

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2005: a process and impact assessment

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Aims

The report presents findings of a process and impact assessment of the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme for the 2005 programme year (VARRP 2005), conducted to provide recommendations for programme development and to fulfil European Union funding requirements.

Context

VARRP 2005 ran from 1 August 2005 to 31 July 2006. VARRP is intended as a cost-effective¹ and dignified alternative to enforced removal/deportation for people whose asylum applications have failed. Assistance available under VARRP includes facilitation of travel to the home country and optional reintegration assistance. VARRP is delivered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). A key change between the VARRP 2004 and VARRP 2005 programmes was the increase on 1 January 2006 (five months into the VARRP 2005 programme year) of the value of the reintegration assistance offered from £1,000 to £3,000.

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

Method

A qualitative assessment of the VARRP 2005 programme, comprising 105 semi-structured interviews with diverse VARRP stakeholder groups, was conducted between May and September 2007. The groups included 48 VARRP and 19 non-VARRP returnees to Pakistan and Zimbabwe; all were interviewed in the return country. Findings from quantitative analysis of IOM management information are included to provide context.

Findings

Effectiveness of VARRP outreach, information and advice

- The IOM marketing team increased its activities during the programme year. These included: holding 656 outreach meetings; production and distribution to ethnic community, and other organisations and VARRP applicants of various printed media in a variety of languages, including booklets telling 'Stories of Return'; and communications through ethnic community media. Tailoring of communication strategies to different community needs was advocated.
- Principal sources of initial information about VARRP were 'word-of-mouth', ethnic community media, and the UK Border Agency. Use of ethnic community

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Keywords

Assisted voluntary return
Asylum
Asylum seekers
Immigration
Return
Voluntary return
Reintegration

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media to optimise communication was supported by people eligible for VARRP. A few would have liked more information than was given.

- IOM advisers were positively regarded. Pakistani returnees particularly emphasised the respectful approach and use of their mother tongue by the advisers. Zimbabwean returnees were impressed by the honesty of advisers and the level of information they provided.

Decision to return

- More than half of those eligible for VARRP reported that return was negatively viewed by their community, and comments suggested that this was possibly linked to the shame of having failed to make a success of their time away or to a desire to conceal that the individual had applied for asylum.
- While many VARRP returnees commented on their dire prospects and limited options in the UK, the IOM emphasis on ensuring that VARRP uptake is voluntary appeared to be fairly effective. More than half of the VARRP returnees considered that they had had a choice when deciding to return under VARRP.
- One-third of VARRP returnees (16 people) expected to have left the UK voluntarily anyway, and one-seventh (seven people) to have been deported,² if they had not returned when they did.
- For around half of the VARRP returnees, positive marketing and communication encouraged a decision to return (the remainder were unaffected by the information received).
- The enhanced reintegration package itself was not so high in value that it eclipsed consideration of other 'push' or 'pull' factors.

Uptake of VARRP

- During VARRP 2005, 8,742 individuals applied and 5,002 people returned to their country of origin. These were increases of 101 per cent and 92 per cent respectively on the VARRP 2004 figures of 4,348 applicants and 2,599 returnees.
- Many VARRP providers considered the introduction of a much higher level of reintegration assistance (£3,000) than had previously been available (£1,000)

² The term 'deported' was used by interviewees but may be a generic colloquialism for various categories of enforced removal.

to have been important in generating the increase in VARRP uptake. Increased marketing efforts, making explicit the assistance value, were also thought to have played a part.

- However, it should be noted that 60 per cent of the increase in VARRP returns between VARRP 2004 and VARRP 2005 could be accounted for by the increase in the number of Iraqi returnees. This in turn was associated with clearance of a backlog of would-be Iraqi VARRP returnees as charter flights to northern Iraq became possible. A special concession to this group, allowing them to defer return for up to six months from VARRP application, may also have encouraged uptake.
- A causal link cannot be proven but the attractiveness of the enhanced reintegration package was supported by the dramatic increase, after its introduction, in the proportion of VARRP applicants who also applied for reintegration assistance.

Withdrawing from VARRP

- Around one-third of VARRP 2005 applicants (2,312 out of 7,608 people) withdrew from³ the programme.
- People eligible for VARRP and the IOM partner agencies perceived fears about security and other conditions in the return country, an insufficient level of reintegration assistance on offer and suspicion of the authorities in the UK and about VARRP as key factors in withdrawal.
- Abuse of the process (to buy time in the UK or access state support) was also suggested to be a factor by some VARRP providers.
- Hope of obtaining legal status in the UK was also suggested to be a factor.
- Strategies to combat withdrawal most frequently suggested by VARRP providers were: increasing support to VARRP clients and ensuring they wished to return; tightening up controls around access to state support; providing better information on return countries; providing more financial assistance; and sending a stronger message about enforced return as the alternative to VARRP.

³ The term 'withdrawal' as used here refers to those applicants who cancelled their application, lost contact with IOM, or were known to have travelled independently.

Uptake of reintegration assistance

- Applications for reintegration assistance increased from 44 per cent of all VARRP applicants during VARRP 2004 to 91 per cent of all VARRP applicants during VARRP 2005; and the increase coincided with the introduction of the higher value reintegration package and marketing making explicit the package value.

Experience of return

- Most VARRP returnees identified some positive consequences of the return home; around half mentioned family reunion. Others mentioned relief from the hardships of the UK, better quality of life, and cultural sensitivity.
- All VARRP returnees interviewed had received reintegration assistance; and for one-third the VARRP advice and assistance had a bigger impact on getting established on their return home than any other factor.
- Of those VARRP returnees interviewed, 43 had found a paid occupation since returning and 20 of these were set up in business within three months of return. Thirty-eight VARRP interviewees reported having permanent accommodation.
- The majority of VARRP returnees thought that the reintegration assistance they received provided them with a good start but not an adequate basis for long-term reintegration. Most did not see their income as sustainable.
- The situation was most difficult for returnees to Zimbabwe because of the particular economic circumstances there.
- The majority had not experienced harassment or violence since return; however, such difficulties were more prevalent among VARRP returnees to Pakistan, especially women.
- Only one-third of VARRP returnees expected to still be in the return country in five years' time; however the realism of this expectation could not be tested.

Satisfaction with reintegration assistance

- The majority of VARRP returnees (37 out of 48) rated the reintegration assistance they received as at least acceptable.
- The £500 cash relocation allowance (paid on departure) and the 'in-kind' assistance delivered on return were regarded as the best elements of reintegration assistance by half of the VARRP returnees.
- Other aspects which were valued were the indirect benefits, such as opportunity for a new start and family reunion, and these could be emphasised in marketing.
- A range of suggestions for improving reintegration assistance uptake (within current funding levels) were provided by both VARRP returnees and VARRP providers. Many of these concerned the following: more flexibility and tailoring of assistance; more marketing and awareness raising emphasising the 'positives' of VARRP; or extending training opportunities (including prior to departure).

Strengths of VARRP and suggestions for improvements

- Reintegration assistance, return with dignity, and quick decisions and processing were most frequently cited as the best elements of the VARRP process by VARRP providers.
- Increasing the information provided to applicants was the most frequent suggestion for improving VARRP. Others included: better targeting; more positive advertising; improving internal communication between partners; and increasing the cash element of assistance.

Differences between VARRP and non-VARRP returnees

- Compared with VARRP returnees, the people who made their own arrangements to return appeared to be less pressured into returning by circumstances in the UK, and more settled and less dependent on state or NGO support upon return.