

# Sustainable reintegration: identikit of a popular policy objective

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## Introduction

For their reintegration to be sustainable, migrants returning to their countries of origin should be economically and psychosocially secure (IOM 2017). The policy objective of sustainable reintegration was introduced in the UN Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) – a first collection of global migration governance’s legal and policy approaches (UN 2018a). While the Global Compact was firmly resisted by populist governments including the Hungarian and the American (UN 2018b), the policy objective of sustainable reintegration is supported by the latter alongside the rest of the international community (IOM 2018). **The across-the-board consensus surrounding sustainable reintegration conflicts with existing discord on the global governance of migration.** This conundrum deserves closer scrutiny. In the following, we first detail what sustainable reintegration is. We then position it within the framework of global migration governance. Finally, we provide two reasons for the apparent consensus surrounding this policy objective: the indeterminacy of sustainable reintegration and the poor monitoring of its effects.

## What is sustainable reintegration?

Assistance may be offered to migrants living abroad who are willing or agree to return to their countries of origin. International organisations like UNHCR

Among the objectives composing the 2018 UN Global Compact for Migration, Objective 21 deals with the return of migrants to their countries of origin. This objective includes a reference to sustainable reintegration occurring when returnees have access to psycho-social assistance, justice and occupational prospects. The policy objective of sustainable reintegration apparently enjoys broad support in the face of some countries increasingly opposing the global governance of migration. Such support can be explained by making reference to sustainable reintegration’s potential to accommodate diverse interests and the limited monitoring of the programmes it underpins.

and IOM offer it in order to facilitate the sustainable reintegration of returnees, primarily meaning their socio-economic readjustment (Lietaert and Van Gorp 2019, 4). UNHCR applied sustainable reintegration to refugees’ return to post-conflict scenarios and related it to peace-building, reconstruction and reconciliation (UNHCR 1997). IOM associated the sustainable reintegration of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants with the prevention of re-emigration instead (IOM 2001). IOM (2015) now understands sustainable return as the economic, social and psychosocial reintegration of returnees allowing the latter to resist re-emigration drivers “on the same level as the local population” (19). The

UN Global Compact for Migration – a non-binding framework of international cooperation on migration management – finally incorporated sustainable reintegration without providing a definition of the concept. The Global Compact requests that nation states facilitate it by granting returnees equal access to judicial and social services as well as vocational training and employment opportunities in their countries of origin (GCM 2018, 30). Under accusations of undermining national sovereignty, the Global Compact was sternly opposed by countries including Austria, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and the United States (UN 2018b). All such countries nevertheless promote reintegration assistance programmes for returnees<sup>1</sup>, showing a unique support for the policy objective of sustainable reintegration which collides with increasing criticism towards global migration governance as such.

### **Sustainable reintegration and global migration governance**

By adding it to the comprehensive Global Compact, global migration governance encapsulated the policy objective of sustainable reintegration. Global migration governance equals the norms and structures regulating migration at the international level (Betts & Kainz 2017). Global migration governance rests on the assumption that international cooperation is considered more effective than national solutions (Pécoud 2015). Still, countries of (mainly) immigration and countries of (mainly) emigration do not necessarily share interests and priorities (Betts & Kainz 2017). Generally, the Global North aims to crack down on irregular migration while the Global South seeks to safeguard the flow of remittances granted by the diaspora (Newland and Salant 2018). Yet, these two perspectives were reconciled around

the nexus between migration and development (Betts & Kainz 2017). This core feature of global migration governance is positioned by Oelgemöller (2017) within the neoliberal consensus, which is a hegemonic discourse rooted in the primacy of economics and technique. The “technocratic and managerial fashion” (Pécoud 2015, 93) permeating global migration governance conceals “asymmetries of power and of conflicts (both between and within countries)” (Geiger & Pécoud 2010, 11). Such depoliticisation explains the prevalence of consent over contention in the attitude of international actors towards the global governance of migration. This consent is however dwindling, as the political backlash against the Global Compact - leading for instance to the collapse of the Belgian ruling coalition (DW 2018) - indicates. The policy objective of sustainable reintegration faces the opposite fate - not least because of the EU throwing its financial and political weight behind it (European Commission 2018) - owing to its peculiar potential to satisfy the interests of various actors.

### **Different interests, one policy objective**

The various actors involved in return migration match their peculiar interests with the policy objective of sustainable reintegration. The governments of countries of destination seek to reduce irregular immigrants to show their constituencies they manage migration well (Newland and Salant 2018). They thus recur to reintegration assistance to motivate and stimulate migrants to leave their territories. The interests of countries of destination meet the demands of countries of origin, which need greater resources to handle the return of nationals falling again under their direct responsibility (Newland 2019). Sustainable reintegration precisely entails returnees correcting the underdevelopment of their home

countries by engaging in profit-making activities through ad-hoc aid packages (Oelgemöller 2017). Often struggling with poverty, migrants tend to seize such opportunities (Gerver 2017). Finally, basing much of their work on reintegration assistance, international organisations like IOM have an interest in furthering it (Pécoud 2017).

The rare consensus about sustainable reintegration depends upon all actors gaining from advancing the assistance programmes it informs. Such consensus could nevertheless break if some inconsistencies were addressed, such as the role which circular migration can play in enlarging returnees' ability to reintegrate into the socio-economic structures of their country (Stepputat 2004). This understanding of sustainable reintegration conflicts with the vision of sustainability as the obligatory conclusion of one's migration experience (Lietaert and Van Gorp 2019). In 2015, the policy objective was nevertheless related by IOM to the option for returnees of re-emigrating with the help of the "skills acquired during the reintegration process" (19). This reference is rather an exception and its correlation with the restrictive nature of migration management appears undetermined. The Global Compact, for instance, does not cite legal emigration in relation to sustainable reintegration. A more outspoken inclusion of the circularity component in the conceptualisation of sustainable reintegration could antagonise hard-line governments and countries of destination in general, thus engendering the widespread acceptance of this policy objective.

## Poor monitoring

Sustainable reintegration's potential to accommodate the interests of various actors accounts for its popularity. Poor monitoring reinforces this potential in preventing from establishing whether alternatives could prove more beneficial in practice. Return programmes per se have been occasionally examined (IOM 2001). Some studies have focused on evaluating the sustainability of return and reintegration at the micro-level, but they are limited (Koser and Kuschminder 2015; Cassarino 2015; Lietaert 2016). IOM regularly releases reintegration assistance highlights stressing positive aspects to justify the perpetration of its work (Geiger and Pécoud 2010). At any rate, they do not present rigorous scientific inquiries into return and resettlement.

Arguably, migrant-receiving countries are uninterested in careful monitoring as they achieved their main goal of fostering returns through reintegration prospects. On their part, migrant-sending countries buy into cooperation on return migration for reasons related to domestic or foreign affairs (Cassarino 2007; Cassarino 2018). Consequently, they may also be little interested in the actual implications of reintegration assistance.

However, greater monitoring could show that the current way in which the policy objective of sustainable reintegration is implemented is not the best to deter re-emigration, smooth returns and bring resources to migrants' countries of origin. Limited studies reported that returnees may evaluate reintegration support very positively or with resentment and disappointment (Lietaert 2019). Appalling and tragic stories of migrants' post-return experiences have also been documented (Gerver 2017; Fennig 2018). In general, the scope of reintegration assistance proves too narrow to

face the extensive challenges accompanying return (Scalettaris and Gubert 2018). Monitoring scarcity impedes a careful analysis of such fragmented evidence and the design of potential alternatives to the policy objective at issue.

## Outlook

By contesting the Global Compact for Migration, some countries questioned the need for global cooperation in the field more generally. One of its policy objectives, namely sustainable reintegration, nevertheless enjoys wide support. This is because it reconciles two fundamental interests of migrants' countries of destination and origin: respectively causing voluntary (and permanent) returns as well as having enough resources to deal with such returns. In the light of these interests, insufficient monitoring does not allow to ascertain the value of the current practices of reintegration assistance. This is problematic considering that large financial resources are allocated to this purpose and the lives of individuals and communities are directly affected by it. Systematic and far-reaching monitoring would allow to critically evaluate whether it is appropriate to preserve the policy objective of sustainable reintegration or to search for alternatives.

## Footnote

- <sup>1</sup> Based on the information found on the respective IOM national websites.

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