

VI transnational e x c h a n g e

Field trip to Belgium Report

Date: 26. – 29. September 2023

Location: Brussels, Belgium

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Transnational Exchange VI delegation outside the Caritas International Belgium headquarters.

Aim of the trip

Transnational Exchange VI project organised its second field trip to Belgium from the 26th until the 29th of September 2023 for six European return counsellors from Sweden, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Germany. The aim of the trip was to get insights into the Belgian asylum and assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) counselling system and to compare it with other European systems. The hosting organization for the Transnational Exchange VI delegation was Caritas International Belgium (CIB).

Overview

In Belgium, the registration for asylum seekers is centralised and carried out in Brussels. Every asylum seeker has a “small” and a “big” interview with the immigration authorities. The latter is always done with a lawyer. There are around 30 000 reception places in Belgium. The asylum seekers have the right to work after 4 months of applying asylum. A work permit is not tied to the asylum procedure.

Looking into the topic of voluntary return, one will find three major players in Belgium:

1. FEDASIL, the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, which offers return counselling and gives out funding for voluntary return counselling,
2. IOM Belgium, the International Organization for Migration, which offers return and reintegration counselling as well as booking the plane tickets (not entirely anymore) and
3. Caritas International Belgium (CIB), which is offering return and reintegration counselling as well as acting as a reintegration coordinator for the reintegration partners from Frontex which are part of the JRS program.

Caritas International Belgium

Caritas International Belgium is a member of the Caritas worldwide network and was founded in 1949. It is also a member of ERSO network (European Reintegration Support Organizations). Voluntary return and reintegration is one focus point of Caritas International Belgium’s work. At Caritas, return counselling is offered as part of Social Service program. It is offered in their own social center, as well as in certain reception centers and so called Return desks (which will be introduced later in this report). The reintegration counselling and coordination with local NGOs in the return countries (referral of JRS cases from RIAT to the local partners in the countries of return) is carried out in the head office. There are 11 people working in the Reintegration Team at Caritas.

Fedasil

Fedasil is the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. Fedasil is responsible for the reception locations in Belgium and supervises the quality of reception and guidance for asylum seekers. Additionally, Fedasil prepares the asylum seekers for an independent life after reception. It is also running a voluntary return program. In Belgium, parallel paths are possible: starting an AVRR procedure and at the same time keeping the

asylum procedure ongoing is not a problem. In every reception center, there is one contact person (a social worker), who is informed about AVRR program and can refer return candidates to a special contact desk.

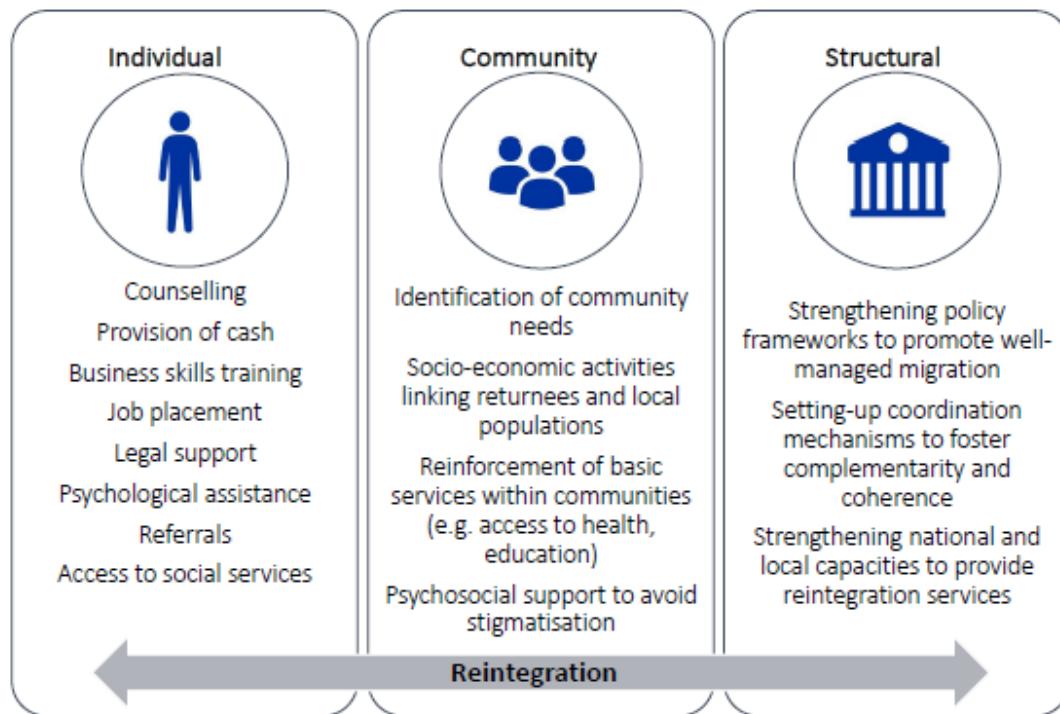
IOM Belgium and Luxembourg



Transnational Exchange VI delegation visited the IOM Belgium and Luxembourg office, located very near to European Parliament.

IOM has been organising voluntary returns from Belgium since 1984. Until 2001, IOM was the only actor in the return field in Belgium. Currently the IOM team consists of 7 dedicated return and reintegration counsellors. IOM sets a strong focus on detecting vulnerabilities and protecting vulnerable clients in the return process. One program, which IOM is running, is called Adapted Medical Assistance After Return (AMAAR), which allows costly medical assistance for very ill return cases. The feasibility and appropriateness of the return are first assessed by the local treating physician or by an IOM doctor, taking into consideration the availability and accessibility of care in country of origin. During the travels, migrants with specific health needs may be assisted by a medical escort (IOM medical staff, nurse/physician or specialized companies). Upon return, provision of specialized reintegration support is given to ensure continuity of care and medication for the beneficiary.

Examples of reintegration support



Reintegration support in IOM works on three levels: individual, community and structural.

IOM carries out country/area specific activities as well which are funded by Fedasil. One project for example is the “Administrative support Balkans”, which targets Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. The objective is to support (returning) vulnerable migrants (often families) to access relevant and available support services (civil registration, housing, health, school/education, employment, etc.). The budget for the Balkan project is 250€/case but the focus does not lay on the financial assistance but rather on the specific vulnerabilities and support available via the local IOM mission.

For more information on reintegration support in Belgium, e.g. budget, please visit our Transnational Exchange VI website: <https://transnationalexchange.com/country/belgium/>

Return desks



Return desk, an open office for return counselling in the heart of Brussels

The return desks are a special feature of the Belgian AVRR system. There are five voluntary return desks, meaning little stop-by offices in central locations, in the five biggest cities in Belgium. The return desks are open every day. There is an additional free phone number and a website giving information.

The work duties at the return desks are shared between the three actors in the return field: Fedasil, IOM and Caritas International. The first meeting at the Return desk can be spontaneous, since return counsellors are always present at the desks. The return candidate can share his/her story and the counsellor maps out vulnerabilities and possible reintegration needs. The fastest return can be organised in a week (of course, in this case without reintegration support). If there is a possibility and a need for reintegration support and services, a second meeting is organised with IOM or Caritas International, who are the two actors doing reintegration counselling. For medical cases, there is a doctor at Fedasil doing the medical evaluations.



Return desks are little offices in central locations. One can easily stop by and have a spontaneous first meeting with a return counsellor.

Machelen – accommodation center for asylum seekers

Currently, a reception crisis is going on in Belgium, meaning that there are over 5000 asylum seekers, who aren't granted housing because of the shortage of asylum seeker accommodation. Mainly young, single men need to sleep outside now.

Transnational Exchange VI delegation had the chance to visit a reception center in Machelen – a little town next to Brussels. The reception center is run by Fedasil. It was earlier located next to the international Zaventem airport, but was moved to new premises in 2022. The former hotel in the outskirts of Machelen has the capacity to accommodate 400 asylum seekers. The premise has 2 floors and more than 100 rooms. There is one “emergency room” for special cases, meaning homeless migrants, who are preparing for return.

In every reception center, there is a social worker, “single point of contact”, specialised in voluntary return. All social workers working at the reception premises are aware of the topic “return” and turn to this contact person when needed. Return option is also integrated in every “key moment” in asylum process. A lot of the residents in Machelen work either inside the house (community service at Machelen, for example cleaning for 1,90 € per hour) or externally.

When getting a negative decision for the asylum, the immigrant has to move to a return center, where he/she has 30 days time to work on his/her return.



Attending a guided tour at the Machelen reception center with the Head of the Center.

Conclusion

The trip allowed the participants to understand the Belgian AVRR system and its actors very well – both on a structural and practical level. The participants were impressed by the non-formality of the interactions of representatives of Fedasil, IOM and CIB and its good working relationship. The answer was simple: good and friendly co-working is the key if there are many actors on the same field. It would be inspiring to see this type of cooperation with regards to return in more European countries – independent from its sizes.



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