WP4 contribution to d9.4 and D9.5: policy brief on how non-EU and diasporic (counter)discourses should be taken into consideration by policy makers in EU+ and non-EU+ countries

Beyond listening: Aligning Return Policy with Reintegration Realities

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FAiR
Finding Agreement in Return

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Beyond Listening: Aligning Return Policies with Reintegration Realities

General Policy Brief D9.4

August, 2026

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HIGHLIGHTS

FAiR research in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye shows that return policy is often organised around administrative categories, while reintegration depends on how prepared people are for return and on the social, economic and institutional conditions they encounter afterwards.

Four policy shifts are needed:

1. **Beyond consultation to co-production:** mobilise returnees' knowledge to shape policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
2. **Make preparedness the organising principle for support** so that the level and type of assistance reflect people's actual needs and capacity to prepare.
3. **Build and connect local reintegration systems:** link pre-return preparedness to sustained, locally grounded support after arrival.
4. **Measure reintegration realities over time**, not only return and assistance outputs, and use the evidence to adapt policy and programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Everything is predictable in Europe, but not upon return.

While return is governed through procedures, agreements, timelines, and assistance packages, reintegration is experienced as far less predictable. This was one of the clearest lessons emerging from FAiR research with returnees in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Türkiye. Returnees face economic insecurity, social pressure, stigma, family expectations, weak local services, and uneven access to support.

This gap matters. Return policy is designed around return modalities and administrative categories – such as voluntary, assisted or forced return – yet reintegration unfolds through lived realities that do not fit neatly into them. FaiR research shows that preparedness is a one important bridge between return policy and reintegration realities: it is shaped by the time and agency people have to prepare, the information and resources available to them, and the social relationships they can draw on. But preparedness alone does not determine reintegration outcomes. These also depend on the social, economic and institutional conditions people encounter after return.

This is particularly relevant as the EU seeks to strengthen return effectiveness and implement its Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. FAiR findings suggest that effectiveness should be judged not only by whether return takes place, but also by whether people are adequately prepared and whether the conditions they encounter after return enable viable reintegration.

It is also a question of discourse. How return is framed shapes which problems policy sees, what it measures, and whose knowledge counts as evidence. When return is primarily narrated as a managed process, returnees can appear as cases to process or beneficiaries to assist, rather than as actors whose experiences reveal whether policies actually work after arrival. FAiR's analysis of dominant and counter-discourses helps reveal what these policy frames leave out — and why moving beyond listening requires returnees' knowledge to shape policy itself.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS: FOUR POLICY FRAMES THAT FAIR CHALLENGES

This brief asks how European Union policymakers can use this knowledge to strengthen preparedness and create more viable reintegration pathways by grounding policy in returnees' voices and local realities.

Drawing across the narratives and discourses identified through FAiR research, this brief synthesises four recurring policy frames that are particularly consequential for reintegration. These frames matter as they shape what policy makes visible, whose knowledge counts as evidence, and how support is designed. Taken together, they help explain why an administratively organised return process can still lead to highly uncertain reintegration outcomes.

At A Glance: What Dominant Policy Narratives Can Obscure

Across these frames lies a broader managerial logic: return is easier for policy to organise, categorise and measure than reintegration**.**

Dominant policy frame	What FAiR evidence makes visible
Returnees as cases or beneficiaries, rather than knowledge holders	Lived experience, agency and returnees' knowledge of what works
Return modality as the organising category for support	Differences in preparedness, agency, vulnerability and need
Reintegration as an assistance package	Local systems, public services and structural constraints
Success as administrative outputs	Long-term, multidimensional reintegration outcomes

1. Returnees can become cases to manage rather than knowledge-holders

Across administrative and humanitarian sources, return is often framed as a process to be organised through legal agreements, procedures, eligibility criteria and assistance packages. This makes return administratively legible, but gives less space to returnees' knowledge of what happens after arrival. FAiR research shows that returnee narratives foreground economic insecurity, stigma, housing constraints, psychosocial strain, debt, family pressure and barriers to services. Yet these experiences can remain marginal to policy design or be treated as illustrations rather than evidence for reform.

What this obscures: Returnees possess knowledge about where support fails, what barriers persist after arrival and what forms of assistance are useful in practice.

2. Return modality can become a proxy for preparedness and need

Return modality often structures eligibility for and intensity of assistance. Yet whether someone returns voluntarily, through an assisted programme or by force does not reliably indicate how prepared they are or what they will need after arrival. FAiR research shows that people with less agency over return may have less time, information and resources to prepare, while also arriving with significant vulnerabilities.

What this obscures: Administrative status does not capture preparedness, vulnerability or need.

3. Reintegration can be treated as an assistance package rather than a local system

Reintegration support is often organised through time-bound programmes and individual assistance packages. Yet returnees ultimately depend on local housing, healthcare, education, employment, social protection, family and community networks. In some contexts, these services are weak, fragmented or absent altogether. Where they exist, return programmes may be poorly connected to them.

What this obscures: Individual preparedness cannot compensate for absent or inaccessible local systems and structural constraints.

4. Administrative outputs can stand in for reintegration success

Return programmes are often monitored through measurable administrative outputs: departures, people assisted, services delivered or grants distributed. These indicators matter, but they say little about whether people are able to rebuild viable lives over time. FAiR research points instead to reintegration as multidimensional and non-linear, shaped by economic security, social relationships, psychosocial wellbeing and community conditions.

What this obscures: A completed assistance package does not demonstrate sustainable reintegration.

BOX 1: POLICY LENSES THAT CAN SUPPORT BETTER POLICY

FAiR research also identifies alternative and counter-discourses that can help bridge the gap between policy frameworks and lived reintegration realities:

- **Rights-oriented perspectives** highlights dignity, fairness, and protection, including for people with limited agency over their return.
- **Solidarity discourse** makes social relationships, community support and the wider conditions of reintegration more visible.
- **Development-transnational discourse** recognises returnees' skills, aspirations and potential contributions, rather than viewing them only through needs or vulnerability.
- **Government accountability discourse** frames reintegration as a public and institutional responsibility, rather than placing responsibility primarily on individual returnees, their households or communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Move beyond listening: co-produce return and reintegration policy with returnees

Returnees may be consulted as beneficiaries, but they are rarely treated as knowledge-holders whose experience can shape policy decisions. Yet they have direct insight into where return and reintegration policies break down in practice — from gaps in information and services to stigma, labour market barriers and psychosocial needs. **Moving beyond consultation means creating mechanisms through which this knowledge can influence programme design, implementation and adaptation.**

Policy actions:

- Establish returnee advisory mechanisms at national and municipal levels, with representation reflecting different return experiences and profiles.
- Include returnees and returnee)led organisations in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, with clear opportunities to influence decisions.
- Create trusted, accessible and where needed anonymous feedback and complaint mechanisms, and establish clear procedures for acting on what they reveal.
- Support returnee-led organisations and peer networks as partners in service design and reintegration support.
- Close the feedback loop by communicating how returnees' contributions have informed changes to policies or programmes.

2. Make preparedness - not return modality - the organising principle for support

Reintegration support often follows return modality and standardised assistance packages, despite major differences in how prepared people are for return and what support they need afterwards. FAiR findings show that preparedness is shaped by the time and agency people have to plan, the information they receive, the resources and social networks they can draw on, and the circumstances in which return takes place. These factors do not map neatly onto categories such as voluntary, assisted or forced return. People with little control over the timing or conditions of return may be among the least prepared, yet may also have access to less support. Assistance should therefore respond to preparedness, vulnerability and need rather than return modality alone.

Policy actions:

- Assess preparedness before return, including time to prepare, information, resources, housing plans, social networks, health and immediate livelihood prospects.
- Reassess needs after arrival, recognising that circumstances and available support may differ from what was anticipated before return.
- Ensure eligibility and intensity of support reflect preparedness, vulnerability and need rather than return modality alone.

- Provide flexible, tiered support pathways that can combine livelihood, health, education, family and protection support according to individual needs.
- Train staff to assess individual preparedness and needs rather than relying primarily on administrative return categories.
- Provide pre-return information, counselling, documentation support, service referrals and opportunities to plan for housing, livelihoods, health and family needs, regardless of return modality.

3. Build and connect local reintegration systems: link pre-return preparedness to sustained support after arrival

Reintegration happens locally and over time, but the systems needed to support it are often fragmented, under-resourced or, in some contexts, largely absent. Return assistance may be short-term, externally designed and poorly connected to public services. Even people who are well prepared for return can struggle where housing, healthcare, livelihoods, psychosocial support or referral mechanisms are inaccessible or unavailable. Policy should therefore connect pre-return planning to existing local services where they function, while investing in local capacity and coordination where they do not.

Policy actions:

- Link reintegration programmes to mainstream public services, including healthcare, education, social protection, housing, and employment services.
- Develop structured referral pathways connecting pre-departure planning with post-return services
- Strengthen municipal and local-service capacities and ensure adequate, sustained financing for reintegration
- Establish local coordination mechanisms connecting government, municipalities, NGOs, service providers, returnee organisations and communities.
- Fund longer-term follow-up beyond initial assistance, adapting its duration and intensity to individual needs and local conditions.

4. Measure reintegration realities, not only return and assistance outputs

Return policy is often measured through administrative outputs — whether return took place, how many people received assistance, or whether planned services were delivered. These measures are important, but they do not show whether people are able to rebuild viable lives after return. FAiR research shows that reintegration is multidimensional, non-linear and shaped by changing economic, social, psychosocial and community conditions. Monitoring should therefore follow reintegration outcomes over time and use returnees' experiences to identify where policies and programmes need to adapt.

Policy actions:

- Track reintegration outcomes over time and across economic, social, psychosocial and community dimensions.

- Combine indicators with returnees' own assessments of their reintegration, including whether support remains relevant as circumstances change.
- Establish participatory local planning forums bringing together returnees, municipalities, service providers, civil society and community actors to review reintegration outcomes, identify emerging barriers and agree on adaptations to local services and programmes
- Use these forums as recurring monitoring and learning mechanisms, ensuring that findings from returnees' experiences are translated into concrete changes in referral pathways, service provision and programme design.
- Build regular reviews points into reintegration programmes so that findings trigger adjustments
- Share learning across institutions and countries while recognising that reintegration conditions differ across local contexts.

CONCLUSION

Return policy cannot eliminate the uncertainty that accompanies reintegration, but it can avoid creating additional uncertainty through rigid categories, fragmented support and short policy horizons. The way return is framed matters because it shapes what policy sees, what it measures and whose knowledge counts. FAiR research shows that viable reintegration depends both on what people return with — including time, information, resources and agency — and on what they return to: functioning services, social support and local opportunities. Moving beyond listening means treating returnees' experiences as evidence that can shape policy, support and learning. Sustainable reintegration therefore requires policy to organise not only return itself, but the conditions that enable people to rebuild viable lives after arrival.

REFERENCES

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CONTACT

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ABOUT THE FAIR PROJECT

The Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) project aims to strengthen the governance of return migration in the EU, addressing the legitimacy issues around return migration policies and alternatives. The project contributes to generating new insights into the factors and processes that either foster or impede the legitimacy and effectiveness of related policies. The initiative places the perspectives of non-EU realities centre stage and brings together multidisciplinary expertise from academic, policy research, governmental, and migrant advocacy organisations across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. This policy brief is based on qualitative data collected by the Samuel Hall research team through interviews, focus groups, validation workshops and corpus analysis in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye.