

## Field trip to Madrid, Spain 18. – 21. 06.2024

The Transnational Exchange VI project hosted a group of 6 European return counsellors to visit the Spanish AVRR field, encountering relevant actors for two full days. In the following, the content of the different meetings is summarized:



Photo 1: from left to right: Lutfullah (IOM Spain), Zoi (IOM Greece), Elena (IOM Spain), Salome (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Christine (Danish Refugee Council), Anders (Swedish Migration Agency), Ashante (LAB Niedersachsen, Germany), Jolien (Caritas International Belgium), Anastasia (IOM Malta), Riikka (Caritas Augsburg), Begoña (IOM Spain), André (IOM Spain)

### **IOM Spain and Its Work in the Voluntary Return Field**

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) Spain plays a pivotal role in the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program, primarily focusing on providing comprehensive support to migrants wishing to return to their countries of origin. This initiative is entirely funded by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration (MISSM) of Spain, with the funding period running annually from January to December.

#### **Information Dissemination**

IOM Spain actively disseminates information to potential returnees through various channels. They utilize information materials and conduct information sessions across different parts of the country. These sessions are crucial in reaching out to migrants and providing them with detailed insights into the AVRR program, the benefits of voluntary return, and the support they can expect throughout the process.

#### **Application Process**

When a migrant expresses interest in returning, the local social worker initiates the application process by:

- Filling out the return application form

- Preparing a social report
- Taking a copy of the travel document
- Providing proof of the migrant's stay in Spain for over three months

These documents are then forwarded to the IOM Spain headquarters in Madrid, where a dedicated AVR team of five staff members processes the applications. The team maintains regular contact with the returnees, primarily through phone calls and emails, to ensure continuous support and address any queries or concerns.

### **Return Assistance**

IOM Spain handles several key aspects of the return process, including:

- Assisting with the acquisition of new travel documents if required
- Detecting any vulnerabilities among the returnees to tailor support accordingly
- Booking flights through their internal Amadeus booking tool
- Providing €450 per person as return money to help cover immediate expenses upon arrival in the country of origin; the money is transferred a few days before departure to the Spanish bank account of the returnees.
- Airport assistance for clients who request it

### **Reintegration Assistance**

For reintegration, IOM Spain offers additional support, although this is limited to specific cases:

- Vulnerable clients or those with strong business ideas can receive a reintegration budget.
- Reintegration assistance is available only for returnees to Honduras, Colombia, and Senegal and ranges around €2000. Returnees to other countries are referred to one of the 11 other NGOs operating alongside IOM Spain in the AVR field.

### **Challenges and Solutions**

One of the significant challenges in the Spanish AVR system is ensuring that the reintegration budget is granted and utilized effectively within the 12-month funding period. This includes:

- Ensuring the reintegration ideas are implemented successfully.
- Collecting all necessary invoices for the donor by the end of the funding period.

To address this, IOM Spain typically grants reintegration assistance only between January and June. This timeline provides returnees with approximately six months to implement their reintegration projects and ensures compliance with the funding period requirements.

### **Business Start-Up Training**

IOM Spain also offers intensive business start-up training workshops for interested returnees. These two-day workshops are designed to equip returnees with the skills and knowledge needed to start their own businesses. Participants are brought to Madrid, where IOM Spain covers their accommodation and food expenses. During the workshops, returnees work on developing comprehensive business plans, guided by IOM expert trainers.

### **Profile of Returnees**

Most of the returnees assisted by IOM Spain are work migrants from Latin America who initially arrived in Madrid by plane with the hope of finding employment. Many of these individuals overstayed their visas and eventually sought help from IOM when their prospects dwindled. This demographic trend explains why IOM Spain primarily deals with work migrants rather than asylum seekers. It is relatively straightforward for migrants to obtain legal residence in Spain



if they can demonstrate successful integration through employment or marriage. In 2023, IOM Spain assisted around 700 returnees, with only 14% being asylum seekers. This data highlights the organization's focus on supporting economic migrants who face difficulties in securing legal status and sustainable livelihoods in Spain.

### **Meeting with the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration (MISSM)**

On the afternoon of June 19, 2024, the Transnational Exchange VI group met with a representative from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration (MISSM). The ministry representative who received the group demonstrated a thorough understanding of the AVRR counselling services available in Spain. His detailed knowledge and insights underscored the ministry's active engagement and oversight in the voluntary return sector.



**Photo 2: Visit to the MISSM**

### **Transition from Sole IOM Partnership to Including Local NGOs**

Historically, MISSM collaborated exclusively with IOM for AVRR services. However, with IOM's transition to a UN agency, the ministry decided to diversify its partnerships to include local NGOs. This strategic shift was aimed at enhancing the service delivery and broadening the support network for returnees.

### **Annual Tenders for NGOs**

To incorporate local NGOs into the AVRR framework, the ministry began opening tenders for NGOs to apply for yearly budgets through the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The representative highlighted the ministry's commitment to inclusivity and transparency by regularly issuing calls for NGOs to participate in the AVRR counselling service. This approach ensures that various NGOs have the opportunity to contribute and bring diverse perspectives and resources to the program.

### **Ministry Staffing and Capacity**

The voluntary return sector within MISSM is managed by a small team. Currently, it consists of four staff members, which will reduce to three starting July 2024. This small team is responsible for overseeing the entire voluntary return sector, which presents significant challenges in terms of capacity and workload.

### **Participation in Frontex and EURP Program**

The representative discussed the ministry's involvement with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. He mentioned that the European Return and Reintegration Network (EURP) program, facilitated by Frontex, offers reintegration assistance, but the countries of origin in this program often do not align with the return destinations of Spanish returnees. Additionally, the limited staff at the ministry makes it difficult to process all the EURP applications, highlighting a critical area where increased resources and staffing could enhance efficiency and support.

### **Government's Stance on Return**

The ministry emphasized that the Spanish government's focus is predominantly on voluntary return rather than forced return or deportations, which occur infrequently. This reflects a humane approach to migration management, providing migrants with the opportunity to return voluntarily under supportive conditions.

Furthermore, the system in Spain allows migrants to obtain legal residence relatively easily if they can demonstrate successful integration through avenues such as employment or marriage. This policy not only facilitates legal pathways for migrants but also reduces the necessity for forced returns.

### **Meeting with Representatives of Karibu and Red Acoge Offering AVRR Counselling**

On the second day of the field visit, the Transnational Exchange VI group visited the Women Training Center of Karibu (NGO) in Madrid. There the team got to learn more about the work of Karibu as well as about the NGOs work in the voluntary return field. After a small tour through the center, representative from Karibu and from Red Acoge shared their engagement in the voluntary return field. This meeting was crucial for understanding the collaborative efforts



between larger and smaller NGOs and the role of the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) in supporting these activities.



**Photo 3: Presentation from representatives from Karibu (left, center) and Vega from Red Acoge**

### **Organizational Structure and Funding**

Due to funding criteria, only larger NGOs are eligible to apply for AMIF funding directly. Consequently, the umbrella organization RED ACOGE applied for an AMIF AVRRC counselling project. Once the funding is secured, RED ACOGE distributes the funds to smaller NGOs that carry out the actual return counselling services. The seven organizations working under RED ACOGE include:

1. **KARIBU (Madrid)**
2. **CÓRDOBA ACOGE & LUCENA ACOGE (Córdoba)**
3. **ECOS DO SUR (A Coruña)**
4. **ELCHE ACOGE (Alicante)**
5. **GUADA ACOGE (Guadalajara)**
6. **MURCIA ACOGE (Murcia)**

The AMIF funding cycle runs from July to June the following year, requiring all reintegration cases to be closed within this 12-month period. This time constraint often necessitates cooperation between IOM and NGOs to refer cases to each other whenever the funding runs out or the first 6 months for granting reintegration budgets are over.

### **Team Composition**

For the AVRRC project under RED ACOGE, the team comprises one coordinator based in Madrid, eight return counsellors (who do not work full time in AVRRC counselling), one psychologist, five support professionals, and ten volunteers.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

The coordinator in Madrid plays a pivotal role in managing the AVRR project. His responsibilities include overseeing referral management, reviewing social reports, and verifying documentation for each return case. He also handles the administrative aspects of sending applications to the Voluntary Return Unit and receives border police reports to ensure that participants are not prohibited from leaving Spain. Additionally, the coordinator is responsible for requesting exceptional benefits authorizations, communicating flight data to the Voluntary Return Unit, and drawing up supporting certificates. Furthermore, he provides training to professionals on voluntary return procedures to ensure that all team members are well-prepared to support returnees.

The return counsellors are tasked with providing essential support and guidance to potential returnees. They offer information and advice, verify participants' documentation, and conduct interviews to prepare comprehensive social reports. The counsellors also make arrangements with consulates for travel documents and send return applications to the coordinator in Madrid. Additionally, they handle the logistics of purchasing return tickets and communicate flight details to the coordinator. Their role extends to delivering financial aid to returnees, offering psychological support before departure, and conducting post-return follow-up to ensure successful reintegration.

### **Reintegration Support**

Each AVRR project has the discretion to decide the level of reintegration support provided, which can range from €1,000 to €5,000 for business startups.

### **Visit to the Emergency Reception and Referral Centre (CAED) of Carabanchel**

On the second day of the field visit, the Transnational Exchange VI group visited the Emergency Reception and Referral Centre (CAED) in Carabanchel, Madrid. This visit provided an in-depth understanding of the emergency accommodation measures for asylum seekers in Spain, particularly in response to the recent influx of migrants from West Africa.





**Photo 4: Visit to CAED**

### **Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers in Spain**

In Spain, the management of reception centers for asylum seekers is typically outsourced to NGOs. The government has entrusted these organizations with the task of providing housing and support services to asylum seekers. There are approximately 40,000 beds available for asylum seekers across various reception centers. Instead of large facilities, these NGOs usually offer smaller accommodations for 10 to 30 people, fostering a more personal and manageable environment.

### **Housing Requests and Recent Influx of Migrants**

Asylum seekers in Spain need to specifically request housing since many migrants initially stay with friends or family upon arrival. However, a recent surge in migrants, particularly from Mali, overwhelmed the existing infrastructure in the Canary Islands. Approximately 5,000 Malian migrants arrived in 2023, necessitating the establishment of additional emergency reception facilities. To address this urgent need, the Spanish government opened the Emergency Reception and Referral Centre (CAED) in Carabanchel, Madrid, and brought the asylum seekers from the islands to the mainland. This center is primarily designed to house asylum

seekers from West Africa, providing temporary accommodation and essential services. The CAED is located within a large military compound, offering a secure environment for the residents.

### **Services and Facilities**

Asylum seekers can stay at CAED for up to three months. During this time, they receive language lessons, food and shelter. The goal is for them to find employment and integrate into the community within this period. However, the more vulnerable individuals can extend their stay up to six months. The CAED center offers housing only for males – females and families have separate housing.

In contrast to the emergency center, the shelters run by local NGOs can accommodate migrants for up to two years, depending on the specific situation and policies of the respective NGO. These shelters focus on integration, providing language training and information on potential opportunities within Spain and Europe.

### **Daily Operations and Community Engagement**

One of the notable aspects of the CAED is its daily operational meetings for the 1,500 migrants residing there. These meetings, conducted with the help of translators, provide essential information about language courses, cleaning schedules, and other important updates. This practice has been instrumental in maintaining a peaceful and orderly environment within the large-scale shelter.

### **Conclusion**

It is always fascinating to compare the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) systems in different European countries. Spain stands out for its focus on voluntary return, particularly among work migrants from Latin America. This demographic trend significantly influences the effectiveness and ease of the AVRR process in Spain. The absence of a language barrier and the cultural similarities between Spain and many Latin American countries contribute to a smoother reintegration experience for returnees.

Spain often serves as a point of entry for many migrants, particularly asylum seekers, who then aspire to move further into central or northern Europe. Consequently, AVRR information sessions targeting these groups have historically been less successful. The return numbers to non-Latin countries are also comparatively small, reflecting the unique migration dynamics and challenges within Spain's AVRR framework.



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