit, most were living with the support of friends and relatives for the time being, or drawing on diminishing savings from Norway.

Most of the respondents interviewed in Afghanistan stated their intention to re-migrate. Some cited security concerns, but most emphasised the lack of economic opportunities. Those who said they would remain in Afghanistan were mostly either running moderately successful businesses or otherwise had access to means of making a living through family networks.

3. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the report makes several recommendations on how to strengthen the return programme to Afghanistan (see chapter 12 for the full version).

Institutionalise training in Norway

In addition to strengthening the reintegration programme in Afghanistan, training while the asylum seekers are waiting for their application to be processed has many potential benefits. If properly developed, skills training can contribute to sustainable reintegration and reduce the propensity to re-migrate. The Danish programme is comprehensive and can serve as an inspiration. UDI should examine appropriate options and models for such a programme.

Reconsider the information work in Norway

The partial success of the information component of IRRANA, as well as the evidently low impact of INCOR's Afghanistan project, means that the information component of the returned programme should be reviewed more closely.

Strengthen the reintegration programme

(1) *Develop the business option:* Both programme staff and returnees considered the size of the reintegration support to be too small, particularly as a basis for starting a business. The two other countries whose programmes were reviewed in the report, the UK and Denmark, either have larger reintegration support or a comprehensive training programme prior to return.

(2) *Develop job referral, training and cash payments as alternative options:* The prevalence of 'sham businesses' suggests that the reintegration programme needs to be restructured. There should be a cash distribution option for those who are confident about managing their own reintegration, and a more structured alternative for those who prefer more extensive advice and follow-up. The latter option could consist of a choice of training, job referral and business establishment, but training and job referral need to be developed and formalised in order to constitute real alternatives to the business option.

(3) *Increase advice and counselling:* For those who return with few support networks and connections, reintegration programmes can be an important source of advice. This aspect of the programme should be further developed, both with regard to the returnees' general reintegration situation, as well as to advice on establishing a business.

Improve monitoring and documentation of the reintegration programme

Regardless of the structure of the reintegration programme, the managing organisation should establish systematic routines for monitoring the impact of the various programme components. Monitoring and documentation is necessary for organisational learning, and will enable internal and external programme reviews to draw on a solid data base.

1. Terms of reference and organisation of research

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, *Utlendingsdirektoratet* (UDI) to assess the assistance programme for voluntary return to Afghanistan. The programme is open to Afghan nationals whose asylum applications in Norway are pending or have been rejected, or Afghans who have been granted the right to stay in Norway but wish to return to Afghanistan. The report focuses on the return programme established in 2006 by the Norwegian government in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Norwegian NGOs. The programme includes information and counselling in Norway, as well as cash payments and reintegration assistance upon return to Afghanistan. The report was to cover only the period immediately after return.

The study team was asked to examine

- the information component in Norway and its effects on voluntary return
- the career planning provided in Norway and its contribution to successful reintegration
- participation rates and the usefulness to the returnees of the IOM-run reintegration assistance programme in Kabul.

On a more general level, the report was to contribute to knowledge about

- the reintegration process for voluntary returnees
- the importance of incentives for the decision to return voluntarily.

The team was also asked to examine briefly similar return programmes in two other European countries in order to assess the effect of incentives in promoting voluntary return.

The starting point for the study was that both the decision to return and the subsequent reintegration process were influenced by factors beyond the return programme itself. To reach a fuller understanding of the role of the programme in the broader process of return and reintegration, it was necessary to go beyond the Terms of Reference as specified (see Annex B) and include contextual data as well as demographic and social characteristics of the returnees (see section 4 below).

The study is based in large part on information from semi-structured interviews with Afghan returnees. In addition, the team drew on secondary observations from staff involved in drafting or implementing the programme in Norway and Afghanistan, interviewed government officials in Afghanistan and staff of international organisations (UNHCR, IOM) and of Afghan and international NGOs, visited reception centres in Norway, consulted internal reports and evaluations of the programme, and analysed statistical data regarding rates of return. IOM Kabul and IOM Oslo reviewed and commented on draft versions of the report. For the comparative section, the team chose programmes in Denmark and the United Kingdom and reviewed relevant statistics and programme documents. In addition, a limited number of interviews with government officials and NGO staff in the two countries were carried out.

Team members consisted of Arne Strand (team leader), Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary and Astri Suhrke, all from the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI); Kristian Berg Harpviken, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO); and Akbar Sarwari and Arghawan Akbari, independent Afghan consultants.

Fieldwork for this study was undertaken intermittently over a period of four months (October 2007-February 2008), with the European-based team members visiting Afghanistan for two shorter periods (in the early and late stages of data collection) and the principal Afghan team member, Akbar Sarwari, working in a more continuous capacity.

2. Background

2.1 Assisted voluntary return programmes

The return of rejected asylum applicants has in recent years become increasingly important to European governments. Steady or growing numbers of asylum claims, reduced processing times, lower recognition rates and, in some cases, costly and difficult procedures for the forced return of rejected applicants have produced a growing population of rejected asylum seekers residing in Europe illegally or in a legal twilight zone. Governments have employed a range of measures to deal with rejected asylum applicants, mainly withdrawal of accommodation and support allowances, assisted voluntary return and forced removal. Voluntary assisted return is by far the preferred option. It is much less costly than forced returns – only around a quarter of the expense – and is more dignified and politically acceptable.¹ Whether it is also more sustainable by producing higher rates of lasting reintegration is unclear.

European governments started to develop programmes for the assisted voluntary return (AVR) of rejected asylum seekers in the early 2000s. The programmes were in part inspired by similar programmes for refugees for whom return was an option after conditions in their homeland had changed, as with Chileans in the early 1990s, followed by Bosnians.² Programmes to assist rejected asylum seekers, however, were introduced in a different context in that the returnees had quite limited, and mostly unfavourable, alternatives. While recognised refugees have the choice of remaining legally in the host country, rejected asylum seekers do not, and are faced with forced removal or illegal residence if they do not go voluntarily. The term “voluntary” therefore has a somewhat restricted meaning for the rejected asylum seeker.

Over time, the AVR programmes have been streamlined and anchored in one entity, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Most AVR programmes are implemented by IOM in cooperation with state authorities and sometimes non-governmental organisations. AVR programmes typically offer rejected asylum seekers and returning refugees paid travel and logistical assistance to their country of origin. Similar schemes exist for irregular migrants and people with various types of uncertain immigration status who wish to return.³ In addition, many AVR programmes include cash payments and reintegration support, such as medical assistance, career counselling, and training or support for small enterprises. Such additional components are typically targeted towards specific national groups, which include Afghans, Iraqis and Kosovars.

IOM national missions will normally undertake some of the information activities of AVR programmes, often in partnership with or complemented by NGOs and national authorities. IOM national missions also arrange for tickets and travel documents. In countries of origin, IOM typically has a reception system to help with onward travel and any further assistance for which the returnees might be eligible. In some cases, the reintegration assistance component is implemented by organisations other than IOM.

¹ *Return Migration, Synthesis report*, European Migration Network, May 2007.

² Black, Richard, ‘Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?’ *SAIS Review*, Volume 21, Number 2, Summer-Fall 2001 (177-199).

³ IOM does not assist with forced removals. However, in some cases the organisation will provide reception and reintegration assistance to involuntary returnees upon their return.

2.2 Afghan forced migration

Prolonged conflict and associated economic hardship in Afghanistan have produced one of the world's largest exile populations. Up to a third of the population left the country at some point during the successive conflicts that started in the turbulent 1970s, which saw military coups, a Marxist revolution and the subsequent Soviet invasion. A lull in the fighting and some return movement took place after the Geneva Peace Accord and Soviet troop withdrawal in 1989, but the trend was shattered by renewed fighting as the rival *mujahedin* groups turned on each other in a bitter civil war in the early 1990s. During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), new refugees appeared. A smaller outflow continued after the fall of the Taliban.

Most of the population outflow in the late 1970s and the 1980s went to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan at one point hosted 3.2 million registered refugees, whereas Iran registered up to 2.35 million. Repatriation of these refugees started in 1989, gained force with the installation of the so-called *mujahedin* regime in 1992, but was declining sharply already in 1994 due to renewed fighting.⁴ Repatriation often took place simultaneously with new outflows. The installation of an internationally backed government in 2001 marked a watershed in population movements. Repatriation took place on an unprecedented scale. In 2002 alone, 2.3 million returned. By October 2007, UNHCR estimated that more than 5 million refugees had returned from Iran and Pakistan.

A smaller number of Afghan refugees and migrants went to Western countries. Most were given refugee status and eventually became citizens. Some of them started returning to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, although mostly on special programmes for the temporary return of skilled expatriates. At the same time, European governments began to consider returning rejected Afghan asylum seekers on the assumption that the general need for protection had been greatly reduced in the post-Taliban era. To this end, tripartite agreements between the newly installed Afghan government, UNHCR and European governments were established. The agreements regulated the voluntary return of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan, but also opened the door to the forced return of rejected applicants, both from an older caseload and from amongst the more recent post-Taliban outflow.

In 2003, the European Commission set up a joint programme for the reception and integration of voluntary returnees to Afghanistan from EU member states. The Return, Reception and Integration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan (RANA) programme was designed to complement existing national AVR programmes by providing extended reception and reintegration assistance in Afghanistan. As well as host country-specific cash grants, reintegration options for returnees consisted of training, job referral and on the job training.⁵ In late 2004 a small grant to start up a business was added as an option after project implementers noted limited demand for the other options.

By the end of the programme in April 2007, nearly 2100 voluntary returnees from 12 EU countries had arrived in Afghanistan through RANA.⁶ In addition, some 2000 involuntary returnees from EU countries had received temporary accommodation, transportation and referrals to reintegration assistance. In total, just under 1100 returnees (both voluntary and involuntary) used one of the RANA reintegration options, that is, about 25 percent of all potential beneficiaries. Of these, about three quarters opted for the small business support package.

⁴ Harpviken, Kristian Berg. 2006. *Networks in Transition: Wartime Migration in Afghanistan*. Doctoral dissertation, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo.

⁵ Laurence Hunzinger, *Return, Reception and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan*, External Evaluation, Final Report, European Union/International Organization for Migration, July 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

2.3 The Norwegian return programme to Afghanistan

The Norwegian return programme for Afghans drew heavily on the RANA model and was mostly targeted towards the post-Taliban outflow.

IOM established a mission in Norway in 2002 to assist with Norway's first AVR programme. Norway had experienced an influx of asylum seekers from the eastern parts of Europe, many of whom failed to gain refugee status or other forms of protection. The IOM programme, called VARP (Voluntary Assisted Return Programme), facilitated the voluntary return of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers to their country of origin. An ongoing programme, VARP involves the organisation of the return journey but does not provide additional assistance and is not tailored to specific nationalities.

In the beginning, VARP was not directly relevant to Afghan nationals, as until 1 August 2003 the Norwegian authorities granted asylum to all Afghan applicants. Following an unprecedented peak in applications – a trend that differed from the number of Afghan applications in other European countries – the government adopted a more restrictive policy and recognition rates decreased.⁷ Afghans whose asylum applications were rejected, or otherwise wanted to return to Afghanistan, could apply to the generic VARP.⁸ A total of 94 Afghan nationals returned through VARP between 2000 and April 2006.

In April 2006, the government launched an extended return programme for Afghan nationals. Central to this was the IOM-implemented IRRANA: Information, Return and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan. The initiative was in line with the tripartite agreement Norway had signed in August the previous year with UNHCR and the Afghan government to regulate the return of Afghans from Norway to Afghanistan. The agreement also opened the way for the forced return of Afghans whose asylum applications had been rejected. The launch of IRRANA was timed to coincide with the start of forced removals. The government announced that rejected Afghan asylum seekers who failed to apply to the programme within a month of their applications' rejection could be subject to forced return.⁹

The IRRANA programme is open to asylum seekers who are under consideration or have been rejected, as well as to Afghans with recognised refugee status or a permanent residence permit. The programme has a dual purpose: to increase the rate of voluntary return and facilitate reintegration. The programme goes beyond VARP by providing additional support in terms of (i) information, (ii) a cash grant, and (iii) reintegration assistance.

While information about ordinary VARP programmes is disseminated mainly by the IOM mission in Norway and in the reception centres as part of their return strategies, IOM also holds special information sessions for Afghan nationals at the Norwegian reception centres with a Dari-speaking staff member.

In addition, a Norwegian NGO, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), established an Afghan-specific information project under its repatriation and return programme (INCOR), which was funded by the overall Norwegian return programme to Afghanistan. Under this project, NRC staff,

⁷ In particular, a more restrictive policy in Denmark seems to have resulted in many Afghan asylum seekers there going to Norway instead.

⁸ Although IRRANA has been open also for recognised refugees or asylum seekers with status, the programme's focus must be understood as the return of failed asylum seekers

⁹ *Ny avtale om tilbakemelding til Afghanistan*, Press statement no 43, 26 April 2006, Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion (<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/aid/pressemelder/pressemeldinger/2006/Ny-avtale-om-tilbakevending-til-Afghanistan.html?id=104382>, accessed 20 May 2008).

including one Afghan, travelled to reception centres to inform Afghan nationals about the situation in Afghanistan as well as the rights of Afghan asylum seekers in Norway. When the announcement of forced deportations resulted in significant political protests from Afghans in Norway (see below), the government allocated extra funding to the INCOR information project as well as to NOAS, an independent NGO providing information and legal counselling to asylum seekers. NOAS was to offer legal counselling to rejected applicants who were likely to be deported.¹⁰

In addition, preparations were made to offer Afghans who had received a final rejection of their asylum application a short training course in Norway on how to establish a business. The course would be organised by the private foundation Business Innovation Programmes (BIP) and run over five days. However, the course was introduced at reception centres in the midst of the 2006 hunger strike among Afghan asylum seekers in Norway. As a consequence, there was little interest in the training course.¹¹

IRRANA goes beyond the generic Norwegian VARP by also providing a cash grant and a reintegration component, similar to the IOM-administered returnee programmes in other European countries. When the programme started in April 2006, the grant was NOK 5000. After internal reviews, the sum was increased to NOK 15,000 in November 2006. The grant is paid in instalments from the local IOM offices after the returnees arrive in Afghanistan.

The reintegration component, described in further detail in section 9 below, is provided by IOM offices in Afghanistan, where returnees have the option of job referral, training or a business support grant worth NOK 10,000.

In the period between 2000 and April 2006, close to 2000 Afghan nationals received a final rejection of their asylum application.¹² 94 Afghan nationals had returned with the generic VARP programme before April 2006, whereas an additional seven had applied to VARP just before the launch of IRRANA and were able to participate in IRRANA as the programme got under way.

By mid-March 2008, only 69 Afghans had opted to return through IRRANA. In the same period, at least 206 Afghan former asylum seekers had been forcibly returned by the police. (A number of applicants had also had their rejections overturned, see below).¹³ There are probably many reasons for the strikingly low participation rate in the voluntary return programme, but it seems to have been determined at least in part by three factors: the presence of other options, political mobilisation among Afghans in Norway against forced returns, and uncertainty regarding changing asylum policies. The latter two were closely linked.

On 26 May 2006, the announced start date for forced removal, a group of Afghan asylum seekers – including many who had received a final rejection – embarked upon a hunger strike in Oslo to

¹⁰ NOAS did not apply for continued funding after the end of 2006, claiming that the project conflicted with its mandate and that the return policy had an uncertain basis in UNHCR recommendations. However, in 2008 the project was restarted.

¹¹ The course was initially envisaged as having two components, one in Norway and one in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, BIP would set up a business centre that could offer loans and employ some of those who had received training in Norway. However, as it was decided that IOM-Afghanistan would be tasked with reintegration support, BIP's proposed role was reduced to one component in Norway.

¹² According to data received from UDI, in the period between 2000 and 30 April 2006, a total of 1874 Afghan asylum seekers received a final rejection and were obliged to leave the country. In practice, these would have received their rejection after August 2003, due to a change in asylum practice at this point. However, an unknown number of those rejected might have left Norway independently prior to the start-up of IRRANA, making it difficult to ascertain the number of potential IRRANA participants. Nonetheless, 69 participants must be considered low by any criteria.

¹³ According to police annual reports, the police forcibly removed 206 asylum seekers to Afghanistan in the period 2006-2007.

protest against the anticipated forced returns. The campaign received wide media coverage and support from a number of civil society actors. After nearly four weeks of protests, the campaign ended when the government agreed that only those with links to the capital, Kabul, would be returned that year. In July 2007 the highest decision-making body for asylum cases in Norway (UNE *stornemd*) formalised this promise, ruling that Afghans from unsafe areas and without networks in safe areas of the country such as Kabul should be allowed to stay in Norway. This meant that a number of Afghan asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected and who were often residing illegally in Norway were entitled to have their cases overturned.

Another mobilisation campaign among Afghans against forced returns took place in the summer of 2007. A group led by the same spokesman as during the previous protest travelled on foot from one part of the country to another, following the path of an old pilgrim route. The group then camped outside the parliament. Some also underwent high profile conversion to Christianity, and the fate of the rejected Afghan asylum seekers continued to be at the centre of public debate.

The political protests worked on two levels to weaken the appeal of the voluntary return programme. By influencing government policy – or at least introducing uncertainty about future practice – the campaign raised hopes that the applicants would be able to have their cases reconsidered. More directly, as a display of solidarity the political campaign exerted group pressure on individual Afghans not to return. Voluntary returns under these circumstances would undermine claims from the protest leaders that return to Afghanistan was unsafe under any circumstances.

Uncertainty and unpredictability also arose from the fact that the situation in Afghanistan continued to be unstable, meaning that the recommendations the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) made as to which areas were safe for return were liable to change. The Norwegian government had said it would follow UNHCR guidelines, and following the UNE ruling in July 2007, the government had also committed itself not to return Afghans to areas that they did not originate from or with which they had no links. Hence, when for instance Ghazni province was declared unsafe by UNHCR in September 2007, the Norwegian government stopped forced returns of most Afghans from this province and asylum applicants from Ghazni who had received a final rejection had their cases reconsidered. Under these circumstances, rejected applicants had some reason to expect a favourable future change and hence had less incentive to sign up for a return programme.

The option to remain in Norway or Europe illegally would also have served as a deterrent to signing up for the IRRANA programme. There are no estimates of how many former asylum seekers remain in Norway but there is some evidence that many chose to travel to other European countries rather than to return to Afghanistan. That intention was stated by several young Afghan asylum seekers during a group interview at a reception centre in western Norway in January 2005. Some of the respondents in the present study explained that many of their fellow Afghan asylum seekers had chosen to move on.

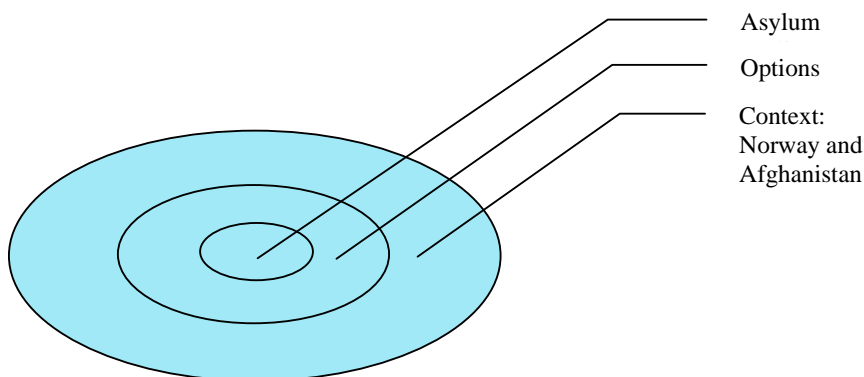
3. Analytical framework and methodology

3.1 Analytical Framework

As with all programmes of this kind, the Norwegian IRRANA has two main objectives. One is to make voluntary return more attractive. A second is to facilitate reintegration. To assess the impact of the programme in both respects requires some understanding of the broader flight-exile-and-return experience.

The literature on forced migration tells us that an assistance programme is only one element – and not necessarily the most decisive one – in a potential returnee’s broader decision-making framework, which includes security and economic conditions in the home country, experiences in the host country and options regarding voluntary return.¹⁴ Assessment of the options will be influenced by individual and family considerations.¹⁵ The decision elements can be presented schematically as follows:

Figure I: Decision to return



Initial investigation suggested that the following factors would be likely to influence the response of Afghan asylum seekers in Norway whose applications had been rejected:

1. Structural context

- security and economic conditions in Afghanistan
- conditions of stay in Norway
- political mobilisation in Norway

¹⁴ Bascom, Jonathan, 2005. 'The Long, "Last Step"? Reintegration of Repatriates in Eritrea', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, (165-180); Preston, Rosemary, 1999. 'Researching Repatriation and Reconstruction: Who is Researching What and Why?' in Richards Black & Khalid Koser, eds, *The End of the Refugee Cycle: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. New York: Berghahn Books (18-36).

¹⁵ Black, Richard & Russel King, 2004. 'Editorial Introduction: Migration, Return and Development in West Africa', *Population, Space and Place*, 10.

2. Options

- forced return, including long-term deportation and inability to return to Europe
- illegal residence – in Norway or elsewhere (including work connections opening ways to go underground)
- voluntary return programme, with multiple aid components for reintegration (information, cash incentives, other reintegration assistance)
- possibilities of getting the asylum decision overturned

3. Individual characteristics

- demographic characteristics (age, family status, ethnicity)
- reasons for leaving Afghanistan
- solidarity networks in Afghanistan
- solidarity networks in Norway
- obligations in the host country or country of origin
- experience in and adaptability to asylum in Norway

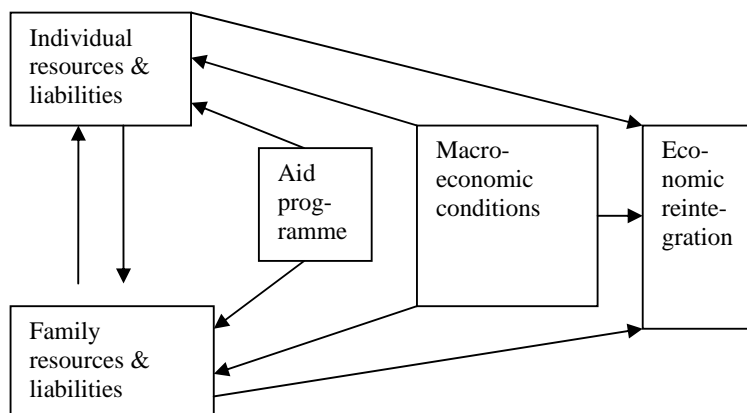
To assess the impact of the return programme and the usefulness of the reintegration assistance, the study team therefore designed a questionnaire for the returnees which covered this broader decision-making complex. The questionnaire covered the decision to leave, the experience in Norway, the decision to return, and the adequacy and usefulness of the various assistance components of the voluntary return programme, including assistance for reintegration. The questionnaire was applied in informal and semi-structured interviews with 28 Afghan who had participated in the programme.

“Reintegration” has social, economic and political meanings.¹⁶ In line with the time perspective given in the ToR, the *study focused on short-term economic reintegration, defined as the ability of returnees to establish themselves in an income-generating situation soon after their return*. To evaluate how the programme contributed to this objective, we relied on discussion with the returnees. Did they make use of the return programme? Which components were most helpful? How adequate was the assistance? For those who used the business component, how did the new business fare? What were the alternatives? We also asked the returnees about their present and future plans to assess how helpful the reintegration assistance had been.

As in the case of the decision to return, the literature on reintegration shows that a given assistance programme is one of many factors that affect the reintegration process.¹⁷ Individual and family characteristics – above all their resources and liabilities of an economic as well as political nature – are important, as are macroeconomic conditions. Factors external to the programme are likely to be especially significant when the programme itself is quite modest, as in the IRRANA case. The place of the assistance programme in the reintegration process is schematically presented below:

¹⁶ Fagen, Patricia Weiss, 2003. ‘Post-Conflict Reintegration and Reconstruction: Doing it Right Takes a While’, in Niklaus Steiner, Mark Gibney & Gil Loescher, eds, *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees and Human Rights*. London: Routledge (197–224); Hammond, Laura, 1999. ‘Examining the Discourse of Repatriation: Towards a More Proactive Theory of Return Migration’, in Richard Black & Khalid Koser, eds, *The End of the Refugee Cycle: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. Oxford: Berghahn (227-244).

¹⁷ Koser, Khalid, 2000. ‘Return, Readmission and Reintegration: Changing Agendas, Policy Frameworks and Operational Programmes’, in Bimal Ghosh, ed., *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* Geneva: International Organization for Migration (57-99).

Figure II: The aid programme and the reintegration process

The interviews form the primary data for the study. In addition, the study team drew on secondary observations from staff involved in planning or implementing the programme in Norway and Afghanistan, consulted internal reports and evaluations of the programme, and analysed statistical data regarding rates of return. The comparative study on the UK and Danish return programmes consulted key programme staff and surveyed available statistics and programme documents.

Data limitations made it difficult to obtain independent, objective indicators of the appeal of the programme. We do have data on one important alternative to voluntary return, i.e. forced removals. The number of removals of rejected Afghan asylum seekers has been much higher than the number who have joined the voluntary return programme. By the end of 2007, when data for both types of departure are available, the number of forced removals was 206, whereas the number of voluntary returns was 67. Some who were deported had originally signed up for the voluntary return programme but were removed from the list by the Norwegian police (see below). Hence, the appeal of the return programme is somewhat higher than these figures indicate. Nevertheless, the figures show that almost twice as many effectively chose deportation rather than voluntary return. Moreover, given that the potential number of voluntary returns throughout the existence of the IRRANA programme per date was much higher,¹⁸ the low number of those who participated (69 adults by mid-March 2008) is further evidence that the programme had only a marginal effect in encouraging return.¹⁹ The fact that the IRRANA uptake was only slightly higher than the number of Afghans who departed with the generic VARP programme when compared over time also demonstrates the limited effect of IRRANA on return rates.

To capture the reasons for this and assess the workings of the programme in more detail, in-depth qualitative analysis relying on interviews with returnees was necessary.

3.2 The sample interviewed and the larger IRRANA group

It should be noted at the outset that the number of persons who applied to the programme is considerably higher than those who actually entered it. Data from IOM-Oslo for the period April 2006 to mid-March 2008 shows that 115 persons applied but only 69 actually departed under the

¹⁸ By mid-March 2008, the number of Afghan asylum seekers who had received a final rejection in Norway was 1910.

¹⁹ In addition one could speculate that at least some of those returning through the programme would have done so regardless of the programme.

programme. The remaining 46 – more than one third – had not returned for several reasons: 19 were rejected by the police because they were on the point of being deported, were expected to cause difficulties during the journey, or had committed a misdemeanour while in Norway. Four were excluded by IOM (typically these were applicants who had applied previously but failed to appear at their scheduled departure), and the rest either withdrew of their own accord (11) or simply disappeared (10). Two applications were pending.

By the time the study team finished its fieldwork in Afghanistan (late February 2008), a total of 67 persons had departed under the programme, including one family of five (two adults, three children). Of the 64 adults that had participated in the programme, 17 chose not to participate in the reintegration assistance part of the programme, but availed themselves of IOM services only for travel assistance (travel documents, tickets) and the cash grant. The team naturally wished to include in the sample both types of participant, but returnees who did not receive reintegration assistance (business, training or job referral) were as a rule more difficult to locate. These returnees mostly disappeared from the IOM system some time after arrival in Afghanistan, and it is likely that many left the country again. As a result, the group had a disproportionately high number of persons who had registered for reintegration assistance.

The team was able to contact only about half of the returnees for several reasons. Security conditions limited the team's mobility. The team members were prohibited from travelling to Ghazni or Wardak, where some of the returnees were living. That applied to Afghan members of the team as well. Team members did travel to other provinces, however, including Nangarhar and Herat, to interview returnees. The team conducted interviews with 24 returnees in Kabul (including the two married returnees); one returnee in Herat; and two returnees in Nangarhar. In addition, two phone interviews were carried out with returnees living in Herat and Samangan province.²⁰

The anonymity of the respondents was upheld throughout the research, and all interviews were based on informed consent.²¹ Confidentiality requirements meant that the team worked through IOM to make contact with returnees. IOM asked the returnees to travel to the local IOM office to sign a consent form to participate in the study before releasing contact details to the team. Names and addresses were never given to the research team, only phone numbers.

IOM was unable to locate several returnees for various reasons (the contact numbers left with IOM were no longer valid, they were in inaccessible areas, or had left for Iran or Pakistan). For the time period when the team was in the field (October 2007-February 2008), the number of *potential* respondents for whom IOM had working contact information and who lived in accessible areas was 54.²² Of these, IOM had succeeded in establishing contact with only 33 who were in areas accessible to the team (see table 1 below).

In the end, the team succeeded with IOM's help in interviewing 29 returnees. While less than half of the total returnees were interviewed, out of the 47 adults who received reintegration assistance almost two thirds were interviewed.

²⁰ The appointments for phone interviews were set up well in advance, making sure that the respondent had the necessary time and quiet. The phone interviews were conducted by one of the Afghan consultants. Our general assessment is that the phone interviews yielded information of the same standard as the face-to-face ones.

²¹ See National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway, 2006. 'Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Law and Humanities', Oslo.

²² This number excludes the children of adult returnees.

Table 1: Record of contact with 64 adult IRRANA participants

	Total	Reintegration assistance	No reintegration assistance	Direct contact with research team
Interviewed by research team	29	28	1	29
Returnee lived in remote or inaccessible province and no contact attempts were made	5	4	1	0
IOM did not have any contact number	5	0	5	0
IOM had a contact number but could not establish contact *	11	1	10	0
As above, but IOM also visited returnee shop, which had closed down	2	2	n.a.	0
IOM was told the returnee had travelled to Pakistan or Iran	4	4	0	0
Relatives told IOM returnee was travelling and out of reach	4	4	0	0
Repeatedly failed to show for interview appointments	1	1	0	1
Research team received phone number but interview was declined	1	1	0	1
Returnee declined interview to IOM	1	1	0	0
Returnee agreed, but did not come to IOM to sign consent form	1	1	0	0
TOTAL	64	47	17	31

* The final destinations of the returnees in this category had been as follows: Kabul (8), Badakhshan (1), Nangarhar (1) and unknown (1).

3.3 Conduct of the interviews

Prior to the fieldwork, the research team had developed an interview form as a basis for semi-structured interviews of the returnees. The first five interviews served to test the interview form, but resulted in only minor revisions. However, the sensitive nature of many of the questions implied that the interviews often proceeded in an unstructured fashion, as the flow of the conversation had to take priority over a strict adherence to sequence.

With one exception, the interviews in Kabul were conducted at a low-profile guesthouse in the city. This was neutral ground and a place the returnees could visit without exposing themselves to outsiders. Twenty-five of the interviews were done in Dari, and four in English as the returnees were sufficiently fluent in the language.

In order to obtain more in-depth knowledge of a select number of returnees, the team also visited shops established by seven returnees with assistance from the reintegration component of the programme, and the homes of five returnees (one of which was a combined interview and home visit). Home and business visits were made after prior agreement with the returnees and their families. The shop visits allowed the team to observe the shop and discuss details of the business operation (stock, profit etc.), and to see how the returnee was handling the business venture. During the family visits the team met with family members, including the returnee's wife. In two cases separate interviews were held with the wife with the help of the female Afghan consultant. The questions included the effects of the husband's absence and the wife's role in decisions regarding flight, return and reintegration. The meeting with the wife was also an opportunity to cross-check some of the answers from the husband. In one case the request for a separate conversation with the wife was declined by the husband. In addition, five follow-up interviews were undertaken during

the second phase of fieldwork in January 2008 to give a slightly longer time perspective on the reintegration.

The majority (22) of the respondents were married by the time they left Afghanistan. In all but one case the respondents had not been accompanied by their wives into exile. In the exceptional case, the husband had travelled to Norway with his wife and their three children had been born in exile. This family was counted as five in the statistics showing the total number of voluntary returnees (67). However, since the wife proved to have limited knowledge about the return programme and to have had little influence on the decision to return, we have counted the couple as a single story, adjusting the total number of 'cases' in our study to 28.

Most of the returnees were quite willing to talk and did not mind sitting through the two hours that the interviews normally took. In a few cases, the returnees stated they had limited time and asked for the interview to be conducted more quickly. When requested, most respondents readily agreed to a family visit. Two of the returnees did not wish the team to visit the site of their business venture, however. The team's policy was to not visit unless permitted to do so.

The returnees did not respond with equal openness to all the questions. Most spoke readily about the migratory process itself (routing, cost and mobilising funds) and, it seemed, the decision to return. Most provided details of the reintegration process, although some were evasive regarding the use of the reintegration grant and the business venture. The most difficult item concerned the reasons for flight. Several returnees described these events in terms that did not seem plausible, although additional discussion (over several cups of tea and as the respondent warmed to the occasion) sometimes helped to fill in the picture. Given that the returnees had been rejected for asylum in Norway, this obviously was a sensitive theme when meeting researchers undertaking a Norwegian study. The tendency for refugees to maintain a relatively coherent flight narrative, incrementally developed in the encounter with various migration authorities, is well known from other contexts.²³

For some, the circumstances surrounding the start-up and closure of their business were topics to which were they responded with some vagueness. The reasons for this are elaborated in section 9 below. However, it should also be stated that on a more general level, Afghanistan, as a conflict-ridden society experiencing continuing insecurity, is a place where details of political background, economic situation and even family are shared only with considerable caution.

In the text, we have used quotations from respondents. We emphasise that most of the interviews were not conducted in English, and that the quotes in the text may differ from the precise formulation of the respondent. We have taken care, however, to select quotations which we believe are in full harmony with the spirit of what the informant expressed in the interview.

²³ Knudsen, John Chr., 1995. 'When Trust is on Trial: Negotiating Refugee Narratives', in E. Valentine Daniel & John Chr. Knudsen, eds, *Mistrusting Refugees*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press (13-35).

4. Profile of respondents

Age, marital status and education

Demographic information and data on the use of reintegration assistance is presented below. We are here comparing information on the IRRANA group of 64 as a whole, as in table 1, with similar data on the smaller sample of returnees interviewed for the study. The analysis shows some significant differences between the two groups. The respondents in our sample were on the whole older, more likely to be married and to have a higher educational level than those who returned under the programme as a whole. Most important for this study was the difference in the use of reintegration assistance. Almost all of our respondents had also accepted reintegration assistance (28 out of 29 in our earlier figure), as compared to somewhat fewer (47 of 64) in the group as a whole. Among those 35 who for some reason or other were not available or willing to participate in the study, only 19 had taken advantage of the reintegration assistance. This suggests that we are dealing with two quite distinct groups: the older, married and more educated returnees are more likely to utilise the offer of reintegration assistance, while the younger, single and less educated are somewhat less likely to do so. The latter are also likely to be more mobile and hence were more difficult to track down. The sample of respondents interviewed for this study is therefore not representative of the IRRANA returnees as a whole.

As can be seen from table 2, whereas almost half of the IRRANA participants were single when leaving Norway, only five of the research team's respondents were single. The age distribution among the respondents differs somewhat. Whereas 50 percent of the larger group of returnees were between 20 and 29 years of age, amongst the respondents only 23 percent fell within this age group. In the respondent group the modal age bracket was 30-39. The older age groups were more heavily represented as well.

We have only partial data on education for the group as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems that the respondents have a higher level of education than the group as a whole, with 10 out of 22 saying they had attended university before leaving Afghanistan.

Unlike the group as a whole, almost all in the respondent group had participated in the reintegration programme as well. This means that the reintegration component of the return programme was comparatively more attractive to returnees who were older, married and had a degree of education.

Table 2: Marital status when leaving Norway

Total IRRANA participants				Informants		
Married	single	Unknown	total *	married**	single***	total
32	28	3	63	22	6	28

* 4 family members (wife and 3 children) in family of 5 not included

** 1 told he was estranged from wife, 1 was undergoing divorce proceedings

*** 3 married upon return

Table 3: Age distribution

	under 18	18-19	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s+	total
IRRANA participants	1	0	31	14	9	6	2	63*
Informants	0	0	5	8	6	8	1	28

* 4 family members (wife and 3 children) deducted from total number of IRRANA participants.

Table 4: Education

Level	Number of respondents	Number of total IRRANA participants*
University degree	6	7
University, not completed	6**	3**
12 th grade	5	14
10 th grade	2	0
9 th grade	2	2
Less than 9 th grade, informal education, or no information	7	37
TOTAL	28	63

* Information shown in this column is based on data received from IOM-Oslo, which records IRRANA participants' education. Standard education categories differ somewhat from how respondents described their level of education, and the data from IOM-Oslo have therefore been adjusted to the Afghan system.

** The higher number of returnees amongst the respondents than amongst the larger group in this category is probably explained by respondents giving a more detailed account during interviews.

Ethnicity

IOM does not register the ethnicity of the programme participants. We cannot therefore say whether our sample is representative of the IRRANA participants as a whole. One striking aspect of our sample, however, is that although a large number of Afghan asylum seekers reportedly are Hazara, there are very few Hazaras amongst the respondents – only five out of 28. This may be partly explained by the prominent role that the Hazara asylum seekers in Norway have played in organising the political protest against forced return. To sign up for a voluntary return programme when other asylum seekers went on a hunger strike to protest against forced returns could be understood as a break of ethnic solidarity ties. Most of our respondents were Tajik (14). This is not surprising since the programme presumably would be of most interest to people with a link to Kabul, the main destination for the returns executed by the Norwegian government. A large part of the population of Kabul is Tajik, which could explain why a majority of the respondents are from this group. In addition, this ethnic group has been particularly influential in the post-Taliban period, dominating several ministries and other official bodies.²⁴ This state of affairs might have made it more attractive for Tajiks to return.

Table 5: Ethnic background of respondents

Tajik	Hazara	Pashtun	Qizilbash	Other
14	5	6	2	1

The full group of returnees through IRRANA arrived back in Afghanistan in the period between April 2006 and December 2007. The largest concentration was between October 2006 and June 2007, when 40 (out of a total of 63) arrived. As shown in table 6, interviews covered returnees arriving at different periods.

²⁴ Suhrke, Astri, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Arne Strand. 2004. *Conflictual Peacebuilding: Afghanistan two years after Bonn*. (CMI Report R 2004: 4). There are signs, however, that this influence is slowly decreasing, with Pashtuns in particular regaining some of their positions.

Table 6: Time of return

Arrived in Afghanistan:	Arrivals in total	Interviewed
April-June 2006	4	1
July-September 2006	9	6
October-December 2006	17	8
January-March 2007	11	2
April-June 07	12	6
July-September 2007	8	3
October-January 2008	2	2
TOTAL	63	28

Use of reintegration assistance

Only one of those interviewed had not made use of the reintegration assistance. Of those 35 IRRANA participants not interviewed, 16 had not made use of the reintegration programme. This distribution is to be expected as IOM is more likely to have extended contact with those that have been processed through the programme, whereas many of those who were uninterested in the programme are likely to have moved on, either within the country or outside, and to have no further links with IOM.

5. The decision to leave

5.1 Reasons for leaving

Most of the returnees cited security reasons for leaving Afghanistan. These explanations must be assessed critically. First, the returnees had probably stressed security concerns in their asylum applications in order to maximise the chance of acceptance and wished to maintain that story publicly. Even though the team made it clear that they were independent researchers, many returnees seemed to regard them as being connected with the Norwegian immigration authorities.²⁵ Some might have left because of private conflicts or implication in criminal events that invited prosecution or private revenge. While this does not constitute persecution (as defined by refugee law), the result is still insecurity and the returnee understandably would want to present himself as a victim rather than a perpetrator.²⁶ As is often the case in forced migration, there could have been several reasons for leaving.²⁷ Some returnees, for instance, said at one point in the interview that they could not get a job because of their political background. Because of the asylum context, however, the returnees tended to emphasise security and political factors when asked about the reasons for leaving.

Keeping these considerations in mind, we can group the stated reasons for leaving into four main categories. In order of frequency they are:

(i) Insecurity arising from political conflict (political affiliation, acts committed in a political capacity when serving a political regime or faction, or more opportunistic action while affiliated with a political faction such as settling old scores or seizing property). (18 out of 28)

Three said they had killed, or been accused of killing, people during the *mujahedin* regime in Kabul (1992-96); relatives of these persons were now in high places and were after them. Two of these returnees expressed strong concerns about their present security.

Nine said they had been arrested or persecuted by the Taliban regime (1996-2001) because of the political background of themselves or their family. One gave a detailed account of the political activities and eventual murder of his father. One said he had been with the political party Hizb-e Islami, which had earned him the enmity of other factions. One said he had been running arms transportation for one of the *mujahedin* factions during the Soviet invasion, which had left him in a dangerous situation when the Soviet-backed government collapsed and factions turned against each other. Two said they had been with the Afghan secret police, Khad, during the communist period, and were persecuted by subsequent power holders. One respondent said he was beaten up after refusing to be a tank driver for the Uzbek general Dostum.

²⁵ The tendency to be associated with aid organisations or governments is a staple for research in Afghanistan, where there is limited familiarity with the concept of independent research. See also: Monsutti, Alessandro, 2005. *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazara of Afghanistan*. London: Routledge.

²⁶ Fagen, Patricia Weiss, 1996. *The Meaning and Modes of Reintegration*, unpublished paper, Washington, DC: World Bank/Geneva: UNHCR.

²⁷ Colson, Elizabeth, 2003. 'Forced Migration and the Anthropological Response', *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. 16, no. 1 (1-18); Lubkemann, Stephen C., 2004. 'Situating Migration in Wartime and Post-War Mozambique: A Critique of "Forced Migration" Research', in Simon Szreter, Hania Sholkamy & A. Dharmalingam, eds, *Categories and Contexts: Anthropological and Historical Studies in Critical Demography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (371-400).

Three cited unspecified political problems linked to personal or family association with the Taliban. One, the only respondent to have been granted refugee status in Norway, said he had political problems with *mujahedin* factions that had forced him to leave Afghanistan, preferring not to talk about this aspect of his past.

(ii) Insecurity arising from personal conflict (over landed property, revenge, marriage) (5)

These respondents cited family conflicts over land, accusations of criminal activity unrelated to the war, marriage conflicts (one had married a woman that the village commander had wanted), or being threatened by a local commander after trying to reclaim the family house that the commander had occupied.

(iii) Economic insecurity due to political factors (2)

Two were professionally trained but had worked with previous regimes and were consequently unable to get a job under the present regime (one was an army officer, another a former member of Khad).

(iv) Other (3)

Three cited other reasons (one had grown up as a refugee in Iran and was sent by his family to Europe to get an education; another went to join his sister in Norway who had recently been widowed). One left because of social recriminations against his family.

5.2 Organisation of travel

From the perspective of this study, the organisation of the outbound journey is important because it reveals something about the conditions for leaving (e.g. in haste or planned) and the obligations incurred (particularly economic).²⁸ These considerations in turn influence the decision whether and how to return.

The sensitive nature of the reasons for leaving also made it difficult at times to map the organisation of the travel. Many returnees portrayed a hastily made decision, possibly to reinforce a case for asylum. On the whole, however, a picture emerged of a long decision-making process that was played out within the family. Most had received supported from the extended family to finance the trip through the sale of land or other property (e.g. jewellery) (See table 7).

Table 7: Financing the travel to Norway

Sold own or family assets (including land)	12
Used his father's compensation money, supplemented by work en route	1
Sold assets and borrowed money	2
Borrowed money only	2
Leased land	1
Worked their way	1
Savings	1
Savings and borrowed	1
Given/borrowed money from friend or family member	2
Sold assets and used savings	1
No information	1
TOTAL	25*

* Not including the three respondents travelling on a visa.

²⁸ Allen, Rebecca & Harry H. Hiller, 1985. 'The Social Organization of Migration: An Analysis of the Uprooting and Flight of Vietnamese Refugees', *International Migration*, vol. 23, no. 4 (434-452).

A hypothesis prior to fieldwork had been that asylum seekers put themselves and their family in significant debt in order to finance the travel, factoring in any reluctance to return.²⁹ However, this proved not to be the case with the respondents. Many had received help from family members, including extended family such as in-laws and uncles, in raising the travel funds. However, few had borrowed money from outside sources such as moneylenders.

While this suggests that the returnees mostly came from families with considerable resources, the same may not apply in equal measure to all asylum seekers from Afghanistan. As noted at the outset, the respondent sample was atypical in that the group was older, had a higher level of education, and had more married members than the IRRANA group as a whole. These characteristics suggest some access to extended family resources not only to finance the outbound journey but – by extension – to help during the reintegration process. It seems family resources tend to facilitate both the decision to leave and, if the application is rejected, the decision to join an assisted voluntary return programme as well.

An exception was three returnees who had worked en route to fund some or all of their travel costs. These were amongst the poorer people in the group of respondents and two were illiterate. An older Hazara respondent said he had worked his way, including as a dockside worker in Greece. He also recounted having seen “hundreds” of Afghans working in Greece to save money for the onward journey. A young respondent, also a Hazara, said he had taken a similar route. He had some money following a compensation payment in connection with his father’s death on a building site in Iran, but as it was not sufficient he had supplemented it by working en route. The third respondent, who said he had worked his way in Turkey, was also of relatively modest means, as the team could witness when visiting his house in a Hazara suburb in Kabul.

Three respondents said they had travelled legally to Europe on Schengen visas. All the other respondents relied on smugglers.

The rates varied from 5000 to 20,000 USD. On average, respondents had paid just over 10,000 USD, a considerable sum. Even though most respondents in our sample came from families with some means, financing the outbound journey meant a significant investment for members of the extended family, who were the most common source of financing.

Not everyone went straight to Norway. Some went first to Pakistan, staying there for some time to organise their onward journey or leaving after finding it difficult to get work there. Some had stayed in Denmark for several years before coming to Norway. When they received a negative answer from the Danish authorities, they applied for asylum in Norway.³⁰

The most important reason why the respondents had chosen Norway as their destination seems to have been the belief that they would be offered citizenship. A few also had relatives in Norway. In many cases, smugglers gave advice about the ease of obtaining citizenship in various European countries, and seem to have recommended Norway. Some smugglers had also proved not to be trustworthy on other matters. One respondent had wanted to go to Sweden, but the smuggler left him in Århus in Denmark, letting him believe he had reached Sweden.

²⁹ Koser, Khalid, forthcoming 2008. ‘Why Migrant Smuggling Pays’, *International Migration*.

³⁰ Some seem to have arrived in Norway from Denmark before the latter started adhering to the Dublin rules, which meant that Norway could not send asylum seekers back to the country of first asylum. Others were returned to Denmark but made their way back to Norway, at which time the authorities agreed to consider their cases.

Travelling to Norway

According to staff at reception centres in Norway, the cheapest (and most dangerous) travel route from Afghanistan to Europe goes through Iran, Turkey and Greece, where asylum seekers work for several months en route to raise money for the next leg of the journey. Their understanding was that this is the route that most Hazaras in Norway use. A more expensive route, normally by plane, and with forged travel documents, goes through Central Asia or Pakistan via Eastern Europe or Moscow to Europe.

6. The stay in Norway

6.1 Asylum procedures and reception

Asylum cases in Norway are considered by two agencies: the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and the Immigration Appeals Board (*Utlendingsnemda*, UNE). If UDI rejects an asylum application – referred to by the returnees as the “first negative” – the applicant can appeal within three weeks and will be assigned a lawyer. If UDI does not change the decision, the case will be sent to UNE. If UNE upholds the rejection – referred to by the returnees as the “second negative” – the applicant has to leave the country, normally within a few weeks. A rejected applicant can nevertheless request UNE to rescind the decision (*omgjøringsbegjæring*), but only if there is new information.

Although Norway has sought to reduce processing time, the applicant normally has to wait at least one year for a final answer. Two years is not uncommon, sometimes even three or four years. While waiting for a decision, the applicant has a right to accommodation in an asylum centre and a small monthly cash allowance (currently 3100 NOK for a single applicant staying in a reception centre with full board). In 2008 Norway had around 60 centres, mostly located in smaller towns or rural communities. Asylum seekers can also stay in private accommodation but will then lose the allowance and the cost of the accommodation is not covered.

If the authorities can confirm the asylum seeker’s identity, he or she is normally given a work permit. There is no limit as to type and hours of work. There is no provision for adult education or training except instruction in the Norwegian language at the reception centres. This service was ended in early 2003 but recently reinstated. In addition, applicants attend compulsory information sessions, which cover such topics as introduction to Norwegian society and culture, but also possibilities for returning to the home country.

If an asylum seeker receives a final rejection (the “second negative”), the work permit is withdrawn and the person must leave the reception centre, except those with children and those who are willing to participate in a voluntary return programme. Depending on what agreements exist with the authorities in the country of origin, the asylum seeker might be forcibly returned, as in the case of Afghans.

6.2 Experience as an asylum seeker

A majority of the respondents (nearly two thirds) stayed in reception centres during the whole stay in Norway, whereas the rest moved to private accommodation after some time. In this respect the group interviewed differs somewhat from the IRRANA participants as a whole: slightly less than half of the large group stayed in the centres the whole time. Those amongst the respondents who moved out of the centres were more likely to have found work while in Norway. They were also likely to be younger and more often single than those who stayed in the centres. This point has broader significance. The young, single applicants, it will be recalled, constituted a larger share of the participants in the IRRANA programme as a whole than they did in our sample. Moreover, we have seen that participation in the reintegration component was lower within the larger IRRANA group than among our respondents. We now see that the larger group also had more persons who were residentially mobile and probably therefore gainfully employed. Upon return, these persons were less likely to sign up for the reintegration package and more difficult to locate, probably because they had re-migrated. The finding suggests a broader pattern whereby younger, more

adaptive and single returnees are more likely to leave Afghanistan after return as compared to the older and married returnees. Possibly, these younger returnees become part of the continuing labour migration from Afghanistan to Iran, Pakistan or further a field. This finding would be generally consistent with the migration literature.³¹ For the younger, adaptive and mobile group, a modest assistance package like the one offered at present seems to be insufficient as an incentive to remain and reintegrate in Afghanistan.

Almost all the respondents said they had wanted to work in Norway, but some were unable to find jobs. Language was often a barrier. Some said that their reception centre was located in a small community with no job opportunities, and they lacked the connections to get a job in one of the cities. Some found conditions of work, often in the informal restaurant sector, appalling and at exploitative wages.

Those who did find acceptable work – slightly less than half of the group – typically moved out of the reception centres. These were usually the younger respondents, but also included a couple of older persons with entrepreneurial experience. Many found jobs in Oslo or another city in the vicinity of the reception centre. Restaurant and delivery jobs were common, and one person worked at a car repair shop. Salaries were generally low by Norwegian standards, often around 10,000 NOK per month. Yet some of the respondents did manage to save money, sometimes a considerable amount by Afghan standards (see section 9 below).

Table 8: Working in Norway

Worked	11
Worked short term but could not find full-time work	3
Wanted to work but could not find a job because of language	5
Wanted to work but could not find a job because of the location of the reception centre	1
Wanted to work but no permit / bank account	4
Did not work due to health reasons	2
Did not work – reason unclear	2

Many respondents, particularly those staying at reception centres, experienced the period of waiting for a decision on their application as protracted, filled with uncertainty and frustration. Enforced passivity due to a lack of work opportunities or training programmes made the situation worse:

I said again and again that I wanted to learn Norwegian, but was told that since I did not have citizenship, they would not invest in me. They did nothing for us. We wanted to learn the language and then do training. I could not work either since I did not speak the language.

Man, 50s, returned autumn 2006

I studied Norwegian for 6 months, then they told me I could not study further until I became a citizen. I could not get a job, as I did not speak Norwegian. I had offers to work illegally but I did not want to ruin my record, and I wanted to respect the laws of Norway.

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2007

By contrast, some of the younger respondents spoke of an exciting time when they were working and making new friends:

³¹ Kasdan, Leonard, 1965. 'Family Structure, Migration and the Entrepreneur', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 7, no. 4 (345-357).

First I worked handing out flyers, then I got a job delivering papers for Aftenposten through a friend. Then I got a job at a pizza restaurant, and I worked in another restaurant for a year. I made so many friends, and I was able to send money to my family.

Man, 20s, returned autumn 2006

7. The decision to return

Those who chose the voluntary return programme did so not because of the attractions of the programme, but because all the other options were worse. A substantial number (almost one fourth) came to this conclusion before the appeals process had been exhausted. The majority, however, had exhausted all possibilities for staying legally, and faced deportation or embarking on an illegal existence before they decided to join the return programme. For these respondents, return was “voluntary” only in a narrow technical sense.³² A minority of returnees cited both “push” and “pull” factors – for example that life in Norway was difficult and that they were homesick (see table 7).

The voluntary return programme is also open to former asylum seekers with citizenship or permission to stay in Norway. Only one of the respondents fell into this category. He had attempted to bring his family to Norway, but he was getting older and said he was unable to find employment, thus failing to secure the income level required for family reunification. As his health was deteriorating, he had decided to go back to his wife and children in Afghanistan.

Most of the respondents gave somewhat composite reasons for why they chose to return through the programme.³³ Many said, for instance, that they were close to forced removal, but then added that they wanted to return in dignity. The main reasons given for the choice to return voluntarily are summarised in the table below.

Table 9: Summary of reasons given for return

Main reason for return	Number of respondents
Homesickness or frustration with life in the centre made respondent leave before first (2) or final rejection (4)	6
As above, but only left after final rejection	2
Engaged to a Norwegian citizen and wanted to secure re-entry into Norway	2
Wanted to avoid being handed over to Afghan police because of security	1
Worked illegally for 10 months but then went back to look after family	1
Return with IOM more dignified than being returned by police	3
No choice / thought he would be deported	10
Thought illegal life in Norway not possible	2
Had citizenship, but was unable to bring children to Norway	1

7.1 Context

The conditions for staying in Norway and the length of the appeal process influenced the decision to return. Almost a fourth of the respondents (six of 28) chose to return before they had received the second and final negative decision on their applications; one of these decided to return even before having received the response to his application. All of them recalled the time in Norway as particularly difficult. They had all lived in reception centres throughout their stay and had not worked. They were also homesick and missed their families.

³² Blitz, Brad K., Rosemary Sales & Lisa Marzone, 2005. ‘Non-voluntary return? The politics of return to Afghanistan’, *Political Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1 (182-200).

³³ Bascom, Jonathan, 2005. ‘The Long, “Last Step”?’ Reintegration of Repatriates in Eritrea’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (165-180); Hammond, Laura, 1999. ‘Examining the Discourse of Repatriation: Towards a More Proactive Theory of Return Migration’, in Richard Black & Khalid Koser, eds, *The End of the Refugee Cycle: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. Oxford: Berghahn (227-244).

After 10 months, I still had not received the first answer to my asylum application. I was missing my family and I was told that the process could take many years. The centre staff told me that in general there was little chance of getting citizenship. In my centre there were eight people who had been waiting for three years and still not received their second answer... I had no idea how long the application process would take. UDI had told me six months, but after 10 month I was still waiting. So I decided to return with IOM.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2007

I waited for 42 months for my appeal and then decided I could not take it any longer. Sitting in the reception centre with nothing to do was like being in a jail. I got mental problems, I got depressed, I missed my family... I returned because of this, not because of the money that I would be paid [as part of the return programme].

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2007

At least one of these respondents seemed to suffer from mental problems, apparently a depression that was triggered or worsened by his stay in the asylum centre. The condition was confirmed by his son.

By contrast, out of the majority (21 out of 28) that did not return until they had received a second negative, 11 had worked and nine had lived outside the reception centres. Only two in this group characterised the stay in Norway as hard and difficult, similarly stating the hopelessness and difficulties of life in asylum centres as the main reason why they returned. One was the man who had brought his family with him. He said he had been worried for his own mental well-being, and about the implications for his family.

After living in a single room with my family for three years I was getting very frustrated and I got some mental problems. At one point [after the second negative] I got so frustrated that I broke a phone. I was put in prison for three days. There, I was thinking that we could not live like this anymore. So I signed the [IOM] papers.

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2006

Conditions in the home country – particularly with regard to security and economic opportunities – would be expected to constitute a structural “pull” factor in the decision to return. In the case of return to Afghanistan, however, both security and economic conditions could have served as general *disincentives* to return, although many returnees stated that upon return, they had found things generally worse than they had expected. Thus upon returning, they frequently stated that lack of economic opportunities was one reason why other Afghans were not returning.

As discussed above, political developments in Norway at this time are expected to have influenced the return decision. Political mobilisation among Afghans in Norway against forced returns in 2006 and 2007 probably weakened the appeal of voluntary return in two ways. By questioning and thereby introducing some uncertainty about future practice, the campaign raised hopes that the applicants would have their cases reconsidered (see below). More directly, the political campaign exerted group pressure on individual Afghans not to return. Voluntary returns under these circumstances would undermine claims from the protest leaders that return to Afghanistan was unsafe under any circumstances. Second, changes in the government’s return policy due to growing insecurity in Afghanistan and new UNHCR guidelines created expectations of future leniency in policy. These factors probably contributed to the overall modest rate of sign-up for the voluntary return programme, although those who did sign up were obviously not deterred.

Some, but not all, of the respondents had followed the protest movement against forced return. Of those prepared to comment, no one said that the political mobilisation had made return more difficult. One stated that he had not been sympathetic to the protesters:

There were some hunger strikes and demonstrations going on among Afghans. I did not want to take part in this. I did not want to appear on TV. People in Afghanistan would see that I was a refugee. The people who were organising this were mostly Hazara. Especially this guy called X. I got a letter from a friend with an announcement of the events and the email and phone number of X. Pashtuns and Tajiks were not happy with this. They were saying, "Why are you making such a bad conflict? You are a guest in this country."

Man, 40s, returned spring 2007

7.2 Options

Asylum seekers who received a final rejection could embark on a clandestine existence, either in Norway or another European country. There are no accurate data on how many chose this option. Among the returnees, there was an impression that many did. One middle-aged man said that half the Afghans who received a final rejection left Norway to work in another country; the other half were eventually deported. He himself had considered going elsewhere in Europe to work illegally but said he lacked money and contacts. One returnee had worked illegally in Norway for 10 months before he decided to return home to his wife, he said.

The threat of deportation was a significant incentive to sign up for voluntary return. More than half (16 out of 28) said in one way or another that they returned with IRRANA because the alternative was forced removal. Some feared deportation would harm their reputation, place them in the hands of the Afghan police, or was undignified. Two respondents were engaged to Norwegian women.³⁴ They feared that a forced removal would prevent them from re-entering Norway for an extended period of time.³⁵

Some emphasised that they experienced a general situation of no choice:

People are not happy to return but there is no other option. UDI said: "you should leave voluntarily, otherwise we will collect you through the police".

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2007

However, others hesitated to sign up with IOM until the threat of forced removal was very real:

I lived with three other Afghans. We learned about the IRRANA programme when their applications were rejected. Two of the others did not sign up with the programme and were collected by the police. Then I just had to accept the [return] programme. I got a call from the police. I knew I would not be able to escape

Man, 20s, returned autumn 2006

I was at Løddingen centre. There had been a hunger strike, but nobody had listened to those striking. In the centre we had all supported the strike. Half of the centre was deported, the other half went to Europe illegally. I was one of the last ones left. I did not want to be collected by the

³⁴ Another respondent had married a Norwegian citizen as his second wife but stated that his reason for returning was that he had missed his family in Afghanistan.

³⁵ There seems to be no set Norwegian rule for how long a ban on re-entry might last and whether it applies in cases of forced removal or for failed asylum seekers.

police, so I signed up for the IRRANA programme. I also heard that someone in Pakistan had attacked my family.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

One respondent had a specific reason why he did not want to go back with the police. He said he had left Afghanistan because he was accused of killing a person close to a powerful former commander and feared revenge. Now he worried that deportation meant the Norwegian police would turn him over to the Afghan police, and the commander he feared was close to the police. To avoid this, he had signed up for voluntary return.

Some respondents emphasised the indignity of being returned by the police. These respondents were mostly older, or they appeared to be from a relatively privileged background, if not both:

I did not want to be returned by the police, it would have been bad for my reputation.

Man, 40s, returned spring 2007

In Norway there is the rule of law, and I did not want to get caught by the police. Norwegian people were good people, and I did not want to break their rule when I realised there was no opportunity to stay. Money [for reintegration assistance] was one thing, but I am a person of prestige. I did not want to be taken back by force.

Man, 50s, returned spring 2007

After six years in Europe I did not want to go back in handcuffs; I wanted to go back in a dignified way. I am not a criminal.

Man, 40s, returned spring 2007

For many, existence as an illegal resident was inconceivable:

When I got my second negative... I got a letter from UNE saying that I could not appeal. I did not want to be an illegal, so I went with IOM. IOM also told me I would be sent back by force if I did not go voluntarily.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

I realised I would not be allowed to stay. This was the law. I did not want to live on the street, like a drug addict... And the police would come. If bad things happen, it should be in your own country.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

I did not want to be an illegal in Norway. In the West you cannot live as an illegal; no bank card, no access to healthcare... I was in Norway for one day illegally and that day I thought everyone I saw was from the secret police.

Man, 20s, returned autumn 2006

Some of the respondents who had returned after their second negative answer said they had closely followed the development of Norwegian asylum policy. As the basis for granting asylum was changing, they said, many Afghan asylum seekers hoped their cases would be reconsidered. Many were disappointed.

There was a hunger strike by Afghans. The Norwegian government asked those who were on strike to stop and said they would reconsider their cases. Then the government announced that persons from Kabul would definitively be deported. I was not happy to go back, but I had received a second negative and two warning letters. I had no opportunity to stay on.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

Some respondents had gone to considerable lengths to find out whether they had any possibility of staying. For at least one applicant, such efforts ended uncertainty in favour of return:

I went to a conference at the Nansen centre. The head of the UDI and the Minister were there. At the reception centre, my translator had told me to go as it would be relevant for Afghans. I spent 200 kroner on the ticket. While I was there, the Minister said that those who had received a second negative, and who were from Kabul, had to go back to Afghanistan. I asked about my case, but I understood that I had to go.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

The importance of the changing asylum practice was confirmed by numerous other sources. According to an Afghan embassy source, when at one time rumours were going around the Afghan community that the Norwegian government would liberalise its asylum policy nobody showed an interest in the return programme. Reception centre staff said on two occasions that they perceived the changing grounds for asylum as the most important reason why many Afghans had not returned through the programme. The overturning of final rejections following the decision by UNE that Afghans from unsafe areas should be allowed to stay was cited as particularly important. According to one reception centre worker, the Afghans at the centre cited one such case when explaining why they would not return through IOM despite having received a final rejection. NOAS and police representatives also emphasised changing asylum practice in the case of Afghans as a key factor in explaining the low interest in the IRRANA programme.

One component of the IRRANA programme was a cash payment of originally 5000 NOK, later increased to 15,000 NOK. The cash grant went to everyone, including those who did not sign up for additional reintegration assistance. The cash payment was designed to ensure that returnees would not arrive completely empty-handed and with no means to survive during the first period. Possibly, the payment would also serve as an incentive to return voluntarily.

Given that all the respondents had spent at least twice, and in some cases six times, the amount of the cash grant to reach Norway, the cash payment seems relatively modest. When asked about their main reason for returning, none of the respondents mentioned the cash payment as a factor in their decision. When prompted, most – apart from one – emphasised that the money had not been a factor at all. Another respondent, when asked if the IRRANA benefits were important, said maybe yes, the benefits also encouraged him to return.

Two of the respondents said that prior to departure they had no knowledge of either a cash payment or the reintegration support. One of these two was the husband who was staying in Norway with his family and whose return would have entitled the family to a significant amount of money, as each family member counted as one returnee. However, his records show that he had signed up for return before the launch of the IRRANA programme, confirming his statement that a cash grant did not play a role in his decision. One returnee said he did not pay attention to the information about the IRRANA package as he was suffering from mental problems at the time. In addition to these two, one respondent said that he knew about the cash payment but thought the amount was lower, and had no knowledge about the reintegration support. All of these accounts seemed credible to the team.

In addition to the cash payment, returnees could choose between job referral, training and the equivalent of 10,000 NOK in kind to start a small business. In theory, the reintegration assistance could serve as an incentive for voluntary return. In practice, it seems to have been of limited significance in this respect. No respondent cited the reintegration support as a reason for returning.

Some respondents, on the other hand, had an exaggerated impression of the kind of support they would get when arriving in Kabul. A few said that they had been told that they would get help to find a job or a house, or that they would receive land. As discussed in section 8.2, in general the returnees' knowledge about the return programme prior to returning was in many cases partial, and in some cases also incorrect. Nonetheless, none of the respondents that held exaggerated information about the level of reintegration support cited such beliefs as a reason why they had returned with the programme.

7.3 Individual characteristics

Individual characteristics clearly shaped the reasons cited for return. Age was important, as was family and marital status. Those who had stayed at asylum centres and returned as a result of homesickness or frustration were with one exception married with children and were generally older than the average in the group. In contrast, those respondents who had worked outside the centres, and only returned when they were certain the alternative was deportation, were relatively young.

The three respondents who emphasised the indignity of forced return all appeared to be persons who were concerned with social status. One had been a wealthy businessman, one came from a family of high social status and one was a former military person. Similarly, those who said they did not wish to reside illegally in Norway seem to have come from relatively privileged backgrounds. One of them illustrated this point when commenting that most of the Afghans who resided illegally in Norway came originally from the remote provinces of Afghanistan. As poor and illiterate people, he said, they scarcely knew the rules and were not bothered by violating them. In contrast, he portrayed himself as an educated person who understood and respected the law of the country he was in.

In assessing their options, other individual characteristics, such as networks in Norway, also played a role. One respondent complained that he would have gone to Europe had he been able to. Coming from a poor family might have played a part. What deterred him from seizing the option to go to another country in Europe was a lack of funds and connections. Another respondent had worked (illegally) for ten months after his final refusal but decided to return when his parents died and his wife was left alone in Afghanistan.³⁶

The team did not collect data on the situation of those who chose *not* to return with IRRANA, and therefore cannot assess in a comparative perspective the importance for the decision to return (or not) of individual characteristics such as a lack of family support and connections in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, most of the respondents who did return and met the team seemed to have access to some support networks, as evidenced by their clothes, their ability to find accommodation and support themselves upon return, as well as their ability to raise money for the journey to Norway in the first place. The knowledge that they would be able to draw on this support network was probably a factor in the decision to return, although it was not brought up by the respondents directly.

On the other hand, having family in Afghanistan also meant obligations, and some returned mainly or partly because of family obligations. The respondent who decided to return to be with his wife, who was alone in Afghanistan, is one example. Another was told by his father-in-law, who had financed his trip, that having failed to obtain citizenship in Europe he should return to Afghanistan and divorce his wife. In this case, the father-in-law, who was also the respondent's uncle, had clearly expected his son-in-law to secure residence and an income in Europe.

³⁶ In Afghanistan it is customary for a married couple to live with the husband's family.

8. Information work in Norway

This section discusses how the returnees obtained information relevant to the return decision and what kind of information they received. Three types of information were most immediately relevant for the decision whether and how to return: information about a) the IRRANA programme, b) the situation in Afghanistan, and c) Norwegian asylum policy. There were also several channels of information available – formal channels, both programme and other mechanisms, and informal channels.

8.1 Channels of information

Formal channels of information

Information is one of the components of the IRRANA programme. Three agencies are formally involved in this component:

IOM

As part of its contract with the Norwegian government, IOM holds information meetings at reception centres about twice a year, including meetings with a Dari-speaking information worker present. Returnees are also able to contact the Dari-speaking information worker at IOM-Norway for questions about the programme and visit the IOM office in Oslo. Additionally, an Afghan woman externally contracted by IOM-Oslo as Liaison Officer was available for contact at the Afghan Embassy in Oslo from September 2006 to December 2007. Her main task was to provide support through travel documentation issuance as well as other general information/counselling services.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

The NRC has run an Information and Counselling on Return and Repatriation (INCOR) project, offering information and counselling for refugees and asylum seekers considering return to their home countries. This project was discontinued at the end of 2007. In 2006, and as part of the start up of IRRANA, an Afghan-specific sub-project of INCOR was established for Afghan asylum seekers who had received a final rejection of their application. Under this project staff, including an Afghan national on secondment from NRC-Afghanistan, visited asylum reception centres in order to offer independent advice about the situation in Afghanistan as well as rights and processes related to return. INCOR also had an office-based counselling service, which asylum seekers and those with resident status could contact for advice about asylum, return and repatriation. Following the 2006 hunger strike, government funding for the Afghan-specific project was increased to cover a larger number of Afghan asylum seekers. After the NRC ceased its information work with rejected asylum applicants in late 2007, it only offered information to this group through its website.

Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS)

NOAS is an interest organisation for asylum seekers that offers legal advice to asylum seekers and, in some instances, will review their cases and present them to UNE for consideration. Following the hunger strike in May 2006, NOAS expanded its capacity to assist Afghan asylum seekers as the government made it clear that funding would provide for this. The project was closed in December 2006, but restarted in 2008.

Other formal sources

Reception centres

Norwegian reception centres are mandated to *motivate* asylum seekers who have received a final rejection to return. After the first negative decision on an asylum application, centre staff hold an obligatory individual conversation about return with the asylum seeker. In addition, a staff member is normally assigned as a contact point for return.

The police

The police sometimes carry out focused information campaigns targeting asylum seekers who have received a final negative reply to their application. This takes the form of letters sent to individual asylum seekers with information about assisted voluntary return, including how to establish contact with IOM.

UDI

UDI's regional offices are tasked with offering information about voluntary return on request. In addition, UDI posts information about both general and country-specific return programmes, including IRRANA, on its website.

UNE

UNE attaches information about return programmes, both VARP and, for Afghans, IRRANA, to its letter informing asylum applicants about a negative result.

Internet

Information about return and the IRRANA programme is published on the websites of UDI and IOM, whereas NRC has information about its counselling services on its website. IOM and NRC publish information also in Pashto and Dari/Farsi.

The respondents' use of information sources

Regarding the return programme, about half of the returnees (15) learnt about the programme through IOM visits to the reception centres while the rest had various other sources.

Several returnees were in contact with NOAS, but mainly to find out about their asylum applications and the possibility of remaining in Norway. This, indeed, is the primary function of NOAS under this programme.

Table 10: How the returnees first learnt of the possibility of voluntary return through IOM

As asylum seeker in another European country	2
IOM centre visit	15
Police	2
UDI/UNE letters	2
Friends in the centre	2
Centre staff plus IOM visits in centre	3
Common knowledge	1
Unclear*	1

* This was the person who had repatriated, meaning he had received citizenship in Norway but chose to return to Afghanistan.

Only two of the respondents claimed knowledge about NRC or its INCOR project from their time in Norway. This is a low number considering that INCOR had a specific programme to offer independent advice to potential Afghan returnees. Of those two that did recall receiving information from NRC, one expressed the view that the assistance received after his return was not what he had been led to believe:

Some people from the NRC, two Afghans and one Norwegian, came to the reception centre (...) They tried to convince you that Afghanistan was a good place, that there were many choices, that you could get a job, all this bla bla. This was all lies. I went to the NRC in Kabul and gave them my CV, but they have not done anything. They have all these drivers and expensive cars, they stay in expensive accommodation and press up the prices, but they do not do anything...

Man, 20s, returned spring 2006

It should be noted however, that while NRC in Norway has been working with rejected asylum seekers, NRC field offices do not consider returning asylum seekers from Norway or other Western countries part of their target group. This difference in mandate is something that returnees might find confusing, as illustrated by the quote above.

Most respondents used friends and family networks for information about conditions in Afghanistan. The extended family was a principal source of information. All the respondents stayed in touch with their family by phone and/or through the internet. In many cases, respondents would also try to get advice from previous returnees. For instance, one returnee said he had spoken to other Afghans in Norway who were in touch with returnees in his home town. Through them he was advised that the IOM reintegration staff in his home town were not reliable and that he would be better off applying for reintegration assistance in Kabul, which he did. When he eventually arrived in his home town, however, he found that the person in question had left IOM.

8.2 Type of information

About the programme

Most returnees said that they had obtained correct information about the cash grant that they would receive. Only four of the returnees stated that they had incorrect information on this point. Information regarding the reintegration programme appears much more inadequate. All but three expressed that they had received incorrect or only partial information about the reintegration programme. Importantly, 14 of the returnees (50 percent) said they had only been informed about one reintegration option. 11 of these said that they had only been informed about the business assistance. The three that only knew about the job referral said they had been certain that they would get help in Kabul to find a suitable job.

Inadequate or misinformation was probably due to several reasons:

- *The returnees' own priorities:* All the respondents stated that the return package played no role in their decision to return. The determining factors were the prospect of forced return, denial of residence permits and frustration over the long waiting time. It is therefore likely that some respondents did not pay much attention to information about the reintegration package. Moreover, according to IOM-Oslo the returnees were mostly interested in the business option. This may have influenced their receptivity to other information.
- *Post-arrival selective memory:* Given that all the respondents eventually chose business as their reintegration option, this could well be the option they retrospectively recall to have been informed about.

- *IOM priorities:* Almost all the returnees said that IOM-Kabul emphasised the business option rather than job referral or training. In interviews with the study team staff at IOM-Oslo expressed the view that the business option was the most attractive one. As a consequence, IOM staff might have focused on this option in their information activities.
- *Lack of information about the situation in Afghanistan:* Many respondents stated that they found it impossible to plan for their reintegration as they knew so little about the situation in Afghanistan. This is likely to have reduced their interest in the details of the reintegration package. According to IOM-Oslo, returnees were generally quite sceptical about whether they would receive the promised reintegration support once in Afghanistan and adopted a wait and see attitude. Having lived through decades of war and being used to unpredictability and broken promises, such reluctance is perhaps to be expected.
- *Political mobilisation:* According to IOM estimates, around 50 percent of Afghan residents have refused to attend the IOM information meetings in reception centres about IRRANA. Such refusals have been part of a coordinated campaign to challenge Norwegian return policy to Afghanistan. The study did not collect data on rates of attendance at IOM meetings amongst the respondents. Nonetheless, it is possible that the campaign served to lessen the ability of individuals to receive information through these meetings, or to make the atmosphere at the meetings less conducive for thorough discussion about the reintegration programme.

Table 11: Respondents' knowledge of cash payment before leaving Norway

No knowledge of cash payment	3
Knowledge, but thought the amount was lower	1
Correct knowledge	23
Did not pay attention in Norway	1
TOTAL	28

Table 12: Respondents' knowledge of reintegration support before leaving Norway

Number of options	Total	Which options			
		Business	Job referral	Business and job	Job and training
No knowledge of any reintegration support	7				
Knowledge of 1 option	14	11	3		
Knowledge of 2 options	3			2	1
Correct knowledge of 3 options	3				
Did not pay attention in Norway	1				
TOTAL	28				

A few reported misleading information about types of assistance. Seven said that they had been informed by IOM-Oslo that they could get help to acquire land through a land allocation scheme. The information refers to an Afghan government land allocation scheme in which state-owned land is handed over to returnees from neighbouring countries. Some of the respondents who had received information about this scheme said that they had been shown a brochure with information to this effect and had believed it was a genuine opportunity, although IOM-Oslo states that they inform that that eligibility is subject to local laws. In reality, none of the returnees from Norway have proved eligible for this scheme, as most have family members remaining in Afghanistan or are not

considered amongst the most vulnerable returnees for other reasons. At any rate, the land scheme has so far allocated far less area than anticipated due to a lack of administrative capacity.³⁷

When the returnees sign up for the return programme in Norway, IOM-Oslo also collects information about their background and qualifications. This information is intended to serve as a basis for the reintegration process in Afghanistan, although according to IOM-Oslo, not all returnees have been willing to disclose in detail their background or education. Moreover, the information has little function in the returnees' reintegration process in Afghanistan, with IOM staff there stating that it is mainly used as background material. In any case, all of the returnees eventually chose the business option.

About the situation in Afghanistan

In general, respondents said that on coming back to Afghanistan, the situation was worse than they had thought. They found that there was a lack of economic opportunities and in particular that the general security situation was bad. A few attributed this to misinformation by IOM, NRC or the Norwegian police, which they now regarded as having been part of a plot to persuade Afghans to return. It is also likely that many respondents were told in the context of their asylum rejection that the Norwegian government saw no threats to their security, which they may have taken as a general assessment of the security situation. Most, however, said they had also received information through the media, family and friends, but that they just did not realise how much the situation had changed for the worse.

Given that only a couple of the returnees had been in contact with staff at the Norwegian Refugee Council, it was difficult to assess the relevance of the information about Afghanistan that the organisation provides through its INCOR project. However, it was noted that all the reception centre staff consulted for this report stated a need for more information about the situation in Afghanistan. Staff expressed the opinion that such knowledge could enable them to communicate with their Afghan residents more confidently. On two occasions staff pointed to the need for more cooperation with the NRC with regard to developing their own knowledge about the situation in Afghanistan. Some staff said that the situation there appeared very unsafe to them, and that this conflicted with their own mandate to motivate those with a final rejection to return. In such a situation, it was felt that it was right to interpret the mandate to motivate to return in a narrow way, by merely informing the asylum seekers about the existence of the return programme.

³⁷ Interview with NGO official, Kabul, October 2007.

9. Return and Reintegration

9.1 Reception and counselling

Arriving in Afghanistan

For most returnees, the journey to and arrival in Afghanistan took place without difficulty. There were a few exceptions. The family returnee claimed that they were wrongly informed about the baggage weight allowance and had to dispose of much of their luggage at the airport in Norway. One respondent got lost in transit at the airport in Dubai, claiming there was no one to show him how to get to the terminal for flights to Kabul, which is located at some distance from the main terminal. He was eventually helped by some Persian-speaking airport staff, but only after having spent two days at the airport.

The returnees were generally met by IOM staff upon arrival at Kabul airport.³⁸ A majority had arranged to stay with friends and relatives; those who did not were temporarily accommodated at the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) reception centre.

At the airport, the returnees were informed about IOM and the reintegration programme by an IOM representative. They were given the address of the IOM office in Kabul where they could pick up their cash payment and get more information about the reintegration programme.

All but one of the returnees had received their cash payment of 15,000 NOK without any difficulty,³⁹ some in three instalments and some in two.⁴⁰

Counselling and reintegration options

According to the IOM programme, three reintegration options are presented to the returnees: job referral, vocational or skills training, and small business start-up support. Strikingly, all of those returnees covered by this study that had signed up for reintegration support chose the business programme. The small business option was added to IOM-Afghanistan's reintegration programmes in 2003 after the organisation found that the other options – job referral and training – attracted little interest. The business programme was introduced as a third alternative and was also thought to address a need for immediate income generation amongst returnees.

According to IOM-Kabul, the demand for job referral and training had been so low that the organisation had not developed or formalised these two options. Job referral was informal and in practice meant that IOM staff would utilise their connections to see if any NGO had a suitable position. If anyone were to request training, IOM-Kabul said, they would identify a suitable course. In this case the 10,000 NOK reintegration grant could be applied towards the course expenses (IOM estimated that it would cover five or six months of training).

Although business was the preferred option for many, it was also evident that it was prioritised by IOM-Kabul. IOM staff believed that the returnees from Norway as a rule did not possess the

³⁸ Exceptions were when a departure was arranged in haste.

³⁹ This returnee moved from Kabul to his home town after he had received his first cash instalment. He experienced some delay in receiving his second cash instalment.

⁴⁰ During the second implementation phase of IRRANA, the instalments were reduced from three to two and the overall cash collection period from four to two months.

qualifications needed to secure a job in Afghanistan's limited and competitive job market.⁴¹ Starting a small business was seen as the most promising activity, with immediate income-generating prospects.

These views were evidently reflected in the advice that IOM gave the returnees. Whereas the majority of the respondents had business as their preferred choice, it is unclear to what extent returnees are informed in any detail – or at all – about the other options. Importantly, some told this team that they had been more interested in other alternatives as they had a professional background and lacked both the experience and aptitude to start a business. They were still advised by IOM Kabul that business was the best option. Five respondents told the research team that they were not informed about any other alternatives at all.

Many of the returnees said that they had made a considerable effort on their own to find a job. One was young and had finished high school in Europe. He had handed in his CV at various places, without success. Two others were older and had previously worked in the government. Having unsuccessfully looked for similar jobs, they had eventually accepted the business option under the reintegration programme. One said:

I did not want to start a business, as I am a professional. However, as I could not find a job I decided to enter into a business partnership with a friend who was selling clothes
Man, 50s, returned spring 2007

In order for reintegration programmes to be *relevant*, returnees need to be able to discuss their plans and aspirations with programme staff. However, discussion between the returnees and IOM-Kabul about their reintegration situation was limited. For instance, two of the respondents enrolled in college after arrival, yet they stated that they never spoke to IOM about these plans and whether reintegration support could be used towards their university studies. Instead, they started a business with support from IOM. One of these two closed down his business after a short time, whereas the other maintained he was still in business, although several attempts by the team to visit his shop were unsuccessful. Both these returnees said that the only option presented to them in terms of reintegration support was the business programme.

The example above indicates that communication was not always optimal and that not all returnees spoke at length about their future plans with IOM. While the majority of the returnees had no complaints about IOM staff, there was also a significant number (seven) who expressed strong reservations. Some of these said that they were not made to feel welcome or that there was a 'take your money and leave' attitude. This must be taken into account as one possible explanation as to why many returnees did not have a careful discussion about their options.

9.2 The business programme

Since all of the returnees from Norway who received reintegration support opted for the small business programme, this component will be discussed in some detail.

⁴¹ Interview with IOM Kabul Reintegration Manager, October 2007.

Setting up the business

Disbursing the business support

IOM-Afghanistan's procedures for setting up a business are as follows:

1. The returnee identifies a business or a business idea to present to IOM for approval.
2. The returnee identifies a site for his business, gets a lease agreement and presents a copy to IOM. Staff from IOM visit the site to approve it. In some cases, if IOM staff are prohibited by security regulations from travelling to the area where the shop is going to be located, the returnee is asked to bring a photo.
3. The returnee fills out a business plan that includes a description of the business, marketing plan, budget request, profit and loss statement, risk assessment, competition and future plans. The returnees prepare these plans in Dari; they are then translated into English by IOM staff and filed electronically. Some of these plans were made available to the team.
4. The reintegration support is paid in kind through the purchase of equipment or merchandise for the business. The returnee must obtain quotations for the same product(s) from three different suppliers. IOM staff accompany the returnee to purchase from the supplier providing the cheapest quotation. One purchase worth 1000 USD is made first; a month later and after IOM staff have visited the shop for monitoring, a second purchase of ca. 600 USD (depending on the exchange rate) takes place. However, sometimes a single purchase uses the whole amount: around a quarter of the returnees said that they had received everything in one instalment.

Almost all the returnees reported that IOM gave no advice about what kind of business to start or advice about location, equipment, markets etc. Most said they were simply told by IOM staff to 'go and find your favourite business':

They gave no advice. I had a friend who was running a business selling bathroom and plumbing equipment, so I entered into a partnership with his business.

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2006

I was not given any advice. I was told to find an establishment and then they would give me the money).

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2007

Faced with the task of formulating a business idea, returnees drew on different resources. Those who had family members in business sometimes set up a shop in the same field so that they could draw on their expertise. Often they had some previous experience of their own.

One of the returnees, a young man whose father owned a bookstore, told the team he had set up a small stall selling science books to university students.⁴² He said he was able to use his father's connections to import the books from Pakistan. Another returnee, a man in his thirties with six children, set up a photography shop. His brother had run a photography shop at the same location

⁴² The team was unable to verify the existence of this shop.

some years earlier and the returnee was also skilled in this trade. One respondent from Herat had worked in the family construction company before coming to Norway and decided to set up a cement shop in order to utilise his skills in this sector.

Some had particular skills they could utilise. One of the returnees was a boxer who had won several local contests. He managed to set up a boxing club in a suburb of Kabul, which the team visited. The club attracted a large number of local boys, who came for training sessions. Another young returnee had studied electronics at high school in Europe and got involved with a business selling solar panels. Several set up partnerships with already established businesses. Sometimes the partner was a family member, but more often a friend or an acquaintance. Often these partnerships were in a business sector where the returnees lacked experience or had no business background at all.

A few set up shops independently in fields where they had no background, for instance groceries, clothing and cement. Typically, these were small-scale, requiring little additional investment.

The programme requires that business support be disbursed in kind, that is, the money is to be used for paying for stocks or equipment for the business. The returnees need to raise additional funds for renting the site, as well as for any fees or licences.

The business plan is in a relatively simple format, and it appeared to have been designed to release the funds rather than to serve as an operational plan for the returnees to run their business. When asked about the importance of the plan for his business, one respondent said:

I filled out the plan, but this was for the IOM. It is good to have a plan. I am keeping the accounts myself for my shop. However, this business plan was for the IOM, it had no role for me.

Man, 50s, returned autumn 2006

Once IOM has approved the site and the business plan, the returnee has to present IOM with three quotations for the goods he intends to purchase, in order for IOM staff to ensure that the best quotation is used. In most cases, about two thirds of the total reintegration support of NOK 10,000 will be spent at this point. About one month later, and following a monitoring visit by IOM, the second purchase will be made, although as mentioned above the whole sum is sometimes spent in a single purchase.

The range of products varied. Some of the returnees chose to set up small, wholesale-like outlets. For instance, three of the returnees opened shops selling bags of cement. Others entered partnerships, but brought a set type of product into the business. In these cases, the purchasing procedure was relatively straightforward. In some instances, however, the returnees were frustrated:

It was so difficult to get this support. I must have applied at least a hundred times! It was always, buy this, bring this quotation, bring the contract with the owner of the shop [for renting the premises] etc. I had to bring in my lease agreement for the shop to IOM. This took a long time, finally when I bribed the property dealer 200 afs I got it.

Man, 50s, returned autumn 2006

The purchase arrangements appeared less suitable for the more specialised shops. One returnee complained that the rule of three quotations made the purchase difficult, and that the IOM staff lacked the specialist knowledge necessary for monitoring the process:

The process to get the support was difficult. I was asked by the IOM staff to get three different quotations for exactly the same thing, and the IOM would then choose the cheapest one. But the stores did not have exactly the same goods; if they did that, they would not have any business.

Rather, the shops have different things and different brands of the same product. ... The IOM did not understand that if one shop had more expensive things it would be because they had higher quality brands. The IOM did not even know the kind of product I was going to sell, they just kept asking me to get quotations for the same things, and then said 'pick the cheapest one'. This would mean getting Chinese products rather than, for instance, German ones of higher quality ... Also, it was difficult getting all the things from one shop. ...

Man, 20s, returned spring 2007

The procedures were problematic in other respects as well. In several cases the team found that the business ventures were short-lived and appeared to be just a mechanism for getting some cash – although a laborious one. In one instance, the returnee said he had been open about the fact that he would not start a business. He received the money in cash and then handed in some pictures from a neighbourhood shop, as requested by an IOM staff member.

Business after start-up, profits and sustainability

IOM monitoring and follow-up

IOM monitoring of the business consists of up to two visits and spans two or three months. In connection with the second purchase, IOM staff visit the business in order to assess progress and approve the purchase. This is normally about a month after the business has started and the monitoring takes the form of an informal talk. Typically, IOM staff will look at the stock, enquire about the profit and ask neighbours for their views of the business. A second visit takes place around a month later. Again, the IOM staff will enquire about progress and offer advice.

Overall, IOM staff estimated the success rate to be around 70 percent. However, this was an estimate only – IOM-Kabul had no statistical data to present to the team. One reason could be that IOM staff are unable to travel to many parts of Kabul due to security restrictions, which limit effective monitoring. Moreover, the office does not sustain contact with the returnees after the initial period of around two months after start-up. In the short run, returnees might well be presenting their situation in a better light than the reality warrants, since this seems to be a precondition for securing the second instalment of the reintegration support.

Findings of the research team

Of the 28 returnees that the team met, 27 had received support to set up a business. In one case, the respondent claimed that he had set up a business but had not received support from IOM. The team could not verify what had been the exact proceedings in this case.⁴³ Of the 27 that had set up a business with reintegration support 14 – just over half – said that they were still running their businesses when interviewed by the team. Of these 14, four had been open for more than a year and two had been running around half a year. The remaining eight ventures had been running for two months or less at the time of the interview. Out of these 14 businesses, the team visited seven. The reason for not visiting the seven other shops were as follows:

- respondent was evasive about arranging a visit (2)
- respondent was living outside Kabul and the interview was carried out by phone (2)
- respondent was only located at the final stage of fieldwork when it was not possible for the team to arrange a visit (2)

⁴³ This returnee lived in an area outside Kabul, and arrived at the interview with bodyguards. During the interview, he was very tense and reluctant to speak. He claimed that he thought he had not received the business support, but that he was not certain and that he would call back to confirm. This he never did and the team was not able to get through to him again. IOM-Kabul confirmed, however, that this returnee had not received the business support.

- respondent, who had set up a partnership, claimed the shop was in an area of Kabul which it was unsafe for him to travel to (1)

The businesses were very different in terms of size, location, degree of specialisation and income-generating function. The boxing club, which had been running for more than a year, was clearly well established in the neighbourhood, judging by the number of youths attending. However, the owner complained that many could not afford to pay the fees and were admitted at no charge. He had anticipated before starting that a boxing club would not be a major income earner, but with only a small start-up grant from the reintegration programme it was the only kind of business he thought possible to open, given his competence.

Another long-running business was the photo shop. In this case, the owner had invested a substantial part of his own money – around 20,000 NOK – to set up the business before he approached IOM. The business was not making a big profit, but the owner was able to take home a small amount (150 afghanis, about 15 NOK) to his family every day. The owner was relatively optimistic and felt that he would continue as he had already made a big investment. The main challenge in running his business, he said, was lack of funds to buy the necessary equipment.

Another shop had been running for 6 months and was visited by the team twice. This was a small dry-goods grocery shop in a poorer area of Kabul. The first time, the owner said he was not yet making enough money to pay the rent for the shop, which worried him. In order to improve his situation, he said, he would need more capital. However, upon a second visit three months later, the team noticed that the shop had increased its stock, a sign that business had picked up. Indeed, despite complaining of a lack of profit, the shop owner was looking healthier and had even started enquiring about getting a wife, a sign that he was somewhat more confident about his future. The respondent's shop was located in a tightly-knit Hazara suburb and in front of the house of his sister, who had lived in the area for some time. The ethnic and social network this location provided possibly helped his business significantly.

The other shops had only been open for a short time and it was difficult to assess their viability. Three of these shops were small stalls selling cement. The owners claimed that things were going well. One respondent hinted, however, that he had set up the shop in order to receive the grant from the reintegration programme and was not interested in running it for a long time. In another case, a partnership, it was clear that the respondent was only marginally involved in the business, if at all. He had relocated to Pakistan, where he had lived before going to Europe, and had a substantial landholding. The business he claimed he had entered into in Kabul was in an area that he said was unsafe for him to visit. It is likely that this partnership had ceased to exist, if it was ever a real partnership in the first place.

Slightly fewer than half of the small business ventures started through the programme – 13 out of 27 – had closed down by the time the team visited, although one had later opened another shop. The reasons for closing varied from an apparent lack of serious intention to certified bad luck and a high-risk business environment.

Nine closings had been partnerships. The respondents explained the closings in quite similar terms. Most had found that the business was not profitable or that they lacked the skills to make it work. One said he had entered into a partnership with a relative who owned a clothes shop. However, having limited knowledge about this type of business, he was cheated by his relative and withdrew from the partnership after a month, losing his money.

Most respondents said they had not lost their money but had been bought out through agreement with the partner. One respondent said he had started a grocery shop, using his savings from Norway,

in order to support his family. This business was successful and still in operation when the team visited. In a parallel move he had had entered into a partnership with the owner of a cement shop, for which he had received reintegration support. He left the cement business after a short time, claiming it was not an all-year business.

Two respondents with closed-down businesses acknowledged they had never intended to run a business but had entered a partnership in order to access more easily the money provided by the programme. The high number of short-lived businesses, particularly the partnerships, suggests that this is a common practice. Anecdotal evidence from other returnee programmes, including the UK programme, supports this conclusion.⁴⁴ In one case, it emerged that neither the partnership nor the shop had ever existed. Instead, the respondent had handed in a picture of a friend's shop, which IOM was unable to verify as it was restricted from travelling to the area.

Four returnees, who had all started independent businesses, offered different reasons for closing down. Two cited security concerns: they had to leave the area where the shop was located. Another had been forced to close because the local municipality was expanding the roadside where his shop was located (this event was confirmed by the team). He lost several months of advance rent and sold all his materials at half price. Another respondent told a similar story, also linked to a confirmed event:

After some time, the government announced that it would close down the market where my workshop was located, Most of the shops in the area moved, so business was no longer any good. I closed down the shop. I lost 1000 USD because I had a six-month contract for the shop.

Man, 40s, returned autumn 2006

This respondent had brought a substantial amount of savings from Norway and had invested 5000 USD of his own funds in his diesel repair workshop. Since the closing of his first business, he had invested in a taxi, but finding that this was not a profitable business either, he intended to sell it. He had also attempted to get a job, but without success. Speaking of his frustrations, he said he would go back to Europe, as there were no opportunities in Afghanistan.

Obstacles and challenges

When asked to assess the business programme, the most common response was that the grant was too small to start a viable business:

They should provide more money, it is not enough to start a business. The grant should be 5000 USD, or at least 3000 USD... Microcredit is no good as they charge an 18 to 20 % interest rate.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2007

I do not have enough money to buy the necessary equipment for my business... Once I applied in a bank for a loan of 300,000 af\$ but they said that the interest rate was 20 percent and that I needed three shopkeepers as guarantors.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

The 1709 USD for business support – you cannot do anything with that amount. For me it is OK, I am living with my family and my business is pocket money. However, if I was living on my own, or if I had a family to provide for... I would be sleeping on the streets.

Man, 20s, returned summer 2007

⁴⁴ Interviews with British Refugee Council and IOM-UK, January and February 2008.

One argued that the sum should be paid all at once as this would allow him to start up a larger business, although the number of instalments was not an issue raised by most of the respondents:

If I had all the money [the cash instalment and the business support] at once, I would have started importing PVC pipes. All the pipes in Afghanistan are metal, and they are not working. There is a good market for this.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2007

Given these constraints, it seems that many of the returnees opted to set up small, short-lived businesses that would at least provide them with access to the 1500 USD worth of goods available through the business start-up programme. Indeed, a connection between the limited size of the grant and the ‘faking’ of businesses was suggested by one of the respondents, who argued that the IRRANA programme did not take the reality in Afghanistan into account. He said that with so little money available, it was impossible to set up a proper business:

I think UDI should have done a survey before designing the programme. They should have a clear picture of the political and economic situation. For instance, the money which is provided for running the business is not sufficient, with this money the only thing you can do is to stand on the street and sell cigarettes. That is why the returnees are making excuses, pretending to start a business so that they can get the money.

Man, 40s, returned spring 2007

The more serious ventures involved the investment of personal savings in addition to the grant. At least three had invested a substantial amount of their own money in their businesses. In one case (the photo shop) the returnee had set up the shop prior to applying for the business programme and had invested around 3000 USD of his own savings. In this case, the reintegration support, worth 1500 USD, represented an additional bonus rather than the basis of the business. Another, young returnee said he had borrowed a substantial amount of money – around 7000 USD – through his elder brother’s connections. The reintegration support was only a small part of the business investment. At the time of the interview, however, he worried that he might be unable to service the loan and wondered if he had been too ambitious in his investments.

The owner of the diesel repair shop and the taxi mentioned above had returned to Afghanistan with around 100,000 NOK in savings. A sum of this size could possibly have served as the basis for a significant enterprise. Having no background in business, however, he evidently made some poor investment decisions. By the time the team met him, he had already closed down two businesses and claimed that he had almost depleted his savings from Norway.

Capital and knowledge are not the only determinants of success. Market access and connections are also important. Research into market dynamics and enterprises in Afghanistan has shown that many sectors are increasingly dominated by a small number of large players with good political connections, e.g. in the construction sector. A report from the Kabul-based Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) argues that this market dominance means that small and medium-sized businesses often become locked into a situation where they depend upon the larger traders for credit and are vulnerable to price fixing by suppliers, which undermines their profit margins.⁴⁵ In such situations, it becomes even more important to have access to connections. Smaller traders can sometimes join hands, for instance to purchase from wholesale sellers at a better price. Moreover, those with a network will be less vulnerable to short-term difficulties and may rely on support from friends and family during start-up or at times when sales are low. In addition, small entrepreneurs

⁴⁵ Peterson, Anna, 2006. *Going to Market: Trade and Traders in Six Different Sectors*, Synthesis Paper, Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit.

standing on their own are especially vulnerable to bribe extortion and harassment by officials. As one respondent stated:

*In Afghanistan, people are now running large-scale businesses. Small business cannot survive.
Man, 20s, returned autumn 2006*

However, many of the returnees whose business ventures had closed down also seemed disinterested in discussing the reasons for closing. This reluctance could reflect a lack of intention from the start to set up a business on a long-term basis, instead wanting to use the scheme to access the reintegration support funds. Claims about the difficulties that forced a quick closing did not always seem plausible.

For those four who were willing to discuss the reasons for closing, common factors seem to be inexperience, a lack of connections and proper advice, but also plain bad luck and a difficult environment. Some appeared to be quite inexperienced but without access to advice. So did some respondents who were still in business. One small shop owner in a poorer suburb of Kabul, who had no previous experience in business, had changed the type of stock repeatedly when his initial stock of cement proved to make no profit. The shop now contained a range of wares from building material to toys, shoes, stationery and groceries, but his profit was negligible.

In order to identify criteria for running a successful small business as part of a reintegration programme it is also useful to focus on the few ventures that did have some measure of success. The common denominators in these cases were a) a background in business, b) specific skills in the case of those setting up a specialised business, and c) the ability to draw upon family and other networks in setting up, financing and running the business. These individual and contextual factors evidently are needed in order for a business support programme to function well.

Other programmes

In order to get a comparative perspective on reintegration assistance programmes, the team also met with officials from another organisation aiding the reintegration of rejected asylum seekers from Europe. AGEF, a German NGO with offices in Afghanistan, runs a reintegration programme that is similar in many ways to the programme reviewed in this study. Its main caseload has been returnees from Germany. It also works with involuntary returnees from the UK, as well as a few returnees from Sweden and Denmark.

AGEF's reintegration options are similar to those of IOM: job referral, training or business start-up; but the programmes differ in several respects. AGEF starts the reintegration process before departure from Europe. Details of the returnees' background and qualifications are forwarded to AGEF-Afghanistan. If the returnee has sufficient qualifications, AGEF will send requests for work to relevant institutions, such as ministries. Their job referral service also includes several job centres (nine countrywide), run in cooperation with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA).

AGEF is an established vocational training institution in Afghanistan. Its centres offer courses such as carpentry, management, English and computing. Most students are non-returnees. The programmes for returnees include a small stipend, financed by the country from which the asylum seekers are returning and varying in size.

AGEF's business programme is subcontracted to a private Afghan organisation (MESBAH). It is only open to literate returnees. In addition, there is a screening process to ensure that only those who are genuinely interested in starting a business and have both a viable business idea and a

network sufficient to run a business are taken into the programme. MESBAH estimates that for every ten applicants, two or three are rejected.

Those who are accepted into the business programme must further attend a 15-day training course, which covers the development of a business plan, presentations by successful entrepreneurs, contact with relevant ministries for legal questions, and one day of 'work experience' with businesses in relevant sectors.

Although the team could not undertake any in-depth assessment of the AGEF programme, it seems to provide a more comprehensive and relevant service for returnees than the reintegration programme currently offered by IOM to the Norwegian returnees. In particular, AGEF's business programme would appear more thorough in the steps it takes to ensure that businesses receiving support are genuine and viable.

Another relevant programme would be the new approach taken by IOM-UK, as described in section 10.1. An important element in the UK's new approach is a longer follow-up period, including additional support for those who remain in business after six months. In addition, the new UK approach includes a wider range of alternatives with regard to reintegration, making it more suitable for returnees who are not committed to starting a small business.

9.3 Returnees suggestions for the programme

Returnees were in general vocal about their suggestions on how to improve the return programme. Many had concrete suggestions for improvement, often bringing up several points.

The most common and frequently cited concern was the size of the grant for business support. Thirteen of the respondents argued that the funding was insufficient. Suggestions for appropriate amounts were in the range of 5-10,000 USD. Some also suggested that returnees should have access to low-interest loans, noting that credit is generally very expensive in Afghanistan. Another common recommendation concerned job referrals and assistance with getting a job. While some expressed the perhaps unrealistic notion that returnees could be given jobs, there was also a general suggestion that much more support should be given to help returnees identify and strengthen employment-relevant skills.

Many of the returnees complained about the long time spent in Norway, characterising it as wasteful, often painful, and in the end useless. A few specifically called for a faster asylum determination process. Several suggested that the asylum seekers should have access to skills improvement or other educational programmes while waiting for a decision, so as to use the waiting time productively.

Vocational skills training in Afghanistan was another frequent suggestion. For instance, one respondent said that returnees should receive training rather than money since training gives qualifications that last forever:

You cannot start a business with that small amount [the reintegration support] in Kabul. But I will not ask for more money because we cannot ask the Norwegian government this. But there should be training, training remains forever. We should learn English, or another language, and anything related to construction. Also, the IOM should help those qualified to get jobs in international NGOs and so on; the returnees do not have access to this now.

Man, 30s, returned autumn 2006

Two respondents said that the programme should establish training institutes, whereas another four stated the need for training in general. Specific skills mentioned were English, computers and skills for working in the construction sector. None of these respondents had discussed training with IOM reintegration staff.

A few also said that returnees should be given accommodation, although it was unclear if this was for the long or the short term.

9.4 Wider context of reintegration

While the main focus in the interviews was the assistance programme, the team also asked the respondents about other aspects of the return and reintegration that might influence the sustainability of their return. How had they been received by family? What did they see as their main challenges in their everyday lives? What were their plans for the future? The last question is of particular interest in relation to the issue of sustainable reintegration. Almost all the respondents stated that they wished to leave Afghanistan, and some (seven) were making concrete plans to this effect, while one was already living abroad.

Family reception

As for the reaction of the family, many respondents said that their families had been happy to see them and had understood that they had no option but to return. This view was generally expressed by the respondents' wives interviewed. Other relatives, including parents, in-laws and friends, had been less understanding. The reactions reflect the family's expectation that the respondent would obtain citizenship in Norway and help the family economy by remitting money.

Some said they were met with an Afghan saying meaning: *You were away for so long and you came back with nothing*.⁴⁶ One father-in-law, upon hearing that his in-law had failed to get citizenship (as mentioned in section 7), had asked him to come back to Afghanistan in order to grant his daughter a divorce. According to the respondent, his wife was equally displeased, accusing him of having misbehaved in Norway and demanding to know why he had not sent any money. However, this was the only case where a returnee said that his return had resulted in an open family confrontation. More commonly, friends and family were unhappy, but apparently not enough to break all ties. Apart from the money spent, the long absence also seemed to be an issue. A point stressed by several respondents was that if their application process time in Norway were reduced, allowing the returnees to come back earlier, it would make it easier for them to face their families.

Only a few chose to make use of the accommodation centre for returnees at the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), meaning that they had other options to fall back on. Most were staying with family and friends, sometimes in the family home or with more distant relatives in what were more temporary arrangements.

Security

While many respondents (17 out of 28) had cited insecurity as a reason for leaving Afghanistan, a smaller number (five) cited personal insecurity as a major problem after they returned. Two of these related their security problem to public/political issues, and two to private conflicts. One was vague

⁴⁶ Directly translated, the saying goes: "Where were you? - Nowhere. What have you brought? - Nothing". The saying is used to express dismay with those who have gone away, typically for a long time, for errands or business but return empty-handed or with no result.

about his security situation, but had been very reluctant to travel to meet the interviewer. When he finally arrived, he was with two bodyguards, stating that it was not safe for him in the area.

While the other returnees did not mention any personal security problems, many expressed a strong concern about the general insecurity in the country. When fieldwork for this report started in October 2007, an unusually large number of suicide bombings took place in Kabul, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity amongst many of the city's residents:

I am very scared. It is insecure here. Since I heard that 150 suicide bombers have entered Kabul to blow themselves up, I feel even more scared. Everyday I wait anxiously for my husband and daughter to come home. I have lost 11 kilos since coming back to Afghanistan. It is very hard to live here.

Woman, 20s, returned autumn 2006

When I was in the transit in Dubai I was told about the new situation in Afghanistan. It is worse than what I had thought. They no longer have rockets that you can hear and hide from. Instead they have unpredictable things like suicide bombs.

Man, 30s, returned summer 2006

Economic situation

Almost all respondents cited economic problems both as a present concern and as their main worry for the future. Some had closed their businesses and were looking for a job, but apart from one who was working as a clerk in an electronic shop, nobody had succeeded in finding employment yet. Nevertheless, most of the returnees appeared to possess some assets and have access to an income. A couple appeared rather poor, while at the other extreme, one lived in a sumptuous house in one of Kabul's best areas and another was a wealthy businessman. As noted above, almost all had financed their travel to Europe by raising funds through selling family property or from savings rather than borrowing money or working their way. This situation can of course work both ways in terms of economic reintegration. Some incurred serious obligations to other family members that weighed upon their future. The respondent who was more or less disowned by his father-in-law was the most extreme example. However, a few others spoke of the same problem – younger men, who typically had their elders to answer to. One said that although his parents had been happy to see him, they were now complaining that he was back but had no job. Another had borrowed funds from his father-in-law. He had been unable to pay the loan back yet. His father-in-law often asked for the money, making him uncomfortable.

However, extended family meant resources to ease the reintegration process. It was noteworthy that most of the returnees, including those who said that they had no family in the area, were fairly well dressed and appeared established. An exception was the two returnees who said they could not go back to their home regions because of security issues.

Plans for the future

The majority of the respondents stated their plan was to leave Afghanistan again. Most of those cited the lack of opportunities in the country as a reason for wanting to re-migrate.

Six said that they would stay in Afghanistan and continue with their businesses. Among these six, three had run their businesses for some time and had started to make profits, albeit small. One was clearly less successful but seemed determined to continue, whereas another had just started his business and wanted to try to expand. One respondent had just started a small cement business, but

as his brothers had recently returned from Iran, he was optimistic they all could re-establish their former family construction company together.

Eight respondents expressed plans to return to Europe. Two had married Norwegian citizens and it seemed likely that they would be able to return on family visas. Another also had a Norwegian wife, but seemed less sure about whether she would be able to help him to go there, and he also had family in Afghanistan. Another returnee was planning to apply for asylum in Europe again. He did not state his reason for wanting to leave again, but appeared tense, possibly mentally unbalanced and concerned about his security. He explained that his parents were dead and he was not aware of his wife's whereabouts. The respondent going through divorce proceedings stated his wish to travel to Europe, perhaps Spain, to apply for asylum, saying that if his divorce went through there was no reason for him to stay in Afghanistan. Another, a father with three children, said he would go to Europe again, using the rest of the cash grant to send his wife and children and then going himself illegally, as there were no opportunities for the family in Afghanistan. Another two respondents stated their intention to return to Europe, although they seemed to have less concrete plans. They were both from better-off families and could perhaps be more confident about their futures.

Two respondents, while having left their businesses, would also stay on in Afghanistan. One, who was older, said he would still try to get a job, although his dream was to obtain land that he could cultivate. The other one was younger and had enrolled at a college course, meaning that he would at least stay for the immediate future.

Two said that they would leave for another country in the region due to insecurity. One respondent, who said that he feared for his life due to a conflict with the bodyguard of a powerful commander, was already making preparations to leave because of this. Attempting to sell his father's land in a province south of Kabul, he said he would leave for Iran or Pakistan once the sale had gone through. Another, claiming to be in a conflict over a house, said he was leaving for Central Asia, although later information emerged suggesting that he could merely be going on a business trip.

Three respondents were uncertain about their plans, appearing somewhat dispirited. When asked about his plans, one said:

I am not optimistic for the business. The situation in Afghanistan is confusing, we don't know what will happen here. There is no hope, so it is difficult to put energy into anything. When you have no hope, when your hands are empty, you don't know what to do. I am always dreaming of being invited to a country where I am safe. [Then] you can make plans, you can have hope for your children. When I was in Denmark and Norway, I always had a plan...

Man, 50s, returned spring 2007

One already lived in Pakistan and was on a brief visit in Kabul when interviewed by the team. He claimed that security prevented him from staying in Kabul, but he also had landholdings and family in Pakistan.

One young respondent also had family in Pakistan. When asked about his plans, he reflected upon the differences in decision-making processes in Norway and in Afghanistan. In his culture, he said, he himself only made fifty percent of the decision and the family made the rest. His mother, a widow, wanted him to come and live with her, as she was worried about the security situation in Afghanistan and wanted him to be in safety. So it was possible that he would follow his mother's wishes.

10. Programmes in the United Kingdom and Denmark

As part of the study, the team looked at voluntary return to Afghanistan from two other European countries. This was done in order to place the Norwegian programme in a comparative perspective, as well as to identify any lessons with regard to voluntary return and subsequent reintegration, with a particular focus on the effect of incentives on return. For this purpose, the United Kingdom (UK) and Denmark were selected. Both countries have had a sizeable number of voluntary returns. In addition, there were some other interesting aspects: the UK had employed an incentive-driven approach to increase voluntary return, whereas Denmark has for many years offered a training programme for asylum seekers waiting to be processed.

The comparative studies were carried out through a desk review of relevant documents and statistics, as well as interviews and phone interviews with selected officials in the two countries. For each study, a short outline of asylum and return policy is followed by a discussion of issues relevant to the Norwegian programme.

10.1 UK case study

The UK asylum system

Overall asylum applications to the UK increased sharply in the late 1990s with a peak in 2002, when the number of applications exceeded 80,000. Since then, applications have fallen, with fewer than 25,000 applications in 2006. Estimated refusal rates varied from 57 to 76 percent in the years between 2001 and 2006.⁴⁷

Applications are considered by the Border and Immigration Agency, an agency of the UK Home Office. An appeal can be made to the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal, with around 20 percent of all cases being overturned. Compared to Norway, processing times are shorter and have been reduced further in recent years. In 2006, 74 percent of cases were fully decided within six months. However, there has been a large backlog of earlier cases, which continue to proceed at a much slower pace.

While their applications are being considered, asylum seekers are entitled to accommodation, which is provided through private landlords, housing associations and local authorities. In accordance with the government's 'dispersal policy', accommodation is not provided in London or surrounding areas. Asylum seekers, whether in accommodation or not, can receive cash support to cover food and basic necessities, amounting to 70 percent of income support for UK residents. They are not permitted to work unless their application process exceeds 12 months.

Some asylum seekers are detained while their applications are being considered. This could happen if the asylum seeker is from a country that is viewed as 'safe' or if the authorities believe that a person is intending to enter or remain in the country illegally.

⁴⁷ As is common, it is difficult to establish what proportion of applications in a given year are granted settlement, as data on decisions are not necessarily related to data on applications from the same period. In addition, UK data on decisions do not include the outcome of appeals. Thus the UK Home Office publishes estimates of application outcomes, but these are not available per nationality.

If an asylum seeker receives a final rejection, accommodation and financial support is normally withdrawn. If the asylum seeker is seen to be taking reasonable steps to leave the UK, for example by applying for voluntary return, he or she can receive limited support until departure.

History of assisted voluntary return programmes in the UK

The first UK assisted voluntary return programme was a country-specific pilot programme set up for Kosovars in 1999. Some 4000 Kosovars had been airlifted to the UK from refugee camps in Macedonia as part of a humanitarian evacuation plan. They were given temporary protection for one year and permission to work. However, as the political situation quickly stabilised, many Kosovars wanted to go home and a return programme was set up. Returns started only a few months after the first arrivals and by June 2000, when the programme ended, 55 percent of those who came on the evacuation programme had returned. The others were given access to the regular asylum procedures. By July 2003, it was estimated that only around 500 of the evacuees remained in the UK.

The programme included funded travel and a grant of £250, later increased to £400. It was open to all Kosovar nationals, including those who had not arrived under the evacuation programme. The programme was immensely successful in terms of return rates, which was attributed to the stabilisation of the situation in Kosovo. An additional component of the programme was an 'explore and prepare' package which allowed heads of household to visit Kosovo and assess the situation before making a decision on return. According to the Refugee Council, 70 percent of those using the 'explore and prepare' option and subsequently returned had found the package useful.⁴⁸

The Kosovo programme became the precursor to a general scheme, the Voluntary Assisted Return Programme (VARP), which was set up in September 2000. 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 percent of the total returnees.⁴⁹ Available data on subsequent years suggest that Afghanistan and Iraq have now emerged as the largest destinations, with significant increases since 2004.⁵⁰ Sri Lanka, Iran and Kosovo have also received a large number of returnees from the UK since VARP started, all with fairly stable rates of return.

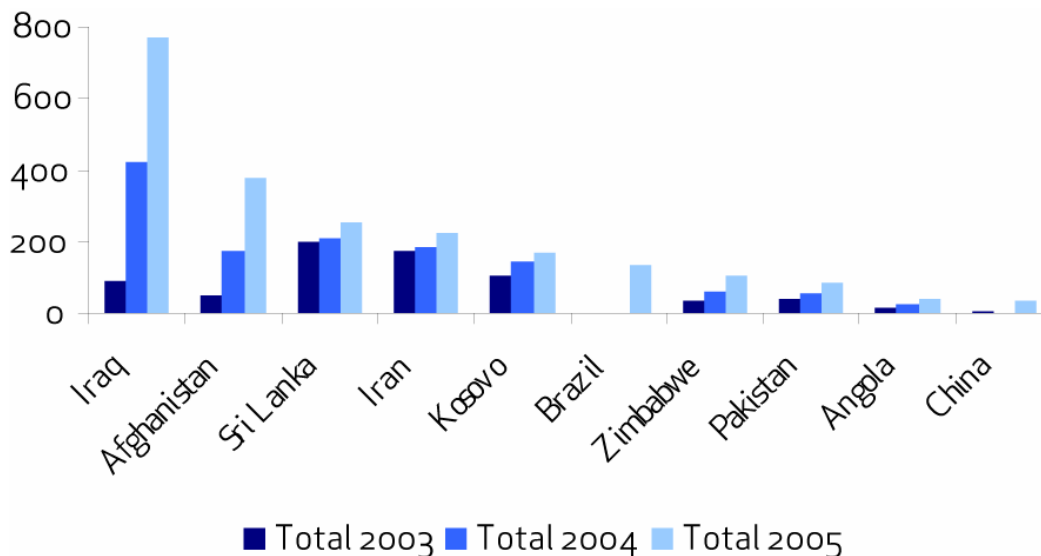
In March 2002, the general VARP scheme was extended to include reintegration assistance and changed its name to VARRP – the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme. When it was established, reintegration assistance consisted of £500 paid in kind through the provision of education, vocational training or support for the establishment of a small business.

⁴⁸ *Voluntary Returns to Afghanistan Programme: Programme Review June 2004*, Refugee Action and British Refugee Council.

⁴⁹ UK Home Office, 2005. *Findings 264: Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme 2003: An Evaluation*.

⁵⁰ From 2006, the Home Office and IOM stopped publishing country-specific data on VARP departures.

United Kingdom: top 10 countries of return



Adapted from IOM-UK, [IOM Facts & Figures - February 2006](http://www.iomlondon.org/publications.htm). Available at: <http://www.iomlondon.org/publications.htm>

The numbers of failed asylum seekers present in Britain became a political issue in the 2005 general election when it emerged that the government was unable to determine the number of asylum seekers remaining in the UK after their applications had been rejected. A national Audit Office report was initiated, placing the number at between 155,000 and 283,500. The government had shortly before introduced a 'tipping point target', meaning that in any given year the number of removals (enforced and voluntary returns) would have to be higher than the number of rejected applications. The targets for 2005 were not met and the opposition seized on the issue.

In the aftermath of this political controversy, the reintegration package was significantly increased. Reintegration support was first increased to £1000 in March 2005. However, in January 2006 an Enhanced Reintegration Assistance Package was introduced as a pilot project. The package offered all asylum seekers who had already submitted their asylum application £500 in cash and £2500 worth of in-kind reintegration assistance if they applied for voluntary return within six months. The scheme was first extended and then followed by a number of shorter time-bound campaigns, under which the size of reintegration support was increased for applicants applying within certain periods. In October 2007, these time-bound packages were replaced by a permanent reintegration package. The new package includes a £500 cash payment and up to £3500 of in-kind support. However, the latter sum indicates a maximum value rather than a standard, as the provision of the in-kind support will now be measured according to output in the country of return. For instance, support for vocational training will be standardised to two months across countries, whereas before the length of training varied according to how much training the reintegration sum could buy in each country.

The UK's AVR programmes are implemented by the IOM under a UK government contract. IOM-UK subcontracts four independent organisations, which provide advice and a referral service for voluntary return. The largest of these organisations is Refugee Action, which has served as an advisory and referral service through its Choices project, giving independent advice and referring those interested in voluntary return to IOM.⁵¹

⁵¹ Despite several emails and phone contact the team was unable to secure an interview with Refugee Action.

Table 13: UK asylum applications and returns, all nationalities, 2001-2006

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
1.Asylum applications	71,025	84,130	49,405	33,960	25,710	23,610	238,484
2.Granted refugee status or leave	31,640	28,405	11,075	5,560	4,740	4,475	85,895
3.Refusal after initial decision	89,310	55,130	53,865	40,465	22,655	16,460	277,885
4.Successful appeals	8,155	13,875	1,607	10,845	5,870	3,610	43,962
5.Total removed or returned	9,285	1,074	13,005	12,595	13,730	16,330	66,019
6.IOM estimate of VARP/ VARRP departures	1,207	1,196	2,461	2,713	n.a	n.a	n.a

Sources: Compiled from Home Office asylum statistics.

Applications are not necessarily processed or concluded in the same year they are lodged. This is why in one year, more decisions can be made than the number of applications lodged.

5. Includes all asylum applicants, regardless of status, who are known to have left the UK, whether through assisted voluntary return, spontaneous return or forced removal.

6. From 2005 onwards, figures for voluntary returns were no longer published. Numbers of returns, however, increased consecutively in 2005 and 2006.

Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

Compared to more established minority communities coming to the UK from former colonies, Afghans in the UK are relatively recent arrivals. A first wave of migration started during the communist government and the Soviet invasion, when many Afghans fled to the UK and received citizenship. A large number of people also arrived in the final years of Taliban rule. Until 2000, the majority of Afghans were granted asylum. However, following the high profile hijacking of a plane flying out of Kabul, where the hijackers and many passengers applied for asylum upon arrival in the UK, the government adopted a more restrictive approach. After the fall of the Taliban, recognition rates fell further.

Plans for an Afghanistan-specific voluntary return programme had begun in January 2002 and a six-month pilot scheme was launched in August the same year. The 'Return to Afghanistan Programme' (RAP) included a £600 cash grant per individual with a maximum of £2500 per family. However, failed asylum seekers were not eligible; only those whose applications were under consideration (including appeal), or those with temporary leave to remain, could apply.

In October 2002, the UK signed a tripartite agreement with the government of Afghanistan and UNHCR to regulate the repatriation of recognised refugees as well as voluntary and forced return.⁵² The agreement stipulated a commitment by the UK to support, where feasible, vocational skills training as well as employment-generating programmes for Afghan returnees. It further opened the way for forced removals to Afghanistan from April 2003, which have since continued on a monthly basis.⁵³

RAP attracted some initial interest: almost 70 people departed in 2003, with close to 60 and 50 departures in 2004 and 2005 respectively. However, as the general VARRP was expanded to offer more benefits than RAP, interest subsided and there were no RAP departures in 2006. At the moment, RAP continues to be promoted as a special programme for Afghans, but in practice Afghans now depart through VARRP.

⁵² UNHCR estimated that there were around 24,000 recognised Afghan refugees in the UK in 2005. UNHCR Afghan refugee statistics, February 2005.

⁵³ Voluntary Returns to Afghanistan Programme: Programme Review June 2004, Refugee Action and British Refugee Council.

Another Afghan-specific programme was an ‘explore and prepare’ programme, similar to the successful Kosovo model. The Afghan programme was set up in October 2003 and was open to Afghans with permanent or temporary status in the UK who wanted to travel to Afghanistan to assess the situation. The programme attracted limited interest, however, with a total of less than 30 participants by the end of 2006. By this time, forced removals had already started, souring relations between Afghan diaspora groups and the Home Office. Thus, there was apparently little confidence among the potential clients that they could actually go back to the UK.⁵⁴

Any estimate of a recruitment rate under the UK’s assisted voluntary return programmes amongst Afghans who received a final rejection of their asylum application would be hazardous, as there are few estimates of how many rejected asylum seekers reside in the UK, whether in general or by nationality. A very rough attempt could be made, however, by taking the total number of those receiving a negative first answer minus successful appeals, and calculating the total number of assisted voluntary returns as a percentage of this figure. The first sum, initial rejections minus successful appeals, is 13,145. Of this number, the 1558 assisted voluntary returns would make up 12 percent, meaning that around 12 percent of Afghan asylum seekers receiving a final rejection in a given period have opted for assisted voluntary return. The take-up rate, then, seems somewhat higher than that of Norway, for which the corresponding numbers are 1910 and 69, which translates into a take-up rate of 8 percent. However, in both cases the estimates should be treated with great caution, as they do not taken into account the numbers that might have left the country independently prior to the start up of the voluntary return programmes. In addition, the UK recognition rates should serve as very rough indicator only since they do not include a backlog of lodged asylum seekers from earlier years.

Table 14: UK asylum decisions and returns, Afghan nationals

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007*	Total
1. Asylum applications	8,920	7,205	2,280	1,935	1,580	2,400	1,575	25,895
2. Granted refugee status or leave	9,820	4,880	600	455	495	805	745	17,800
3. Refusals after initial decision	2,545	3,300	3,375	2,225	1,050	1,310	1,195	15,000
4. Successful appeals	110	230	695	325	205	135	155	1,855
5. Total removed or returned	125	395	615	800	1,155	1,185	870	5,145
6. Assisted voluntary return	0	9	33	173	376	519	372	1,482
7. Forced removals			232	361	473	434	654	2,154

Sources: Home Office asylum statistics; IOM-UK and Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR).

* Apart from row 7, numbers for 2007 are up to September 2007.

3. Includes all asylum applicants, regardless of status, who are known to have left the UK, whether through assisted voluntary return, spontaneous return or forced removal. Also includes applicants who have applied at ports and left immediately upon rejection, and applicants transferred to another European country as part of the Dublin convention.

6. Numbers received from IOM-UK.

7. Numbers received from the Afghan MoRR.

The use and effect of incentives

In 2006 and most of 2007, time-bound incentives were a central policy in a bid to increase voluntary return. During this period, as illustrated by table 15 below, the value of the reintegration assistance offered varied from £1000 to £4000 (NOK 10,300 to 41,250). The rationale was that by

⁵⁴ Ibid.

offering higher reintegration assistance within limited periods, applications for voluntary return would increase as the target group seized on the chance.

Table 15: UK reintegration assistance

Time period	Reintegration assistance available
March 2002	£500 in-kind assistance per returnee introduced.
March 2005	Value of in-kind reintegration assistance increased from £500 to £1000.
January-October 2006	Enhanced Reintegration Assistance Package pilot introduced. Returnees eligible for up to £3000 worth of assistance in the form of a £500 cash allowance on departure and up to £2,500 of in-kind assistance delivered in the country of origin. Available to those who had applied for asylum prior to 31 December 2005 and applied for return between applied for VARRP in the period January–October 2006.
November 2006-January 2007	Standard package of £1000 of in-kind reintegration assistance.
December 2006	Standard package is £1000 of in-kind reintegration assistance plus £500 in cash paid to those who departed in December.
February-May 2007	VARRP applicants and dependants who returned within 3 months of their application were entitled to an enhanced reintegration assistance package worth £3500 (made up of a £500 cash grant on departure and £3000 of in-kind assistance).
May 2007	Those applied or returned in May 2007 received an additional £500 in payment, in order to increase returns in May.
June 2007	VARRP applicants and dependants who returned within 3 months of their application being approved were entitled to £500 cash payment and £2,000 of in-kind assistance.
July 2007	Standard £1000 of in-kind assistance and an additional £500 cash grant on departure.
August 2007-present	New approach to VARRP introduced in October but backdated to August 2007. Each returnee entitled to assistance worth up to a maximum of £4000 each, £500 of which is paid in cash on departure. New features of the approach include a luggage allowance payment, childcare support, job placements (in some countries), and a small business booster grant provided at 6 months.

Source: adapted from AVR timeline, Home Office document.

However, in interviews with UK officials conducted as part of the study, it emerged that the effectiveness of these fluctuating incentives is regarded as inconclusive. The policy of short-term ‘campaigns’ was abandoned in October 2007, when it was replaced by a permanent package. In discussion with this study team some officials expressed little confidence in the effectiveness of a campaign approach based on monetary incentives to return. Rather, the wider contextual issues such as personal circumstances and conditions in the home country were seen as determining factors. One official concluded that although one might see an increase in applications just before the expiration of an advantageous offer, this rise would be offset by a following decrease in applications. This view was also expressed by NGO representatives reflecting on the UK experience. On the other hand, other officials took a more cautious approach in discussions with the study team, stating that there is no evidence ‘either way’ in terms of the effect of increased/fluctuating payments on voluntary return.

The evidence is indeed slim. The Home Office has not undertaken or commissioned research to examine the effects of time-bound monetary incentives on return, nor are there independent studies that attempt to isolate the effects of the incentive schemes from other factors. For instance, whilst

2006 saw an increase in total returns, 37 percent of these were to Iraq, a destination which saw almost a doubling in returns from the previous year. This was taken as an indication by one Home Office official that fluctuations in returns could also be linked to broader factors such as changes in overall country conditions. Moreover, although there had been a decrease in overall applications in recent months, this was attributed as being linked to widespread rumours of an amnesty.⁵⁵

Home Office officials stated that the main reason time-bound incentives campaigns were abandoned was feedback from NGOs involved in return work. NGOs reported difficulties in explaining to potential returnees and their communities the frequent changes in payments. Potential returnees became confused and frustrated by the many schemes, compromising trust and long-term information work.

Such feedback was a basis for introducing a more consistent approach to reintegration support. Nonetheless, the level of support remains high at a maximum of £4000 per returnee, or approximately NOK 41 250 (see table 15 above).

Reintegration

In October 2007, a new approach to reintegration was launched within the ongoing VARRP programme. The new approach is partly based on previous IOM internal evaluations, in particular the latest evaluation carried out in November 2006 to February 2007.⁵⁶ This evaluation interviewed more than a thousand returnees who had received reintegration assistance since 2002. A principal finding was that the reintegration support was most useful for those returning with some personal savings and who had family networks in the country of return.

This view was reinforced in interviews with the study team. IOM officials argued that the size of reintegration support was much less important for reintegration than the skills, connections and other resources that returnees could mobilise. A further background for the new approach, it was argued, was a tendency amongst returnees to view the reintegration support merely in terms of its immediate cash value rather than as long-term aid towards re-establishing themselves. For instance, returnees have acquired cars through the business support grant only to sell them shortly afterwards; in other words, they are simply using an in-kind business programme to access cash. Similar anecdotes surfaced in other meetings, where it was suggested that such practice seemed particularly common in Afghanistan.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The background for this belief was the announcement in July 2006 of the existence of a large number of 'legacy cases' – asylum applications which for various reasons had not been closed. A review of these cases was initiated and a number of the applicants considered 'legacy cases' were eventually granted status, giving rise to rumours of a general amnesty.

⁵⁶ Interviews with IOM-UK and Home Office officials, Jan-Feb 2008. The 2007 evaluation is so far only available in a summary form.

⁵⁷ Interview with British Refugee Council, January 2008.

IOM-UK 2007 self-evaluation

Other findings of the IOM-UK 2007 self-evaluation (only available in summary form):

- Business was the preferred reintegration option for 81 percent, whilst 7.5 percent chose job placements, 6.6 percent training and 4.2 percent education support.
- Of those who had started businesses, 77 percent were still running their enterprises with an income. Of those who had closed their businesses, the most common reasons for closure were a lack of funds to develop the business further, a lack of planning and management skills, a low level of experience or motivation, competition, or a lack of demand in the area.
- vocational courses were in general more successful in securing employment than enrolment in further education. Most successful were job placements, through which 85 percent secured employment.

Drawing on these findings, the new VARRP approach seeks to ensure that returnees are equipped with skills, networks and resources. The programme now aims to provide a higher level of support for returnees in the form of advice and follow-up, and more varied forms of support. At the same time, the new approach aims to introduce closer monitoring and verification. More emphasis will be placed on individualised reintegration paths, whereas previously advice had strongly favoured the business option. Under the new approach, returnees will be offered reintegration assistance in accordance with one out of four strands: business, education, job placement and training. There will also be an emphasis on pre-departure counselling, with IOM staff in the UK registering the returnees' skills and preferences and forwarding these to the IOM mission in the country of return.

There are also some new elements within the existing modalities:

The business programme now includes a compulsory business training course. The course lasts between two weeks and one month and during this period the returnee receives a subsistence allowance. Following the completion of the course, support of £1500 (NOK 15,450) is given for the purchase of equipment for the business. An additional £500 (NOK 5150) in support is paid out after 6 months, subject to review. In addition, stricter standards of evidence for the existence of a business, such as licences and lease contracts, will be put in place. For instance, in order to purchase a taxi, beneficiaries will have to prove that they are members of a taxi company.

Education support translates into £1500 (NOK 15 450) in school fees, uniforms or other necessary equipment, and is available to adults and children.

Vocational training support comprises fees and a subsistence allowance paid for up to two months.

Job placement is a new component whereby the employer hires a returnee for 12 months, of which three will be paid for. The job placement was particularly well received amongst the Afghan diaspora in the UK.

Under the new approach, returnees will also be offered help with accommodation (paid for up to three months) as well as childcare.

Relevance for the Norwegian programme

Given its large caseloads and comprehensive programmes, which offer reintegration assistance to all nationalities, the UK is an interesting case to compare to the Norwegian programme. Some aspects of the UK programme, such as outreach and information work, are undertaken under different conditions, given that the UK does not have reception centres and depends to a larger extent on outreach. Of particular interest for this study is the use of time-bound incentives and the background and content of the new approach in terms of reintegration.

As for the impact of the time-bound incentives on the take-up rate – i.e. the decision to sign up for a voluntary return programme – the experience from the UK appeared to be indecisive, with no clear evidence. Regardless of the effectiveness of time-bound incentives, the UK has chosen to discontinue campaign-based schemes and focus on a consistent package with more emphasis on individual needs and support. Given that most research, including this report, argues that incentives play a minimal role in the decision to return, decoupling reintegration support from the issue of return rates appears sensible.

It is too early to assess the impact of the new UK reintegration approach, as it was only put in place a few months ago.⁵⁸ Yet it is clear that many of the changes – and the underlying assumptions of these changes – resonate strongly with the findings of this study. This report has identified a need for increased counselling, monitoring and follow-up throughout the reintegration process. To that end, the new UK emphasis on individualised, more tailor-made reintegration support with expanded counselling is of relevance. It should also be noted that the UK experience with regard to the genuineness of some of the businesses is similar to those brought up in this study.

10. 2 Denmark case study

Asylum and return in Denmark

Asylum policy in Denmark has changed significantly over the last decade. Following a change of government after an election that had focused on immigration and asylum, a series of new laws were passed in 2002. These laws were designed to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers arriving, as well as the number of residence permits. Recognition rates decreased markedly and conditions for asylum seekers under consideration were tightened. As a consequence, applications have decreased correspondingly (see table 16 below).

Currently, Danish asylum seekers are housed at accommodation centres, of which there were nine in 2007, accommodating close to 2000 asylum seekers. A small allowance is provided. Compared to the allowance in Norway, the amount is low. Asylum seekers are not permitted to work. Unusually, children do not attend school but are taught inside the centres.

All asylum seekers over 18 years old must participate in compulsory activities, such as cleaning, simpler routine tasks and language training (English or the asylum seeker's mother tongue). The purpose is to keep the asylum seekers active.

In addition, the Danish Red Cross has developed a project called want2work, which offers vocational courses and in some cases work experience and access to external educational institutions. The project is described in further detail below.

Want2work

⁵⁸ However, IOM-Kabul reported in late February 2008 that although measures to implement the new approach for the returnees from UK had been initiated, returnees were still mostly interested in the business option. In addition, there had been very little interest in business training, and so IOM-Kabul was attempting to set up a shorter course of five days in order to make the business training more attractive (Email communication with IOM-Kabul AVR manager).

The want2work project was set up in 2002. Its main objective has been to maintain and strengthen asylum seekers' professional skills while their applications are under consideration. This was based on a concern that long periods of inactivity risked depleting asylum seekers' skills and undermining their confidence and initiative. At the time of start-up, the programme was mainly focused on preparing for integration into the Danish labour market and Danish society more generally. However, a more restrictive asylum policy was implemented shortly after the project started and changes were made to ensure that the project was also targeted towards return. For instance, the language of instruction was changed from Danish to English and courses were adjusted to be more relevant for labour markets in countries of origin.⁵⁹

Want2work places strong emphasis on developing individual schemes for asylum seekers. Typically, these schemes encompass preparatory language training, vocational training courses, and sometimes work experience or enrolment at educational institutions. The Danish Red Cross runs most of the accommodation centres and staff inform residents about want2work projects during individual counselling sessions as well as group information meetings about specific courses.

Want2work vocational courses include design, hairdressing, sewing, computers, catering, business start-up, solar technology, gaining a driving license, media and several other fields. The courses and learning material are produced by the Red Cross and the courses normally involve twenty hours of teaching each week for an 8 to 12-week period. Completion of courses normally leads to certificates issued by want2work.

In addition, a smaller number of returnees undergo work experience at companies or are enrolled at courses at external training institutions, including universities, after having completed want2work courses. For this, want2work co-operates with a number of other actors, such as trade unions and employer organisations, as well as various educational institutions. By February 2008, project staff estimated that around 800 asylum seekers had participated in the project. Typically, those with some education and skills were better represented.

An evaluation in 2005 found that participants and project staff viewed the impact of the courses as positive. Training institutions, and particularly companies participating in the scheme, also reported satisfaction. The evaluation pointed out, however, that want2work has not yet developed a presence or carried out activities in the countries of return and little was known about the effect of the project on the reintegration process of those returning from Denmark.⁶⁰ In this context it should be noted that IOM-Kabul's reintegration manager was a returnee from Denmark and had participated in the programme. He spoke very highly of the initiative, saying that it had equipped him with qualifications enabling him to land his current job. Moreover, he said he knew of other returnees from Denmark that had participated in the scheme and were equally successful.

Return

As part of a broader shift in immigration and asylum policy, from 2001 onwards the Danish authorities introduced a number of measures to encourage the return of rejected asylum seekers. Asylum seekers who have received a final negative answer are supposed to meet with the police in order to organise return travel. IOM does not have an office in Denmark, but can assist with arranging travel from its mission in Helsinki. If a rejected asylum seeker fails to co-operate with the police, money allowances might be withdrawn, although the asylum seeker is normally permitted to remain at the accommodation centre and will receive food. In some cases, however, he or she might be detained for refusing to return. A small monetary support package (3289 DK/3475 NOK per

⁵⁹ Want2work evaluation 2005.

⁶⁰ At present, want2work is developing a project for asylum seekers returning to Northern Iraq, where they will work together with AGER.

adult by 2007) was introduced in 2003 for all voluntary returnees. In addition, there have been country-specific returns programmes for Iraq and Afghanistan (see below for a description of the latter).

Between 2004 and 2007, for which period numbers are available, 4824 voluntary assisted departures were verified by the authorities (see table 16 below). In the same period, there were 831 escorted departures, a category which includes but is not identical to forced removals.⁶¹ A large number of rejected asylum seekers, however, left their accommodation centre every year, and the police subsequently released a missing report. Between 2004 and 2007, the total number of such missing registrations was 8676. According to the latest published figures (12 January 2008), of the approximately 2000 residents at asylum accommodation centres 747 had received a final rejection of their asylum application and had been told make arrangements to leave the country. Of these, 15 were Afghans. By far the largest group was Iraqis (409).

Table 16: Asylum applications and returns, all nationalities, Denmark

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Asylum applications	12,512	6,086	4,593	3,235	2,281	1,960	2,226	32,893
Granted refugee status or residence	6,263	4,069	2,447	1,592	1,147	1,095	1,275	17,888
Removed/escorted	n.a	n.a	n.a	259	242	210	120	831
Ensured departure/assisted voluntary return	n.a	n.a	n.a	1,591	952	1,795	486	4,824
Spontaneous return	n.a	n.a	n.a	93	95	34	44	266
Reported missing	n.a	n.a	n.a	3,024	2,452	1,795	1,405	8,676

Source: http://www.nyidanmark.dk/dadk/Statistik/udlaendingeomraadet/statistik_udlaendingeomraadet.htm

Return to Afghanistan from Denmark

In 2007, the Danish government estimated that around 11,500 people who had been born in Afghanistan or were of Afghan origin had citizenship or residence status in Denmark.⁶² More than two thirds of these had arrived after 2000 as asylum applicants. The rates of asylum applicants granted refugee status or residence peaked in 2001 with 97 percent of application decisions that year resulting in a positive answer. Since then, both the application and recognition rates have decreased.

In 2005, the Danish government introduced a temporary cash payment for Afghan asylum seekers whose applications were under consideration or had been rejected. The scheme ran from January to August 2005, and those departing under this scheme received 15,000 DK (NOK 15,850). 47 people returned under this scheme, which was managed by Udlændingetjenesten in co-operation with IOM, the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Red Cross.

⁶¹ The Danish national police, which compile statistics on returns, include in this category rejected asylum seekers who are returned against their will but also departures where 'humanitarian reasons or special demands from the receiving country demands escort by the police'. Email communication with official at Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

⁶² Tal og Fakta på udændingområdet 2006 Udlændingetjenesten, May 2007, Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

Table 17. Asylum applications and returns, Afghan nationals, Denmark

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Asylum applications	2,713	1,186	664	285	182	127	123	5,280
Granted refugee status or residence	2,075	882	724	171	87	62	n.a	4,001
Escorted return	n.a	n.a	4	6	30	17	11	68
Ensured departure/assisted voluntary return	n.a	n.a	93	75	57	16	13	254
Spontaneous return	n.a	n.a	3	2	12	1	0	18
Reported missing **	n.a	n.a	579	338	163	83	67	1,230

Source: Statistics received in email from Ministry of Refugees, Denmark.

*An apparent gap between the total number of departures and the number of unsuccessful applications on the one side, and between the sum of categories 2-6 on the other, could be due to a backlog of earlier rejections as well as to departures of people with refugee status.

**A number of asylum seekers who received a negative answer to their applications in Denmark subsequently went to Norway.

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) travelled together with an IOM representative from the Helsinki mission to inform Afghans at accommodation centres about the support scheme. The DRC is an independent Danish NGO working with refugees and asylum seekers. Similarly to its Norwegian counterpart, DRC is tasked by the authorities with providing advice and counselling to asylum seekers and refugees considering repatriation. However, in contrast to NRC, DRC also provides legal advice, reviewing asylum seekers' cases and presenting them for appeal in some instances.⁶³

In addition to the cash support scheme, the Danish government has participated in the RANA programme, enabling returnees from Denmark to receive reintegration assistance upon return. Danish RANA support is administered by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and funded from the Danish development budget, and as a consequence it is relatively autonomous from other aspects of voluntary return to Afghanistan.

Relevance for the Norwegian programme

Two things seem to be of particular relevance to the Norwegian return programme. Firstly, the Danish experience suggests that the connection between return rates and cash payments is limited. Returns were in fact higher in the first year when there was only a limited standard cash payment. However, given that the number of voluntary returns from Denmark has been significantly higher than voluntary returns from Norway, it could be worth investigating whether there are any differences in the profiles of rejected Afghan asylum seekers in the two countries.

Secondly, while the Danish authorities have not carried out any evaluations of the Danish reintegration process, the want2work project would be an interesting model to explore in the context of the Norwegian programme. Such a programme could potentially have many benefits. It would engage asylum seekers during the application process, avoiding the long periods of inactivity which in many cases can contribute to depression and mental difficulties. Moreover, upon return the returnees would arrive with an active mindset and equipped with qualifications relevant to re-establishing themselves in the home country. Finally, having acquired new skills the returnee might be more confident about returning home and facing family and friends.

⁶³ Telephone interview with DRC official, March 2008.

11. Conclusions

At the most general level, the most important impact of the programme is that it offered Afghan asylum seekers in Norway an opportunity for dignified return. This is important, and many of the respondents stressed the dignity aspect of the programme, seeing it as an exit opportunity in an otherwise very difficult situation. For many of those who chose to return with the programme, the main alternative would have been deportation, since they had already received the ‘second negative’, and had no further options for securing a legal stay. To be picked up and forcibly returned by the police – just like a criminal – was seen as undignified. Some were also worried that forced return could jeopardise their future chances of obtaining a visa to return to Norway. The assessment of the various components in the programme is mixed. The travel component functioned well. The same is the case for the initial reception arrangement whereby the returnees were met at Kabul airport by IOM staff. The information component of the programme, which targeted Afghan asylum-seekers in Norway, was only moderately successful. The reintegration assistance in Afghanistan also had severe deficiencies, including the inability to develop a package that suited each individual’s profile and the inability to follow up and to correct the course, when needed. Overall, the programme probably had limited impact on the reintegration of returnees.

The programme has not had a significant impact on the willingness of Afghan asylum seekers in Norway to return, and only 69 signed up to return. Those who had chosen to return with the programme had done so for a number of reasons, and the ability to receive some financial support – possibly also some advice – did not figure highly on the list of motives. For those who were inclined to return, regardless of the programme, the opportunity to go back in dignity may have played an important role, albeit rarely a decisive one.

More specifically, the study addressed two sets of issues:

The first set of issues centres on the decision to return with the voluntary return programme. What was the role of the incentives provided by the return programme? What was the impact of the information programme in Norway? To address these questions, the study first explored which factors formed the basis for the decision to return, and then examined the role of the programme components.

A small set of factors emerged as central to the decision to return. Most of the respondents had received a final decision on their asylum application. The possibility of being returned by force or the prospect of living illegally in Norway weighed in favour of joining the voluntary return programme. A smaller group of respondents referred to the protracted asylum process, characterised by passivity and uncertainty about the future, as a reason for choosing to return. For neither of these groups was the decision to return perceived as a positive opportunity, but rather a means of avoiding alternatives that were even less attractive. The provision of reintegration support or a cash grant did little to alter the perception of return. The finding is in line with previous research on the effect of incentives, which finds that they have limited, if any, effect on voluntary return.⁶⁴ The studies of the voluntary return programmes in Denmark and the United Kingdom likewise support this conclusion. There was no evidence that the cash payments offered served to encourage return.

By the same token, this finding suggests that the decision to return can be influenced by policy instruments that are located *outside* the voluntary return programme itself, in particular the use of

⁶⁴ Black, R., Koser, K., Munk, K., Atfield, G., D’Onofrio, L., and Tiemoko, R. (2004). *Understanding Voluntary Return*. (Home Office Online Report, 50/04).

forced removals, the conditions of life in the reception centres and the conditions of illegal residency. When facing the choice of what to do, the prospective returnee seemed more attuned to the costs or opportunities of the other options rather than the benefits of voluntary return. Once the ultimate objective – permanent residence in Norway – was out of reach, it was a calculus that focused more on the stick than the carrot. It follows that these other options can be shaped so as to make the voluntary return by comparison more attractive. Unless the voluntary return programme is made dramatically more attractive, its role in increasing return is likely to remain modest. Effectiveness, however, cannot be the only criterion guiding policy. Whilst the stick elements of return policy might be more effective in increasing return, they also carry significant human costs and are less preferable from an ethical perspective.

The IRRANA programme contains an information component designed to increase knowledge about the reintegration programme and the situation in Afghanistan. The component is intended to stimulate interest in the voluntary return option. The study found that the existing priorities or previous choices made by the asylum seekers shaped what information they were seeking. The majority of respondents were most interested in obtaining information about their ability to remain in Norway rather than about the situation in Afghanistan or details of the reintegration programme. Some respondents actively sought out information to confirm whether they would be able to stay in Norway by attending conferences and through consulting NOAS and UDI. Establishing certainty about their asylum status led in some cases to a decision to return.

The study found that information work in Norway was only moderately successful if judged by what the respondents had learnt. Only a small minority held correct knowledge about the reintegration programme. The respondents' secondary interest in information about the programme or the situation in Afghanistan helps explain why many had limited knowledge of the details of the reintegration programme prior to returning. Such knowledge did not seem very relevant in a situation where the main concern was to explore possibilities to remain in Norway or to escape from life in the asylum centre. However, the study also noted that INCOR's Afghanistan project had limited demonstrable output. The project provided information and counselling about return to Afghanistan by travelling to asylum centres across Norway. However, when asked only two of 28 informants recalled any knowledge about NRC or INCOR from their time in Norway.

The second major focus of the study was the short-term reintegration process after arrival in Afghanistan. The task here was to consider the effect of individual career planning and counselling components for the subsequent reintegration process in Afghanistan, as well as to assess the usefulness of the IOM-run reintegration programme in Afghanistan, and eventually the overall reintegration situation of the programme participants.

The study identified lack of economic opportunities and a general concern with security as the main challenges for the overall reintegration situation of the returnees. Perhaps not surprisingly, the study also found that most of the respondents intended to leave Afghanistan again.

Given that the returnees had been back in Afghanistan for only a short period of time, the main focus of the study was the reintegration assistance. On balance, the study found that a majority of the returnees made use of the full range of assistance offered through the programme (although 25 per cent did not and only received the NOK 15,000 cash assistance upon arrival). The study also identified some shortcomings in the reintegration part of the programme. The information collected by IOM in Norway regarding the qualifications and aspirations of the individual returnees, it turned out, was not used to inform IOM's counselling of returnees in Afghanistan. Despite individual variations in background and aspirations, all of the returnees chose the business option in the programme offered by IOM. The study found three reasons for this: limited counselling, underdevelopment of the other programme options, and the nature of the business option itself.

The counselling offered by IOM staff to the returnees was as a rule quite limited, and rarely touched upon overall future plans for those who had just come back. This must be considered a weakness of the programme: to be relevant, a reintegration programme requires open and confident communication about the returnees' situation and options.

Although IOM staff maintained that they informed returnees about the three options in the programme – the small business option, training, job referral – several returnees said they had only learnt about the business option and were not aware of the alternatives. One reason is probably that in the absence of an institutionalised mechanism for job referral or for training, the other two options appeared largely hypothetical to the returnees.

Despite its evident attractions the business programme itself had significant shortcomings. Firstly, the level of in-kind support – 10,000 NOK – is not sufficient to start up a sustainable business, as was acknowledged by both IOM staff and returnees. Consequently, IOM staff advised returnees to enter into partnerships with persons who had an established business. The study found that both partnerships and individual businesses were often set up solely in order to access the reintegration support. In these cases, the partnership would be dissolved or the stock of goods sold at the earliest time possible. Similar observations had been made by those involved with the UK reintegration programme. Quite possibly, the insufficiency of the reintegration support for setting up a business encouraged the practice of 'pretend shops', as some returnees openly said. They were *able* to do so, moreover, because of the lack of monitoring and follow-up in the programme, and in at least one case, with the complicity of programme staff.

The practice of establishing 'fake' businesses is problematic in several respects. They represent significant transaction costs and waste for both the programme and the returnees. The processing of fake businesses absorbs programme resources. The returnees, for their part, engage in deception that is equally wasteful, and perverts communication between programme staff and the returnees, undermining the possibility of addressing the real challenges of reintegration. The process also gives a false picture of how the returnees are faring, hence distorts the basis for formulating effective aid programmes for reintegration.

On a more fundamental level, the process embodies a paternalistic logic familiar from other assistance programmes. The underlying assumption is that the recipients cannot make informed decisions about how to manage their resources and therefore cannot simply be given money. A number of control mechanisms are laid down in order to ensure that aid is used in appropriate ways. In some cases, however, this logic produces unintended consequences as the recipients circumvent these control mechanisms to access and use the funds as they see fit. In such situations, it is wiser to admit defeat than attempt to keep up a costly but formalistic programme. In the case of the programme under scrutiny here, that could point towards simply increasing the cash grant, despite the risk that it might be used for financing renewed flight (just like the business grant, once it has been cashed in).

More importantly, however, we may look for alternatives or supplements to the business support option. It is of interest to draw on the experience gained from the studies in Denmark. We have taken note of the changes made in the Danish case, where technical training and language courses are now provided for asylum seekers while in Denmark. Although the impact of this reorientation has not been fully reviewed, returnees from Denmark to Kabul emphasised the value of the new approach for their ability to secure jobs. Returnees from Norway, on the other hand, pointed to the negative effects of the long waiting period, with limited opportunities for training or work.

12. Recommendations

The findings of the study, the specific suggestions from the returnees, and the experiences in Denmark and the UK suggest some measures for improving the Norwegian programme for voluntary return to Afghanistan. The following recommendations are designed to strengthen the sustainability of return with due consideration given to transaction costs.

Training in exile

The time that asylum-seekers spend in Norway can be used productively for education, specific skills improvement or language training (primarily English). The importance of giving content to the time spent in the asylum centres was stressed by many of the informants, and this makes sense from several perspectives. Educational programmes help focus and structure the daily lives of asylum seekers, reduce stress and broaden their social networks while in exile. Such programmes can consist of self-contained short-term courses in order to secure a tangible gain even if the education is unexpectedly interrupted. Enhanced skills would help the Afghans reintegrate more easily if they return and might prepare them better for the Afghan job market. Likewise, training would help integration in Norway for those granted asylum. In addition, for those who return the acquisition of skills and qualifications would generate a sense of achievement likely to boost confidence in the ability to reintegrate. In a larger development perspective, training would ensure that those returning to Afghanistan had been able to maintain and develop their skills whilst away, equipping them to contribute towards the reconstruction of the country.

Training programmes should be provided from the time of arrival in Norway, or at the very least after the initial rejection of asylum. Offering brief training courses just prior to returning would have a much more limited impact.

Information in exile

Interviews with those who have returned to Afghanistan with the help of the programme indicate that the information efforts in Norway have been only partially successful in conveying the content of the programme and alternative options within it. Nonetheless, continued information efforts are pivotal to ensuring that Afghan asylum seekers in Norway know about the programme. There is a need to undertake a review of the information material and communication strategy applied, as a basis for developing a more effective information strategy. As part of this, the NRC needs to reconsider the relevance of informing about of their programmes in Afghanistan as long as these remain out of reach for the returnees.

Reintegration support

Reintegration programmes in Afghanistan can be structured as a two-layered approach. The first option is basically a cash distribution programme. This option has few transaction costs, reflects the apparent desire of many returnees simply to receive some capital for their own disposition, and respects the autonomy of their decisions. It serves to make superfluous practices in which short-term or sham businesses are used in order to convert reintegration support into cash. The second option offers stronger support for those who express a desire to have such assistance (e.g. those with less developed social networks, skills or experience). The reintegration options – business, training and job referral – could remain the same, but each option needs to be strengthened. In particular, training and job referral should be developed and presented as a real alternative for those who are not interested in business.

Basic information about the programmes should be made available in Norway, although realistically the returnees are unlikely to make full use of the information until they have returned to Afghanistan.

In more detail, the two layers could be developed as follows:

- 1) Those who are confident and wish to handle their own re-establishment in Afghanistan would receive a one-off cash payment upon arrival, the amount to be determined. The total cash equivalent today (cash grant plus business support) is NOK 25,000. Most returnees as well as IOM staff felt this was inadequate. The UK, in the aftermath of its programme review, gives the equivalent of up to NOK 45,000 to all returnees. The Danish government, in contrast, provides very little cash but, as discussed above, has a solid training programme in Denmark.
- 2) Those returnees who are not confident about handling their own return would be offered a composite assistance package:
 - i. A detailed interview in Norway before return, mapping education, skills, destination, networks and their own plans for reintegration. The challenges and opportunities would be discussed with the returnees to help them prepare for the challenges ahead and to make an informed decision upon arrival in Afghanistan.
 - ii. Following their establishment in Afghanistan (for which they should receive a cash payment of a more limited scope than the layer one option) and some time to familiarise themselves with the situation, returnees should have the choice between several options:
 - a) *A small business solution*: The returnees would receive training to establish and develop a business. A suitable start-up grant would be provided, as well as advice from qualified personnel over a period of several months.
 - b) *Job referral* (possibly including on-the-job training): Ideally, the programme would provide a salary for an initial period (e.g. 3 months), with follow-up and monitoring from the programme manager to ensure that the arrangement works to the satisfaction of both parties.
 - c) *Further skills training*: This could entail a course at a recognised training institute with a view to developing skills relevant for the Afghan labour market.
 - d) *Higher education*: Support should enable the candidate to pursue a higher degree in Afghanistan, possibly with extension subject to documented progress. The returnees would be offered support to cover expenses for fees, books and transportation.

Organisational involvement

For both of the two alternatives discussed above, IOM could handle the process in Norway, the actual return and the payment (including the extended payment under option I). For track II, there are several management alternatives that need to be explored in more detail. The programme could be administered by:

1. An Afghan ministry (such as MOLSA), which might seek partners to implement the various components;
2. A consortium of a ministry, an NGO and IOM;
3. An NGO; or
4. IOM.

The first and second option would help build Afghan government capacity and anchor the responsibility for returnees with the Afghan authorities. At the same time, this option would benefit from the expertise and networks of NGO(s) and IOM. The third and fourth options should be based on a review of documented professional capacity and skills in the respective organisations, with emphasis on their ability to monitor, document and report on project goals and achievements.

Monitoring

There is a need, regardless of who is in charge, to establish systematic routines for monitoring the impact of the various components of the return programme. Monitoring is a necessary foundation for organisational learning. Furthermore, voluntary return programmes are capital-intensive, and they are of considerable importance in the debates on asylum policy in Norway and other exile countries. While continuous monitoring will not necessarily eliminate the need for external reviews, it would reduce it, and when reviews are undertaken, they would in part be able to build on existing data.

For all options, the payment for services should be made through block grants, paid against documented services provided to the returnees, which would conform with the new arrangement introduced by the UK.

13. Appendixes

Appendix A: Meeting list, September 2007 - March 2008

AFGHANISTAN		
Organisation	Name and position	Dates
IOM-Kabul	Fernando Arocena, Chief of Mission Helene Fors, AVR Programme Manager Ali Haider, RANA Reintegration Manager Massoud Ahmadi, Programme Assistant Sayed Abdul Qahar, Senior OPS Assistant, IOM AVR, Kabul airport	30 Sep 30 Sep, 5 Oct, 30 Oct 1 Oct, 30 Oct 1 Oct , 30 Oct 30 Oct
IOM-Herat	Mr Amand, Reintegration Assistant Serena di Matteo, Manager IOM Herat	28 Oct
UNHCR	Aurvasi Patel, Senior Protection Officer Jawid Wali Hakimi, Pprotection Assistant Zahida Shahidy, Advisor to MoRR (seconded from UNHCR)	4 Oct 18 Oct
Norwegian Embassy, Kabul	Stine Iversen, Return Attache	30 Sep, 17 Oct
British Embassy, Kabul	Iqbal Makati, Return Liaison Officer	20 Oct
Norwegian Refugee Council	Ann Kristin Brunborg, Resident Representative Shah M Rajae, Information Counsellor Mirzad Arezo, ICLA Manager	 18Oct
Agef	Mr Mirwais, Head of Returnee Service Centre	17 Oct
Ministry of Repatriation and Reintegration (MoRR)	Mr Hadi, Deputy Minister Khawja Fitri, Advisor Khair Mohammad, MoRR representative at the airport Mr Shamshuddin, Head of Department	02 Oct 28 Oct
DoRR/Herat		
Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA)	Engineer Rahim, Director, National Skills Development Programme	21 Oct
Afghan Independent Human Right Commission	Ahmad Zia Langari, Commissioner	3 Oct
Mesbah (Agef partner)	Ahmad Zia, Vice president	25 Oct
CORDAID/ CIDIN	Marieke van Houte, Researcher/coordinator	10 Oct
NORWAY		
UDI	Bente Scott- Amundsen, Senior Advisor Øistein Berg, Advisor Elin Nordtug, Advisor	10 Sep
IOM-Oslo	Antonio Polosa, Chief of Mission William Paintsil, VARP Project Coordinator Hiwa Meradi, IRRANA Case Worker	11 Sep
NOAS	Morten Tjessem, Secretary General	11 Sep

Norwegian Refugee Council	Susanne Utsigt, Project Coordinator Mi Christiansen, Legal Advisor Ghulam Rasool, INCOR Project Worker Oddhild Günther, Senior Advisor Sosan Mollestad, Project Coordinator	11 Sep
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Oslo	Sperghei Safi, Liaison Officer Fatana Hakimi, Liaison Assistant	12 Sep
Dale Reception Centre	Gunn Fadnes, Head of Centre	8 Jan
Hobøl Reception Centre	Olav Strand, Head of Centre	14 Feb
Søre Sunnmøre Reception Centre	Hallstein Saunes, Head of Centre	17 Sep
The National Police Immigration Service	Camilla Dahlin (on secondment to UDI at the time of the interview)	13 Sep
Business Innovation Programme	Giggi Langfeldt	11 Jan *
UNITED KINGDOM		
IOM-London	Julia Hartlieb, Reintegration Manager Marek Effendowicz, Communications Director Hamayoon Ferthut, Outreach Assistant	04 Feb
Border and Immigration Agency, Home Office	Eileen Gough, AVR Policy Team Kirsty Gillian, Asylum Process Research Section Andrew Zurawan, Head, Asylum Process Research Section	08 Feb
British Refugee Council	Gary Bell, Information Officer, Voluntary Returns Project Jonathan Parr, Senior Information Officer, Voluntary Returns Project	14 Jan
	Peter Marsden, independent consultant,	15 Jan
DENMARK		
Danish Refugee Council	Dorte Smed, Legal Consultant, Asylum and Repatriation	07 Mar *
Danish Red Cross	Mette Schmidt, project staff member, <i>Want2work</i>	07 Mar *
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Henrik Jespersen, Department of Humanitarian Policy and Assistance and NGO Coordination	07 Mar *

* *Phone Interviews*

Appendix B: Excerpt from Terms of Reference (Konkurransesgrunnlag)

3. OM OPPDRAGET

3.1 Returprogram til Afghanistan:

Høsten 2005 undertegnet norske myndigheter en trepartsavtale med afghanske myndigheter og UNHCR om retur og tilbakevending av afghanere i Norge. På bakgrunn av denne avtalen ble prosjektet "Retur og tilbakevending til Afghanistan" etablert i samarbeid med UDI og International Organization for Migration (IOM). Prosjektet startet den 26.04.2006 og varer ut 2007. Målgruppen for prosjektet er afghanske asylsøkere med avslag på oppholdstillatelse og afghanere med oppholdstillatelse i Norge som ønsker å vende tilbake og bygge opp hjemlandet. Prosjektet bygger på det etablerte og pågående EU prosjektet RANA.

Prosjektet innebærer økonomisk støtte, informasjon og rådgivning, helseundersøkelse, assistanse i den første tiden etter ankomst Afghanistan samt hjelp og støtte til å komme i arbeid, utdanning, arbeidsopplæring eller oppstart av egen virksomhet i hjemlandet. Personer som tvangsreturnerer med politiet har ikke rett til økonomisk støtte men får tilbud om reintegreringsstøtte etter ankomst hjemlandet.

UDI samarbeider med Flyktningshjelpen v/ INCOR for særskilt informasjon og rådgivning vedr prosjektet overfor afghanere. I 2006 samarbeidet Norsk Organisasjon for Asylsøkere (NOAS) med INCOR om juridisk rådgivning.

I løpet av programperioden hittil har 51 personer reist frivillig tilbake på dette programmet. Til sammenlikning er 129 personer blitt returnert med tvang av politiet i 2006.

Returprogrammet til Afghanistan er i dag det eneste pågående returprogram fra Norge hvor flere komponenter herunder reintegreringsstøtte er en del av programmet. Hensikten med reintegreringsstøtte i et returprogram er å gi asylsøkere med avslag muligheten til en ny start i hjemlandet.

3.2 Bakgrunnen for prosjektet

Inneværende år arbeider UDI med å videreutvikle konseptet om landprogrammer og planlegger også å påbegynne utviklingen av et generelt globalt returprogram med reintegreringskomponenter. Som ledd i det videre arbeidet med utviklingen av returprogram ønsker UDI å øke kunnskap om hvordan returprogram til Afghanistan har virket for de som har returnert.

Behovet for mer kunnskap om reintegreringssituasjonen for asylsøkere som har returnert understøttes også av en nylig gjennomført kartlegging av returarbeid i mottak. Kartleggingen viser at mottaksansatte opplever et behov for kunnskap om hvordan returprogrammer virker for de som har reist tilbake. Mer kunnskap om dette vil føre til at de vil være sikrere/ stå tryggere i sitt pålagte arbeid for å motivere til retur.

3.3. Hensikten med prosjektet

Hensikten med prosjektet skal være å samle erfaringer fra et returprogram med reintegreringskomponenter. Det er et ønske å få mer kunnskap om hvorvidt de ulike programkomponentene samlet fører til reintegrering og varig retur i hjemlandet.

Med utgangspunkt i returprogram til Afghanistan skal studien bidra med kunnskap som kan overføres til det videre generelle utviklingsarbeidet med frivillig retur.

Prosjektet skal komme med forslag til hvordan returprogrammer bør utformes for på best mulig måte å ivareta returnerte asylsøkeres behov for støtte i reintegreringen i hjemlandet.

Det norske returprogrammet skal sammenliknes med 2 andre europeiske lands returprogrammer til Afghanistan. Det kan være hensiktsmessig å velge ut land som har en annen sammensetning av insentiver og støtteordninger enn det norske returprogrammet. Sammenlikningen skal ha fokus på programmenes komponenter og på hvilken effekt disse kan ha på resultater i form av antall frivillig returnerte innenfor programmene.

3.4. Målgruppe

Prosjektets målgruppe er asylsøkere som har returnert til Afghanistan frivillig med returprogram til Afghanistan

3.5 Prosjektmål

Av konkrete mål for prosjektet kan nevnes:

- Vurdere effekten av informasjonsarbeidet om returprogrammet i Norge på asylsøkernes ønske om å returnere frivillig
- Vurdere betydningen av individuell karriereplanlegging i Norge på evnen til vellykket reintegrering i hjemlandet
- Beskrive deltakelse og nytteverdi av reintegreringskursene for returnerte asylsøkere i Kabul drevet av IOM
- Gi økt kunnskap om reintegreringsprosessen for de som har returnert frivillig
- Gi økt kunnskap om betydningen av insentiver for asylsøkernes motivasjon for deltakelse i programmet

Prosjektets fokus vil være på den første tiden etter retur. Det skal gi kunnskap om hvordan den umiddelbare reintegreringssituasjonen arter seg og om hvorvidt programmets komponenter møter de behov som de returnerte viser seg å ha etter ankomst hjemlandet. På et mer generelt nivå er det et ønske at prosjektet også skal kunne gi antydninger om retur programmets mer langsiktige effekter relatert til varig og bærekraftig retur. Sammenlikningen av det norske programmet med andre europeiske lands returprogrammer til Afghanistan skal gi kunnskap om i hvilken grad insentiver og støtteordninger kan sies å motivere til frivillig retur.

3.6. Følgende komponenter i returprogrammet skal studeres (Avgrensning)

Måltrettet retur informasjon (før avreise)

- Individuelle retur samtaler (før avreise)
- Individuell karriereplanlegging / rådgivning (før avreise)
- Kontantstøtten, beløpets størrelse samt utbetalingsrutiner (utbetaling etter ankomst)
- Reintegreringstøtte i hjemlandet i form av yrkesrettede kurs, yrkesformidling, oppfølging av karriereplanlegging etc
- Individuell yrkesrettet oppfølging etter retur
- Behov for annen type oppfølging etter retur, helse, bolig, omsorgssituasjon etc

Fokus skal legges på de særskilte og målrettede aktiviteter knyttet til forberedelser til retur i Norge, gjennomføringen av prosjektet i Afghanistan og eventuelle effekter av programmet på reintegrering og varig retur. Det skal anlegges et helhetlig fokus slik at alle relevante programkomponenter skal sees i sammenheng.

Sammenlikningen med de 2 andre europeiske lands returprogrammer skal bestå av en skjematisk vurdering av insentivenes og programmenes betydning / innvirkning på antall frivillig returnerte og om mulig deres reintegreringsprosess etter retur.

3.4 Metode

Metoden vil være en blanding av dokumentgjennomgang om returprogrammets innhold og komponenter samt personlige intervjuer av aktuelle nasjonale og internasjonale organisasjoner, NGOer, myndigheter og returnerte asylsøkere i Afghanistan. Feltarbeid med intervjuer og datainnsamling skal foregå delvis i Norge, delvis i Afghanistan. Feltarbeidet i Afghanistan vil foregå i Kabul og beregnes til ca 1 ½ - 2 mnd . Intervjuer av returnerte asylsøkere skal bare foregå i Afghanistan. Erfaringsmessig er det vanskelig å spore personer i hjemlandet etter retur. Det er derfor viktig å foreta denne undersøkelsen mens prosjektet pågår slik at det skal være lettere å få tak i informanter fra gruppen av de returnerte.

Sammenlikningen mellom europeiske lands returprogrammer kan bestå av samtaler med myndigheter, gjennomgang av skriftlig dokumentasjon/ rapporter etc samt ved intervjuer av aktuelle aktører i Afghanistan. Det kan være hensiktsmessig å velge ut to land med ulike programmer, ett med høyere insentiver og ett med lavere insentiver enn det norske returprogrammet. Det er opp til forskerne å gjøre avtaler om besøk og datainnsamling i Norge så vel som i Afghanistan.

Vi er åpne for andre metodiske tilnærminger så fremt disse begrunnes og kan gjennomføres innenfor prosjektets rammer.

3.5 Rammebetingelser

Det forutsettes at arbeidet blir igangsatt så snart prosjektet er tildelt i løpet av høsten 2007, og senest i løpet av august/september 2007. Prosjektet har en samlet kostnadsramme på maksimalt NOK1 mill. Den totale prosjektperiode er satt til 6 – 8 mnd fra prosjektets oppstart. Vi ber om en begrunnelse for metodiske valg for at prosjektet evt strekker seg ut over 6 mnd. Det presiseres at alle utgifter, inkludert MVA, tolk, reise og oppholdsutgifter, skal dekkes innenfor prosjektrammen.

3.6. Anbefalinger og sluttprodukt

Prosjektrapporten skal presentere en samlet beskrivelse av returprogrammets innvirkning på de returnertes reintegreringssituasjon i hjemlandet. På bakgrunn av erfaringene fra Afghanistan skal prosjektet komme med tydelige og konkrete forslag til tiltak som kan overføres til myndighetenes pågående arbeid med utvikling av komponenter i et returprogram.

3.7 Referansegruppe

Planen er at UDI danner en egen referansegruppe for prosjektet. Referansegruppen kan brukes av prosjektet etter behov, og foreslås møtes anslagsvis 2- 3 ganger i prosjektperioden. Referansegruppen vil hovedsakelig ha en rådgivende funksjon.

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SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, Utlendingsdirektoratet (UDI), to assess the programme for voluntary return to Afghanistan. The programme is open to Afghan nationals whose asylum applications in Norway are pending or have been rejected, or Afghans who have been granted the right to stay in Norway but wish to return to Afghanistan. The report focuses on the return programme established in 2006 by the Norwegian government in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Norwegian NGOs. The programme includes information and counselling in Norway, as well as cash payments and reintegration assistance upon return to Afghanistan.

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