

**BACK TO AFGHANISTAN:
EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES
BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND
REINTEGRATION**

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WHY WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT RETURN AND 'REINTEGRATION'

Why is return so unattractive?

Which factors affect the post-return experience?

How can return programmes become more beneficial for both people and policy?

Increased focus on return and sustainable reintegration are the preferred durable solution for refugees and rejected asylum seekers since the 1990s.

However:

- Repatriation programmes do not meet the needs of returnees
 - Assistance even negatively correlates with reintegration (Ruben, van Houte and Davids 2009, Fransen and Bilgili 2018, Flahaux 2017).
- Return policies are ineffective and inefficient
 - Less than 3 per cent of the global refugee population returns (UNHCR 2015).
 - The majority of rejected asylum seekers in Europe do *not* return (Van Houte and Leerkes 2019).

OUTLINE

See:

Van Houte, M. 2016. Return Migration to Afghanistan: Moving Back or Moving Forward? London: Palgrave MacMillan.

- Reintegration: a problematic concept
 - And a solution!
- Return experiences: an Afghan case study
- Concluding: mobility as an innovative solution for return and 'reintegration'?

Policy Frame	Policy Rationale of return	Sustainable reintegration =	Empirical Reality
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A PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT – AND A SOLUTION

REINTEGRATION

- Confusing: Multiple (contrasting) meanings emerging from competing policy frames
- Sedentary bias: meant to put migrants 'back in their place' (Bakewell 2008).
- Normative: 'restoring order'
- Does not do justice to the ambiguity and variety in the experience of return.

BELONGING

- Analytical: A lens to look at strategies of people to feel 'at home', by analysing a person's identification with and participation in society, beyond the ideas of "reintegration" or "going home."
- Multi-local: belonging can be to multiple places or communities at the same time
 - Not exclusively about migrants:
- Non-normative; dynamic and non-linear result of the interaction between individuals and their social environment

STRATEGIES OF BELONGING AFTER RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN

3 main options:

- Making differences disappear
 - Identify and comply with the existing structures, claiming belonging to “Afghan” practices and values
- Seeking continuation of a “European” lifestyle
 - “Expat” life
- Creating a hybrid between “European” and “Afghan”
 - Transnational or in-between?

FACTORS AFFECTING POST- RETURN BELONGING

(in order of appearance)

- Winning or Losing
 - Socio-economic background & networks
 - Timing of migration
 - Legal status

WINNING OR LOSING

During my internship, September 11 happened. Then I was in demand. I was able to help a lot then. In 2002 I went to Afghanistan. Just to see how it was, just looking, for two weeks, and to see the family. I accidentally ran into someone of an American organization. Media. I helped them with some interviews. They are an organization that brought the Afghan media back on their feet. I accidentally got in contact with them and we had a conversation. I worked first two weeks and after that two months for them.

- Nadir (m, interview, original in Dutch)

(A) All the Afghanistan people, they just split up and they went to different places. I went to the UK and ... Afghanistan just broke out like a tree. ... One branch falls down, the other branch goes another way, one branch just burns and the other branch just gets dry and then at the end the actual tree has nothing. It's only a dry tree. This is what happened to me and at this time.

—Omar (m), interview, original in Dari, via translator)

FACTORS AFFECTING POST- RETURN BELONGING

(in order of appearance)

- Winning or Losing
 - Socio-economic background & networks
 - Timing of migration
 - Legal status
- 'Light' or 'heavy' return
 - Agency in return decision

LIGHT AND HEAVY RETURN

After I finished my studies and all this time I worked, and I was quite bored about everything. And didn't know why ... I'm not happy because I had everything. ... And then what was still something missing and I was looking for it what can it be, should I change my job, should I change my style, should I change my life, and what's the problem. ... And then I found out, maybe it's a good thing to go back to my roots and start again as a human being ... can you live in Afghanistan, it is something for you, do you still identify yourself as an Afghan?

—Eshan (m, interview, original in English)

How long do you want to stay in the Netherlands? You will never get a permanent status. Here, every time I call here, my mother says you have to go back, my father says come back. And I heard my father died. Only then I say OK, I go back to Afghanistan.

—Areef (m, interview, original in Dutch)

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- Present and expected security

PRESENT AND EXPECTED SECURITY

After two years it starts to be unsafe for me here. ... people know that when they put a gun against my head, that daddy will pay a hundred thousand. And he will.

—Amir (m), interview, original in Dutch)

I'm not really worried about getting killed or dying or whatever, one day you're born and the other day you just die. I'm not really worried about that. But the only thing I'm worried about is my kids. And my wife. So. If I get killed what will happen to them.

—Ajmal (m), interview, original in Dari, via translator)

CONNECTING THE DOTS: MOBILITY

- Strong empirical difference between the post-return experiences of returnees who have the capacity to be transnationally mobile and the experiences of those who do not.
- Mobility continues to be an essential desire in the lives of return migrants.
- In the context of Afghanistan, a main indicator for post-return mobility is legal status in the 'host' country.

A SENSE OF (IM)MOBILITY

These people have the advantage that they can always leave again. So therefore they can easily come back. That is a great advantage. ... Because I like to come and work here, not because it's that safe here, but because you can mean a lot. And that gives a lot of satisfaction for your work. And when it goes bad then I'm out again.

—Salim (m), interview, original in Dutch)

(T)he thing is that in Afghanistan once you're in a circle, if the circle gets tighter and tighter you have to live with it. And you have to deal with it. ... You cannot just get yourself out of the circle.

—Omar (m), interview, original in Dari, via translator)

CONCLUSION & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Why is return so unattractive?

- In essence, deportable and deported migrants are less worried about being back in their country of origin as they are about not being able to leave anymore.

Which factors affect the post-return experience?

- Only if return occurs under the condition of continued transnational mobility can we prevent that return inflicts harm on fragile places & people

How can return programmes become more beneficial for both people and policy?

- Innovative solutions for the lack of return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers and former refugees: offer more flexible rights to post-return transnational mobility.

THANK YOU!

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