

Experiences with assisted return from Norway – a research review

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Assisted return programmes in Norway target migrants who do not fulfil, or no longer fulfil, the conditions for stay or for residence, such as rejected asylum seekers. They are application-based schemes that grant support to migrants in this target group who wish to return to their country of origin and re-establish there. Assisted return can offer these migrants a way to return in a safe, orderly and dignified manner, and on a voluntary basis, as called for in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. Norway has developed and implemented assisted return programmes as a policy measure that encourages voluntary return since 2002. This brief summarizes research on the effectiveness of Norway's assisted return programmes, based on a 2018 literature review published by Fafo. We begin by presenting the design and implementation of the Norwegian programmes, before looking at key research findings that are relevant to policy makers and the wider public beyond Norway's borders.

Four types of reasons why migrants agree to assisted return

Because assisted return is application-based, migrants themselves must be motivated to apply if programmes are to be efficient. Consistently, studies emphasize four sets of independent variables that affect migrants' willingness to choose assisted return.

County of origin variables

Firstly, *the situation in the country of origin* is pivotal for the decision to return. If the security situation improves, this positively affects the use of the assisted return scheme, and vice versa. However, migrants may experience the same situation differently depending on their personal networks, resources and opportunities.

Host country variables

Secondly, *the situation in the host country* is assumed to be relevant to whether people will apply for assisted return or not. The reviewed literature suggests that restrictions on rights to work or study in the host country reduce livelihood opportunities and may motivate people to apply for assisted return. Two studies looked specifically into Norwegian policy changes that curtailed reception conditions for rejected asylum seekers. Numbers of returns did not increase after Norway withdrew accommodation and

Data and methods

This literature review summarizes findings from Nordic or English language studies of assisted return, with an emphasis on studies of Norwegian assisted return measures. A total of 46 studies are included in the review. The majority of the studies are concerned with the effectiveness of various return programmes, and explaining why migrants apply for assisted return. The research presented here also includes studies of programmes that are no longer operative.

For details and references, see Silje Sønsterudbråten (2018) *Assistert retur. En kunnskapsstatus*. Oslo: Fafo. <https://www.fafo.no/index.php/en/publications/fafo-reports/item/assistert-retur>

economic rights for rejected asylum seekers in 2005, but the analysis in this regard is inconclusive. The later introduction of designated accommodation centres for this group aggravated living conditions and had serious unintended consequences. They were therefore discontinued.

One Norwegian study shows that the execution of forced returns statistically increases the likelihood that others who are resident in the same accommodation centre will apply for assisted return. At group level this finding holds for Iraqis, but not for Afghans. This group level difference points back to the pivotal significance of the security situation in the country of origin. Notably, execution of forced returns was also correlated with an increase in people absconding from the accommodation centre. A qualitative study of Nigerian migrants similarly found that they considered assisted return only when forced return became imminent. Access to assisted return programmes and reliable, well-timed information about their options may enable migrants to choose to return. Returnees themselves describe other factors than the support schemes as more significant for their decision, but we cannot conclude from their narratives alone whether this is true.

Individual level variables

Thirdly, the literature suggests that several *individual characteristics* influence the decision to return. Research on other individual characteristics such as age, health, gender and family status, and willingness to choose assisted return, is thus far limited or inconclusive. Most returnees leave within their first two years in Norway, while those who stay more than three years in Norway rarely choose assisted return. It may be that their motivations change over time, or it may be that the remaining migrants differ along other characteristics.

Opportunities elsewhere in Europe

Fourth and finally, qualitative studies suggest that migrants also consider their *opportunities for residence and work in other European countries* when they consider applying for assisted return. Considering their future mobility, migrants may be more willing to choose assisted return if forcible return is a realistic alternative, as this would restrict their re-entry to the Schengen area. As noted, they could also disappear to attempt an irregular existence, which could be easier outside of Norway.

What motivates people to apply for assisted return?

The following table summarizes our review of how conclusively the existing research allows us to identify and interpret effects of the various independent variables on migrants' willingness to choose assisted return. Confirmed effects have been identified and interpreted consistently in multiple studies, including studies with a research design that allows for an effects analysis. Probable effects

have been identified and hypothesized consistently in multiple studies, often with qualitative methods, but not confirmed through an effects analysis. We consider the available research inconclusive where it has not produced a consistent rationale for the variable's effect or where competing interpretations are unresolved.

Independent variables	Our assessment of the conclusiveness of available research
<i>The situation in the country of origin</i>	
Security	Confirmed effects
<i>The situation in the host country</i>	
Access to assisted return	Probable effects
Knowledge about assisted return	Probable effects
Access to work or education/livelihood	Probable effects
Risk of forced return	Confirmed effects
<i>Individual characteristics</i>	
Residence period	Inconclusive
Age	Inconclusive
Family situation	Inconclusive
Gender	Inconclusive
Health	Inconclusive
<i>Other and future opportunities in Europe</i>	
Opportunities for work and residence	Probable effects
Opportunities for re-entry to Schengen	Probable effects

Norway's assisted return measures

Norway introduced the first assisted return programme in 2002, which offered migrants information and financial travel support to return home through IOM. Country-specific programmes were introduced for Afghanistan in 2006 (IRRANA), Iraq in 2008 (IRRINI), Ethiopia in 2012 (ARE) and Somalia in 2014, as well as separate programmes for vulnerable groups and unaccompanied minors.

Today, the programmes mainly offer practical and financial support, with the Somalia programme being the only one to offer in-kind support after arrival, in addition to the vulnerable programme. Migrants returning to other countries or areas can access reintegration support in the form of cash payments. Cash and in-kind support vary between country programmes, and cash payments are smaller if migrants are under an expulsion order at the time of application.

Who can access the assisted return programmes?

Migrants can apply for the assisted return programmes if their asylum application is being processed or has been rejected, if they are not legal residents and have not applied for protection, and if they have been issued with a decision to return to a third country in accordance with the Dublin regulation. Information about assisted return is disseminated by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, IOM, the non-profit organization NOAS, and designated return advisors at each accommodation centre.

Information is a consistent challenge

The studies we reviewed consistently show that migrants in the target group have deficient knowledge about their prospects and options for return. At the same time, migrants themselves reported that they are adequately informed, reflecting low interest in more information. Migrants who live in accommodation centres receive more information about assisted return than those who live on their own, who generally know less about their return options.

How can information be delivered effectively?

Well-timed information work might enhance the effectiveness of return programmes, but the literature is divided over when migrants might be more interested to receive it. Some studies recommend giving information at an early stage, before the Directorate of Immigration issues a decision imposing an obligation to return. The argument is that this obligation shuts down the option for dialogue between migrants and return advisors. Other studies recommend giving information gradually, and adjusted to the migrants' legal status, in order for the migrants to experience the information as relevant to their situation.

Several studies find that return advisors do adjust the information they give to how receptive they consider the migrants to be, depending in part on their legal status. However, the studies also find that migrants are unreceptive both before and after having received a decision with

an obligation to return, but for different reasons: before, because they perceive the information as irrelevant, and after, because they resist return and focus on their hope to stay.

The literature emphasizes that effective information work requires that the information is reliable and provided by someone the migrants trust. Migrants reported that they perceived the information as unreliable if they believed that return advisors glossed over the actual conditions in their home countries, or if they believed the advisors to have an interest in their return. Such factors threatened the credibility of the information provided more generally. Some studies also warn of similar effects when advisors from different organizations contradict each other. This latter risk is particularly relevant in efforts to reach migrants who live outside the accommodation centres, which are carried out by a number of organizations and by staff members who are not trained specifically for the task.

Returns are efficient, reintegration is problematic

Evaluations of Norway's four country-specific return programmes conclude that in general, applications for assisted return are processed swiftly, with the exception of applications for return to Ethiopia that take a longer time to process because the nearest embassy is in Sweden. The evaluation also found that returns are efficiently implemented through IOM Norway. Implementation of reintegration support varies more between the country specific programmes. Migrants were more positive towards the reintegration support they receive in Iraq and Somalia than in Afghanistan and Ethiopia, but the programmes are not directly comparable. The types of support, the number of people returning and the context for reintegration differ between these countries.

What difference does reintegration support make?

In these four countries, migrants who returned through the programmes found cash payments to be more useful than in-kind support. The cash payments reportedly make the first phase after return more manageable for the returnees. In-kind support is not paid to the returnee directly and could cover workplace training, education, or start-up costs for a business. A 2016 evaluation found that IOM encourages returnees to start a business with their in-kind support instead of choosing education or workplace training. Most returnees followed this advice, but few succeeded, and some used it as a strategy to convert in-kind support into materials that they could sell for cash. The evaluation concluded that most returnees had not found a job or been successful at starting a business that could provide a long-term income, and the researchers therefore questioned this practice of recommending starting up businesses. The researchers also question whether the reintegration support can effectively reduce motivations for secondary migration, but they do not study secondary migration patterns empirically.

Assisted returns increased, but not for all destinations

Two studies identify an increase in the total number of assisted returns during the period after Norway introduced assisted return programmes, and an increase in the general likelihood of the target group returning. The studies are cautious in drawing conclusions about causality, but point to strong indications that the introduction of support for return has been a factor in this development. However, the studies identify major country differences.

Did programme introduction increase assisted returns?

Very few have yet returned through the country-specific programme for *Somalia*. Assisted returns to *Afghanistan* decreased after the introduction of the programme, and the likelihood of migrants under an expulsion order returning did not increase. Quantitative and qualitative studies emphasize that the worsening security situation in Afghanistan is a key explanation for why financial support apparently has failed to make assisted return a more relevant option. Although more Ethiopians returned from Norway

than from any other European country, assisted returns to *Ethiopia* have been relatively few, and did not increase over time with the introduction of a country-specific programme. Assisted returns to *Iraq* increased after the introduction of the assisted return programme, as did the likelihood of migrants choosing an assisted return. Assisted return to *Kosovo* was terminated despite high return rates because the Norwegian authorities suspected that people would apply for asylum in Norway to obtain such support.

The introduction of a return programme may coincide with a number of changes that may influence migrants' willingness and ability to accept an assisted return, in a positive as well as in a negative direction. Overall, the Norwegian studies support the findings in the broader literature that financial support contributes towards migrants' motivation to choose assisted return, but the country-specific differences clearly illustrate that other factors may have a larger impact on migrants' decision to return.

The project

The findings in this summary are based on a literature review funded by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and implemented by Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, published in the following report:

Silje Sønsterudbråten (2018) *Assistert retur. En kunnskapsstatus*. Oslo: Fafo.

Fafo

is an independent and multidisciplinary research foundation focusing on social welfare and trade policy, labour and living conditions, public health, migration and integration. Fafo has extensive experience from research on migration and asylum systems, and our researchers have published a wide range of academic articles and policy reports on these subjects.