

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008: a process and impact assessment

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This report presents findings from research assessing the process and impact of the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) during the 2008 funding year (August 2008 to May 2009). The research was commissioned by Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management (ARK) to fulfil the European Commission's funding requirements.

Context

VARRP offers asylum seekers the opportunity to return voluntarily to their country of return and provides an alternative to enforced removal. It is part funded by the UK's allocation from the European Commission's (EC's) Return Fund and is delivered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on behalf of the UK Border Agency.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with nine IOM officers in the UK (face-to-face) and Pakistan (by telephone) and telephone interviews were conducted with 32 adults who had applied for VARRP between August 2008 and May 2009 and returned to Pakistan. Pakistan was chosen as the case study country because of high numbers of returns, including families, resettlement in rural and urban areas and the feasibility of conducting telephone interviews.

Findings

The research presents findings on the impact of VARRP on motivations to return and actual return behaviour. It then discusses the process and efficiency issues around applications and returns before considering evidence on the effectiveness of the reintegration assistance in promoting sustainable returns.

The decision to return and take up VARRP

The research revealed that VARRP by itself rarely provides the initial incentive for individuals to make the decision to return to their country of origin. However, once their asylum claim has been rejected and it becomes clear that they will not be able to stay legally, VARRP enables people to leave the UK sooner, with more dignity and with better prospects than through removal (while also costing less for the UK Border Agency).

The main impetus for applying to VARRP was a failed asylum application and associated potential removal from the UK. VARRP returnees saw no option for them to stay in the UK and perceived voluntary departure as preferable to enforced removal (although not all respondents had fully exhausted their options to remain legally in the UK).

Once individuals had made the decision to return, VARRP facilitated and expedited their actual return:

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Keywords

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- ten out of 25 returnees said they would not have returned to Pakistan without VARRP assistance, and all but one of the other 15 were referring to return via removal rather than through independent means; and,
- approximately half the returnees interviewed (13 of the 27 who answered the question) said they would have applied to VARRP sooner had they known about the programme.

Process and efficiency of application and return process

IOM UK marketing of VARRP is varied and tailored to different ethnic and population groups. The UK Border Agency also promotes VARRP through asylum caseworkers and information placed in UK Border Agency premises. Many returnees interviewed (18 of 32) had learnt about VARRP through officials or while on UK Border Agency premises (mostly Immigration Removal Centres) suggesting that the efforts to publicise VARRP within the asylum system are having a positive effect. Of those who had not been in detention, nine of eighteen had heard about VARRP through community channels suggesting the outreach activities led by IOM are also having an impact.

IOM officers in the UK and in Pakistan reported that the excellent working relationships between key partners (IOM London, IOM overseas Missions and the UK Border Agency) were essential to the smooth running of the programme. Other key factors found to facilitate the VARRP application process were:

- flexibility in the way applications can be made to the programme;
- requirement on the applicant to provide only essential information and documentation;
- the approach and assistance of IOM UK staff;
- fast approval decisions by the UK Border Agency on VARRP applications; and
- language skills of IOM caseworkers.

IOM officers and returnees suggested factors negatively affecting rates of application and withdrawal from VARRP included: the 'General Grounds for Refusal' rule introduced in April 2008 prohibiting people from returning to the UK within five years of leaving through VARRP; distrust of IOM; and applicants not planning to leave but using a VARRP application to access Section 4 support for a limited period of time.

One potential area for improvement is in the use of the Individual Return Plans (IRP). These were introduced in

October 2007 and are meant to be developed during the application stage, holistically setting out applicants' reintegration needs. However, little evidence emerged that IRPs were being fully developed while applicants were in the UK, possibly delaying the delivery of reintegration assistance and increasing the risk of returnees experiencing hardship. Possible reasons emerged as:

- applicants being focused on their actual return rather than reintegration;
- IOM officers in the UK and in Pakistan feeling that IRPs (particularly the business set-up component) are best completed once applicants have returned; and,
- limited capacity of the reintegration team in the UK.

In addition, the Pakistan Mission does not proactively engage with returnees on arrival in Pakistan as happens in some other overseas Missions. This can also delay returnees accessing support and may contribute to some returnees spending their relocation grant on items which could have been covered by other elements of reintegration package.

Delivery of reintegration assistance and sustainable return

Respondents were very positive about the delivery and content of their reintegration assistance and emphasised the help and advice provided by IOM officers. Few had any other resources or financial support in Pakistan and the businesses set up with reintegration assistance were their main source of income. Some indicated that without VARRP assistance they would have been destitute. However, the adequacy of the business grant for generating a living wage was questioned, as was the duration of housing assistance .

Most returnees reported having experienced violence, harassment and threats on return to Pakistan. There was no evidence that this was due to having left Pakistan for the UK and returned through VARRP. Financial hardship was also relatively common. Despite these difficulties, only two respondents out of 32 were considering leaving Pakistan.

The sustainability of respondents' return was uncertain due to the political and economic climate in Pakistan. The opportunity to establish a business had given respondents a foundation on which to build a future in Pakistan and IOM officers and respondents were in agreement that this was the most useful form of assistance to facilitate a sustainable return.