

Improved assisted voluntary return: a self-sustainable information network for an effective return ***Melhorar o retorno voluntário assistido: uma rede de informação sustentável para um retorno eficaz***

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Abstract Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) is part of a comprehensive approach to migration management aiming at promoting the return and reintegration of migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host countries. The search for the most human, sustainable and effective approach to return drives IOM to always improve its assistance. In Portugal IOM Lisbon implements an AVR programme since 1997. Over the years, IOM expanded the geographical coverage to reach new potential beneficiaries through the project SuRRIA: "Support to Return – Information and Advice Network". Funded by the EC, it creates a decentralized network of partners all over the territory.

Keywords voluntary return, reintegration, decentralized network, self sustainability, return counselling

Resumo O programa de Retorno Voluntário Assistido (RVA) é parte de um enfoque compreensivo à gestão de migração e pretende promover o retorno e a reintegração dos imigrantes que não podem ou querem ficar no país de destino. A busca por enfoques mais humanos, sustentáveis e efectivos de retorno, levou a OIM a melhorar a sua assistência. Em Portugal, a OIM implementa o RVA desde 1997. Ao longo dos anos a OIM expandiu o seu alcance para chegar a mais beneficiários, através do projecto SuRRIA: "Apoio ao Retorno - Redes de Apoio e Aconselhamento" que é financiado pela CE e cria uma rede descentralizada de agentes em todo o território.

Palavras-chave retorno voluntário, reintegração, rede descentralizada, auto-sustentabilidade, aconselhamento de retorno

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Resumen El programa de Retorno Voluntario Asistido (RVA) es parte de un enfoque comprensivo a la gestión de la migración y pretende promover el retorno y la reintegración de los inmigrantes que no pueden o quieren quedarse en el país de destino. La búsqueda de enfoque mas humanos, sostenibles y efectivos de retorno, llevó a la OIM a mejorar su asistencia. En Portugal, la OIM implementa el RVA desde 1997. Inicialmente centralizado en Lisboa, la OIM se dio cuenta de la necesidad de expandir su alcance para llegar a los posibles beneficiarios, y en colaboración con otras instituciones, desarrolló el proyecto SuRRIA: Apoyo al Retorno – Redes de Apoyo y Asesoramiento” que es financiado por la CE, creando un red descentralizada de agentes en todo el territorio.

Palabras claves retorno voluntario, reintegración, red descentralizada, auto-sostenible, asesoramiento de retorno

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Monica Goracci e Marta Bronzin

Since 1997, the Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) Programme in Portugal, financed by the Portuguese Border and Alien Service (SEF) and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), aims at promoting the human, effective, and sustainable return and reintegration of migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin. The demand for AVR assistance among immigrants grew progressively over the years, passing from 388 in 1998 to 634 in 2008.¹ The requests for assistance soared to 730 in the first eight months of 2009 alone, mainly due to the economic downturn linked to the unfolding of the global financial crisis. Such an increase in the demand posed a number of challenges related to outreach and access to information as well as counselling and assistance services. In 2006, SEF and IOM jointly tackled these challenges through the Project SuRRIA "Support to Return – Information and Advice Network", which has been implemented throughout 2007 and the first months of 2008.

The Project SuRRIA represented the first concrete effort to offer all potential beneficiaries in Portugal an easier access to AVR information, a greater involvement of social actors at the local level, thus promoting the proximity with the beneficiaries, and an integrated and swifter assistance to return. The decentralized network created through the project to address these challenges, seeks to provide a long term self-sustainable response to information, counselling and assistance for voluntary return, by relying on existing structures, namely the National Immigrant Support Centre (CNAI) and selected Local Immigrant Support and Integration Centres (CLAII), migrant associations, and Border Police territorial departments. Since its creation the network more than doubled the number of participating entities.

The importance of return counselling

Return counselling consists of exploring jointly the possibility to return; to elaborate on the person's present situation, on his/her motivations to return, as well as on his/her expectations once back in his/her country of origin; to share information on return and obtain, if needed, enough information on the country of origin to take an informed decision; to determine which steps need to be taken to prepare the return.² In some cases where the AVR Programme foresees a reintegration component, the person will also explore how best to reintegrate back in his/her country in the short term and how best to use a reintegration grant. This assisted reflection will possibly lead the person to take the decision to return.

In some cases the person already took the decision to return. In this case, the counsellor will provide information as to how the return process will unfold and what kind of assistance the AVR candidate will receive until his/her departure.

An innovative information and counselling mechanism

The new approach brought by the SuRRIA is shaped by three main guiding principles: self-sustainability, heterogeneity, and inclusiveness.

Self-sustainability

Instead of setting up new structures, whose return activities could not be ensured after the closure of the Project, IOM and SEF opted for relying to a great extent on already existing means, thus making the SuRRIA return management mechanism self-sustainable in the long term.

Heterogeneity

The project sought to promote heterogeneity by appointing as advice and counselling units a range of diversified entities. Hence, the network becomes a useful tool to foster closer contacts and exchange of views among entities which, by nature and mandate, approach the issue of voluntary return under different perspectives. SEF, as authority responsible for the project, plays an important part in the network. In fact, most of the advice and counselling units are border police's appointees within the respective SEF's territorial departments. The remaining points of assistance are mostly run by CLALLs, which work in close contact with the immigrant population and, therefore, provide advice and counselling on voluntary return as part of their daily functions of social support. Assistance to return is also provided by migrants' associations, voluntary welfare organizations, charity shelters, and local institutions. Innovation also passed through the assignment of counselling functions to SEF delegations.

Inclusiveness

Although formally composed by the pre-defined points of assistance, the network is conceived as a flexible, inclusive and enlarging structure, whose ultimate goal is to multiply the points of assistance and increase their functions over time.

The purpose of the information and advice network

The main rationale is providing migrants wishing to return home with an increased access to information and an enhanced and swifter return counselling and assistance. To this end the network has three main objectives: a) Improving local access to information on the option of voluntary return and the functioning of the AVR to the benefit of migrants' communities and entities working with the targeted population; b) Offering the potential beneficiaries with a better support throughout the process and a swifter procedure, thanks to an enhanced proximity with the points of assistance; c) Promoting an integrated approach to voluntary return, which enhances the pre-departure counselling on reintegration constraints and prospects.

Having a decentralized and extensive network on the territory allows using targeted communication channels to reach out to potential beneficiaries, thus avoiding the risk of passing a generalizing and misleading message to the migrant community as a whole. Indeed, the ultimate objective of AVR is not to promote the return of irregular migrants altogether, but rather to provide timely and practical information and assistance to those whose migratory project did not meet the expectations and choose to voluntarily return home.

Each point of assistance of the network acts as:

Multiplier of information at the local level. Thanks to the knowledge of the local reality, each point of assistance will be able to better reach out to the public and local entities in its respective area and consequently contribute to enlarging the existing referral network of contacts. Consequently, the role of the referral entities is to refer any person willing to return to the nearest point of assistance of the network, which will process the request.

Advisers/counsellors: migrants in distress, due to their precarious and vulnerable situation in the host country, can contact one of points of the network to seek assistance to return home. The adviser informs him/her on the possibility to receive assistance to return and the procedure to follow. In most cases, these persons have already taken the decision to return but lack practical information on the AVR Programme. In these cases, the assistance focuses on the concrete preparation of return on the one hand, and on future prospects for reintegration in the home country, on the other hand. Access to timely, objective, and up to date return-related information on the country of origin in the pre-departure phase is crucial to allow the returnee to make an informed decision on his/her return and properly assess his/her reintegration options. The aim is therefore not to promote the candidate's return, but rather to contribute toward the sustainability of his/her return once the decision is taken. The counsellors will conduct a structured interview with the aim of collecting more information on the returnee's situation in both the host and return country. This process helps detecting any specific vulnerability, which may require a faster return and helps the returnee and the adviser to jointly work on the post-arrival reintegration phase.

Conclusions: building on the results for continuous improvement of return assistance

As highlighted by the European Commission and the Council, the provision of adequate return and reintegration information and support are preconditions for an effective pre-departure assistance and, ultimately, for a sustainable return. Bearing this in mind, SEF and IOM sought to promote an integrated approach to Assisted Voluntary Return, including country of origin information services and an enhanced reintegration financial support and assistance, marking a turning point in the assisted voluntary return management in Portugal. This allowed for a more complete and structured counselling performed by the network. The results achieved and the lessons learnt during the SuRRIA project served as a basis to define the way forward to build on what

was done so far, explore the full potential of the network, and address its weaknesses. A set of recommendations related to the enlargement and improvement of the network include: a) wider information activities, b) enhanced role of counsellors of the network as multipliers of information at the local level, and c) more participative approach in involving entities into the network. The second set of recommendations focused on the improvement of communication strategies and in particular on the diversification and targeting of dissemination strategies, and mapping of main information channels of migrant communities to enhance outreach activities.

The current Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme, financed by the National EU Return Fund 2008 and the Portuguese Government, builds on the results of the SuRRIA. The Programme can now rely on a network that counts twice the number of entities, passing from 15 to more than 30 points of assistance countrywide. Sensitization sessions with local entities as well as open information sessions with migrant communities are foreseen at the local level to help multiply information on the territory and the mapping of the main migrant communities' information channels complements standard dissemination activities to ensure an effective and targeted outreach of potential beneficiaries.