

The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008: a process and impact assessment

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This report presents findings from research assessing the process and impact of the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) during the 2008 funding year (August 2008 to May 2009). The research was commissioned by Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management (ARK) to fulfil the European Commission's funding requirements.

Context

VARRP offers asylum seekers the opportunity to return voluntarily to their country of return and provides an alternative to enforced removal. It is part funded by the UK's allocation from the European Commission's (EC's) Return Fund and is delivered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on behalf of the UK Border Agency.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with nine IOM officers in the UK (face-to-face) and Pakistan (by telephone) and telephone interviews were conducted with 32 adults who had applied for VARRP between August 2008 and May 2009 and returned to Pakistan. Pakistan was chosen as the case study country because of high numbers of returns, including families, resettlement in rural and urban areas and the feasibility of conducting telephone interviews.

Findings

The research presents findings on the impact of VARRP on motivations to return and actual return behaviour. It then discusses the process and efficiency issues around applications and returns before considering evidence on the effectiveness of the reintegration assistance in promoting sustainable returns.

The decision to return and take up VARRP

The research revealed that VARRP by itself rarely provides the initial incentive for individuals to make the decision to return to their country of origin. However, once their asylum claim has been rejected and it becomes clear that they will not be able to stay legally, VARRP enables people to leave the UK sooner, with more dignity and with better prospects than through removal (while also costing less for the UK Border Agency).

The main impetus for applying to VARRP was a failed asylum application and associated potential removal from the UK. VARRP returnees saw no option for them to stay in the UK and perceived voluntary departure as preferable to enforced removal (although not all respondents had fully exhausted their options to remain legally in the UK).

Once individuals had made the decision to return, VARRP facilitated and expedited their actual return:

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Keywords

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).

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- ten out of 25 returnees said they would not have returned to Pakistan without VARRP assistance, and all but one of the other 15 were referring to return via removal rather than through independent means; and,
- approximately half the returnees interviewed (13 of the 27 who answered the question) said they would have applied to VARRP sooner had they known about the programme.

Process and efficiency of application and return process

IOM UK marketing of VARRP is varied and tailored to different ethnic and population groups. The UK Border Agency also promotes VARRP through asylum caseworkers and information placed in UK Border Agency premises. Many returnees interviewed (18 of 32) had learnt about VARRP through officials or while on UK Border Agency premises (mostly Immigration Removal Centres) suggesting that the efforts to publicise VARRP within the asylum system are having a positive effect. Of those who had not been in detention, nine of eighteen had heard about VARRP through community channels suggesting the outreach activities led by IOM are also having an impact.

IOM officers in the UK and in Pakistan reported that the excellent working relationships between key partners (IOM London, IOM overseas Missions and the UK Border Agency) were essential to the smooth running of the programme. Other key factors found to facilitate the VARRP application process were:

- flexibility in the way applications can be made to the programme;
- requirement on the applicant to provide only essential information and documentation;
- the approach and assistance of IOM UK staff;
- fast approval decisions by the UK Border Agency on VARRP applications; and
- language skills of IOM caseworkers.

IOM officers and returnees suggested factors negatively affecting rates of application and withdrawal from VARRP included: the 'General Grounds for Refusal' rule introduced in April 2008 prohibiting people from returning to the UK within five years of leaving through VARRP; distrust of IOM; and applicants not planning to leave but using a VARRP application to access Section 4 support for a limited period of time.

One potential area for improvement is in the use of the Individual Return Plans (IRP). These were introduced in

October 2007 and are meant to be developed during the application stage, holistically setting out applicants' reintegration needs. However, little evidence emerged that IRPs were being fully developed while applicants were in the UK, possibly delaying the delivery of reintegration assistance and increasing the risk of returnees experiencing hardship. Possible reasons emerged as:

- applicants being focused on their actual return rather than reintegration;
- IOM officers in the UK and in Pakistan feeling that IRPs (particularly the business set-up component) are best completed once applicants have returned; and,
- limited capacity of the reintegration team in the UK.

In addition, the Pakistan Mission does not proactively engage with returnees on arrival in Pakistan as happens in some other overseas Missions. This can also delay returnees accessing support and may contribute to some returnees spending their relocation grant on items which could have been covered by other elements of reintegration package.

Delivery of reintegration assistance and sustainable return

Respondents were very positive about the delivery and content of their reintegration assistance and emphasised the help and advice provided by IOM officers. Few had any other resources or financial support in Pakistan and the businesses set up with reintegration assistance were their main source of income. Some indicated that without VARRP assistance they would have been destitute. However, the adequacy of the business grant for generating a living wage was questioned, as was the duration of housing assistance .

Most returnees reported having experienced violence, harassment and threats on return to Pakistan. There was no evidence that this was due to having left Pakistan for the UK and returned through VARRP. Financial hardship was also relatively common. Despite these difficulties, only two respondents out of 32 were considering leaving Pakistan.

The sustainability of respondents' return was uncertain due to the political and economic climate in Pakistan. The opportunity to establish a business had given respondents a foundation on which to build a future in Pakistan and IOM officers and respondents were in agreement that this was the most useful form of assistance to facilitate a sustainable return.

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I. Context

This report presents findings from research on the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) for the period it was part funded by the European Commission's (EC's) Return Fund 2008 funding year; from August 2008 to May 2009. The purpose of this report is to assess the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of VARRP 2008 based on qualitative case study research. It supplements a quantitative review of IOM management information also provided to the EC. The evaluation is a requirement of EC Return Fund funding and was commissioned by Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management (ARK) of the UK Border Agency.

The Return Fund supports developments in the practice of return management and co-operation between European Union (EU) member states. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) delivers VARRP in the UK on behalf of the UK Border Agency. VARRP offers people the opportunity to return voluntarily to their country of return and provides an alternative to enforced removal. It is available to those who have an outstanding asylum claim or appeal, those who have been granted related exceptional leave to remain or discretionary leave, and those whose asylum applications or appeals have been rejected but are not subject to a deportation order.¹

According to the analysis of the monitoring information from the IOM, during VARRP 2008 (based on the 12-month period from August 2008 to July 2009), there were 5,133 applications, comprising 5,544

individuals. In the same time period, VARRP assisted 2,896 people (associated with 2,709 applications) to depart the UK.²

Pakistan was chosen as the case study country for this research as it has consistently been in the top five countries of return. It had 179 principle returnees during VARRP 2008, or 213 including dependents (ranked fifth after Iraq, Afghanistan, China and Iran). Pakistan also has a comparatively high number of returning families with children (8% of principle returnees were accompanied by dependants, ranking third in number of families returning after Zimbabwe and Nigeria), as well as including returns to both rural and urban areas. These factors provided the potential to explore policy areas of interest.³ The feasibility of conducting telephone interviews was also a factor in the decision to choose Pakistan as a case study country.

This report presents the methodology used for the research in Section 2 (covered in further detail in Annex I). Section 3 discusses the findings from the research covering the impact of VARRP on motivations and decisions to return, and the process and efficiency of the application process. It then covers the findings in relation to the delivery of reintegration assistance in the country of return and the experience of returnees, including the likelihood of sustainable return.

¹ Additional checks are also carried out relating to outstanding criminal offences and child protection issues which can place restrictions on those eligible for VARRP.

² Evans, O., and Eisenstein, E. (2010) *Analysis of VARRP 2008 Management Information*. Unpublished but submitted to the EC. The IOM management data are not drawn from a cohort of people followed through the VARRP process. Not all VARRP 2008 applicants will return during the VARRP 2008 year, and some VARRP 2008 returnees will have applied during the VARRP 2007 programme year.

³ The data collected were analysed to test for differences between urban and rural returns, and for those returning with dependants and without; however, no substantial differences were found.

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2. Methods

Data were collected for this study through:

- telephone interviews with people who returned to Pakistan through VARRP having applied between August 2008 and May 2009; and
- interviews with IOM officers in the UK (face-to-face) and in Pakistan (by telephone).

Findings from quantitative analysis of IOM management information are also included to provide context.

Six UK-based IOM staff were interviewed, including managers and case workers, operational and reintegration staff and people with specific responsibilities such as marketing. In addition, three IOM overseas Mission staff in Pakistan were interviewed, covering responsibility for the management of VARRP in Pakistan, the delivery of reintegration assistance and finance.

A sample of 45 returnees was drawn from a sampling frame comprising 87 individuals. The sampling frame included all VARRP adult returnees⁴ to Pakistan who had applied between August 2008 and May 2009 and for whom telephone contact details were held. A target of 30-35 interviews had been set but a larger sample was drawn in anticipation that not all would prove contactable. Purposive non-random sampling was used in order to explore the range and nature of experiences. It is important to note that it is not possible to draw statistical inferences from this kind of sampling method.

The characteristics used to select the 45 individuals were: sex; age; membership of family group; location (rural/urban); and date of return to home country. The final sample comprised a relatively even spread of return dates, ages, and location types. Although all women from the sampling frame were selected, they comprised just 22 per cent of the final sample. The sampling frame contained eight family groups (defined as groups of two or more) and two individuals were selected from each group (three from one family). These were a mix of husband-wife and parent-child relationships. Members of family groups represented just over a third (36%) of the final sample. A total of 14 respondents had applied for VARRP while resident in an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC).

Annex I details the process through which Pakistani VARRP returnees were accessed and their participation secured as well as a demographic breakdown of the sample.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings from the case study, drawing on the qualitative interviews with IOM staff in the UK, with IOM Mission staff in Pakistan, and with Pakistani returnees. Only IOM staff in the UK were able to comment on VARRP issues generally, rather than in the specific context of Pakistan. Findings presented here which do not relate specifically to the operation and effectiveness of VARRP in the case study country should be treated with a degree of caution as they may not reflect the views of staff working in other countries of return.

Decisions to return and take up VARRP assistance

The research revealed that the effect of the VARRP programme on return decisions and behaviour was subtle. VARRP by itself rarely provides the initial incentive for individuals to make the decision to return to their country of origin. However, once their asylum claim has been rejected and it becomes clear that they will not be able to stay legally, VARRP enables people to leave the UK sooner, with more dignity and better prospects than through the alternative of removal (while costing less for the UK Border Agency).⁵

Only one respondent reported having been primarily influenced to return by the assistance available through VARRP. Returnees talked at length about the benefits of the support they received (discussed further below), but tended to talk about VARRP as a facilitator of return rather than a main impetus for their decision to return.

- Ten out of 25 returnees said they would not have returned to Pakistan without VARRP assistance, and all but one of the other 15 were referring to return via removal rather than through independent means.

⁴ Adults were taken to be those aged 18 and over.

⁵ NAO (2009) *Management of Asylum Applications by the UK Border Agency*. http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/management_of_asylum_appl.aspx

- Approximately half the returnees interviewed (13 of the 27 who answered the question) said they would have applied to VARRP sooner had they known about the programme.

The most influential factor that led the respondents to consider VARRP was the rejection of their asylum claim. The vast majority of respondents (22 of the 25 respondents whose asylum status was known) had received a negative decision on their asylum claim prior to applying for VARRP and 17 (out of the 28 who explained their reasons for applying to VARRP) were explicit that they had been influenced to take up VARRP assistance because their claim had been rejected.

Three respondents (including a husband and wife) spontaneously stated that they had applied to VARRP before the outcome of their initial asylum claim was known. However, 11 said they would not have considered doing so. For example:

"No, I wouldn't have applied earlier, it's just that I was waiting to see what would have happened with my asylum claim and when I didn't get my asylum claim that's when I decided to return."

(Male, aged 43, returned to urban area).

Yet it seems that individuals do not necessarily have to have exhausted all their options to stay in the UK legally before considering returning under VARRP. Only three (of the 25 interviewees who reported their asylum status) said that their appeal had been rejected and that they had been under imminent threat of removal, while five had still been awaiting an appeal decision. The remaining 17 cases reported that their applications had failed but it was not clear if they had appealed or not.

Only two respondents reported actively wanting to return to Pakistan when they applied for VARRP. Many returnees expressed their reasons for applying to VARRP in terms of having no choice to stay in the UK, no other options, or as preferable to enforced removal. For example:

"...our situation was such that we didn't have any choice. It was a choice between being deported or returning through IOM on a voluntary basis and that's why we decided to apply to the IOM."

(Female, aged 22, returned to an urban area).

Respondents explained the challenges of living for an extended period of time as an asylum seeker, whether in the community or in an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC). Seven respondents cited the hardships (financial and psychological) associated with living as an asylum seeker in the UK, particularly once their application or appeal had been refused and support consequently withdrawn, as the main reason for applying for VARRP. For example:

"The England Government ... refused me asylum and that created a lot of problems for me...and it was problematic because I couldn't find a job either, my relatives weren't helpful and I was living a very difficult life, a degrading life."

(Male, aged 55, returned to rural area).

Despite experiencing conditions leading them to want to leave the UK, only one of the respondents reported having had the means to return to Pakistan independently. Most had, therefore, faced a choice between returning with VARRP assistance and awaiting the (assumed negative) outcome of their asylum application or appeal and associated removal. This is illustrated by the following comments:

"I thought I might as well return because firstly UK weren't giving me asylum, they had confirmed that...but I didn't have any money at all and you need money to return."

(Male, aged 43, returned to an urban area).

"I knew that they were going to send me back to Pakistan. I definitely had to return... I would have had to return to Pakistan but I didn't have any money. At least IOM paid for my flight and a little bit of money for when I returned."

(Male, aged 28, returned to a rural area).

VARRP therefore facilitated an earlier return for these individuals and avoided the process (and cost to the UK Border Agency) of removal.⁶

Returnees and IOM officers reported that VARRP also provided a dignified return, which was a highly valued element of the programme. For example:

"They send you back to your own country with your own self respect, they don't send you by force, it's voluntary"

(Male, aged 65, returned to a rural location).

⁶ Voluntary assisted returns cost less than enforced returns by between £100 and £3,400 for a single adult and by between £1,400 and £14,600 for a family. National Audit Office (2009) *Management of Asylum Applications by the UK Border Agency*.

Factors affecting VARRP application and withdrawal rates

No interviews were conducted with people who had withdrawn from the VARRP process but IOM officers and returnees were asked for their views on the factors affecting application and withdrawal rates for VARRP.

Two IOM officers and six returnees suggested that the 'General Grounds for Refusal' rule, introduced in April 2008 prohibiting people from coming to the UK within five years of returning to their country of return through VARRP, acted as a deterrent. One IOM officer suggested that this rule had:

"deterred people from making the decision to go back for longer, so they stayed in an exploitative situation, they stayed for longer in a destitute situation because they were terribly afraid that if they go back they can't return...it's a barrier, it's a psychological block to taking the decision."

A further three returnees suggested that distrust of IOM may prompt people to withdraw their application.

An IOM officer suggested that a small number of applicants may have had no intention of returning but used a VARRP application to secure Section 4 Support (under provisions set out in Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999). This support provides accommodation and vouchers to people who are destitute and whose claim for asylum has been refused and appeal rights exhausted and who are taking reasonable steps to leave the UK.

Process and efficiency of application and return process

Marketing and sources of information

IOM officers in the UK reported tailoring the marketing of VARRP to different ethnic groups. Their marketing strategy was informed by diaspora mapping exercises that began in 2005 (including one for the Pakistani community) to find out the best ways to communicate with these groups.

Marketing activity included targeted advertising in particular newspapers and magazines and on selected radio and television stations. Outreach workers have reportedly engaged with particular communities (including Pakistani community) and video conferencing has been introduced between community members in the UK and those in their country of return who returned through VARRP. IOM officers thought this was a very effective form of marketing and dissemination.

The marketing strategy deliberately brands the information material under IOM and not the UK Border Agency in order to engage people's trust in the scheme.⁷ This said, the UK Border Agency also has a role in promoting VARRP. Potential applicants are informed about VARRP whenever they come into contact with the UK Border Agency. This includes information (literature and looped DVDs) in reporting centres, enforcement offices and IRCs. Asylum caseworkers inform those who fail in their asylum claims about VARRP and how to contact IOM, and information is also included in refusal letters.

IOM caseworkers reported that people learn about VARRP from a wide variety of sources and that this can vary by ethnic group and nationality. It was suggested that community knowledge plays a key role in the dissemination of information about VARRP amongst the Pakistani community, partly because of the size of the population in the UK.

Table 1 summarises information about the sources through which the returnees interviewed first heard about VARRP. It shows that 13 respondents had found out about VARRP while in an IRC: five through written material (posters on a notice board for example and likely to be IOM publicity material); five through staff (possibly IOM or UK Border Agency staff); two through other detainees, and one did not specify. A further five had been informed about VARRP during visits to the UK Border Agency (four via written material and one by an official). Five had heard about VARRP through friends and acquaintances, and only two respondents (from the same family group) learnt about VARRP through the media – in this case a television advertisement.

This evidence suggests that the UK Border Agency's efforts to publicise VARRP within the asylum system, and particularly within IRCs are having a positive effect and should be continued.⁸ It also shows that, of those not detained in an IRC before return, many (nine) had heard about VARRP through community channels suggesting some impact from the outreach and community-based marketing efforts.

7 One consequence of this, visible in some of the quotes throughout this report, is that returnees appear to see the programme and resources they receive as being from IOM, not making the link back to the UK Border Agency.

8 Fourteen of the 32 returnees interviewed for this evaluation were in an IRC prior to their return and it is not known how much time (if any) they spent living in a community setting.

Table 1 Initial sources of information

First source of information about VARRP	Number
In IRC (UK Border Agency and IOM staff, posters, leaflets, other detainees)	13
UK Border Agency (posters, leaflets, staff)	5
Friends/ acquaintances	5
Leaflets/ posters (location unspecified)	2
Media (TV, newspapers)	2
Unclear	5
Total	32

Applying for VARRP

The VARRP application process was described by IOM officers as follows. An application is made and is checked against the basic eligibility criteria and to ensure that all the required information is available (applicants with children, for example, must provide their full address to allow Social Services to carry out checks). IOM caseworkers also inform applicants about the reintegration assistance available, assess their reintegration needs and complete an Individual Return Plan (see *Use and effectiveness of individual return plans* later in this chapter for further details about IRPs). The application is then forwarded to the UK Border Agency for approval. Once approval has been granted, IOM caseworkers contact the applicant and advise on any additional information or documentation required. IOM officers stressed that applicants are fully informed about the assistance available to them, about the process involved and about the voluntary nature of the programme. An IOM Mission officer in Pakistan confirmed that when returnees made contact with the Mission they were usually well informed about the process and entitlements. This was corroborated by the returnees interviewed – only one expressed dissatisfaction about the level of information or support provided at the application stage and many emphasised that entitlements and processes had been fully and clearly explained.

“She [IOM caseworker] helped me do my application, she helped me a great deal, she gave me reassurance and she explained everything clearly.”

(Male, aged 65, returned to a rural area).

The level and type of contact applicants have with IOM during this process varies depending on the nature of the case and the preferences of the applicant. Some applicants will have several meetings or telephone discussions with an IOM caseworker and others will have only one. An IOM caseworker reported that face-to-face contact is preferable but that they can offer the same level of service whatever the mode of contact.

Once the paperwork is in order, IOM caseworkers agree a departure date with the applicant, book flights and inform the applicant of his/her date of departure. Returnees are met at the airport by an IOM team based there and guided through security.

The majority of respondents (28 of 30) reported that the process of applying for VARRP had been straightforward and that they had not experienced any difficulties, despite many applicants having limited English language skills, living some distance from IOM offices and having limited prior knowledge and understanding about voluntary return. Returnees reported that the application form had been short and simple, making it easy for friends or relatives to translate or to assist illiterate applicants. None of the returnees could suggest ways in which the process could have been made easier.

Returnees were also overwhelmingly positive about IOM staff and only one reported that his advisor had been unhelpful. Respondents particularly commented on the extent of help IOM staff provided and the friendly and respectful way staff had related to them.

“They showed us so much respect. They placed the tickets in our hands and with the utmost respect they sent us back to our own country.”

(Male, aged 28, returned to a rural area).

The two respondents who had experienced difficulties reported problems completing the application form because of poor literacy and because no Urdu speaker had been available at IOM. A couple of returnees reported a degree of frustration at the length of time which elapsed between making their application and returning (although there was no evidence they had experienced a delay), and IOM officers confirmed that this can be a source of complaint, but it did not emerge as a significant issue.

IOM officers were similarly unable to point to problems with the VARRP process or suggest any improvements. One caseworker reported that obtaining travel documents for applicants who lacked necessary documentation (proof of identification for example) could prove difficult, but IOM staff were able to advise applicants and help them overcome these barriers.

Factors facilitating the application process

A number of factors were found to be particularly important to the efficiency of the application process.

The varied means in which IOM accept applications was an important factor. Applications can be made by telephone, email, post, fax, in person, or through a third party (such as a refugee organisation or friend or relative) who can liaise with IOM on their behalf.⁹ IOM also has six sub-offices across England, Scotland and Wales so applicants need not travel to London to make an application. In April 2008, IOM officers started regular surgeries in the IRCs to assist detainees.

The language skills of IOM caseworkers also facilitated applications as they can cover 35 languages between them. IOM officers reported that the staff base is adjusted to accommodate shifting language needs, for example due to fluctuations in asylum applications from different countries. The positive approach and assistance of IOM UK staff was cited as an important factor.

Applicants were also encouraged by the simplicity of the process and the requirement to provide only essential information and documentation.

IOM officers reported that by 2008, eligibility was being confirmed by the UK Border Agency with greater speed than previously. These quick decisions on eligibility for the programme ensured that the process worked smoothly. This was particularly beneficial for those wanting to return home without delay.

Use and effectiveness of individual return plans

In October 2007 a new approach was introduced to VARRP involving reintegration packages tailored to meet individual needs. A key component of this approach is the IRP, which is meant to be developed during the application stage in the UK and sets out applicants' reintegration needs (schooling, training, help with business, job placement, housing). Applicants are invited to consider how they can best use the assistance available to facilitate their reintegration. IOM can assist them with pursuing this, making contact with and asking the advice of Mission staff if necessary. Each individual family member returning through VARRP, including children, should have his/her own IRP.

9 The applicants themselves must sign the relevant documentation, including a statement signed on application confirming they agree to leave voluntarily, and one on departure which withdraws any asylum claims and appeals.

Little evidence emerged that the IRPs were being comprehensively developed, an indication perhaps that IOM caseworkers do not yet consider the development of IRPs as a key component of the application process. Applicants were asked what form of reintegration assistance they wanted. They were provided with full information about the assistance on offer, and this information was recorded on the relevant documentation and forwarded to the Missions. However, further development of these plans appeared to be rare. IOM officers in the UK and in the Pakistan Mission reported that very few returnees had returned with fully developed IRPs and no returnee reported having made a detailed plan. As one IOM officer in London commented:

"it's [the IRP] quite structured, it's quite a lengthy document and the idea is they fill in as much information as they can pre-departure and the rest is filled in once they go back home. The reality is that normally not a lot of information is filled in over here in the UK."

The returnees interviewed were unfamiliar with the IRP and in discussion tended to simply confirm that they had been fully informed about the assistance available and asked to specify what assistance they needed.¹⁰ The experience of one returnee illustrates this well:

"There was some information about a reintegration plan. I saw all the information on their poster and they also told us what they would offer us. They asked what our needs were, if we needed any accommodation and they offered to pay our rent for three months. They asked if we wanted to start up a business and they would support that and they told us how they would help out. So they told us about this but I'd say most of the information we got when we returned to Pakistan."

(Female, aged 22, returned to an urban area).

One reason provided by IOM officers for the limited development of IRPs in the UK was that applicants were often focused on the process of return and so had little interest in discussing reintegration needs in detail. This was reflected in a more general prioritisation of return, rather than reintegration issues, prior to departure by IOM, as one officer acknowledged:

"What happens is that operations is very busy, the logistics are very challenging...the priority sometimes here is the operations, the flights...it becomes a priority because the

10 The interviewer always explained the term IRP to the interviewees, describing what it was and not relying solely on the terminology that might be unfamiliar to returnees.

migrant is more interested in departing, he wants to depart quickly or he wants to go back as soon as possible because he may be destitute or he wants to see his family back home, so the pressure is really co-ordinating that."

IOM caseworkers in the UK and in Pakistan felt that the business set-up element of IRPs are best completed once applicants have returned because only then are they in a position to assess the marketplace. However, the research suggests that developing the IRPs further before departure (including business and other elements of the IRPs such as housing, education or training and childcare) could reduce some of the hardship experienced by some of the returnees by ensuring they have access to the support they are entitled to in a timely manner.

An IOM officer reported that there had been limited capacity in the reintegration team despite a rise in reintegration needs over the past five years as a result of increased take-up of reintegration assistance. One reported consequence has been limited capacity to bring ideas and new developments to fruition.

"We can do much more in terms of better training for the case workers, the time also to discuss reintegration even if they [applicants] don't know what they want to do...we want to do sheets per country explaining the reintegration... everyone has had those ideas...but it's a lot of work, co-ordination with the Missions, then editing. So with two people [staff], three people, that isn't possible when you're also attending conferences, producing statistics, trying to do the monitoring list."

Restructuring reported to be underway within IOM (i.e. in the VARRP 2009 funding year) will increase the capacity of the reintegration team to six members, allowing for greater focus on this aspect of the programme. This should improve the level of frontline reintegration assistance and attention to this issue at the application stage.

Working together: interaction between partners

All the IOM officers interviewed in the UK and in Pakistan reported excellent working relationships between key partners (IOM London, IOM overseas Missions and the UK Border Agency).¹¹ No problems were reported and no changes suggested. One IOM officer in the UK, talking specifically about his relationship with the overseas Mission in Pakistan went as far as to say *"it's perfect, let's not touch it."*

¹¹ UK Border Agency staff were not interviewed as part of the evaluation and so discussion about the relationship between IOM and the UK Border Agency is from the perspective of IOM officers only.

The regularity and flexibility of contact emerged as key to the success and effectiveness of these relationships. For example, IOM officers in London and in the Mission in Pakistan reported that they were in daily contact and can get in touch whenever necessary. Similarly, a senior IOM officer explained that senior IOM staff have monthly meetings with the UK Border Agency to identify how processes can be improved and discuss issues arising but that *"we don't even wait for a monthly meeting; if there's an issue that needs to be dealt with we are constantly on the phone or email and the correspondence is ongoing"*. This makes it easy to implement changes quickly, something commented on by another IOM officer:

"Since I started here the reintegration has changed and the programme has changed dramatically, and it's good [to] try new things.... Other organisations, they do a lot of research but they take years to take action... it's good that IOM has the kind of flexibility with Government to implement things [quickly]."

The UK Border Agency was reported to be *"very responsive"* at both a senior and a caseworker level. One IOM caseworker reported having an excellent relationship with UK Border Agency staff whom he described as helpful and understanding when it came to, for example, needing to fast-track an application.

Mission staff similarly indicated that officers at IOM London were responsive and flexible. One reported that approval for reintegration assistance is often given within 24 hours and that they are understanding about the difficulties returnees experience producing the required documentation and will make efforts to help overcome these. IOM staff in London, meanwhile, reported that *"our mission in Islamabad ... they are just brilliant"*.

Respondents were clear that these relationships were crucial to the effectiveness of the programme.

Reintegration assistance received

Each individual 2008 VARRP returnee was entitled to a £500 relocation allowance paid to him/her on departure in cash or via a payment card at Heathrow airport (a family of four would therefore receive £2,000) as well as flights home and an excess baggage allowance. Beyond this, reintegration packages were tailored to individual needs (a change made in 2007) but could include one or more of the following provided through in-kind support:

- a grant to establish or invest in a business;
- training courses;
- three months rent;
- help with onward travel to final destination in country of return;
- job placement; and
- school or childcare fees.

There was an upper value limit of £4,000 per person per total package of support (provided in-kind), including the £500 relocation grant. Within this, a limit of £2,000 was set on funding for business start-up, £1,500 of which is payable when a business is established and a further £500 on review after six months. The returnees interviewed were mostly aware that they had been entitled to £2,000 to start a business but none reported knowing that the value of their total reintegration support package could reach (or not exceed) £4,000. This reflects UK Border Agency and IOM policy not to publicise the upper value limit in an effort to ensure that support is provided according to individual need rather than according to a fixed sum.

Once returnees arrive in their country of return, VARRP reintegration assistance is delivered by IOM overseas Missions. Returnees are eligible for assistance with onward travel if they require it. If they wish to take up reintegration assistance they must contact the mission in their return country within three months. Returnees can use their reintegration assistance for up to twelve months after their return. They are required to satisfy administrative requirements (proving a business is genuine, for example) before funds are released. All reintegration cases are sent to IOM in London for approval.

A grant to establish or invest in a small business was the most common form of reintegration assistance provided to the returnees who were interviewed, and IOM Mission staff confirmed that this reflected the general picture. All 32 respondents reported taking up this form of assistance and nine had attended a week-long IOM-funded business training course to support and prepare them for establishing a business. In addition to this support, nine respondents had their rent paid for three months – one was in training and the school fees of three respondents' children were paid for a year.

Process issues in the delivery of VARRP assistance on return

None of the returnees interviewed reported having been met at an airport¹² and officers at the Pakistan Mission reported that they were not proactive in engaging with returnees once they arrived in Pakistan. This reflects practical considerations (lack of contact information) but also an emphasis on the voluntary nature of VARRP. The onus is on the returnee to make contact with the IOM Mission to request assistance, having been provided with a letter and IOM contact details before departure from the UK. Once returnees initiate contact the process of determining and arranging reintegration assistance begins.

Evidence suggests that the process of accessing reintegration assistance varies from country to country and between offices within the same country. A caseworker in a Pakistan sub-office, for example, reported that IOM London does sometimes request that they meet a returnee at the (local) airport. An IOM caseworker in the UK working with countries other than Pakistan described how IOM London provide the Mission with information about who is returning, whether they want to be met at the airport, require onward travel or have any other immediate needs and subsequently receive an email confirming that all the returnees have arrived as expected. Also, a monitoring report about VARRP in the 2004 funding year,¹³ with Sri Lanka as a case study country, describes how full information is provided to Mission staff about all returnees; they are met and guided through passport control and shortly after arrival are invited to an orientation event.

There was no direct evidence that the process as it operated in Pakistan was detrimental to returnees and no respondents directly raised it as an issue. However, discussion with respondents on other issues, suggests it may have had some negative impact as hardship in the early stages of arrival was relatively common (see *Difficulties experienced on return* later in this chapter). This was partly because of delays in setting up a business which could possibly begin sooner if returnees had earlier contact with IOM.

Also, relocation grants provided on departure were frequently spent on items that could have been covered by other elements of reintegration assistance, including

¹² Although they were not asked if they had been as a direct question.

¹³ Home Office (2010), *Research Report 30, The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2004 and 2004 Extension: Monitoring Report*

onward travel, accommodation costs, and setting up a business. Of those interviewed, 13 reported spending at least part of their relocation grant on these items (business set-up most commonly). Returnees may simply have been eager to start their businesses or may have chosen to invest their relocation grant in a business because their immediate needs were met through other means. However, use of relocation grants for these items may also reflect limited opportunity to access the necessary arrangements and funds in time. This might be addressed by earlier contact with IOM and more developed IRPs.

Despite an apparent lack of proactive engagement with recent returnees, IOM Mission staff reported that very few returnees fail to make contact or fail to take up reintegration assistance although the time returnees take to do so varies widely. There was reportedly no clear reason why some returnees make contact early and others wait several months. The IOM monitoring data show that of those who applied to return to Pakistan between August 2008 and end of July 2009, 181 had returned by the end of October 2009 (i.e. three months after the last application date). Of these, 138 (76%) took up reintegration assistance by the end of January 2010 (i.e. at least three months after return).¹⁴ The rate of assistance take-up across all VARRP 2008 returnees was 73 per cent (ranging between 89% in Afghanistan and 29% in Albania in the top ten countries of return).

IOM Mission staff in Pakistan reported that the requirement on returnees to produce extensive documentation relating to their business before funds were released sometimes presented a problem. Mission staff explained that in Pakistan it can be extremely difficult to satisfy administrative requirements established in the UK. They explained, for example, that people do not register vehicles in Pakistan, that bribes are often necessary to obtain relevant paperwork, and that certain forms of registration do not exist. This had not presented an insurmountable barrier to any of the returnees interviewed, but five people did raise it (unprompted) as an issue. For example:

"They should relax their rules about documentation, it would make it much easier for people. Once you are here in Pakistan you need to get certain documents produced, some people demand a lot of money for those."

(Male, aged 32, returned to an urban area).

¹⁴ This was calculated on a different cohort from which the qualitative research was sampled, as it covers a 12-month period and includes those aged 18 or over.

In only one case were these kinds of problems reported to have seriously jeopardised a returnee's ability to establish a business. This respondent explained that:

"I actually thought of giving up...at one point I thought 'I don't want the assistance', I felt dizzy due to all the requests, I thought it might be better to give up."

(Male, aged 38, returned to an urban area).

The flexibility of IOM UK emerged as crucial to overcoming administrative barriers. IOM staff in the UK were reported by Mission staff to be flexible, understanding, willing to consider claims on a case-by-case basis, and to exercise discretion (within the rules and guidelines). Alternative forms of proof, for example, such as affidavits from respected members of a community confirming a business was genuine, were often accepted in replacement of official documentation.

With the exception of the administrative requirements and some issues raised about the limits placed on reintegration assistance (see next section) returnees were very positive about the way in which VARRP assistance had been delivered. In particular, the help and advice provided by IOM officers and the way in which they had been treated by them was highly valued.

Impact and effectiveness of reintegration assistance

Overall, respondents were very positive about the reintegration assistance provided to them and many expressed gratitude for the help. The assistance they received had been crucial to their reintegration, as the majority (24 of the 28) reported they had no other resources or financial support to re-establish themselves in Pakistan (although a couple later mentioned having stayed with relatives on their return). Two respondents had been able to borrow money from friends, one reported that friends had helped him a little and one reported having had savings. Respondents were clear that VARRP reintegration assistance had made an important difference:

"I would have come back to a lot of difficulties if I had just been given a flight back to Pakistan then I wouldn't have had anything in my hands in terms of money. This would have created a lot of problems for me. At least I can live my life properly here."

(Male, aged 28, returned to a rural area).

Some returnees indicated that destitution could have been the alternative for them:

"Without the grant they gave us [to start a business] we would have died of starvation. If I'd gone back I wouldn't have survived."

(Male, aged 60, returned to an urban area).

"If this programme didn't exist then I'd be ruined by now. We'd lost everything... we didn't have anything to return to."

(Male, aged 76, returned to an urban area).

Respondents struggled to identify the most useful element of their reintegration assistance, reflecting that every element of their support package was important. Of the few respondents who were explicit on this issue, eight reported having found the business start-up grant most useful, two the housing assistance, and one the payment of school fees. This broadly reflects the proportion of respondents taking up each of these forms of assistance.

"All of IOM assistance is useful. I mean firstly they gave me money and helped me get back to Pakistan. When I was in the UK I only had so many pounds... I didn't have any relatives here either and if IOM didn't exist then who would have helped me? They purchased my tickets for me and then even gave me money for my household because they knew that when I returned I needed money for my kids... and they've even given me money to make sure that when I get back to my homeland I can earn money and I can feed myself. What I'm trying to say is everything they've done has been good."

(Male, aged 57, returned to a rural area).

None of the respondents reported that the reintegration assistance provided through VARRP had been unhelpful or of little use. Many did, however, question the adequacy of the small business grant and the housing assistance available. Nine respondents had received housing assistance (three months rent paid) and seven expressed the view that three months was not long enough to re-establish oneself and take over the payments.

Of the 32 returnees who had set up or invested in a business, 13 expressed the view (unprompted) that £2,000 was not enough to establish a business capable of generating a living wage. This was particularly true of those who had set up a shop who reported being unable to buy adequate stock, which, in turn, limited the income-generating capacity of the business.

"Prices are so high in Pakistan, £1,500 doesn't do anything for you, you'd need at least £3-4k, I'd be able to run my shop on that, my business would be able to run."

(Male, aged 59, returned to a rural area).

However, IOM Mission staff reported that the UK Government was more generous in its reintegration allowances than other countries participating in AVR programmes, although one did suggest that the upper limit on business start up grants should be increased.

Difficulties experienced on return

The majority of respondents reported some degree of difficulty since returning to Pakistan, with only a small number of cases (five out of thirty) not experiencing any problems. The main difficulties reported related to issues that respondents had previously left Pakistan to escape. There was no evidence that the violence and harassment returnees experienced resulted from them having left Pakistan for the UK and returning through VARRP.

Six respondents referred to general conditions in Pakistan which made them fearful (regular gunfire and violence, for example). Fifteen respondents reported they had received threats (to their life in three cases) and/or experienced harassment or violence. Only one of these respondents reported that the situation was now resolved. Four respondents said they had moved as a result of threats made against them and two said they were currently 'in hiding' from their enemies. Three reported that their ability to run their business had been undermined because they were fearful to be on the premises.

"We're threatened all the time and that's still the case. It is very difficult to get resettled here. Since getting here there's been quite a lot of bombs so it's difficult for me... I'm still being threatened now, I do feel fearful when I leave the house. I rarely leave the house and I try not to go out too far, there's quite a lot of threat currently."

(Male, aged 32, returned to an urban area).

"Since returning we've had to relocate elsewhere because we've got enemies in Pakistan and they found out we were returning... so we did have to leave [name of city] and we can't even meet with our relatives any more, not much anyway, so now we're living in [name of city] and we don't have a permanent address here, we've changed addresses a couple of times"

(Female, aged 24, returned to an urban area).

Despite these difficulties, only two respondents expressed regret about their decision to return.

Seventeen of the 32 respondents reported experiencing financial hardship since returning, including struggling to make ends meet, having nowhere to live and not being able to pay for basic necessities. For some (six of the seventeen), this was attributed to the time gap between returning and accessing reintegration support.

"If the money was deposited into your account straight away then as soon as you got to Pakistan you'd be able to establish your business and get on with things, you can at least make ends meet initially, otherwise when you get here you have to wait three months for your first instalment."

(Male, aged 28, returned to a rural area).

Others described the cause as the time delay between a business being established and actually generating income. Those who invested in existing businesses tended to yield a financial return more quickly than those working in agriculture for example, where income is not generated until crops are harvested or livestock grown.

"My main income is from that [my business], only now am I going to benefit from it. Before then everything's been really tight. Now that we're going to cut the crops I'm going to make some money but before that my circumstances were really difficult, I really struggled to survive."

(Male, aged 55, returned to a rural area).

Many (12 respondents) reported that their business performed poorly and they were not or were only barely generating enough income from their business to cover basic necessities (discussed further below).

The other cause of financial hardship reported by respondents was the cessation of reintegration support such as rent (more commonly) or school fees (mentioned by seven respondents). This proved problematic where businesses were still only providing low levels of income.

"The three months that IOM paid my rent is now up so that comes out of my pocket now and it's really difficult when you've got kids and not much income, you have to pay rent for your accommodation, you have to pay rent for your business...all those expenses add up and are far too much, it's far too much. I'm really struggling [respondent starts crying]."

(Male, aged 62, returned to an urban area).

It should be noted that at interview, respondents had all arrived back in Pakistan within the past 15 months and some had arrived as recently as three months ago. It is, therefore, difficult to draw conclusions about the extent to which these problems will prove to be long-term challenges.

The sustainability of returnees' reintegration

VARRP provides reintegration assistance in order to facilitate sustainable returns. Indicators of sustainability include the capacity of returnees to house and support themselves now and in the longer term, and their continued presence in their country of return (i.e. not having re-migrated). Providing in-kind support to help returnees set up a business or improve their training is thought more likely to result in a sustainable outcome than a cash payment for living expenses, which would quickly be spent. The research found that the assistance being provided was helpful for many returnees, but that factors relating to the country of return raised concerns for the sustainability of their businesses which are their main sources of income.

The majority of returnees interviewed (20 out of 32) expressed an intention to stay and build their business. As one explained:

"My intention is to focus on my business, to develop it and make my future out of it."

(Male, aged 29, returned to a rural area).

Two respondents were considering leaving Pakistan and three explained that, with businesses failing, their future was uncertain. A further seven would not speculate about their future because of a religious conviction that one's fate is determined by Allah.

In the majority of cases, returnees' businesses provided their only source of household income, therefore, the sustainability of their return was highly dependent on their viability. All the returnees reported that the income from their business provided their main source of income and 15 made a point of emphasising that it was their sole income. Only two respondents reported having additional household income (one had a small pension and one did occasional agricultural work to supplement the income from his business).

Many returnees described their current circumstances in terms of basic survival. Only six reported that their business was prospering and reports of barely earning enough to cover essential outgoings were commonplace.

"You can just meet household expenditure and that is with a lot of difficulty"

(Male, aged 55, returned to a rural area).

However, respondents' businesses had generally not been established long and one respondent pointed out that the current climate in Pakistan made it extremely difficult for anyone, not just recent returnees, to prosper.

Although most respondents (20 out of 32) hoped or expected that their business would survive, some were pessimistic about their future financial circumstances. Only eleven thought their income might improve (often expressed as hope rather than expectation), three thought it would remain the same and seven thought it was likely to decrease. The remainder were unable to predict their income trajectory or did not respond to this question.

The majority of respondents had secured stable housing; 27 reported having a permanent place to live¹⁵ and 20 were of the view that their housing was broadly similar to the people around them (only six said it was worse).

Concerns expressed by respondents about the sustainability of their return tended to stem from the difficult economic circumstances in Pakistan. Respondents explained that their own future was closely associated with the situation in Pakistan and pointed to the unpredictability of the national political and economic situation:

"I do want to establish my business here, I want it to prosper here...but the problem is I don't know what's going to happen in Pakistan because of all the problems."

(Male, aged 65, returned to a rural area).

"I think that Pakistan isn't going to have a very good future because of what's happening here so it's not going to be better, it's going to get worse. Business is being affected quite a lot by the bombs and people can't afford things anymore either. Prices have risen generally for food and more durable things but income isn't increasing to meet the price rises."

(Male, aged 25, returned to a rural area).

One man explained that his home and business were close to the Indian border where there is sometimes firing and *"the tension between India and Pakistan could flare up at any time"*. As a result, he was unsure how long he could remain safely in his current place of work and residence.

¹⁵ Respondents interpreted the term 'permanent' in different ways. Some will have been referring to owning their own home and others to having somewhere stable to live. This may have been rented accommodation or with relatives on a long-term basis.

Although many respondents were not (or not yet) earning more than a basic wage from their businesses, IOM officers in the UK and in Pakistan were firm in their view that grants for small business set-up were the form of reintegration assistance most likely to facilitate a successful and sustainable return. As reported above, respondents also tended to view this as the most useful assistance they had received and that without it destitution may have ensued. Whatever difficulties respondents were experiencing, it was clear that their situation would have been more fragile and uncertain were it not for VARRP support.

Annex I Details of the process for accessing and interviewing VARRP returnees

A sample of 45 returnees had been drawn purposively from a sampling frame comprising 87 adult returnees to Pakistan who had applied for VARRP between August 2008 and May 2009 and for whom telephone contact details were held.

IOM Mission staff in Pakistan made efforts to contact all 45 returnees by telephone and secure agreement to participate in the evaluation. The evaluation team provided Mission staff with a written brief to guide their discussion with potential respondents. Using this guidance, Mission staff explained the purpose and aims of the evaluation to potential respondents, provided them with information about the evaluation team and what the interview would entail (length, topics covered, who they would be speaking to). It was also stressed to potential respondents that participation in the evaluation was entirely voluntary and refusal would not affect the assistance they received from IOM. Potential respondents were reassured that the interviews were confidential and anonymous and that they could terminate the interview at any time. An information sheet in English and Urdu was subsequently sent to all respondents reiterating this information and providing contact details for evaluation team members and IOM staff should respondents wish to make contact or have any queries before or after their interview.

Those who agreed to participate were asked to specify the language they wanted the interview to be conducted in and the most convenient time/day/date for the researcher to contact them. This process generated a list of 36 returnees.

Of these, 32 were subsequently contacted by a researcher and interviewed by telephone, in the language of their choice and a time of their convenience, over a two-week period in November 2009. Information about the evaluation and reassurances about confidentiality were reiterated again before each interview. All interviews were recorded (with consent), translated and transcribed verbatim.

The resources and timescale of the evaluation demanded that telephone rather than face-to-face interviews were used. It was recognised, however, that telephone interviews are not an ideal means through which to collect in-depth qualitative data. There are ethical considerations associated with the use of telephone rather than face-to-face interviews with potentially vulnerable groups, or when discussing personal issues. It is more difficult, for example, to establish trust and rapport, to put the respondent at ease, to make an ongoing assessment of the impact of the interview on the respondent, and to organise debriefing support. Also, because rapport is harder to establish on the telephone, respondents tend to tire quicker and so telephone interviews need to be kept relatively brief, posing a challenge if in-depth qualitative data is required.

In an effort to balance the practical and ethical considerations against the demands of the evaluation for qualitative data about returnees experiences of VARRP the interviews were kept short (25 to 35 minutes) and structured but used primarily open-ended questions. Prompts were used, and a few key questions were explored in depth (for example, 'Why did you decide to apply for VARRP?') but respondents' answers were not always explored extensively.

Demographic profile of the sample

The profile characteristics of the final sample of 32 returnees are presented in Tables A1 to A5. A total of 14 respondents had applied for VARRP while resident in an Immigration Removal Centre.

Table A1 Age profile of sample of returnees*

Age	n	%
16-24	6	19
25-34	10	31
35-44	2	6
45-54	4	12
55-64	8	25
65+	2	6

* Totals may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Table A2 Sex of sample of returnees

Sex	n	%
Male	25	78
Female	7	22

Table A3 Location of sample of returnees

Location	n	%
Urban	18	56
Rural	14	44

Table A4 Family status on return

Status	n	%
Single	20	62
Family	12	38

Table A5 Period of return

When returned	n	%
First 5 months of 2008 VARRP year	17	53
Second 5 months of 2008 VARRP year	15	47

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