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## Defining, Measuring and Influencing Sustainable Return

### Summary of Key Issues

*Return migration after an end to conflict or persecution, as the conclusion to a successful economic migration, or as a factor in managed migration (including forcible returns), is often the goal of governments. Under certain circumstances, return is also the goal or ambition of some migrants. Few could argue that it is desirable for such return to be sustainable. Yet, the notion of a 'sustainable return' is contested, and could be conceptualised in a number of different ways.*

*This briefing reviews competing definitions of sustainable return and explores how the sustainability of return might be measured. It is argued that instead of focusing on individual returns, it is important to place return in a wider context. This includes the context of many different people being affected; the context of wider patterns of mobility before and after the 'act' of return; and the context of wider political, socio-economic and cultural change. Looking at these contexts provides a framework for measurement of sustainability as well as pointers towards beneficial policy interventions.*

### Return Migration in Public Policy

There are a number of different starting points for the return agenda in public policy.

- Return is often seen as the preferred durable solution for refugees, particularly those in regions of origin. Indeed, the return of refugees and internally displaced people has come to be an integral part of many post-conflict reconstruction efforts, from Bosnia to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Return is also seen as potentially beneficial for development, especially where it might help reverse the 'brain drain' and promote the transfer and investment of migrant capital in countries of origin.
- Return can be seen as a response to the 'immigration crisis' where it plays a part in governments' attempts to 'manage' immigration numbers by promoting return. There is particular public interest in the return of failed asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Yet this can result in a conflation of forced and voluntary return where it is difficult to disentangle what rights migrants have in the return process.

The actual return of refugees and other migrants may not always live up to the expectations of policy makers. This is particularly true if the motivation for promoting return is rooted in exclusionary policies in host countries, rather than a realistic analysis of the consequences of return for countries of origin. As a result, return has become a highly politically charged process in a number of contexts, both for

returnees themselves and also for those who did not migrate or flee, leading to questions about whether return 'home' can ever be unproblematic. For example, doubts remain about the voluntariness of return, the capacity of individual returnees to re-integrate in and contribute to their home countries and regions, and the wider sustainability of the return process.



Return is not always the best option for migrants or their families

### The Problems of Return

Many of the problems of return concern the capacity of individuals or families to reintegrate into the country of origin. Problems that are frequently identified include:

- Inability to return to the original house, job or neighbourhood (especially for refugees).
- Lower salaries or poorer economic opportunities than were available abroad.
- Difficult relationships between returnees and non-migrants.
- Frustration with the business climate, banking systems etc.
- Concern about corruption or 'different way of doing things' in home countries.
- Inadequate savings to invest in both consumption and production, leading to a perception that migrant earnings are 'lost' to development.
- Excessive demands on resources by the family and friends of migrants.
- Nostalgia for the country of destination.

**"When you get here people point at you with a finger, meaning here is the newcomer who has new ideas, who wants to change everything"**  
(Ivorian returned from Germany)

These problems, however, do not preclude return being successful, depending on how that success is measured. Return is increasingly expected to be measured in terms of its 'sustainability'. Yet this in turn can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

## Definitions of Sustainable Return

### • Staying Put

One way of defining sustainable return is to see it as involving the absence of re-migration. Such a definition might be attractive to home or interior ministries who are concerned with the successful removal of unwanted immigrants. Yet few countries, if any, have zero migration, suggesting that even this definition needs to allow for some amount of re-migration.

### • Achieving Certain Living Conditions

An alternative approach to sustainable return would take into account socio-economic conditions faced by returnees such as the availability of employment or access to housing and basic services, or indeed fear of violence or persecution for refugees. Each of these is likely to underpin any decision to re-migrate. However, a key question is how a

**A young Albanian was deported to Pristina from the UK in 2003; his parents collected him and took him back to Keneta in Durres. He borrowed money (£4,000) and set off into Greece via the hills of Devoll. In a month he had paid 900 euros for a false passport and French visa. A truck he travelled in was stopped on the way, and he was arrested and sent to Sangatte. Within two months he was flown to Albania. He now lives in Keneta with no work and no prospects. He is taking driving lessons to find work as he did in the UK. He doesn't want to stay but does not see any choice.**

(Source: Diana Hiscock, ICMC Albania)

'sustainable' set of living conditions can be defined. This might mean returnees are able to survive back home without external inputs, as many returnees may remain dependent on aid or remittances from migrants or refugees who remain abroad. Alternatively, the 'sustainability' of any set of living conditions could be measured against returnees' pre-departure experiences, their experiences abroad, or the conditions of those who never migrated. Clearly, who returnees are compared with may influence the extent to which their return is considered sustainable.

### • Accessing Rights

This approach is taken by UNMIK in Kosovo and its definition of a sustainable return encompasses a number of rights: to public and social services, to property and to freedom of movement. A focus on rights suggests absolute, rather than relative standards of sustainability, although this still raises the question of what level of rights might be considered necessary to promote sustainable return.

### • Aggregate Sustainability

All of the above approaches focus on the sustainability of return for individuals or families. However, another way to look at sustainable return is to focus on the consequences of return for the wider society. Return, especially on a large scale, to very poor areas, could contribute to the further impoverishment of the population already living there. In addition, relations between 'stayees' and returnees are not always harmonious. To assess whether return to particular regions is sustainable in aggregate terms, it might be possible to use a 'sustainable livelihoods' framework in which livelihoods are considered 'sustainable' if they can be maintained without external inputs and are sufficiently robust to withstand external shocks. Extending this framework to return migration, we could ask if return increases or decreases reliance on external inputs, and whether it makes economic, social and political systems more or less vulnerable to shocks.

No one definition of sustainable return is ever likely to be satisfactory in encompassing all these aspects. However, one definition of aggregate sustainability that emerges from research at the University of Sussex is that:

***Return migration is sustainable if socio-economic conditions and/or levels of violence and persecution are not significantly worsened by return as measured one year after the return process is complete.***

## How can Sustainable Return be Measured?

Measuring sustainability in terms of whether people 'stay put' may be conceptually problematic, but it at least has the benefit of simplicity. It could be achieved by tracking a sample of returnees over time to measure levels of re-migration, onward displacement or desire to leave (if returnees remain at home only as they are forced to do so against their will, this can hardly be sustainable). Looking at a range of individual factors that might influence re-migration could also in principle be monitored by following up individual returnees and families. However there are limitations to such an approach, due to the cost of following mobile populations. There would also be differing effects of a range of benchmarks that could be chosen, such as how to judge residual levels of out-migration, or how to measure economic, social and physical standards against pre-migration levels, those in countries of destination or conditions of non-migrants. In practice, attempts to do this have had limited success and benchmark surveys exist in few countries.



Return is often more about reconnecting with family and friends than economic conditions

Assessing the aggregate effects of return on a community within a livelihoods framework also raises a number of issues of definition, including whether remittances could be counted as an 'external input'. One way to proceed might be to measure conditions for individuals and/or populations as a whole, both at the time of return and one year later. However, whilst both individual and aggregate conditions could be measured, linking these to the effect of return itself is much more problematic.

## What Influences Sustainable Return?

In analysing these different approaches to defining sustainable return, it is clearly sensible to look at return not as something that is a one-off, one-time event but as something that happens in context:

- The context of the family including demographic, educational and cultural characteristics of returnees.
- The context of wider patterns of mobility before and after 'return' including levels of out-migration in the country of origin, the nature of a migration 'project' and the nature of return, particularly whether it is voluntary or forced.
- The context of wider socio-economic, political and cultural change. In particular the context of the host country in terms of conditions of employment and legal status and the home country context in terms of recognition of qualifications, labour market, financial infrastructure and governance.

Measuring aspects of these contexts for return might be just as useful for beneficial policy outcomes as measuring the experience of return itself.

## Implications for Policy

In analysing the sustainability of return it is important to distinguish factors that cannot be affected by policy, including innate characteristics of the migrants such as age or gender, and those where policy can play a part, such as education, skills and work both before and during migration, and the context of return including the role of return assistance. Research shows that there are two main factors that are most likely to influence the sustainability of return.

- The **voluntariness** of return plays a major part in so far as those who have returned against their will are more likely to want to re-migrate and, as poor migrants, are less likely to move out of poverty than those who returned voluntarily.
- The return **environment** in the country of origin is also key. Put simply, return is more likely to be sustainable in countries where there are opportunities for socio-economic advancement and political freedom. States of origin need to promote such conditions, in order to capitalise on return's development potential. It is also important to recognise that movement does not necessarily end with return, and that migrants and countries of origin may benefit from returnees maintaining access to overseas financial markets, from continued opportunities to develop skills acquired abroad and from interaction with professional, or other, contacts.



## New Research

The issues raised in this Briefing draw on Sussex-based studies funded by the UK Home Office and DFID as well as a series of workshops held on the sustainability of return in Albania, Bangladesh and Brazil during 2004-5.

The next step would be to monitor a return programme in terms of its sustainability. Yet this is not as easy as it sounds. Many assisted voluntary return programmes are too small to monitor impacts on aggregate conditions in countries of return, whilst the bulk of return often takes place outside the context of official assistance. Nonetheless, there is scope for measuring the sustainability of return and reintegration, just as the British government is exploring options for longitudinal research on immigration to the UK. Such a study could provide valuable evidence to inform the development of return schemes, whether post-conflict or otherwise, in the future.

## Further Reading

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## Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

The Migration DRC aims to promote new policy approaches that will help to maximize the potential benefits of migration for poor people, whilst minimising its risks and costs. It is undertaking a programme of research, capacity-building, training and promotion of dialogue to provide the strong evidential and conceptual base needed for such new policy approaches. This knowledge base will also be shared with poor migrants, contributing both directly and indirectly to the elimination of poverty.