

## The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2006: a process and impact assessment

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### Introduction

#### Aims

Research was conducted to contribute to fulfilling the reporting requirements of the European Refugee Fund (ERF) II.

#### Context

Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration (VARRP) is intended as a cost-effective<sup>1</sup> and dignified alternative to enforced removal/deportation for people whose asylum applications have failed. VARRP provides support for return to and reintegration in the country of origin. VARRP 2006 (1 August 2006 to 31 July 2007) was co-funded by the UK Border Agency and the ERF, and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). During the VARRP 2005 programme year the maximum value of reintegration assistance available to returnees had risen from £1,000 to £3,000. The VARRP 2006 programme year saw the maximum reintegration package value fluctuating, with the maximum value at different times ranging from £1,500 to £4,000.

### Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse VARRP 2006 stakeholders. Extracts from analysis of IOM

management data are included to provide broader VARRP 2006 context. There was a focus on Nigeria as a return country.<sup>2</sup>

Limitations to the representativeness of research informants should be borne in mind when considering the implications of the findings for VARRP programme development.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 For each VARRP programme year between 2004 and 2006, priority case study countries have been identified by the UK Border Agency on the basis of having high uptake of VARRP and/or being of particular interest in terms of VARRP policy developments. Target countries for the research have then been chosen from the UK Border Agency priority list after consideration of the feasibility of conducting research there (e.g. safety, freedom of movement, IOM support, dispersal of returnees, infrastructure). Iran and Nigeria were chosen for the VARRP 2006 research. Ultimately the research team was unable to gain access to Iran.
- 3 The VARRP users and potential users whose views are reflected in this report may not be representative of the wider pools from which they were drawn. Returnees were exclusively Nigerian; and only VARRP returnees who took up reintegration assistance could be contacted. The interviews with non-VARRP returnees provide an interesting contrast, but how representative of all non-VARRP returnees these people were is again unknown. Interviews took place between four and 15 months after return, so long-term sustainability of reintegration remains unknown. The VARRP providers interviewed were, inevitably, interested parties, so dispassionate appraisal of the VARRP 2006 programme may have been difficult. Some of their suggestions are reflected in programme changes introduced during the VARRP 2007 year, which they would have been anticipating (i.e. stabilising the VARRP package, and introduction of individual return plans and reintegration assistance more tailored to individual and country specific circumstances).

1 National Audit Office (2005) Removing failed asylum applicants. National Audit Office: London. [http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0506/returning\\_failed\\_asylum\\_applic.aspx](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0506/returning_failed_asylum_applic.aspx)

### Contents

Executive summary	i
1. Introduction	1
2. Method	2
3. Findings	3
Apendices	13
References	23

### Keywords

Assisted voluntary return  
 Asylum  
 Asylum seekers  
 Immigration  
 Return  
 Voluntary return  
 Reintegration

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## Findings

### VARRP process and partnerships

- VARRP continued to operate successfully with good partnership working and delivery of a dignified and cost-effective alternative to enforced removal.
- Improvements or increases were suggested in respect of the following: independent assessment of VARRP and communication of findings to stakeholders; communication of relevant policy changes by the UK Border Agency and within the UK Border Agency about VARRP;<sup>4</sup> and flexibility of reintegration assistance.

### Marketing and outreach

- With caveats, work with diaspora communities was favoured by VARRP providers as a way of increasing VARRP referrals and returns.
- Enhanced value packages available under VARRP 2006 may have increased referrals and applications but fluctuating package value was perceived to have negative impacts.<sup>5</sup>
- Increased use of video-conferencing between actual and potential returnees was suggested.
- Mistrust around VARRP could be reduced by minimising visible links with the Home Office.

### Sources of information about VARRP

- Most, though not all, of those eligible for VARRP were aware the programme existed.
- VARRP users suggested VARRP was best advertised in the community (shops, cafés, churches, community centres). The initial source of information may impact on response.

### Experience of help from VARRP advisers

- Most VARRP returnees were satisfied and contact with IOM personnel increased confidence in the programme.

- People withdrawing from VARRP,<sup>6</sup> while also positive about the input of advisers, focused on the access to support while they were in the UK that this contact brought them. Those eligible for VARRP in the UK wanted greater reassurance about the programme.
- VARRP providers advocated greater use of free phone lines and publicity about availability of translation.

### Decision to return

- VARRP returnees tended to be closer than non-VARRP returnees to the point of having appeal rights exhausted when they decided to return to Nigeria.
- VARRP returnees appeared 'pushed' by a lack of alternatives other than deportation. Non-VARRP returnees to a greater extent appeared 'pulled' by expectations of a better life on return.
- Half of the VARRP returnees (five out of 11 people) said they would not have returned if there had been no VARRP programme.

### Applications and returns

- There were 6,243 VARRP 2006 applications and 3,692 people were assisted to depart the UK. This was a decrease of 26 per cent on the 5,002 people returned under VARRP 2005, but still 42 per cent higher than the 2,599 people returned under VARRP 2004. Returns under VARRP 2005 were boosted by the possibility of returning a large number of Iraqi people.
- Nigeria was the 11th most frequent return destination during VARRP 2006, with 99 applications made and 60 people returned.
- Applicants' views on the situation in the country of return, rumours of an asylum amnesty, and publicity around enforced removals were all thought to have influenced VARRP 2006 applications and returns.

### Withdrawal from VARRP

- The rate of withdrawal from VARRP 2006 was 31 per cent overall but only 12 per cent for Nigerian applicants.
- Fears about conditions in the return country were most frequently seen as the key factor.

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4 In 2009 the UK Border Agency AVR team commenced recruitment of regional AVR liaison officers to act as central contact points and assist in dissemination of information about AVR across the UK Border Agency.

5 From 19 October 2007 the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach was introduced and the monetary value of the assistance available under the standard VARRP package was no longer made explicit to potential applicants and has been held constant.

6 The term 'withdrawal' as used in this report refers to those people who cancelled their VARRP applications, lost contact with IOM or made their own arrangements to return.

- Suggestions for ways of reducing withdrawal could be categorised as: tightening up on regulations and enforcement around failed asylum applicants; more liberal assessment of protection needs; and increased emphasis on the benefits of VARRP and of return in VARRP marketing.

### **Experience of return**

- Non-VARRP returnees were more likely than VARRP returnees to feel that conditions in Nigeria had improved since they had claimed asylum in the UK.
- Hopes and fears about return most frequently concerned family reunion and starting again. VARRP returnees also looked forward to starting a business, whereas non-VARRP returnees looked forward to getting a job.
- Initial difficulties due to lack of money and interpersonal problems were generally overcome; accommodation was less of a problem for VARRP than for non-VARRP returnees.

### **VARRP support for return and reintegration: impact and effectiveness**

- Generally returnees were enthusiastic about VARRP support for return.
- The cash relocation allowance (paid on departure) was rated highly by VARRP returnees. It was used to meet a variety of needs (predominantly housing, food, and transport); and some was saved and invested.
- Uptake of reintegration assistance was lower among Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees than among VARRP 2006 returnees in general (54% compared with at least<sup>7</sup> 71% of all VARRP 2006 returnees).
- Small-business start-up support was the most popular reintegration assistance option among the Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees, as among VARRP 2006 returnees in general. Most VARRP returnees interviewed had contacted IOM within one week of return.

- Almost half of the non-VARRP returnees to Nigeria said they had not known that reintegration assistance was available as part of VARRP.
- Uptake of reintegration assistance may be influenced by the following: trust in bureaucracies and authorities in return countries; IOM capacity in return countries; tailoring of assistance to take into account inflation and cost of living; confidence building prior to departure; and accessibility of IOM and support on return.
- Re-migration within five years was anticipated by more VARRP than non-VARRP returnees. Most returnees reported reasonable (by local standards) housing conditions; but VARRP returnees were less likely than non-VARRP returnees to have a permanent place to live.
- The main source of income for VARRP returnees was their business; for non-VARRP returnees paid employment was also important.
- VARRP providers rated the relatively large value of the reintegration package and the cash relocation grant as the best elements of the VARRP 2006 package.
- Their suggestions for improvements included: improving monitoring and feedback for providers; providing potential returnees with better information on the return country and opportunities; introducing new rules to control the way reintegration assistance for dependants is used; and increasing flexibility around use of reintegration funds (e.g. for purchase of cars or children's education).<sup>8</sup>
- Some Nigerian VARRP 2006 returnees suggested that higher-value reintegration assistance would improve the programme, but most felt the programme as it stood was good: "*they should just do it the normal way they do it*", and they rated reintegration assistance highly.

<sup>7</sup> The VARRP 2006 programme year ran from 1 August 2006 to 31 July 2007. VARRP returnees who wish to take up reintegration assistance are generally required to do so within three months of return. As at 31 October 2007, 71 per cent of all those people returned under VARRP 2006 had taken up reintegration assistance. It is possible that a few VARRP 2006 returnees might have been permitted to take up reintegration assistance after October 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The introduction of the 'tailored reintegration assistance' approach in October 2007 also saw changes to the rules around use of assistance – for example, assistance for minors must be used for their education and can no longer be pooled with that of parents to contribute to a family business. From 2010 there will be increased flexibility to enable providers of reintegration assistance to respond to country-specific conditions when determining the use of reintegration assistance.