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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Post-return, reintegration assistance and sustainable reintegration: coordination between actors and engagement of partner countries

In its communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Commission announced that it would adopt a Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration (hereafter referred to as “the Strategy”) as a tool for an effective and common EU system for returns and a framework for activities fostering sustainable reintegration. The [Strategy](#) was indeed published in April 2021. The Pact and the Strategy highlight the need to move forward on a structured and sustainable approach as regards activities focusing on the sustainability of reintegration support and ownership of partner countries.

The Strategy includes the commitment to enhance the EU’s development actions’ contribution to sustainable reintegration, which in turn should support and be linked to broader development strategies in partner countries to generate development benefits.

A number of challenges however persist, including but not limited to, different interpretations and understandings of what sustainability and ownership as presented in the Strategy means, overlap of activities as well as gaps, and challenges to coordinate from a strategic point of view and jointly support the building of resilient structures and services.

There is no common definition or joint understanding across EU migration and development actors of sustainable reintegration in the different stages that are part of the return and sustainable reintegration process. This Presidency note views **post-return assistance** as immediate assistance after arrival in partner countries (e.g. the activities of Frontex-led EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)¹ within 15 days after return), **reintegration assistance** as assistance in the first years after return (including Frontex assistance in the first 12 months, but also individual assistance by development actors from medium- to long-term), and **sustainable reintegration** as systemic support to strategies/ processes, governance systems and approaches.

In addition to a discussion on return and reintegration assistance at the Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) meeting held on 23 April 2024, the Presidency has decided to pursue the debate on sustainable reintegration at the joint EMWP-CODEV meeting on 17 May 2024. Both discussions aim to provide guidelines for further strategy development, consolidation of existing approaches, continued development of promising practices and research work to be carried out in the coming years with regards to the European return system and the EU support to sustainable reintegration.

This Presidency note² will focus this discussion on the following issues to be further looked at so as to consolidate the EU activities fostering sustainable reintegration.

¹ On 1/4/2024 Frontex has changed the name of the reintegration program Joint Reintegration Services (JRS) to EU Reintegration Programme (EURP).

² This Presidency note draws on discussions held in several fora. Three years after the publication of the Strategy, the Belgian Presidency organised a conference on 19 and 20 March 2024 on return and reintegration, together with Frontex, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe). It provided an opportunity to take stock of the current state of play and to explore return and reintegration policies and practices, as well as to evaluate the ongoing dynamic of EU-level programming and both its interaction and influence on national programming. It also reflects the discussions and exchanges the Presidency had with the European Centre for Development Policy (ECDPM) on how to build sustainable systems in support of reintegration in preparation of a background paper to be published later.

Roles, responsibilities, division of labour

- At EU-level, a wide range of actors are involved in the design and implementation of policies and programmes on post-return, reintegration assistance and sustainable reintegration, ranging from national and EU authorities and agencies to civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organizations. While development actors funded through the NDICI have broadly focused on south-south return and reintegration and building systems, some have become increasingly active in supporting individual migrants returning from EU Member States. Migration actors have mainly been engaged in individual post return and reintegration assistance from the EU, but have also supported emerging systems in partner countries (e.g. by involving or supporting national and/or local governments in partner countries in developing reintegration assistance). Yet, overall, the myriad of activities has in some instances contributed to fragmented systems, duplication of work, gaps in approaches to build capacity in receiving communities, lack of oversight of origin country authorities and overall too little coordinated impact for sustainable reintegration.
- In partner countries the situation at the EU level is often mirrored, with a variety of actors responding to the fragmented state of play in the EU.
- Currently there is some degree of overlap amongst actors, most strongly regarding the provision of reintegration assistance at individual level through different systems - some more short-term/ some more long-term - while not optimally working together in referral chains.
- As discussions during the recent Presidency conference on return and reintegration and the background research have shown, a clearer understanding of a strategic division of labour and a delineation of the roles and responsibilities of EU, EU Member States and international migration and development actors is needed. In order to move towards a common EU approach, it is important that the EU and EU Member States further develop a longer-term vision of how post-return/reintegration assistance and support for sustainable reintegration can be aligned with and support national and local systems, policies and strategies in order to ensure the local ownership needed for sustainable reintegration in partner countries.

- A clearer strategic division of labour also includes clarity on funding streams and how the roles of various actors could be strategically supported by EU budgets, instruments and funding streams, including a Team Europe approach. Whereas AMIF has largely focused on post-return and reintegration assistance of returnees from the EU, NDICI funding aims to cover both reintegration assistance for South-South returnees, and support for reintegration systems and governance.

Linking up, coordinating and creating a joint vision among EU actors

- In terms of coordination, attempts have been made at the operational level³ to connect and build links between actors active along the spectrum of post-return assistance, reintegration assistance and longer-term systemic support to sustainable reintegration. Yet, gaps persist and there are few practical examples of cooperation between EU and international migration and development actors. At the strategic level, more efforts can be put into defining roles and to better connect the activities of the various actors.
- EU interventions on post-return assistance, medium-to long-term reintegration assistance and systemic support can be better connected. A joint vision of EU actors that helps to establish connections between the migration and development ecosystems (both at the level of the EU, with international actors but also in partner countries) is missing. EU actors have advocated for improved coordination among development and migration management agencies with a view to strengthen the capacity and accessibility of existing services⁴.
- Many initiatives are yet to materialize into concrete referrals, to be scaled up or to lead to coherent approaches to build local and national systems in partner countries. Difficulties are linked to the separate ecosystems of the return and development fields, each with its own funding streams and objectives. Aligning their projects in terms of beneficiary and project definitions, eligibility criteria and timelines has proved to be challenging. Some stakeholders have expressed concerns about potential overlap of activities in partner countries.

³ The ERRIN/RRF Technical Working group on Reintegration and Development has aimed to connect the two ecosystems resulting in an operational framework.

⁴ This could take place within the context of existing frameworks and practices such as the Technical Working Group R&D of the RFF (although with a stronger involvement of EU development agencies) or the MPI Community of Practice.

- From the perspective of partner countries, returns from Europe are often not the most significant in terms of numbers, and long-term, systemic approaches to reintegration are essential to deal with the phenomenon, including spontaneous and non-assisted returns. Background research interviewees and conference participants have highlighted that, in order to be effective, EU efforts need to be based on long-term strategies, which are well-coordinated and aligned with partner countries' sustainable reintegration and development frameworks. For EU funded activities to be sustainable and to support reintegration in the long-term, they will need to be embedded over time in partner countries' institutions and systems and be part of development approaches.

Approaches to sustainable reintegration and engagement/ownership by the partner countries

- While the reintegration of a returnee is an individual process supported by systems, supporting partner countries to assume responsibility for the reintegration process is part of wider development processes. While national and local contexts and the strengths of reintegration systems differ in each partner country, existing local practices and policies must be the entry points for EU efforts that aim to support long-term sustainable reintegration. This concerns both national and local referral systems, as well as the opportunities that exist and the attractiveness of local areas and communities to which returnees return.
- In line with the Strategy, the EU and several Member States now aim for more comprehensive partnerships with partner countries, in order to align reintegration initiatives with overall development strategies and to increase the ownership by partner countries. There are, however, different expectations and understandings of what ownership entails. While in some cases migration actors find it less desirable for country systems to take responsibility over the administration of reintegration assistance (e.g. in countries where government actors are considered parties to conflict or persecution), in other cases there appears to be a lack of official partners (e.g. where state capacity is weak or focused on other priorities) or competition between official partners. However, from a long-term development perspective, it is an important principle to build on and support existing country systems.

- An essential point for the EU actors is to align interventions with existing systems, policies and (development) strategies in partner countries and to support capacity building, as well as to co-create and co-implement activities for longer-term results. One way to achieve this is to promote multi-stakeholder strategies involving national and local authorities, EU Member States and EU agencies, international organisations and CSOs, and to enhance the efficiency and sustainability of return assistance and sustainable reintegration efforts. Another way is for EU migration and development actors to work together to link project cycles to existing emerging local systems in partner countries to ensure relevance and effectiveness for the benefit of both the individual returnees as well as local and national structures and communities over time.
- The emphasis on enhancing ownership in partner countries however also requires more nuance and understanding of the existing systems and priorities that are in place for managing both spontaneous and South-South returns as well as for EU Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) processes. Ownership also comes with the involvement of civil society and community organizations, which are often an essential part of the system in delivering services locally, sometimes alongside or at times instead of national authorities. Development actors' contributions to sustainable reintegration need to include support for local governance to be inclusive of returning migrants – an aspect that some EU development actors are addressing.
- While some efforts have gone into monitoring the impact of individual post-return and reintegration assistance (e.g. through the Evaluation Monitoring Framework (EMF) developed by Frontex EURP⁵, the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) and IOM's Reintegration Sustainability Survey (RSS)), there is less knowledge about the approaches that have led to success in working with national and local state authorities in partner countries to support their systems and embed EU interventions in overall development planning. It would be useful to better monitor such approaches so as to build evidence of what works over time for building durable systems to support reintegration in the context of overall development. A monitoring framework for development-oriented activities would need to include indicators that focus on approaches towards reintegration, adaptation of services as well as systems.

⁵ Formerly known as Frontex JRS.

The Presidency would like to invite delegations to reflect and share their views on the following questions:

1. How do Member States and the EU see the **division of labour** regarding post-return assistance, reintegration assistance and development efforts towards sustainable reintegration, and the potential need for a better delineation of **roles and responsibilities**?
2. In order to optimise the impact of the programmes and ensure coherence in the EU messages, how could migration and development actors working on **return assistance and sustainable reintegration be better incentivized to develop a common vision** at partner country level?
3. What strategies can be developed – and which good approaches can be shared – to actively **engage partner countries** throughout the ‘project cycle’ to ensure initiatives are in alignment with national development strategies and effectively contribute to the well-being of returnees and local communities?
4. What experiences do the EU and MS have – through their development cooperation or other funding – in **supporting national and local authorities** to build or strengthen social services and systems that include sustainable reintegration approaches?
