

REINTEGRATION SERVICES FOR RETURNEES AND SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN TO ALBANIA

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Abstract

With the deepening of the economic crises in Europe, return migration to Albania has significantly increased. Empirical evidence suggests that returning migrants may have exceeded by now 100,000 and more are about to return to Albania from Greece, in light of the worsening economic conditions there. Greece has been the main destination country for circular Albanian migrants with the majority of migrants coming from poor families from rural areas. Those who return do so in their villages of origin and try to either invest in local agricultural economies or to internally migrate to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities. The challenge for authorities in Albania is to create an environment that encourages reintegration of returnees through actions that address unemployment and avoid re-migration, while maximizing the development impact of migration. The paper presents the findings of an in-depth analysis of reintegration services made available to returnees in Albania, and their impact on sustainability of return. It argues that in the absence of efficient reintegration support, returning migrants are not able to either realize their potential, or to re-integrate successfully, which leads to a less sustainable return to Albania. Returnees may also be exposed to high vulnerability and risk becoming a social burden for local communities where they settle if no appropriate actions are taken to address their situation. The paper provides specific recommendations for national and local stakeholders on how to address challenges linked to reintegration of returnees and their sustainable return.

Keywords: *Returnee, reintegration, sustainable return, local development, vulnerability*

Introduction

Two decades after massive migration of its citizens to Western European countries, migration flows from Albania have decreased due to increasing stability and economic progress in the country. Yet, given its circular nature, migration from Albania continues to take place, including return migration as part of the cycle. The latter has in particular negatively affected the Albanian migrants who live in Greece, lowering their chances to find a job and renew their work permit, leading therefore in many cases to return to Albania. According to the projections of the Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade (ACIT), in the period 2007-2012 between 18% to 22% of the Albanian migrants in Greece equivalent to approximately 180,000 individuals, have returned to Albania (ACIT, 2012). Given the circular nature of migration from Albania and the effect of visa liberalisation on mobility of the Albanian citizens in the EU Schengen area as of December 2010, the propensity to migrate and consequently to return, remains high (European Movement Albania [EMA], 2011). Strong national capacities are therefore required in preparing for future challenges of labour mobility that relate also to return and reintegration of migrants.

Those who return, in most of the cases do so in their villages of origin and try to either invest in local agricultural economies or to internally migrate to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities. As of 2000, some direct reintegration assistance for returnees has been provided by international organizations, and civil society actors mainly in the form of resettlement support, and in the framework of return programmes implemented by EU countries. The Government support to reintegration of returnees in Albania consists primarily of orientation assistance to returnees to access available public services such as health, education, employment, and so forth. Yet, field evidence shows that returnees demand specific support to access labour market in Albania, public education, vocational training, health and housing services, along entrepreneurship support services, and not simply orientation assistance. Such demand questions the efficiency of the current reintegration support mechanism in the country (IOM, 2013). The demand is also overwhelming for public service providers who struggle everyday with their limited capacities and resources to efficiently perform under the given mandate. Three years from the start of implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan there is still confusion among returnees as well as among public institutions as to what should *reintegration support* entail, and who should benefit from it. Such confusion is clearly reflected in the legal framework of emigration, return and reintegration in Albania. The discrepancies between services offered and those demanded point to the need for a thorough analysis of the reintegration support mechanism in Albania as to advise future reforms. Without appropriate reintegration services in place, the SMs may soon lose their credibility, returnees may again tend to re-emigrate, and the development impact of return migration in Albania may remain largely unexploited.

This paper argues that there is a need to re-determine the scope and content of the reintegration support mechanism in Albania as to be able to address the needs of returnees and the country within the given local and national capacities. It presents the findings of an in-depth analysis of reintegration services made available to returnees in Albania, and their impact on sustainability of return. It argues that in the absence of efficient reintegration support, returning migrants are not able to either realize their potential, or to re-integrate successfully, which leads to a less sustainable return to Albania. The paper also argues that there is a need to replace the present minimalist approach of viewing reintegration support as in functioning of fulfilling basic needs of the returnee and his/her family only. Every single intervention in the area of return migration should have in mind the development impact of

migration and its utilization for the development of local communities where returning migrants settle. If return migration is utilized to its best, it means that local communities will be more developed, better served with public and private services and consequently returnees and their families will be better off in Albania and will not feel the need to emigrate. The paper provides specific recommendations for national and local stakeholders on how to address challenges linked to reintegration of returnees and their sustainable return.

The paper presents some of the findings of my work in progress under the doctorate programme of the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Tirana. The dissertation project aims to undertake a thorough analysis of migration policies on reintegration of Albanian citizens, relevant legislation and social reintegration services, as to be able to recommend reforms in the current reintegration system in Albania.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this paper is based on qualitative methods of research, consisting primarily of document reviews and analysis. Available statistics provided by public institutions and previous researcher works in the field of return migration were used as input to the analysis. Both, primary and secondary data were used; primary data was gathered through direct contact with various government entities at the central and local level responsible for the implementation of the Reintegration Action Plan and through IOM Tirana. Factual evidence collected during capacity building activities of Migration Counters throughout the Albania I have delivered in the period 2010-2013 on behalf of IOM Tirana. The analysis in this paper reflects also the conclusions of the round table on mid-term review of the Reintegration Action Plan organized jointly organized by IOM and the Ministry of Labour on 15 July 2013 with participation of Migration Counters in all regions of Albania (12) and all responsible focal points of the ministries and institutions as defined in the Action Plan of the Reintegration Strategy. The secondary data were collected from various public documents and archival records, formal studies and reports related to the research topic. A ‘content analysis’ of the data was undertaken by answering questions such as: why do Albanian migrants return (casual analysis); what is the response of government institutions to return migration (obligation/responsibility analysis); what challenges are they facing (obstacles/gap analysis), as well as what improvements are required (exploring and analyzing new interventions, services, activities and cooperation).

Definitions applied

The definitions of returnee, return migration and reintegration applied in this paper are the one introduced by IOM (IOM, 2011, p.82) as applied also by the Government of Albania in the Reintegration Strategy.

- *A returnee is any person returning to his/her country of origin, in the course of the last year, after having been an international migrant (for a minimum of one year) in another country. Return may be permanent or temporary. It may be independently decided by the migrant or forced by unexpected circumstances.*
- *Reintegration represents re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or a process, e.g. of a migrant into the society of his or her country of origin or habitual residence. Reintegration entails three aspects: cultural, economic and social.*

Results of the analysis and discussion

➤ *Reintegration proves efficient when elaborated at different stages and according to individual needs of returnees as well as the country needs*

Reintegration as a concept has several different components, social economic, political and cultural; those are being measured in relation to several and diverse indicators such as access to housing, health care, education, etc. Nevertheless, the concept of reintegration may differ between origin and destination countries (IOM, 2003). If the origin countries view reintegration in terms of securing a job and thus an income that satisfies their needs, receiving countries may view reintegration in terms of sustainability of return. Because of the difficulty to measure the objectiveness of this link it is advisable to divide the concepts of reintegration and sustainability as such. But, on the other hand it is very important to explore the effect of reintegration on sustainability. The economic situation of the returnee (employment or unemployment) and his social and family situation have an important impact on the reintegration capacity and on the decision whether to make the best out of the circumstances or turn to the alternative of re-migrating. Beside this situation the circumstances may also not permit the returnee to valorise skills developed during the migration or to maintain social links, influencing in this way the decision to re-migrate.

The same analysis can be developed for several reintegration components, yet, what is more important is to understand that the *reintegration has to be elaborated into different stages, and an external assistance is needed at each stage in order to ensure the sustainability of return*. King. R (2000) arguments that reintegration entails social change and adaptation challenges (cultural, economic and social). Citing (Gmelch, 1980, p.140), King. R (2000) also proposed that the evidence of reintegration difficulties for returnees could be also examined under two perspectives: *etic* and *emic*. The first examines the objective criteria of reintegration, the extent to which the migrants have found jobs and satisfactory accommodation, developed personal relationships, participated in community organizations and so forth. The emic perspective focuses on migrants' own perceptions of their adjustment and to the extent to which they feel the homeland satisfied self-defined needs. In reality migrants' return is often accompanied by considerable ambivalence. Once, home migrants are expected and indeed are under pressure to behave as "migrants: and not to revert to former roles. They must display their "success" and are virtually forced to do so. Local institutions and customs are built up around return migration. King R. also argued that reintegration entails a chain of affects associated with return migration on wages, employment, saving and investment. Quoting Ghosh (2000) he called our attention that a useful distinction should be made between the economic welfare of the individual returning migrant or family and the aggregate contribution that return migration makes to the country, region and community of origin. According to him the number of returnees, duration of absence from the country, destination of the return, social class, and nature of the training received abroad, how the return is organized, may all adversely influence reintegration home.

In sum the economic benefits of return migration are chimeric. Personal prosperity may be achieved by some, but this makes the distribution of income in the sending society more unequal (Lipton, 1980). Nevertheless that in theory migration can be a real stimulus to home country development because it enhances chances for local development through transfer of knowhow and technology, investment of accumulated capital or savings, and so forth. When reflecting on the theory and practice of return and reintegration in the context of Albania, it must be acknowledged that the provision of reintegration support has primarily been demanded by the process of Albania's integration in the European Union and did not come in

response of demand from returnees, even though such demand has started as of early 2000 when the first programmes of assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes were implemented between EU member states and Albania. This certainly has impacted the way in which reintegration support is delivered today in Albania and predisposition to deliver care services for returnees as it will be shown latter in this paper. The current national policies in Albania clearly state the aim of delivering reintegration support as a way of guarantying sustainable return (Qeveria Shqiptare, 2010, p.3). However, a multi stage approach of the reintegration support is not yet being applied and direct service provision according to returnee needs is very limited.

➤ ***The provision of reintegration support in Albania is limited to “orientation services that facilitate reintegration”***

In 2010, in view of the financial crisis and the potential high returns to Albania, the Government of Albania developed the *Reintegration Strategy for Returning Albanian Citizens (2005-2010)* and it's Action Plan as a more concerted approach to providing support to returning migrants. These policy documents limits the provisions on reintegration support to the establishment of an information and referral system to existing public social services that could “help” migrants reintegrate. The core element of the referral system is Sportele Migracioni - SMs (Migration Counters) within the regional and local employment offices (36 in total), that assesses the reintegration needs of returning migrants and refers them to existing public services, after a standard interview is conducted by the SM specialist in order to identify the most pressing needs of the returnee. The registration at SMs by returnees is conducted on a voluntary basis. The SMs should be acknowledged as a hub for information and orientation towards the socio-labour and public care services but also to the private and the third-sector ones. Against all expectations that SMs will deliver direct reintegration services to returnees, this is not possible, because of the many components that reintegration entails, and which require the intervention of many public and non public service providers, and not simply that of SMs. The guiding principle of the reintegration strategy became ‘the avoidance of positive discrimination for the non- emigrant population, implying that “reintegration support” should consist mainly of improving information made available to returned Albanian citizens on existing social services accessible to all Albanian citizens under the Albanian legal framework. Consequently, the common faced question whether Sportele Migracioni are reintegrating returnees is not realistic and should be replaced with the question whether SMs are *facilitating* reintegration of returnees in compliance with the provisions of the strategy?

The official statistics of the National Employment Service (NES) clearly indicate that the number of returnees registering at Sportele Migracioni have significantly increased each year, from 544 in 2010, to 725 in 2011 and 1536 in 2012 (Ministria e Punës, 2013). Yet, an accurate profile of returnees has not been elaborated; however by analysing the NES data it is possible to build a generic profile of returnees. During 2012, most of the returns took place from Greece (86%); the majority of returnees have returned with their families (74%) and 79.1% admit to have the intention of staying long in Albania. The main reason for return among all registered returnees was lack of employment in the destination country (88%), followed by lack of documentation as the second main reason (2%) and the desire to invest at home (1%). The majority of returnees belonged to the age group 25- 40 years old; 36 % of them have attended the high school, 17% professional high school and only 6% have completed university studies (NES, 2013). A total of 1.752 returnees are now registered as unemployed job seekers against 912 that were registered in 2011, and at least 15 % of returnees have benefited of economic aid.

In terms of services being provided to them, SMs have provided career guidance and job brokering to 65.4 % of returnees that were searching for a job. This is the only reintegration service that is directly delivered by the SMS. The latter were established at the regional and local labour offices primarily on the assumption that support to access labour market is one of the key elements of the reintegration support, which in fact proves to be true as evidenced by returns in 2012. Thus, SM specialists are employment specialists who have been trained on migration issues and on referral support for returnees. It is important to highlight that over the time the SMs have taken more responsibilities and at present they assist three categories of migrant, *potential emigrants* from Albania who opt for regular labour migration schemes with European and non-European destination countries; *returnees* as described in this paper, and labour *immigrants* in Albania. The central theme however in the services delivered remains “labour migration”. But are other categories of returnees integrated in the labour market?

What is evident is that returnees who register at SMs are generally benefiting from all employment related services provided by the local and regional employment offices. Having said this, it cannot be concluded that returnees have better access to the labour market, because once they try to access the market, they face all problems and challenges as other Albanian citizens do, which include, the inability to match the offer and demand for labour market, high informality, lack of recognitions of qualifications and skills obtained in migration, etc. For returnees it is not always simple to understand the social and economic transformation of the country of origin, as well as changes in the labour market. As part of career guidance services, returnees are also referred to vocational training (16% of the returnees for 2012), however one should highlight that at present the public vocational training centres lack capacities to address the specific needs of the returning migrants in enhancing their entrepreneurial skills, or applying the knowledge which they received abroad to the particular local context. It is important to highlight also that in terms of employment services the SMs largely fail to assist returnees in rural areas. In national statistics returnees in rural areas are considered as fully employed by reason of the family having a plot of land. Once they are considered as self-employed in agriculture, they cannot claim unemployment benefits or economic aid, or other job brokering services, unless they declare as not living in rural areas any longer. Finally, it is important to highlight that since their establishment, the SMs have received capacity building support in the framework of various interventions implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and various international and local organizations, yet there is a need for further capacity building on service provision for returnees (S. Banushi, personal communication, March 2013).

An important element of the support services has also been assistance to access education for children of returnees (registration in the education system, recognitions procedures for diplomas obtained abroad, etc). A good part of returnees require support to access health services (32.29 % during 2012), yet the public health system in Albania suffers from poor quality of service, poor infrastructure and high corruption of services, which certainly has an impact on reintegration of returnees, who return from countries where health services are guaranteed at high standards. A specific aspect of social welfare concerns the pension and social security rights of returnees. Despite the good will of the Government to negotiate with the main destination countries on transfer of social security and pension payments for returning Albanian migrants, to Albania no progress has been made.

Other referral services include also orientation to start up or grow a business (3% of returnees during 2012); however the SM specialists themselves have limited information on legal and regulatory frameworks of SMEs in Albania, which limits their support and orientation to business set up for returnees. On the other hand, returnees, who come back with the intention to invest in a productive activity, might not be able to: correctly study the local market and define a business plan valid on the medium term; evaluate his own entrepreneurial skills; evaluate the real possibility for the local context to absorb innovative ideas; evaluate the profitability of the properties accumulated over the years. The European practice shows that in general countries of origin try to gear the potential of returnees toward the wider needs of the national economy, for example through distribution of returnees in less developed areas of the country. Koser K. (2000) noted that in the case of Greece a lump sum was paid to those returnees that settled in the rural areas. Another method applied in Germany was to concentrate returnees in particular sectors of the economy, for example incentives to encourage self-employment in agriculture, trade and research. Yet, in the context of Albania, the efforts to promote returnee investments toward local development are hampered by the lack of local development strategies and plans.

Beside the establishment of SMs throughout the country, the wish of the Government to ‘materialise’ the reintegration support was also made possible through the amendment of the legal framework on reintegration, namely the Law Nr.9668, dated 18.12.2006 "On the immigration of Albanian citizens for employment purposes" as the key legal act that regulates the migration of Albanian citizens. The law is meant to regulate the regular process of emigration of Albanian citizens for employment or vocational training purposes abroad, and their return and reintegration in the country. However, since its adoption in 2006 until 2011, this law remained unimplemented due to a number of ambiguities, gaps and controversy in its scope and expectations. On 3 March 2011, the Law no. 9668 was amended by Law No. 10389 in accordance with measure 1 of the Action Plan and Reintegration Strategy in an attempt to legitimize reintegration services for all categories of returnees. In order to provide reintegration services two orders of the Minister of Labour were approved on the content and procedure of obtaining the *Emigrant Status* and the form and content of the *Register of Emigrants*. In fact, the 2011 amendments have failed to address the real problems of this law that of a lack of clear scope, and clear law subjects. According to Article 13 of the law, upon registration in the Emigrant Registry, the returnee obtains the Emigration Status and can automatically benefit from employment promotion programmes and form free public vocational training courses for returning migrants. In this way the law discriminates positively against those who have not emigrated, and who should benefit vocational services against payment. Article 28 (as amended) imposes the Ministry of Labour with the drafting and approval of programs active and passive employment and vocational training in the country for returning migrants with economic problems "and support to benefit from the provision of economic aid. Yet, the law or its bylaws do not specify the definition of emigrant with economic problems, because any individual may consider themselves as having economic problems, consequently the application of the bylaws in practice remains to be analyzed. Moreover, if taken into account that in 2011, at least 1,536 returnees were registered by SMs, the cost of including this category in economic assistance is very high. In terms of vulnerability, there is a need to clearly define vulnerability and special services in support of vulnerable categories which at present remain disadvantaged (such as Roma, minors, etc). On the assumption that vulnerable categories are treated through specific programmatic interventions, very often vulnerable categories such as Roma in migration or unaccompanied minors find themselves as not receiving any protection or care service.

Finally, there is no appraisal system for satisfaction of returnees from current services, which makes it difficult to assess whether such support may have helped migrants reintegrate back home. As evidenced during a round table organized by IOM and the Ministry of Labour on 15 July 2013, the Reintegration Action Plan is being implemented at the level of 95%, yet returnees demand reintegration support.

Conclusions and recommendations

For political and utilitarian reasons, there is a need to guarantee reintegration services for returnees, in order to facilitate their reinsertion in their communities of return and to support their sustainable return. All this process is expected to have its positive influence in the process of Albania' integration in the EU; yet the driving force of progress should be found in the need to progress care and welfare in Albania for all categories of population that demand it, including here the various categories of returning migrants.

It is evident that there is a political commitment to reintegrate returning migrants, however there is a lack of clear vision as to where should reintegration of returnees lead to. The SMS remain an important hub for information and orientation to public and private services for returnees; however they remain a tool for only facilitating reintegration. Successful reintegration will become a reality when needs of returnees and the country will be identified, and reflected into a concrete strategy of intervention. Only then, the specific public authorities involved at the national and local level will be able to design a multi-step response to reintegration needs according to their area of expertise, in compliance with their mandate (education, employment, housing, etc), and over the necessary periods of time that are required.

In line with what Piperno F. points out, key services for migrants, as those regarding pensions, social security and job inclusion, must respond to the needs of both people in loco and people abroad. This has an impact on the way services are organised, structured and promoted, and it is certainly a valid argument in terms of reintegration support in the country of origin too. Therefore, the government should continue its efforts to negotiate specific agreements with destination countries on issues of interest for the migrants (such as labour agreements, transfer of pensions, etc) (CESPI, 2013).

Similar to the Greek or other European countries' experiences, the Government of Albania should encourage the development aspect of return migration, by eliminating the minimalist approach of viewing reintegration support as in functioning of fulfilling basic needs of the returnee and his/her family only (through the provision of income, housing, etc). Every single intervention in the area of return migration should have in mind the development impact of migration and its utilization for the development of local communities where returning migrants settle. If return migration is utilized to its best, it means that local communities will be more developed, better served with public and private services and consequently returnees and their families will be better off in Albania and will not feel the need to emigrate. Local development may also be an important reason to continue maintaining links with destination country and trying to explore further avenues for business between the two countries. Elaboration of local development plans will be essential to all efforts for linking migration with development in the context of Albania.

Finally, the legal framework governing migration of Albanian citizens and especially reintegration services should be revised as to adequately address the dynamics of Albanian migration, to clearly define the rights and obligations of the citizens and the requirements for

specific services for those who wish to migrate and those who return from migration. Moreover, the legal framework should clearly define vulnerability and special services in support of vulnerable categories.

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