RETURNEE VOICES MATTERS: TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE RETURN POLICIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Return and reintegration policies often fail to reflect the lived realities of returnees. As a result, many face exclusion, stigma and poverty upon return, and some feel compelled to migrate again even when they wish to reintegrate. The FAiR project examined how public narratives and policy discourses shape these outcomes and identifies ways to make return policies more inclusive and effective.[1]

The research, conducted in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye, supports three core arguments:

- **Narratives** – specific stories and frames used by individuals, media, policymakers and communities to talk about return (e.g. *return is difficult,* or *returnees contribute to development*) – shape perceptions of return, including whether it is seen as legitimate. However, they seldom reflect returnees' actual experiences.
- **Discourses** – broader, more structural ways of thinking that shape these stories — refer to the underlying logics, assumptions and power dynamics that influence how return is interpreted and acted upon. These discourses frequently silence returnees, making them invisible in policymaking and reinforcing their dehumanisation.
- **Alternative**, **locally grounded discourses can foster more inclusive and effective return policies**. For example, a development-transnational discourse highlights the skills and contributions of returnees and diaspora communities, enabling more participatory approaches.

Overall, the findings show that return policies are strengthened when they draw on discourses originating in countries of origin and meaningfully incorporate returnees' own perspectives. This enhances policy legitimacy, supports reintegration and increases the credibility and impact of European return initiatives. To this end, this policy brief offers concrete recommendations to translate these insights into practice for EU institutions, governments in countries of origin, municipalities, CSOs, and IOs.

[1] Samuel Hall, Koç University, and Erasmus University Rotterdam (2024), *Discourse and Policies: Silencing Returnees and the Need for More Inclusive Return Policies*, FAiR working paper. Available here.

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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 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.

INTRODUCTION

Based on new research examining how discourses in non-EU countries shape return, readmission and reintegration policies, FAiR proposes novel approaches that more meaningfully incorporate returnees' voices and perspectives into policy design.

The research was led by Samuel Hall and combined qualitative fieldwork with corpus analysis (large-scale analysis of relevant sources). Fieldwork was conducted in Georgia (Tbilisi), Iraq (Duhok) and Nigeria (Abuja and Benin City). In Türkiye, limited access to target groups meant that only corpus analysis was possible. Qualitative data collection included a desk review, policy mapping, key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and validation workshops. In total, over 350 people were interviewed.

The goal of the research was to identify how dominant narratives shape policy, highlight where returnees' voices are missing and propose ways to build more inclusive return policies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM FAIR RESEARCH

Return policies are disconnected from narratives that describe returnees' experiences.

FAiR research demonstrates a clear gap between how return is referred in policies and how it is experienced by returnees. Narratives are specific stories and frames used by individuals, media, policymakers and communities to talk about return. Policies often focus on legal frameworks or technical assistance, while narratives that describe the real experiences of returnees rarely link back to policy. As a result, returnees' needs and challenges remain poorly reflected in programmes.

Across the four countries, seven dominant narrative types were identified:

- **Assistance narratives** focus on the *need for support*, especially in relation to assisted voluntary return, human trafficking and irregular migration. They rarely include returnees' voices.
- **Legitimacy narratives** judge return policies as (un)fair, often drawing on personal accounts of harm associated with deportation. They speak primarily to forced return but say little about assistance.
- **Experience narratives** emphasise the challenges and risks faced by returnees (*return is difficult*), often through personal accounts. When they mention policies, they tend to be critical.
- **Dehumanisation narratives** are common in policy documents, focusing on numbers and procedures rather than people. Returnees' stories are absent.
- **Transnationalism narratives** highlight diaspora identities and belonging, focusing on the nation or group rather than the individual or policy level.

- **National responsibility narratives** stress the duty of governments in countries of origin to support reintegration and improve return policies. Though they seldom reflect individual experiences (except in Nigeria[2]), they can help link returnees to policymaking.
- **Impact narratives** connect returnees' experiences to socio-economic contexts in countries of origin (*return is beneficial for the country*). These can serve as bridging narratives, though references to policies and assistance are limited.

Together, these narratives reveal a persistent **disconnect:** policy-focused narratives largely exclude returnees, and narratives that highlight returnees rarely address policy – except to criticise it.

Dominant discourses silence and dehumanise returnees.

Discourses are broader, more structural ways of thinking that shape stories and frames on return. They influence policy decisions, public attitudes, and how authority is exercised. To this end, understanding which discourses are amplified or ignored helps explain how governments impact return policies.

FAiR identified five key discourses relevant for return policymaking:

- **Crisis discourse** portrays migrants as statistics or threats, overlooking their agency and contributions.
- **Solidarity discourse** centres returnees' experiences and advocates for stronger community and civil society support.
- **Humanitarian discourse** focuses on needs and assistance and is particularly prevalent outside the EU where it is embedded into NGO and policy work.
- **Development-transnational discourse** views diaspora and returnees as agential and skilled individuals eager to contribute to national development.
- **Government accountability discourse** emphasises governments' responsibilities toward protecting returnees' rights through transparent, participatory governance.

The identity of the messenger, in particular, matters. For instance, in Nigeria, assistance narratives carry different meanings depending on who communicates them. When articulated by *policymakers* or *NGOs*, they often reproduce humanitarian discourses that can be dehumanising. Yet when *individuals* express the same narratives, they instead promote solidarity by acknowledging returnees' agency and challenges.

Silencing and dehumanisation occur through:

- **Excluding returnees from policymaking**, with debates centred around European priorities rather than local realities.
- **Prioritising numbers over returnees' agency**, driven by (EU) crisis narratives that reduce migrants to statistics.

[2] Returnees' stories and voices are largely absent from national responsibility narratives in Iraq and Türkiye, which highlights the disconnect between policymaking and their lived experiences. In contrast, these narratives are overrepresented in Nigeria, where documents acknowledge the collaborative efforts of federal and state governments in providing return and reintegration assistance.

FAiR research also shows how silencing intersects with agency and cash-based support mechanisms. In Iraq, deported individuals often receive less cash assistance than those returning through voluntary programmes, despite having greater needs and less preparation time.

The degree of agency exercised in the return process, and the level of support received, also shape public discourses. Deportees are often assumed to be criminals, drug users or members of other stigmatised groups, contributing to their exclusion from critical public conversations. By contrast, individuals who return without assistance are more likely to be portrayed as "positive" examples by the media. Forced returnees, who face the greatest stigma and enjoy the least support, are the most absent from public debates.

Access to assistance is further constrained by social exclusion. In Nigeria, some returnees avoid identifying themselves, while others adopt a "returnee identity" to access services or rebuild social status.[3] However, this identity can also be instrumentalised by European and international actors when used to present returnees as "ambassadors of regular migration" to discourage irregular migration.[4]

Bridging and alternative discourses can contribute to more inclusive and effective return policies.

Policymakers can leverage solidarity and development-transnational discourses to reconnect returnees with policymaking processes. First, FAiR research indicates that these discourses are most commonly expressed by returnees themselves. Second, these discourses emphasise the lived experience of migration (including trafficking), return policies (and related legal frameworks) and diasporic identity. Third, they highlight the differing needs of returnees and the roles that both returnees and diaspora actors can play in supporting sustainable reintegration.

Discourses that emerge in countries of origin – rather than being centred around European perspectives and agendas – are particularly valuable, especially when shared by returnees.

Two specific discourses are instrumental for more inclusive and effective policymaking:

1. Development-transnational discourse (*return is beneficial for the country*), and
2. Government accountability discourse *(the government of the country of origin is responsible for returnees)*.

These discourses are key because they:

- **Focus on perspectives from countries of origin,** taking into account both returnees' needs and the positive impacts of return.
- **Enable a shared vision and collective narrative** by integrating returnees' experiences and voices and improving communication and information flows between policies and those affected by them.
- **Act as bridging devices**, as they appear across countries and contexts and apply to different types of return.

[3] Mariia Shaidrova (2022), *Performing a "Returnee" in Benin City, Nigeria*.

[4] The framing of returnees as "ambassadors of regular migration" was mentioned by several key informants in Nigeria.



While current policies are often not adapted to the needs of returnees, leading to poor reintegration outcomes and inefficiencies in migration management, they can be significantly strengthened through more inclusive and participatory policymaking.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Component 1. More Inclusive Policymaking

1.1 Incorporate returnees' voices and perspectives into systems that enhance policy development and lead to improved design and adaptation of return and reintegration programmes. Specific short-term actions include:

- **Map key stakeholders and engagement pathways** to understand *who* to involve and *how* to include migrants' participation in policymaking, initiatives and referral pathways at local, subnational and national levels;
- **Integrate regular and meaningful consultations** with returnees and other key stakeholders (such as governmental entities, municipalities, CSOs, NGOs, the private sector and IOs) and establish **validation processes through feedback and complaint mechanisms.**[5] These consultations and mechanisms could be implemented anonymously - online as well as in-person at local municipalities - to ensure they lead to adaptations in policies and programmes;
- **Schedule regular feedback loops and restitution to returnees** (e.g., biannually) and proactively share information with participants concerning any adaptations or changes to policy frameworks, support options, referral mechanisms or other relevant aspects of the return landscape. This will ensure that previous rounds of consultations have been used and acted upon, building trust and ensuring buy-in.
    - More regular follow-ups should reflect a broader shift in the structure of governmental and other support programmes available to returnees, building on a longer-term conceptualisation of return and reintegration as a continuum rather than a singular event.

1.2 Ensure direct and local funding of initiatives that integrate returnees' voices. Resources must be allocated to projects that actively engage returnees at the civil society and municipality levels. Specific medium-term actions include:

- **Establish and fund support groups at the local level** (e.g., municipalities, CSOs) where returnees can share experiences related to the return and reintegration process (e.g., the business-grant application process as well as general social challenges including those arising from negative discourses). An example is the exchanges organised by the European Technology Training Centre (ETTC) in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq;
- **Set up local centres dedicated to identifying returnees' needs, counselling them on next steps and linking them to funding initiatives that support their reintegration**, such as the Samgori Multifunctional Center in Tbilisi, Georgia. Founded in 2024 with IOM support, it helps

[5] For further recommendations related to Monitoring, see FAiR Policy Brief: *Best Practices of Implementing a Human Rights Approach in Assisted Voluntary Return (and Reintegration) – Introducing Human Rights Monitoring*, Antonella Patteri (2024). Available here.

returnees rebuild damaged houses by providing tools for rent (e.g., wheelbarrows, shovels), becoming a pillar of support within the community;

- **Fund opportunities for the creation of returnee networks and collectives that can function as platforms for knowledge generation, advocacy and peer-to-peer support,** reinforcing a sense of community among returnees and providing guidance based on lived experiences. These networks and collectives will feed into the consultations detailed in recommendation 1.1 mentioned above.

Component 2. Improved Responses to the Needs of Returnees

2.1 Strengthen operational strategies and procedures at the government level to address the needs of returnees. Specific medium-term actions include:

- **Create a dedicated governmental unit focused specifically on return and reintegration**, as these issues are often subsumed under broader migration-related mandates (such as emigration or refugee policy), which may not provide the capacity to adequately address returnees' needs. This unit should be composed of representatives from various ministries or agencies (e.g. Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Labour);
- **Create a national referral mechanism to support returnees,** based on comprehensive mapping of relevant actors, agencies and ministries in countries of origin. Expanding the model of the NRM operated by the Federal Government of Iraq, this mechanism should integrate non-governmental actors and service providers and provide opportunities for the meaningful participation of returnees.

2.2 Improve the availability of and access to adequate support – such as financial assistance, healthcare, education and other essential services – delivered in countries of origin by governments, municipalities, CSOs and IOs. Specific actions include both pre-return and post-return steps:

- **(Pre-return) Conduct profile assessments of returnees** (e.g. age, gender, level of education, professional experience) to provide tailored assistance that addresses their specific needs and preferences, disaggregated by age (e.g., recognising the distinct needs of elderly returnees), gender (e.g., differentiating between the needs of men, women and people with diverse SOGIESC) and level of education (e.g. differentiating between the type of training required). These assessments should be conducted pre-return to enable proper planning for reintegration activities.
- **(Pre-return) Plan the integration of returnees into specific programmes** rather than categorising assistance by "type" of return. Specifically, the practice of providing less assistance to forced returnees or to those who appealed their return decisions should be proscribed, particularly as available evidence shows that this group may be most in need of support. Instead, profile assessments should inform a capacity-based and needs-based approach to integration.
- **(Post-return) Provide business grants to returnees** to help them start their own businesses. Applications could be submitted online or in-person. For in-person applications, it is essential to establish a support team (e.g., at the municipal level) to assist returnees through the

process. This is particularly important in contexts such as Georgia, where many returnees may not be familiar with digital platforms.

2.3 Create evidence-based opportunities for skills development linked to the support provided in 2.2**.** Specific medium- to long-term actions include:

- **Ensure that skills development opportunities align with returnees' needs and aspirations** through participatory monitoring and consultation processes and ensure that vocational training programmes reflect existing skills and local needs through **participatory market assessments** involving local authorities, returnees and private sector employers.
- **Establish platforms that foster regular exchanges between private sector employers, government authorities, non-governmental reintegration practitioners and returnees**. Existing examples, such as the Multi Stakeholder Platform (MSP) in Iraq involving the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and various Chambers of Commerce, can serve as models to be expanded upon with greater attention to the inclusion of returnees in high-level discussions.

2.4 Improve access to and monitoring of governmental support available to returnees. Specific short-term actions include:

- **Engage municipalities and civil society organisations in return and reintegration programmes,** given their local footprint and proximity to citizens, and require regular monitoring updates on the progress of these programmes;
- **Establish a centralised online platform and physical information centres** (such as those at MRCs or municipal levels) to ensure returnees, including those with limited digital literacy, can access information on available support programmes, application processes and eligibility criteria.

Component 3. Enhanced Information and Communication to Connect Returnees and Policies

3.1 Promote a mindset shift by challenging biases against migrants' knowledge and building an approach that actively supports and values migrants' participation in policymaking processes. Specific medium-term actions include:

- **Develop targeted information and communication strategies** for existing return and reintegration support by engaging governments, diplomatic representations and media. These may further encompass:
    - **Design comprehensive communication campaigns** to ensure returnees receive timely, accurate and comprehensive information about available reintegration support, their rights and their entitlements;
    - **Develop multi-platform awareness-raising campaigns** that engage media outlets, religious actors, local leaders, communities and returnees to identify and include counter-discourses or alternative viewpoints that challenge stereotypes about return and reintegration. These campaigns should seek to move away from negative discourses such as the 'crisis discourse' and adopt a whole-of-society approach;

- **Include host communities in areas of high return in awareness-raising campaigns to reduce stigma and counter negative discourse surrounding return.**
    - Facilitate "town hall" style meetings to discuss the challenges faced by returnees, clarify (mis)conceptions about life in Europe and the decision to return and highlight the added value that returnees bring to their communities;
    - Ensure that these participatory initiatives make inclusivity a standard practice and operational principle so that policies remain relevant, effective and responsive to the real needs of returnees, while avoiding any impression of preferential treatment that could disrupt social cohesion or undermine reintegration.

      The list of relevant actors may vary by country. For example, in Georgia, religious actors significantly influence community perceptions of returnees; in Iraq, social media influencers, entrepreneurs and local authorities play similar key roles.

3.2 Establish effective communication channels between policymakers and returnees to facilitate continuous dialogue and bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that returnees' needs and experiences feed into policy development. Specific medium-term actions include:

- **Embed Migrant Resource Centres within governmental line ministries**, as is the case with the ICMPD MRC embedded within MoLSA in Baghdad, Iraq.

All told, developing sustainable and legitimate solutions for return, readmission and reintegration requires **moving beyond EU-centred perceptions that distance policymakers from the realities of returnees.** Instead, policies should focus on individuals and the contexts to which they return. Implementing participatory policymaking processes is crucial to ensuring that the needs and perspectives of returnees are genuinely addressed.