



## WP6: Experiences and impact in countries of origin, an ethnographic approach

Summary report



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**Disclaimer:** *This document provides a concise summary of the key findings from the study 'Experiences and Impact in Countries of Origin: an Ethnographic Approach' in the framework of the MORE project. For detailed analysis, evidence, and comprehensive insights, please refer to the full report. The information in this summary should not be considered complete or fully representative of the entire study.*



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***“You went looking for gold, but you came back with a donkey's tail.”***

(Returnee youth, male, Niger)

## Introduction

Work package 6 of the MORE research project examined the *experiences and perspectives of young people who had migrated to Europe and been returned*, either forcibly or voluntarily, to their country of origin or transit. It sought to build a holistic understanding of their journey to Europe, and their return and reintegration, exploring the impact return had on their lives, and on the lives of their families and communities. Data collection took place in Albania, Ethiopia, Georgia, Iraq, Niger, and Senegal from June to October 2025 and was coordinated by Save the Children. In total, 340 individuals participated (162 women and 178 men), including young returnees aged 18 to 30 years, young peers from the community, family members of the young migrants, and civil society actors. Research methodologies consisted of participatory data collection tools, such as image theatre and youth innovation labs, as well as community conversations, key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

This summary report examines the young person's migration journey, focusing particularly on the return journey and their experience of reintegration in their country of origin and/or transit. It also describes their recommendations and suggestions for improving the system of returns and readmission.

## The migration to and stay within Europe

***“When I tell you this, it comes back to me like a nightmare.”***

(Returnee youth, male, Iraq)

The study explored the motivations underlying young migrants' decisions to migrate, and documented their experiences throughout the migration journey, recognizing these as interrelated factors shaping their reintegration outcomes.

Reasons for migration shared by participants included pressures and drivers in the country of origin, such as structural economic challenges, high unemployment rates, and a perceived lack of viable economic futures; pressure or encouragement from friends and family to migrate, often similarly rooted in economic considerations; escaping conflict; and, for some young people from ethnic minority groups, experiences



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of racism and discrimination by government authorities. Restrictions around behaviour and a lack of cultural freedoms were also discussed as reasons to migrate particularly for women and girls, as shared by one young returnee in Georgia speaking about a friend: *“she simply wants to go out for a walk, but cannot”*.

Positive views and perceptions of the destination countries also played a role in decisions to migrate. This could include a general sense of Europe as ‘El-dorado’ (quoting a participant), with young people being inspired by stories from those that had already migrated, often observed through social media. Re-unifying with family members or following friends who had migrated and were residing in Europe was a reason for many, while for some, being able to access higher-quality health and education services was a motivator. Many spoken to, however, described how they did not want to migrate but felt they had no choice due to the poor living conditions and lack of opportunity within their home country.

Practically, many **chose to migrate through irregular routes**, often with the support of smugglers. They explained how regular options, such as obtaining visas, were not seen to be as viable due to their high cost, inaccessibility, and lack of transparency in the processes.

*“We trust pirogues [boats] more than visa services. At least you leave or you get your money back.”* (Peer youth, female, Senegal)

While **migration journeys** varied by route, length, and method of transport, they were all, to varying degrees, characterised by a lack of information on the part of the migrant which contributed to a frequent **sense of confusion**, as well as a high degree of **fear and distress**. Female migrants often described a heightened sense of fear compared to their male peers, discussing the risk and prevalence of sexual abuse in particular.

Germany was the most common destination country mentioned by young participants, while France, the UK, Spain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands were also discussed. The duration of their **stay within Europe** varied considerably, from days or weeks to more than ten years. Returnees commonly described **very negative emotions** during their time in Europe, including a heightened state of **fear, stress, and anxiety**, which could be sustained throughout their entire stay. This was often compounded by limited access to information and poor living conditions, especially for those in detention. As shared by a young returnee from Georgia: *“I was sleeping in my clothes in*



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*constant fear of deportation raids. They [police or law enforcement] would break into people's flats; children were also afraid. They would throw out even those who need medical treatment."*

The analysis found how the reasons underlying a young person's migration, combined with their pre-departure expectations and experiences during the journey and stay in Europe, directly shaped their later reintegration experiences.

## The return and re-integration experience

*"Returnees are immigrants in their own country."  
(CSO, Albania)*

The majority of participants experienced forced return, administered by authorities and often characterised as sudden and, in some cases, violent. A smaller number returned through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes, which were similarly organised by authorities but offered varying levels of support intended to incentivise return. Others returned 'spontaneously', having made the decision independently and without receiving formal assistance. In these cases, return was often driven by difficulties integrating in Europe, high levels of stress or anxiety linked to irregular legal status, or family obligations in the country of origin.

The **return process** was often described as **unclear and confusing**, with poor preparation for return, which increased their stress and anxiety.

Upon arrival, they reported **minimal or non-existent government support** for returnees. Although NGOs sometimes provided assistance upon return, this support was often limited in scope and frequently fell short of returnees' expectations. As at other stages of the migration journey, information about available support and how to access it was limited and confusing, further undermining young people's ability to reintegrate successfully.

*"When I came, I thought they would support me. It was not like that."* (Returnee youth, male, Iraq)

The **return and reintegration experience** was described across all participants as largely challenging, with **limited examples of successful reintegration**.



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*“My death was when I returned.”* (Returnee youth, male, Iraq)

Returnees described their return as being dominated by **feelings of shame, guilt, and regret**. A pervasive sense of failure was closely tied to their inability to remain in Europe and fulfil the plans and aspirations that had initially motivated their migration. These feelings were further intensified by the reactions of their families and communities. While a few reported returning to a supportive community, most described encountering **stigmatisation** from those around them. Even among those who expressed relief at being back, this feeling often coexisted with anxiety about an uncertain future.

*“In people’s eyes, coming back means you’ve failed. No matter why you’ve returned, even if it’s voluntary, even if it’s to invest or to regain your health, you’re treated like someone who hasn’t succeeded.”* (Returnee youth, male, Senegal)

Overall, they portrayed their communities as judgemental, and many felt that they were seen as a disappointment, which affected their ability to successfully reintegrate. Many returnees reported **not knowing why they had been returned**, which contributed to these feelings of shame and guilt, which not only fuelled their own doubts but also allowed others to speculate that the return might have been preventable. Some spoke of how they were hiding the fact that they had been deported in order to avoid further stigmatisation and judgement by others.

*“There are even those who call you stupid, saying I’m not intelligent. How can you go there and come back?”* (Returnee youth, male, Niger)

Returnees also frequently spoke of **pain, anger, and a strong sense of injustice** linked to their migration journey and return. This was often compounded by family and community members blaming them for returning, contributing to returnees feeling that they had been treated unfairly by society. This sentiment was also shared by young people in the community, who described a sense of unfair treatment by wider society towards returnees. Firstly, for not being understood by society when they chose to migrate, and secondly for feeling “used” solely as a source of income:

*“A friend did everything for his family. As soon as he returned, he was ignored. Even his wife avoids him.”* (Peer youth, male, Senegal)



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Returnees recurrently described their **social isolation**, and how they could feel ashamed to be in public. Minority ethnic groups, including Roma in Albania and Chechens in Georgia, faced additional **social exclusion** as a result of continued **discrimination** on their return, while others described how broken social ties and a loss of status within families and communities could hinder successful reintegration.

*"I've seen young people come back and not go out anymore. They're afraid to make eye contact."* (Peer youth, Senegal)

The contrast between values and lifestyles encountered abroad and those prevalent in their home communities often resulted in a **culture shock**, with returnees feeling like outsiders after their return. Individuals who had spent longer periods within Europe often struggled to reintegrate into family and community life.

Some participants spoke of the **bureaucratic obstacles** faced upon return, which really affected their ability to reintegrate successfully. These were particularly noted in Albania and Georgia, primarily in relation to education and language with returnees reporting significant challenges with school re-enrolment for their children.

**Attitudes from family and community** further affected the ability of returnees to successfully reintegrate. Participants referred to a generalised **lack of trust and respect toward returning migrants**, with some individuals being perceived as 'foreigners' within their own families or as having abandoned local traditions or moral expectations - for example, by getting tattoos or ceasing religious practices. Such perceptions often led the community to view them negatively. Peers and family members described concerns that some returnees were adopting **negative coping mechanisms in response to social rejection**, including the use of drugs:

*"...because I often see friends who smoke, and it's due to the disappointment of the trip, but above all to the difficulty of reintegrating. Currently, they spend all their time by the sea, smoking and staring at the ocean."* (Family member, female, Senegal)

In Iraq, for example, young people reported that women were reluctant to marry returnees, viewing them as *"not good"*. Communities often assumed that returnees had consumed drugs or alcohol while in Europe and were generally untrustworthy, reinforced by beliefs that they had been returned because they had caused problems abroad.



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Participants spoke how returnees were often seen to be a **burden**, either immediately or shortly after their return. Families worried about the returnee's wellbeing and often felt unprepared to provide the psychological support they needed. Financially, families had to sustain the returnee, as any income previously provided was no longer available and debts remained unpaid. Many had to sell land, property, or exhaust their savings to finance a failed migration. Together, these factors placed a heavy emotional toll on returnees, as reflected in the account of a young man from Iraq, who shared his family's reaction upon his return:

*"I wish you had not come back. We spent money on you, and we even sold land for your sake."* (Returnee youth, male, Iraq)

While most return experiences were described as challenging, there were **some positive accounts**, most commonly among those who **returned voluntarily**, and especially when their return was supported through assistance programmes that help returnees develop new business opportunities.

## The impact of return

*"When they come back, they are like bodies without souls. They feel useless because they learned nothing there, and they have nothing here either."*  
(CSO, Senegal)

The challenges returnees faced upon return combined with the limited support received, impacted the mental health of returnees and their ability to gain economic independence, making it especially difficult for them, as young people, to rebuild their lives. Wider impacts were also experienced by the families of returnees and the community at large.

**Mental health problems and psychological distress** were the most frequently reported impacts mentioned by participants. The previously discussed feelings of failure, shame, and guilt, alongside experiences of social isolation and hostility perceived from their community took a significant psychological toll on returnees. Participants described how many returnees had developed **mental disorders linked to social exclusion** and feelings of failure and shame. This had a major negative effect on the ability of returnees to rebuild their lives, which, in some cases, they were unable to do.



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*"I see returning migrants with trauma almost every day. And we don't always know how to help them." (CSO, Senegal)*

*"It looks that she doesn't want anything at all, even living. She has no energy to continue." (Peer youth, Georgia)*

Return often led to **economic marginalization**. Young migrants reported re-entering their communities in a precarious position, with diminished assets and limited access to employment or livelihood opportunities, which undermined their ability to reintegrate sustainably. This economic precarity not only constrained their capacity to rebuild independent livelihoods but also resulted in increased dependency on family and social networks, a loss of autonomy, and growing frustration. These conditions would ultimately delay their transition to adulthood, hindering their ability to achieve financial independence, establish households, and secure stable social status within their communities.

Returning migrants noted how many **support programmes** provided upon return **did not align with** returnees' actual **skills and needs**.

*"When they are back, even if they learned something new, they won't be able to find the job here. Nobody needs a neurosurgeon or even a German translator in our village." (Peer youth, Georgia)*

Returnees did, however, describe **some (limited) examples of successful economic reintegration**. Some, for example, established businesses while others were able to draw on the skills acquired abroad and their networks to become involved in entrepreneurial or community projects.

**Re-migration** was, for many, the only way out of their difficult circumstances. The challenges faced upon return, combined with a personal sense of failure and shame, a lack of support, and a widespread perception of limited future prospects, led many returnees to express intentions to migrate again at the earliest opportunity. While these significant barriers to reintegration often drove such decisions, additional pressures, such as the desire to reunite with family members still in Europe, also played an important role. The only cases in which returnees explicitly stated that they did not intend to re-migrate were those who had received financial or business support upon return, and these were very few. In some instances, the painful experiences endured during the



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migration journey to Europe led family members to express a desire to discourage their children from migrating again. However, given the persistent difficulties associated with reintegration, many young returnees felt they had little alternative but to leave once more.

*"Personally, I still have problems with social reintegration. If I go out, it's for personal needs, otherwise I lock myself in my room all the time. I no longer feel at home with the way society looks at me, the judgements, the comparisons with other migrants who have had successful returns. It's difficult. If tomorrow I had the opportunity to migrate again, I would do so, and that is my only wish at the moment."* (Returnee youth, male, Senegal)

Impacts affecting **families and the community** included **family disintegration**. Participants spoke of 'broken families' resulting from the return of migrants, highlighting conflicts arising from unmet expectations, accumulated frustrations related to unpaid debts, the additional burden of supporting returnees, and a sense of disappointment over their return. Families also described that a sense of shame not only affected the returnee but also their wider families, who could feel judged by the community in a process of 'collective failure'.

*"Sometimes it's worse for the families. They've invested everything and got nothing in return. They also become silent victims."* (CSO Senegal)

In some cases, the return of young migrants could mean more competition for a very limited number of jobs in the communities, with some describing subsequent **increases in unemployment** and decreasing levels of family income. In Iraq, returnees also reported feeling that they were blamed by brothers and other relatives as their return meant their own dreams to migrate were derailed.

*"You came back, and all my hopes were shattered."* (Returnee youth, male, Iraq, quoting a relative)

Positive aspects of return for the community were also noted, albeit less frequently. These included returnees bringing back new skills and business initiatives, improvements in unity amongst neighbours and families, and a greater sense of togetherness, contributing to **revitalised communities**. In addition, peers sometimes reported that observing the experiences of returnees helped them **better understand**



**the risks and hardships associated with migration.** For the broader community, these returns could have either a motivational or discouraging effect, depending on the migrant's experience.

## Recommendations by participants

Young returnees themselves, their families, and communities, rarely have the opportunity to inform the design of support that is provided to returnees. As such, this work package sought their views and ideas, and describes their recommendations and suggestions in relation to the different stages of the migration journey.

### Before migration and the journey to Europe

- Address the root causes of migration, especially those connected to the lack of economic opportunities;
- Improve access to information at different levels. On regular migration options: on the dangers and risks of the journey and stay in Europe; and as a counter to the misinformation provided by smugglers;
- Develop the role of families as positive role models to influence the young people who wish to migrate;
- Make options for regular migration easier, making obtaining visas more transparent, straightforward, and cheaper, as well as regularising existing migrants in Europe;
- Provide (better) support along the migration route, especially life-saving services.

### Stay in Europe and the return process

- Improve the living conditions and rights of migrants, strengthening legal protections, improving access to justice, and enhancing the conditions of detention;
- Improve provision of, and access to, information, making it more useful, appropriate, timely and accurate, with multilingual, user-friendly, digital information-sharing platforms for migrants and asylum seekers;
- Work with diaspora communities to co-create solutions and support.

### Upon return and reintegration

- Improve psychosocial support for returnees and their families, seeing it as a foundational step before other forms of support can be effectively provided. Suggestions included creating reception/listening centres for returnees offering psychosocial re-integration programmes;



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- Improve access to information, developing information hubs close to the communities as well as ensuring that promises made in Europe before departure concerning the nature of support to be received on return are fulfilled;
- Reduce bureaucracy and improve access to support, simplifying processes and procedures;
- Address stigmatisation, working with families and communities to improve their knowledge, tolerance, and empathy;
- Improve support from the state, particularly structured and longer-term, with mandatory minimum standards in reintegration packages;
- Provide practical support focused on securing employment and income-generating opportunities, improving access to credit, and prioritising market-relevant livelihood re-integration as a sustainable solution;
- Incorporate youth and community input in re-integration support design, ensuring that it better meets the needs and interests of those being returned;
- Provide more specific, personalised support, tailored to individual needs and context, distinguishing between types of returnee when relevant.



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