

Field trip to Helsinki, Finland 27. – 30. 08.2024

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



Photo 1: Visit at the Finnish Police. From left to right: Alen (BBU Austria), Vega (Red Acoge, Spain), Helen (Evangelisches Zentrum für Beratung in Höchst, Germany), Nina (Goedwerk Foundation, the Netherlands), Maria (the Police, Finland), Anna-Stina (the Police, Finland), Salome (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Emma (the Police, Finland), Riikka (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Karel (IOM Belgium), Martin (IOM Estonia)

The Finnish Immigration Service

The Finnish Immigration Service operates service points for customers in 10 locations across Finland. Its head office is located in the Pasila district in Helsinki. The organization employs around 1,300 people and manages reception centers in Helsinki, Joutseno and Oulu. Finnish Immigration Service is guided and supervised by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

The goal of the Finnish Immigration Service is to run Europe's most efficient permit services:

- Residence permits and right of residence
- Registrations of EU citizens' right of residence
- Decisions on international protection
- Finnish citizenship
- Alien's passports and refugee travel documents
- Decisions on removal from the country

International protection

Each year, the Finnish Immigration Service issues around 5,000 positive decisions regarding international protection. In 2023, approximately 20,000 decisions were made regarding temporary protection. This high number is due to the influx of Ukrainians, who got temporary protection right away. Additionally, a total of 1,342 quota refugees were selected for resettlement in Finland during the same year.

Assisted voluntary return in Finland

Key Actors in Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) in Finland are:

- **Finnish Immigration Service:** Oversees the national AVRR system, provides guidance and training to social workers in reception centers who talk to potential returnees, and coordinates AVRR-related projects and activities in Finland
- **Reception centers:** Offer return counseling and handle the processing of AVRR applications
- **International Organization for Migration (IOM):** Manages operational return arrangements and provides reintegration grants in specific countries
- **Police:** Approves voluntary returns (checking the criminal records of the returnees) and offers operational support for voluntary returns from detention centers
- **Finnish Refugee Council:** Since 2023, this Finnish NGO is focused on the quality assurance of return counselling by offering counselling trainings to relevant actors who speak with potential returnees. It also is involved in the outreach to migrants regarding voluntary return.

Applying for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) in Finland

Voluntary return counselling is provided by reception centers, the Finnish Immigration Service and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Information on AVRR is shared at various stages of the migration journey in Finland. The AVRR application is prepared together with the returnee by a social worker at the reception center or by the Finnish Immigration Service (for undocumented migrants). Applicants are required to provide personal details, the intended place of return, and other relevant information to assess their need for return and reintegration support. Then the application is forwarded to the Finnish immigration service. Once it is approved (including a quick check with the police regarding any open criminal cases), the decision and application are sent to IOM to initiate the return arrangements.

Return Travel Arrangements

- Returnees receive assistance in obtaining travel documents and registering children born in Finland.
- IOM manages all travel logistics, including domestic, international, and in-country arrangements for the return.
- Medical assessments and escorts are provided when necessary.
- Support is offered at the airport during departure, transit, and arrival.
- Family tracing services are available if needed.

Reintegration support

The reintegration grant can be provided either in cash or in-kind. The amount of the grant is determined when the individual applies for assisted voluntary return:

- EUR 5,300: If the person applies for AVRR within 30 days of receiving their first negative asylum decision or withdraws their initial asylum application.
- EUR 2,000: If the person applies for AVRR after 30 days have passed since receiving their first negative asylum decision.

For identified victims of trafficking the reintegration grant is EUR 3,000. There is an additional EUR 1,000 for individuals with significant vulnerabilities. Individuals from visa-free third countries are not eligible for the reintegration grant, except for the additional EUR 1,000 in cases of significant vulnerabilities. The Finnish Immigration Service collaborates with both Frontex EURP and IOM, depending on the country of return. Currently, Frontex EURP is used in 16 countries, in cooperation with ETTC and Caritas.

Finland has large communities of Somalis and Iraqis. Accordingly, the Finnish Immigration Service has projects, which are especially targeted for these migrant groups:

SOIRE Project

- A return and reintegration project focused on Iraq and Somalia
- Collects information on reintegration opportunities to enhance return counseling
- Facilitates cooperation on return and reintegration with various stakeholders, including national entities, the EU, NGOs, and international actors

Sustainable Reintegration Iraq 2 (the second half of 2024)

- A follow-up project to SRI, funded by the EU/RRF, to be implemented in Baghdad and Erbil
- Provides pre-departure counseling with an emphasis on the economic aspects of reintegration
- Offers business training and psychosocial support for returnees

The Finnish Police

AVRR program in Finland is operated by Finnish Immigration Service who partners with the Finnish Police – more specifically the Finnish Immigration Police. They are responsible for accepting asylum applications, alongside the Finnish Border Guard, keeping track of all repatriation cases where a residence permit has not been granted or has been revoked. They also ensure the fulfillment of return processes once a negative decision regarding asylum has been issued.

The Finnish police approves voluntary returns by checking the criminal records of the returnees and giving green light for the departure from Finland. In case, the rejected asylum seekers are not leaving Finland voluntarily within the allotted time, the Finnish Immigration Police ensures the proper execution of the return processes, which entails the supervised or the forced return. The level of police involvement in the return process is determined based on the returnee's history, behavior, needs and preferences. Return options vary, ranging from independent return to being escorted by authorities:



Additionally, the Police has also its own EURP reintegration counselling team of four staff members since 2023 focusing on clients in detention centers. In this case, the focus is to advertise the financial assistance from EURP by Frontex after deportation. The counselling team also focuses on telling detainees that they can do a retro application after the deportation. The first information session is mandatory. If detainees are interested, they can have more counselling sessions and the staff workers fill out the EURP application with them and connect them with the reintegration partner in the country of return. The EURP reintegration counselling team at the Finnish Police is funded by the AMIF Program.

Reception centers in Finland

In the beginning of 2024, there were 112 reception centers in Finland, of which 22 were for unaccompanied minors. The remaining 90 reception centers are designed to accommodate both single adults and families. These centers are equipped with either private or shared kitchens, where residents are responsible for preparing their own meals, or the center provides prepared meals. Reception centers are managed by the following actors: The Finnish Immigration Service, municipalities or welfare areas, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private companies.

Functions and Tasks of Reception Centers:

- Providing reception services in accordance with national legislation.
- Informing both the residents of the centers and the surrounding communities.
- Assisting with the asylum and temporary protection processes, including forwarding interview requests and providing information as needed.
- Ensuring the general safety and security of the centers and their residents.
- Facilitating the transition of residents from reception centers to municipalities.
- Collaborating with local authorities and other relevant stakeholders.

In the beginning of 2024, there were 35,415 persons in the Reception System. In the beginning of 2022, before the war in Ukraine, the number was only 5,113. Asylum seekers and persons seeking temporary protection are eligible for social services. Health care services for residents of reception centers are organized centrally by the centers themselves, along with healthcare providers procured by the Finnish Immigration Service and the wellbeing service counties. The reception center coordinates services for individual residents. Upon arrival in Finland, reception center nurses conduct initial health assessments and provide immediate healthcare services to the residents.



Photo 2: Visiting the Transit Center of the Helsinki Reception Center. In photo (from left to right): Riikka (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Nina (Goedwerk Foundation, the Netherlands), Jaakko (Helsinki Reception Center, Punavuori Unit), Vega (Red Acoge, Spain), Salome (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Helen (Evangelisches Zentrum für Beratung in Höchst, Germany), Alen (BBU Austria), Karel (IOM Belgium), Martin (IOM Estonia), Mikael (Helsinki Reception Center, Punavuori Unit), Mikko (Helsinki Reception Center, Punavuori Unit), Santeri (Finnish Immigration Service)

Transit Center of the Helsinki Reception Center

The Transnational Exchange VI delegation visited the Transit Center of the Helsinki Reception Center in Punavuori. The capacity of the transit center is 200 client places and a staff of approximately 20 employees.

The Transit Center of the Helsinki Reception Center is a facility-based center designed for adults and families, providing meal services. From there, the asylum seekers get assigned to different centers all over Finland. With a capacity of 200 clients, the center caters to specific groups such as particularly challenging clients, Dublin cases, EU citizens, and members of the LGBT+ community. Key responsibilities of the center include 24/7 reception of new arrivals, management of transit functions and operations, and coordination of capacity across the Greater Helsinki area. Returnees from other parts of Finland come and stay at the Helsinki Transit Center upon their return.

Provision of comprehensive reception services is in accordance with the Reception Act, which include:

- Accommodation
- Reception allowance
- Healthcare
- Social services
- Interpretation services
- Work and study activities
- AVR (Assisted Voluntary Return) guidance and return support. The first information on AVR comes in mandatory info session already in the beginning.
- Additionally, the center offers general guidance and counseling, crisis intervention and family support, assistance in relocating clients to municipalities, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

IOM Finland

IOM Finland has been involved in assisted voluntary return (AVRR) since 2015. At the moment they are running 4 projects related to AVRR in addition to managing the operational return arrangements in Finland and providing reintegration grants in specific countries. For example IOM Finland is promoting the reintegration support in Iraq and Somalia in the “SOIRE” project of the Finnish Immigration Service.

IOM Finland is very active and engaged in the field of AVRR. They are working closely with all the actors in the Finnish AVRR field: The Finnish Immigration Service, the Police, reception centers and Finnish Refugee Council. IOM Finland is also a part of a larger Northern European network, doing projects in Sweden and running the AVRR project in Iceland.

The activities IOM Finland has in the field of AVRR include the following:

- TD acquisition
- Child registration
- Counselling phone
- Medical assistance
- Risk assessments
- Escorts
- Embassy liaison
- Return travel arrangement, incl. Finland, transit and CoO
- Reintegration assistance – follow up
- Monitoring (pre-departure, return decision, RSS)

In 2023, there were 181 voluntary returns from Finland. In 2024, by the end of August, there have been already 210 returns to 39 return countries. Most of the returns were to Russian Federation (26%) followed by Iraq, Georgia and Colombia (each ca. 20%). Post-arrival reintegration support (in-kind or cash) was granted to ca. 85% of the returnees, whereas ca. 15% got no integration support.



Photo 3: At IOM Finland, hearing about their RRTiPP-SWE project in Sweden (Return & reintegration assistance for victims of trafficking and persons in prostitution in Sweden)

AVRR Iceland (by IOM Finland)

IOM Finland is also leading the project “AVRR Iceland”, since Iceland does not have an IOM office. Since the beginning of the project, 1.8.2020, there have been 346 returns from Iceland (stand until 31.7.2024). All assistance is provided remotely. There are also no relevant embassies located in Iceland, so the IOM staff from Finland is often in contact for example with the respected embassies in Oslo. The majority of returns from Iceland are to South and Central America, with Venezuelans making up the largest group. There has been a significant increase in the number of returns in recent years.

There are three phases in AVRR process in Iceland:

Pre return –phase

- Multilingual counselling
- Acquiring travel documents
- Assisting with registering children born in Iceland
- Identifying vulnerabilities and adjusting return arrangements accordingly
- Medical check-ups when needed (IOM medical form and/or airline’s fit to travel)
- Buying return tickets

Movement

- Assisting at airports (departure, transit, arrival)
- Organizing accommodation when needed
- Supporting returnees over the phone during the return journey
- Accommodating health related needs (wheelchair, stretcher etc.)
- Escorts for traveling (medical or operational)

After return

- Payment of post-arrival reintegration support by local IOM office
- Guiding with local services
- Temporary accommodation if needed

Post-arrival reintegration support in Iceland is cash or combination of cash and in-kind support. Amounts of support vary from nothing to 4200€ depending on the return country and status of the applicant's asylum application.

The Finnish Refugee Council

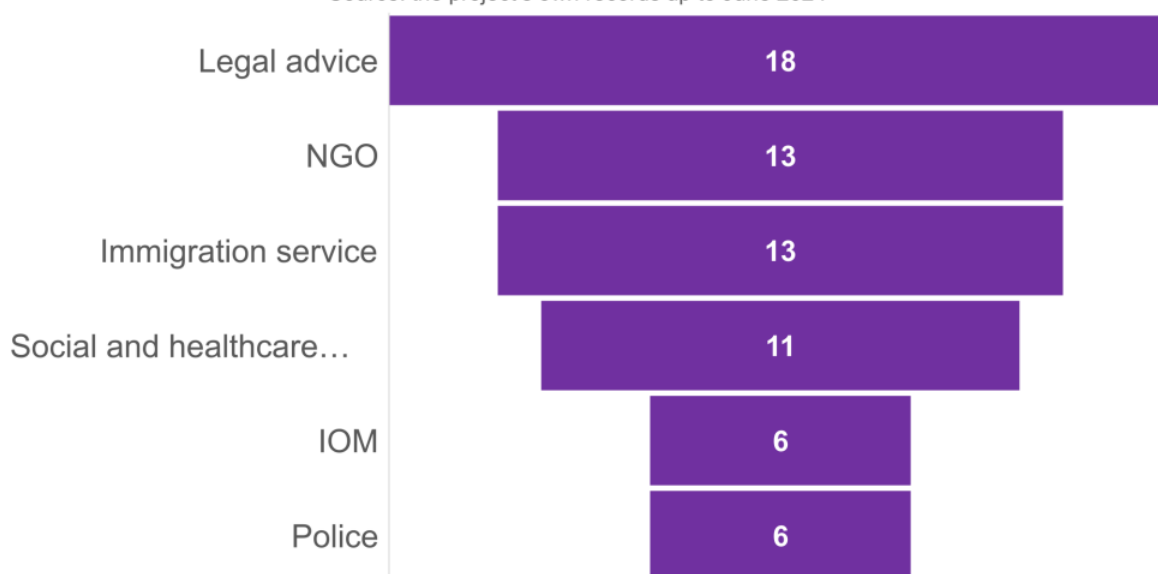
The Finnish Refugee Council is a Finnish NGO specialised in issues considering refugees and the forcibly displaced. Since the 01.05.2023, they have been implementing a "Return Project" that involves activities aimed at supporting asylum seekers and professionals. Offering personalized advice to professionals and engaging in advocacy work related to AVRR programs promotes voluntary return as such, since there has been a lot of resistance for AVR in Finland. Now as the rights of undocumented people are decreasing in Finland and the political atmosphere is getting harder on the topic, there is a trend upwards for AVRR.

The Finnish Refugee Council promotes a humane approach to AVRR, conducting training sessions for social workers, counsellors and other professionals. They provide information on AVRR to asylum seekers at reception centers and deliver presentations to migrant-led and diaspora organizations.

The Finnish Refugee Council also offers a weekly drop-in service for advice and counselling for those considering returning to their home countries. Referring individuals to other relevant services is at the core of their work as well:

WHERE DO WE REFER OUR CLIENTS?

Source: the project's own records up to June 2024



The chart shows where the AVRR interested clients of Finnish Refugee Council are referred to (between May 2023 and June 2024).

Conclusion

Meeting all the actors in the Finnish AVRR field offered a holistic view on the Finnish AVRR system. In a small country like Finland, the co-operation between different institutions and organisations seemed seamless. The bigger role of the Police was something different compared to many other European countries. Also the fact that the Police is actively offering reintegration support for those getting forcibly returned, was something special on a European scale. The NGO involvement in Finland is still relatively new and the roles getting clearer. The reception system is very well planned and functioning with a careful capacity planning. Involving the social workers in reception centers in reaching out about AVRR is at the core of the Finnish AVRR in practice.



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