



MAGYC

Migration Governance and Asylum Crises

Nigeria: returning migrants at
risk of new displacement or
secondary migration

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IDMC

MAGYC: The MAGYC (**Migr**Ation **G**overnance and **AsYlum C**risis) project seeks to assess how migration governance has responded to the recent “refugee crises” and has since been influenced by it, and how crises at large shape policy responses to migration. This four-year research project (2018–2023) brings together twelve international partners: the Hugo Observatory from the University of Liège (Coordinator), Sciences Po, the University of Economics in Bratislava, the GIGA institute of Global and Area Studies, Lund University, the IDMC, SOAS University of London, the University of Milan, the Lebanese American University, the University of Macedonia, Sabanci University, IfPO/CNRS.

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MAGYC Case Study

In 2016, over half a million Nigerians are thought to have set out across the Sahara in a bid to reach Europe, but only around 46,000 Nigerians reached the countries of the European Union, with many Nigerians dying in transit or finding themselves stuck in other countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad region. Displacement is largely caused by the actions of non-state armed groups like Boko Haram, and often closely linked with the need to seek better economic opportunities. Since then, hundreds of millions of euros have been spent on improving Nigerian border control to reduce irregular migration, addressing the root causes of migration, and funding voluntary return and reintegration programmes in the region.

Building on previous research by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre which showed that many returning migrants are internally displaced after arriving back in their country of origin, this study explores the impact of voluntary and forced return policies and programmes on the sustainability of return and reintegration to countries of origin, and the resulting risk of new displacement or secondary migration.

Summary

The large-scale arrival of migrants and asylum-seekers on European shores since 2015 has prompted an upscaling of migration policies and practices. Although Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were the three countries from where the highest number of people originated at the peak of the so-called migrant crisis, more than 46,000 Nigerians applied for asylum in the countries of the European Union (EU) in 2016, and more than 39,000 in 2017, many of whom arrived by boat from North Africa.¹ In response, the EU has expended significant resources to quell the scale of irregular migration. Alongside funding for Nigerian border control policies, a particular focus has been on returning migrants to their country of origin.²

In this study, based on over one hundred qualitative interviews with returning migrants in Nigeria, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) explores the impact of voluntary and forced return policies and programmes on the sustainability of return and reintegration to countries of origin, and the resulting risk of new displacement or secondary migration.

The study arrives at the following key findings:

¹ Eurostat, [Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data \(rounded\)](#)

² The Correspondent, [A breakdown of Europe's €1.5bn migration spending in Nigeria](#), December 2019

Opportunities for return are sometimes constrained

Many research participants felt that there was no way back once they had embarked on their journey. Movement restrictions and costs of travel limit opportunities for spontaneous return, as do expectations of success abroad from the migrants' relatives back in Nigeria. Migrants aware of opportunities for assisted voluntary return, meanwhile, are not always able to use such schemes due to an inability to contact institutions that arrange for return. For some, the possibility of return emerges only once in detention, either in the form of voluntary return or deportation.³

Migrants are at risk of exploitation and abuse

Many of the research participants had experienced exploitation or abuse on their migration route. This included kidnapping, bonded labour, sexual abuse, and economic exploitation. Many returnees felt they had been deceived into migrating in the way they did.

Returnees may be economically worse off than before they left

Although most of the Nigerian returnees interviewed had left the country in search of better economic opportunities, the majority came back destitute. In many cases, the accumulated costs of travel, exacerbated by the dealings of smugglers and traffickers, had resulted in high levels of debt. Returning migrants often receive an initial cash grant upon return, but this is rarely sufficient to cover their basic needs. The delay between initial cash grants and subsequent business start-up assistance leaves many returnees struggling to make ends meet. Those who receive no reintegration assistance are likely to be even more vulnerable.

³ Definitions of the types of return are from the [IOM Glossary of Migration 2019](#):

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration is administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin.

Expulsion is a formal act or conduct attributable to a State by which a nonnational is compelled to leave the territory of that State. The terminology used at the domestic or international level on expulsion and deportation is not uniform but there is a clear tendency to use the term expulsion to refer to the legal order to leave the territory of a State, and removal or deportation to refer to the actual implementation of such order in cases where the person concerned does not follow it voluntarily.

Forced return is the act of returning an individual, against his or her will, to the country of origin, transit or to a third country that agrees to receive the person, generally carried out on the basis of an administrative or judicial act or decision.

Spontaneous return is the voluntary, independent return of a migrant or a group of migrants to their country of origin, usually without the support of States or other international or national assistance.

Voluntary return is the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another country based on the voluntary decision of the returnee.

Returns are often unable to afford housing

Many returning migrants are dependent on family and friends for shelter. Unable to afford the cost of rent, even with the initial cash grant, some returning migrants are evicted and find themselves homeless.

It may be warranted to include returning migrants in the durable solutions framework

In clear incidences of internal displacement, some returning migrants are displaced by evictions or insecurity following their return to Nigeria. Many others face continued assistance and protection needs or suffer from discrimination on account of their returnee status. There is a case, therefore, for expanding the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework on durable solutions to returning migrants in general.⁴

Return and reintegration policies and programmes should strive to reduce the risk of secondary migration or displacement

Policy and programmatic responses should not only take into account protection concerns in places of origin, but also promote broader, longer-term, development-oriented reintegration assistance for all returnees, irrespective of their modalities of return.⁵

Introduction

In 2016, over half a million Nigerians are thought to have set out across the Sahara in a bid to reach Europe.⁶ Many died during the journey; others found their journeys interrupted.⁷ More than 46,000 Nigerians reached the countries of the European Union (EU) and applied for asylum in 2016, and more than 39,000 in 2017. Nigeria was the first country of origin in the Sahel and Lake Chad region in 2017.⁸ Due to the scale of irregular migration, Nigeria is one of six Sub-Saharan African countries that has bilateral agreements with the EU on migration.⁹ Hundreds of millions of euros have been spent on improving Nigerian border control, addressing root causes of migration, and funding

⁴ IASC, [Framework on durable solutions for Internally Displaced Persons](#), 2010

⁵ Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020; Newland, K., Salant, B. [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Migration Policy Institute, 2018

Note: there are some existing programmatic responses which aim to do this. The IOM's approach strives to achieve sustainable reintegration through a holistic and a need-based approach that takes into consideration the various factors impacting on reintegration, including economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions, across individual, community, and structural levels.

⁶ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

⁷ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

⁸ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020 ; European Commission, [EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#)

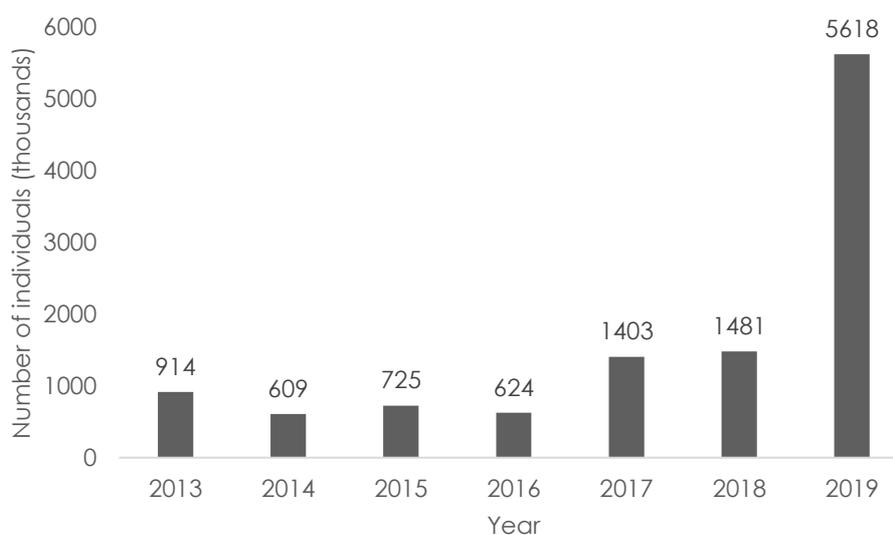
⁹ European Commission, [Migration and Home Affairs: Africa](#)

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voluntary return and reintegration programmes in the region.¹⁰ Safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration is one of the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which has been endorsed by nineteen EU states.

In 2019, 5,618 Nigerians were repatriated through voluntary return and reintegration programmes.¹¹ This is around four times the figure from previous years (see Figure 1). Around 3,000 more were returned from Europe following an order to leave.¹²

Figure 1. Number of individuals assisted with voluntary return and reintegration support from 2013 to 2019¹³



Previous research by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) has shown that many people returning from having sought refuge abroad are internally displaced after arriving back in their country of origin; nearly two thirds of returning Nigerians surveyed in North-East Nigeria in 2019 were living in tents or shelters.¹⁴ Are returning migrants exposed to these risks of internal displacement? What happens to those Nigerian migrants who return or are returned to their country of origin?

Funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, the MAGYC (Migration Governance and asYlum Crises) project seeks to appraise policy responses in light of the recent 'migrant crisis', and assess their efficiency for the long-term governance of migration. In this report, IDMC explores how voluntary and forced return policies targeting irregular migration trajectories may impact the durability and sustainability of return to

¹⁰ The Correspondent, [A breakdown of Europe's €1.5bn migration spending in Nigeria](#), December 2019

¹¹ IOM, [2019 Return and Reintegration Highlights: Annexes](#), 2020

¹² Eurostat, [Third country nationals returned following an order to leave - annual data \(rounded\)](#)

¹³ IOM, [2019 Return and Reintegration Highlights: Annexes](#), 2020

¹⁴ IDMC, [The Displacement Continuum](#), 2020; IDMC, [Once the road is safe: displacement and return in North-eastern Nigeria, 2019](#)

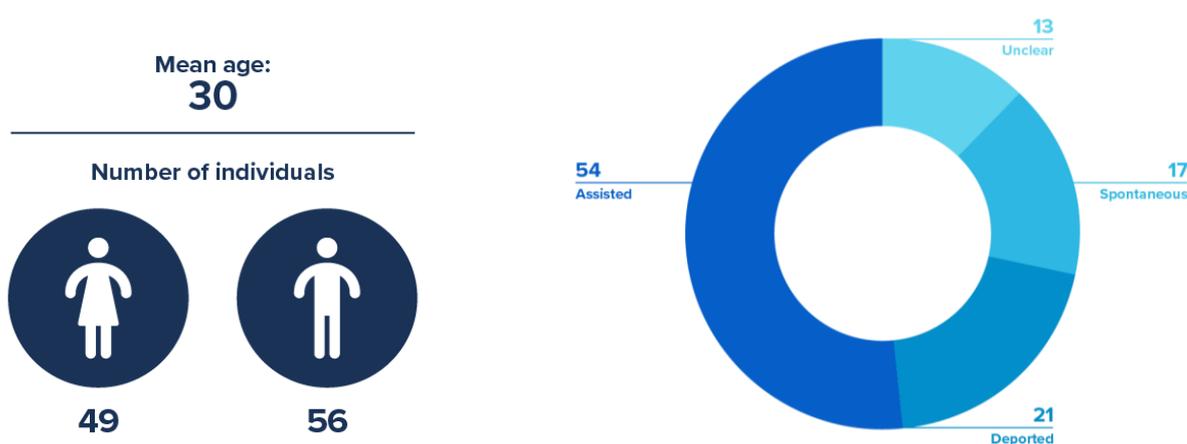
countries of origin, and whether this potentially exposes returning migrants to a risk of displacement.

Methodology

The findings of this report are based on 105 qualitative interviews conducted with Nigerian returnees in Lagos (40 individuals), Edo (41) and Borno (24) states between August and September 2020. Data was collected by Datadrill Research. Research participants were identified through purposive sampling, drawing upon the consulting firm's existing network. A Covid-19 mitigation strategy was developed by the consulting firm to uphold the safety of researchers and participants.

As illustrated below, efforts were made to include returnees who had been forcibly returned, returnees who participated in assisted voluntary return programmes, and spontaneous returnees. No personally identifiable information was collected during data collection; all names in this report have been changed.

Figure 2. Number of respondents by gender, age, and return modality



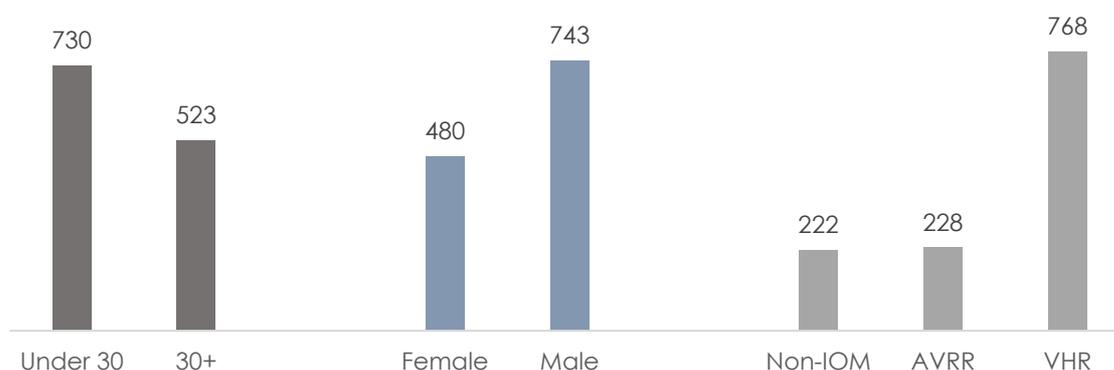
Research tools were designed to provide insight into respondents' prior experiences of displacement, their migratory trajectories, the modalities of their return, and their post-return mobility. A major limitation of this study is that respondents' narratives focus more heavily on their experiences of migration than their subsequent return. In order to remedy this issue and obtain additional information on return and reintegration challenges, the study also draws upon aggregated Reintegration Sustainability Survey (RSS) data for Nigeria provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The RSS was designed to assess fifteen indicators covering the economic, social and psychological aspects of reintegration, to provide a reintegration score that measures progress towards sustainability of reintegration.¹⁵

15 IOM, [Sustainable reintegration: Knowledge Bite 1](#), 2020

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This comprehensive dataset is based on 1,223 interviews conducted with returnees in Nigeria between 2018 and 2020. It disaggregates data based on age, sex, and type of returnee; AVRR, VHR, or 'non-IOM', which indicates that the individual received reintegration support, but did not travel to the country of origin through IOM.

Figure 3. IOM RSS respondents in Nigeria



In order to understand the research participants' reasons for voluntary return, a first section of this report is dedicated to the migratory experience, including motivations for migration, migrant smuggling, migration routes and experiences of abuse and exploitation. Subsequently, we turn our attention to the modalities of return, examining the experiences of those who return spontaneously, through assisted return programmes, or as a result of deportation or forced returns. A final section of the report focuses on reintegration, shining light on reintegration assistance, barriers to reintegration, and subsequent mobility, including the risk of secondary migration or displacement.

Patterns of migration and abuse

Drawing upon the narratives shared by returnees interviewed in Lagos, Edo and Borno states, this chapter shines light on migrants' motivations and modes of migration, and highlights the challenges and abuses experienced by those on the move.

Motivations for migration

In any given context, cross-border migration is prompted by different motivations. People may choose to move abroad to seek better life opportunities but also to flee persecution, conflict or violence.¹⁶ When motivations include a combination of both, the line can be fine between what qualifies as voluntary migration and forced displacement.

16 Mixed Migration Centre, [MMC's understanding and use of the term mixed migration](#)

Those who embark on dangerous journeys across deserts and oceans often do so because they feel their options are constrained in their country of origin. Certainly, this was the case for most Nigerian returnees interviewed for this study, the majority of whom left the country for economic reasons. “The weight of poverty was very high”, explained Eghosa “so I decided to move to another country like Italy to have a better future.” Banji felt similarly restricted: “in Nigeria, many skills are wasted. [...] People’s destinies are damned. [...] Opportunities are so limited to grow,” he said. Overwhelmingly, respondents spoke of wanting a better life. “I thought that there would be easy to achieve my dreams”, shared Femi, recently deported from Algeria.

Many respondents also emphasised their desire to support their families, especially for those from female-headed households. “I made the decision because things were really hard,” said Abeni. “My mom is no longer with my dad and she feeds us alone”. Similarly, Bukola was raised by a single mother and decided to leave Nigeria at the age of eighteen to support her three younger siblings; she subsequently suffered sexual exploitation in Libya before returning through IOM’s Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme.

Sometimes, the line between forced displacement and voluntary migration is fine. “After the Boko Haram crisis started I became a target as a result of a disagreement with some of their members in my area,” said Ibrahim, “so my brother who was staying in Libya said I should come to Libya and search for a job.” Two thirds of the respondents in Borno State had been internally displaced, sometimes multiple times, before deciding to seek better opportunities abroad; not all of them, however, would have been considered refugees.¹⁷

For many Nigerians, seeking better opportunities abroad means migrating to Europe. “I heard it is very easy to get money there”, said Esohe. Hearsay, indeed, is an important driver of migration. “I heard that people were travelling to Italy to make money [...] that the money is better than Nigerian money, that if I get there, I will see a good job and be sending money and everything will be okay,” said Fola.

Inspired by tales of prosperity, more than half of the returnees interviewed for this study had intended to migrate to faraway places which they were eventually unable to reach: 51 respondents had planned to travel to Europe, and four to Canada. The other respondents did not have a specific intended destination in mind. The majority of respondents were hosted in Libya. Only two returnees interviewed had in fact made it across the Mediterranean: Banji, who lived in the Netherlands for close to a decade, and Aisosa, who reached Spain from Morocco twice but was sent back both times.

¹⁷ Thirteen per cent of respondents in Lagos had been internally displaced before crossing a border, and 7% of respondents from Edo state.

Migrant smuggling

The hearsay driving migration is often promoted not only by migrants and prospective migrants themselves, but also by an array of facilitators who benefit financially from migration, namely smugglers and traffickers. One study with migrants in transit in Niger and Mali found that 61% of respondents had used a smuggler at that point in their journey.¹⁸ These smugglers were broadly perceived as travel agents or business people¹⁹ However, nearly two thirds of migrants who moved with a smuggler had experienced trafficking along the route, highlighting the intersectionality of smuggling and trafficking networks in North Africa and the Sahel.²⁰

Friends often play a role in linking prospective migrants to smuggling or trafficking networks. Osaru was put in touch with a smuggler by a friend who had successfully made it to Europe. Other 'friends' have less honourable motives. "I was deceived by an aunt of mine," explained Tokunbo. "She told me that if I could take the risk, pay a certain amount of money, she and her people would guide me and help me travel and settle in Libya. I told my mother about her offer because she also knows the person, we both trusted her, and then she convinced me." On arrival in Niger, however, Tokunbo found himself stranded. "I was confused because I paid the exact amount she said would take me to Libya".

Like Tokunbo, many migrants are fooled into travelling.²¹ It is common for Nigerian traffickers to recruit their victims in Nigeria, later selling them to Libyan traffickers in Libya.²² "A blunt truth is that many people will come and tell you [...] how Arabians treated them like dogs", said Omolade, "but the truth is we Nigerians are actually the major problem, because it is a Nigerian girl that will control another friend from Nigeria and will take her in for prostitution."

"I saw this lady that told me she will take me abroad and I will make hair for white people," said Abeni, at the time working as a hairdresser in Lagos. "I was very happy that things will change for good. She told me she will make me a passport and that she will take me on a flight. I paid her for the passport. Then she told me to get some hair attachments and weave-ons so that I will sell them and make some money there." On arrival in Libya however, Abeni was forced into prostitution. "The person that took me from Nigeria didn't tell me that was what I was going there for. [...] They asked me to work because I didn't pay for my transportation from Nigeria." Abeni is one of eight women in this study who had experienced sexual exploitation in Libya. One study of migration and

¹⁸ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

¹⁹ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

²⁰ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

²¹ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

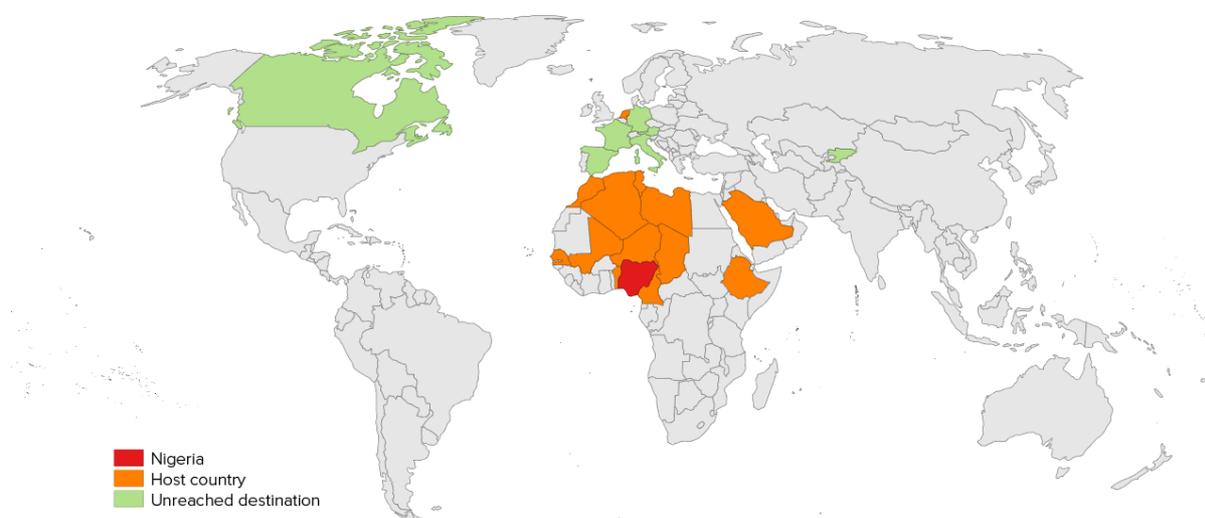
²² IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel found that over a quarter of women surveyed had been sexually exploited.²³

Even in the absence of sexual exploitation, bonded labour is often part of the arrangement between migrant and smuggler. “The woman who arranged our trip to Libya gave us jobs in the General hospital as a cleaner”, explained Bimbo. “It was from whatever I earned there that I paid the woman who brought me to Libya because she was the one who paid for my trip. I paid her for a year.” Often, bonded labour goes hand in hand with abuse. “They treated us like slaves. No clothes, no food, nothing”, recalled Bola, who worked as a maid for a year to refund the cost of her journey to Libya. Nike, also working as a maid, had to fend off repeated sexual harassment by her employers. “I wore four trousers to sleep every night. I pushed my wardrobe behind the door to block the door. I kept a fork to protect myself,” she explained.

Perilous journeys

Figure 4. Actual and intended destinations



(Mis-)guided by smuggling or trafficking networks, almost all respondents attempting to reach Europe used the Central Mediterranean route, transiting through Libya; others opted to travel to Libya in order to seek employment in the previously oil-rich North African country. As a result, 73 of the returnees who took part in this study had spent at least some time in Libya. This was less common for respondents in Borno, only four of whom travelled to Libya; neighbouring Chad, Niger and Cameroon were more common destinations,

²³ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

perhaps due to higher rates of poverty in Borno State restricting opportunities for migration.

For most migrants, the northbound journey is composed of various stages, exposing them to increasing levels of risk as they progress from their country of origin to the Sahel and up to North Africa.²⁴ Movement from the Sahel to North Africa often entails “a hazardous journey through the desert, the risk of kidnapping, and theft by bandits”; for women, there is an additional risk of rape, rampant at border crossings and checkpoints.²⁵ Upon arrival in North Africa, and particularly Libya, migrants are exposed to “violent detention, being held hostage for ransom payments, bonded labour, and in some cases being sold into situations of slavery.”²⁶ Narratives shared by research participants provide insight into the challenges experienced along the route. Bola’s story, below, is just one of many examples:

“My experience is a terrible one, a difficult one. It was an experience I would not allow any person to encounter. It was an experience that I myself wouldn’t want to even remember. [...] We all know a Hilux van should not take more than 9 people. We were about 34. [...] You can’t straighten your legs, the journey can last either a week or 4-6 days depending on the driver [...] Imagine if you are sitting down somewhere for two days and you will be there without stretching your legs and when it’s daytime, the temperature is so hot, there’s no water to drink. People were looking for urine to drink and you can hardly find urine on your own self. [...] Some people fainted and died [...] When we finally succeeded and got to Libya, it was there I knew that there would be more delays and the journey from Libya is also a journey of life and death. Libya as a country has no government in place, so everyone is running and hiding from here to there. If you are caught, they take you to a hidden place and start beating you, demanding money from you and your people. Until they are able to meet up with their demands, they won’t let you go. [...] The journey is just all about delay. It was a very horrible and terrible experience.” – Bola

Like Bola, many migrants are kidnapped and held for ransom, in a practice known as *tranke*. “They kidnap you and call your family for ransom. If the family fails to pay, they’ll maltreat the person to the point of death”, explained Eseosa. Those unable to pay are sometimes put to work.²⁷ This was the case for Tunde: “in the prison they use you as a slave, threatening you, beating you.

²⁴ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

²⁵ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

²⁶ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

²⁷ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

They carry you to work, they won't pay you and then they take you to back to the prison", he said.

Detention by both state and non-state actors is a common experience, especially in Libya. Of the 73 respondents who had spent time in Libya, 43 people (59%) had experienced detention, often multiple times; another study similarly found that 54% of their sample had been detained.²⁸ Conditions in detention centres, whether formal or informal, are often dire. "Sometimes we'd go two to three days without food," recalled Eseosa. "It was hell. You could visibly see the bones and ribs of a lot of people." Four respondents suspected that their food had been drugged during detention to prevent them from trying to escape.

For those seeking to reach Europe, the final stage of the journey is often one of the most dangerous. "They woke us up one midnight to start the journey on the sea and on the way, we heard a loud bang, it was our boat that burst and we all fell into the sea," recalled Dele, who worked in Libya for three years to finance his crossing after being deceived by his smuggler. "I couldn't swim but I was on a plank holding onto it tightly. Suddenly, we saw a boat and a person who we thought was a fisherman; he was able to rescue 86 out of 150 of us. Then he called for another boat to rescue us but these fishermen sold us to some people who took us to a camp and in that place they asked us to call our people to send money to them. People who couldn't reach out to any of their relatives and those who said they didn't have money were killed."

Indeed, alongside the risk of drowning, migrants attempting the crossing are exposed to a heightened risk of kidnapping. According to Ivie, "There are groups of gangsters who stay on the sea. These guys catch us and send us back to Libya. They usually take us girls to a place to sell us and then take the guys to prison or ask them to call their family to send them money."

Confronted with these risks, some migrants such as Aisosa question their motivation to migrate: "Sometimes I ask myself... Is Europe really worth all this? Do you know how many souls have been lost in that sea? How many souls have died throughout this journey? I give praises to God that I'm alive." Aware of perils to which they would be exposed, Tosin and Abiodun decided against attempting the crossing. "I can't risk my life because I want to pursue my dreams", said Abiodun. "If I'm dead, my dreams are dead."

²⁸ Global Initiative, [The intersection of irregular migration and trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel](#), 2020

In their words

Aisosa: Western European route

I grew up without a dad and my elder brother was playing the role of the father. He got married and I decided to take care of my family so he could take care of his. I took it as a responsibility. Many of my friends had been leaving the country so I decided to go to.

This journey is a journey of pain and sorrow. But I'm lucky enough to be alive and complete.

We passed through the desert. Our jeep was going from Niger to Algeria and people died. Almost 90 people died of dehydration and starvation. Our jeep broke down and we had no food, no water. We had to drink our pee. We had no choice but to drink it. Because we were weak and the pee was the only source of water. Females even sold their own urine. Just to survive.

We were caught and deported to the border of Mali. It's called 7 kilometres to hell. I keep getting nightmares about it. It's not an experience I'll wish for anybody. There's a valley where there are tents made from cellophane. It's called no man's land. There are ghettos. If you try to leave that place, you'll pay at least a 1,000 Euros. They collect large amounts of money. They'll force you to get someone to pay for you. People's eardrum got burst from slaps. They'll beat and torture you just so your relatives can pay. The journey is a nightmare.

Morocco was my destination because from there you can get connected to Spain. I wanted to go to Europe. It took me four years. I left Nigeria in 2002 and saw Morocco with my eyes in 2006. A journey that will take some people 1-2 weeks took me 4 years.

I faced deportation in Algeria three times. When they catch you, they'll take you to deportation camp. That was another hell. The smell, the air. We were treated like animals. That's just how it is. That's when I knew there are people who hated you for your colour. That's when I knew that there was still racism in this world.

When I got to Morocco I was there for like 10 years. That country, the lifestyle there is conducive. I call it Europe in Africa. I entered Spain twice but I was sent back to Morocco. The second time, we had to swim. Without our life suits and jackets and everything. I give praises to God that I'm alive. Unharmmed. After 16 whole years, I came back in 2018.

Osaze: Central European route

A friend of mine came to me and told me that he was about to travel. I said I wasn't interested. After about two months, I heard that my friend was now in Europe. This made me think, 'if this guy can do it, why can't I?' Then I started making plans.

I planned to travel to Germany but unfortunately, I could not cross from Libya to Europe. My experience outside Nigeria was hell. While I was in Niger, the place we were kept was a space made for livestock. Then very early one morning some guys came by bike and said that we were to follow them. They took us to the bush. They told us to lay low and make no noise because security was everywhere.

In the evening they brought some vehicles. Nine of us were loaded on the back seat. Due to the odour of the car and the fact that air could not enter some people fainted. From there we were taken to Zigidin, then Agadez. It took way over ten hours. Whenever we come across security posts they ask for a passport and since we didn't have any, we had to give them money.

From Agadez to Libya it was desert all through. We spent two weeks in the desert. We were loaded on two Hilux vehicles. Suddenly we started hearing gunshots and the drivers said they were bandits. These bandits stopped us, looted both vehicles, and then allowed our vehicle to go.

We continued our journey to Libya. The driver stopped and told us he was coming back. He didn't return. Another vehicle arrived and we had to follow this new guy because it was his territory.

This new man took us to a shelter. Beside the shelter there was a well, and in the well was a passenger's body. We had no choice but to drink from the well. The man left and said he was coming back. He left us for four days.

We continued our journey and then got to a security checkpoint. We were asked to go to the back of a building where they asked for money. If you could not provide it they would beat you. After that we headed into Libya.

Our first stop was in Tijeri. After three weeks they brought a vehicle that took us to a ghetto in Sabha. My life there was really hell. The most dangerous place on this Earth is Sabha, Libya. Everybody there carries guns and does anything they like. We went to work and they would use guns to chase us and not pay.

With all this stress and pain I thought about what I wanted to go and do in Europe again. So when I heard about IOM, I decided to find them to help me back.

Modalities of return

Motivations for return can be as complex and multifaceted as the motivation to migrate in the first place. The motivation can impact the modality of return; spontaneous return may be prompted by, for example, missing family. Assisted return might be selected in the absence of economic opportunities in the host country and therefore the means to return independently. In this chapter, we examine the different modalities of return available to Nigerian migrants, including assisted return, spontaneous return, and deportation.

Assisted return programmes

When migrants decide to discontinue their journey and abandon their plans to travel onwards to Europe or elsewhere, they often require assistance in order to return to Nigeria. Over half of the returnees interviewed for this study had benefited from assisted return programmes. This includes both the Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme from Libya, and the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme from other countries of transit and destination. The programmes are designed to provide “administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin.”²⁹ The Libya-specific VHR programme was launched in 2017 in response to the abuses faced by migrants in the country’s detention centres, with funding from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (see Spotlight below).³⁰ Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR also have a tripartite agreement for voluntary return.³¹

Appealing to the Nigerian embassy is often the most expedient way for migrants to avail themselves of assisted return programmes. “When I heard that they were conveying people back to their countries, I went to the Nigerian embassy in Libya”, said Mohammed. “It was the Nigerian embassy and IOM that organised and facilitated our return.”

However, this requires awareness of the repatriation scheme, sufficient freedom of movement to travel to the embassy, and the economic means to travel – an impossibility for those in detention, and a significant hurdle for those in other parts of the country. Ademola, who heard about opportunities for repatriation on television while in Sabha in southern Libya, paid people to smuggle him to Tripoli in order to go to the embassy; the journey to Tripoli took him a month. The process was smoother for Abiodun. “A man told us about the UN and the Nigerian evacuation plan and we were able to verify that the information was true,” he said. “He took us to Nigerian embassy where we registered for the evacuation. That’s how I left Libya.” Outside of Libya, word-

²⁹ IOM, [Glossary on Migration](#), 2019; IOM, [Reintegration handbook](#), 2019

³⁰ IOM Libya, [Voluntary Humanitarian Return \(VHR\)](#); EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, [Voluntary Humanitarian Return Programme from Libya resumed since a temporary hold began five months ago due to Covid-19](#), 2020; Montalto Monella, L., Creta, S. [Paying for migrants to go back home: how the EU’s Voluntary Return scheme is failing the desperate](#), 2020

³¹ UNHCR Kora, [Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR sign a tripartite agreement on the returns of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon](#), 2017

of-mouth has a similar role to play. Bankole, left stranded by his smuggler in Ethiopia, was told about the possibility of repatriation by another migrant:

“One day when we were begging I met a Sudanese man who noticed I could speak English. He was the one that helped me. We spoke at length and I narrated my story to him. He told me about IOM and how I can return to my country through them. When I got to their office, I introduced myself, submitted necessary documents and they said they would call me later. I went back to the shelter, continued begging until one day they called me to say that they booked me a ticket to come back.” – Bankole

Migrants in Libya and other parts of North Africa are sometimes able to register for return through IOM, if they are being detained in an official detention centre. “IOM comes to the prisons and counts the migrants and ask what people are doing there, what happened and how they got there, you will now explain to them and tell them if you want to go back to your country”, explained Omolade. After prolonged periods in detention, many migrants are eager to avail themselves of IOM’s support to return to their countries of origin.

“We were in prison for 8 months. We didn’t see outside, didn’t know sunset or sunrise, they gave us food when they liked. We couldn’t talk, if we talked, the Arab men would come and beat us mercilessly. [...] We don’t know how the news got to IOM and the UN that there were some immigrants in the prison. They came and saw some of the things we are passing through and they asked who wants to go back to their country. Many of us raised up our hands because of the suffering.” – Wale

Voluntariness of assisted return

Assisted voluntary return is often perceived as a win-win for both governments and migrants. IOM’s reintegration handbook acknowledges that “for governments assisted voluntary return is usually a more cost-effective and administratively expedient alternative to other actions such as detention or deportation. For the migrant, voluntary returns allows for a more humane alternative to forced return.”³² The true voluntariness of such schemes, however, is sometimes called into question.³³ The tension between different understandings of voluntariness is also recognised in the handbook:

“There is no agreed definition of voluntary return. Some actors consider return to be voluntary only when migrants still have the possibility of legally remaining in their host countries. According to these actors, when a migrant has the legal obligation to leave the host country and chooses

³² IOM, [Reintegration handbook](#), 2019

³³ Newland, K., Salant, B. [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Migration Policy Institute, 2018; Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020

to return of their own volition, return should be described as obliged, mandatory, compulsory or accepted return. Others consider that voluntary return should be understood in a broader sense: that migrants can express their will, even in the absence of legal options to remain in a host country, as long as other conditions are met. Specifically, for IOM in the context of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), voluntariness is assumed to exist if two conditions apply: (a) freedom of choice, which is defined as the absence of physical or psychological pressure to enrol in an AVRR programme; and (b) an informed decision, which requires the availability of timely, unbiased and reliable information upon which to base the decision.”³⁴

One categorisation of voluntariness provides three distinct degrees: absence of force, choice between return and unacceptable alternatives (e.g. deportation), and choice between return and acceptable alternatives (e.g. local integration).³⁵ Within this categorisation, it has been argued that only the latter option represents true voluntariness; that consent should be freely given, in possession of all relevant information, and in the presence of acceptable alternatives.³⁶

For Nigerian migrants, acceptable alternatives are often few and far between. “The only option I had was to return since I was already caught and put in the detention camp,” said Bukola. “I decided that I would return instead of dying in a foreign country.” Like Bukola, many migrants decide to return “in order to avoid detention, or so as to escape otherwise abusive, exploitative or even life-threatening situations.”³⁷

“I'd never been in prison. [...] It was the worst experience ever. I would never like to experience it again. We were packed in a room with the toilet and bathroom. We ate there. The water was bad, the food was bad. People died there and they would even refuse to pack the bodies. They saw death as nothing. I didn't want to come back before but with this thing, I had to come back. [...] The Nigerian embassy came to and asked who wanted to go back willingly. Some people bribed their way out of prison but I didn't have anyone to help me pay. Nobody was aware in my family. So I wrote my name down willingly.” – Jide

³⁴ IOM, [Reintegration handbook](#), 2019

³⁵ Morrison (2000) cited in Black, R. Koser, K. Munk, K., Atfield, G, D’Onofrio, L. and Tiemoko, R. *Understanding Voluntary Return*, Home Office Online Report, Sussex Centre for Migration Research (2004), pp4-5.

³⁶ Long, K. *The Point of No Return: Refugees, Rights, and Repatriation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p.172

³⁷ Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020

Spotlight: EU policies

Predating large-scale arrivals on European shores, an annual EU-Nigeria dialogue on migration and development was launched in 2008, contributing to a working arrangement between Nigeria and the EU External Borders Agency (FRONTEX) in 2012.³⁸ In early 2015, the EU and Nigeria reaffirmed their will “to prevent and combat irregular immigration in accordance with applicable international standards” in a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM), stressing in particular “the relevance of voluntary return schemes and reintegration to achieve this goal”.³⁹

With this focus on irregular migration, in 2015, before the onset of the so-called migrant crisis, the European Agenda on Migration was launched. Later that year, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was created at the Valletta Summit, with initial financing of €1.88 billion some of which is dedicated to assisting the voluntary return of migrants through the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration.⁴⁰ The Agenda’s emphasis on cooperation with third countries led to the Partnership Framework in 2016, with the short-term objectives “to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea, increase rates of return to countries of origin and transit, and enable migrants and refugees to stay close to home avoiding taking dangerous journeys”. Return, readmission and reintegration policies form an essential part of the framework, which calls for a measurable increase in the number and rate of returns and readmissions.⁴¹

In the face of rising deaths along the Central Mediterranean route, in 2017 the European Commission issued the Malta Declaration, committing to cooperate more closely with Libya as the main country of departure in order to reduce migratory flows. As well as offering training and support to the Libyan national coast guard, the declaration called for increased support from actors working in the field of assisted voluntary return.⁴² This was echoed by the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya, which includes a commitment to promote international organisations’ efforts to return migrants to their countries of origin, including through voluntary return.⁴³

³⁸ FrancoAngeli, [Preview: Joint Declaration on a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the European Union and its Member States](#), 2015

³⁹ FrancoAngeli, [Preview: Joint Declaration on a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the European Union and its Member States](#), 2015

⁴⁰ EU, [Migration Partnership Framework](#); European Commission, [EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#); [EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration](#)

⁴¹ European Commission, [Communication on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration](#), 2016

⁴² European Council, [Malta Declaration by the members of the European Council on the external aspects of migration: addressing the Central Mediterranean route](#), 2017

⁴³ Odysseus Network, [Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the state of Libya and the Italian Republic](#), 2017

Spontaneous return

While spontaneous return was relatively common for respondents in Borno due to the proximity to neighbouring countries, with fifteen respondents having done so, it is relatively rare for Nigerian migrants to return spontaneously from North Africa: unless they are able to return for free through assisted return programmes, they are unlikely to have the means to finance travel back to their country of origin.⁴⁴

Osahon applied for repatriation from Morocco in order to save the little money he had succeeded in accumulating abroad: "After I made a little money in Morocco I decided that if I should use this money to return to my country I wouldn't have enough money left [...] I wanted to save it. I went to immigration and I explained that I wanted help to go back to Nigeria," he explained. Similarly, Fola had been contemplating spending all her savings on a return ticket from Libya when she found out about the support available from the Nigerian embassy:

"I didn't have peace of mind in that country. After I worked for 6 months, I gathered some money to come home [...] I told one of my friends because she too was planning to come home. I was planning to buy a ticket. I didn't know about IOM, and she now told me that there was a free plane from Libya to Nigeria. I was very excited about that free plane. [...] I kept thinking about that 6 months of money I would have used to buy a ticket before my friend told me that there is a free plane" - Fola

Some migrants are unable to benefit from assisted return and do so independently due to conditions in the host country. Funmi, who returned to Nigeria in 2006 before the advent of current assisted return programmes, had no other choice: "The money I was able to raise there was what I used to come back home. I came back home with nothing. [...] I didn't get any support then because they had not started the program that helped deportees." Omoruyi, however, returned in 2018 – it is unclear whether he was unaware of the existence of assisted return programmes, or if he was for some reason unable to avail himself of this support:

"I left because that place is dangerous and all my efforts to cross to Italy by sea were futile. Whenever I work and make some amount of money to give to these people to help me cross, they won't do it. They scammed me every time I gave them money. After so many failed attempts and them always telling me to wait, I decided to come back home. [...] Someone arranged a vehicle from Libya to Niger and then another vehicle was arranged from Benin to come pick us up in Niger. No one supported me. [...] I raised one hundred and fifty thousand Naira [approximately 400 USD] to give these people. I worked and gathered

⁴⁴ Only one respondent from Lagos and one respondent from Edo reported having spontaneously returned.

the little money I was earning. I gathered it for a year; it's not easy to raise the money on time because I had to eat and take care of myself."
– Omoruyi

Deportation

Deportation is widely considered “one of the most contentious actions states undertake in their efforts to manage migration flows.”⁴⁵ The way in which such forcible returns are carried out also varies widely, ranging “from individualized legal proceedings with due process and reintegration support, to coercive mass returns with no legal or humanitarian safeguards.”⁴⁶ This includes forced returns from Cameroon, where humanitarian and human rights organisations report that tens of thousands of Nigerian migrants have been rounded up by security forces, loaded into trucks, and returned to Nigeria.⁴⁷ At the other end of the spectrum, close to three thousand Nigerians were returned from Europe in 2019 following an order to leave.⁴⁸

Alongside those who returned to Nigeria spontaneously or through assisted return programmes, 21 respondents reported having been deported, often after lengthy periods in detention. “We spent 6 months and 3 weeks, almost 7 months in prison before they deported us,” recalled Rotimi. Conversely, Tunde’s deportation was much more expedient: “They caught me in the sea in January 2019. [...] The Libyan police took us to prison. [...] They returned us to Nigeria within 5 days.”

However, it is sometimes unclear from respondents’ narratives whether their perceived deportation did not in fact fall within the remit of assisted return schemes. Tobi, who was arrested by the police in Mali and taken to a deportation camp, nonetheless specifies that she returned through IOM, who “helped with our flight”. The IOM, however, does not arrange travel for forced returns. This confusion in terminology illustrates once again the blurred boundaries between voluntary and involuntary return.

In other cases, respondents seem to have been deported from one country to another, and then enrolled in assisted return programmes. Abubakar, for example, was arrested by security forces in Algeria and returned to Niger: “After they arrested us we were taken to a town called Samaka, it’s a border town between Niger republic and Algeria”, he said. “There they handed us over to IOM and Nigeria embassy officials who brought us back home.”

Although some agencies such as GIZ and IOM provide reintegration assistance to deportees on the same basis as other returnees, migrants who are deported

⁴⁵ Newland, K., Salant, B. [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Migration Policy Institute, 2018

⁴⁶ Newland, K., Salant, B. [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Migration Policy Institute, 2018

⁴⁷ “[They Forced Us Onto Trucks Like Animals’ Cameroon’s Mass Forced Return and Abuse of Nigerian Refugees.](#)” *Human Rights Watch*. 2017; “[Testimonies of Forced Return.](#)” *Medecins Sans Frontieres*. 2017.

⁴⁸ Eurostat, [Third country nationals returned following an order to leave - annual data \(rounded\)](#)

to Nigeria are often reported to face greater challenges upon return, and benefit from much lower levels of assistance.⁴⁹

Reintegration and displacement risk

As part of the Global Compact for Migration, states have committed “to create conducive conditions for personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion in communities, in order to ensure that reintegration of migrants upon return to their countries of origin is sustainable.”⁵⁰ In practice, many returning migrants face significant challenges. The IOM is a central organisation in AVRR programmes globally, providing assistance in the dimensions of economic, social and psychological reintegration. In this final chapter, we discuss the support provided to returning migrants, and examine the extent to which the success or failure of reintegration endeavours may be associated with a risk of secondary migration or displacement.

Reintegration assistance

Nearly three quarters of the returning migrants who participated in this study received some form of formal reintegration assistance upon return to Nigeria, most of whom received support from IOM. In 2019, IOM provided over 8,630 post-arrival reintegration assistance services in total to returnees in Nigeria, including economic assistance and reintegration counselling.⁵¹

Economic assistance

Although the economic assistance provided to research participants in the current study varied, it generally involved a cash handout of approximately 100 USD upon arrival to meet the migrants' immediate needs, followed by vocational training and start-up assistance amounting to approximately 1,000 USD per person in order to set up a new business, often in partnership with other returnees. Uyi shared: “They trained us how to manage your business, how to live with a business, how to know when you're gaining or losing in business. They assisted us with money to embark on the business. We were in a group. It was about 1.1 million Naira (close to 3,000 USD) that they gave to three of us for the business, so I got about 380,000 (around 1,000 USD)”. In IOM's survey of returnees, around two thirds of respondents reported that they never or only rarely borrow money.⁵²

While many returnees spend the initial cash handout on transport, accommodation or healthcare, other returnees noted that the handout was used instead to repay debts accrued during migration. Overcoming debts is a challenge for many returnees.⁵³ Bankole, who borrowed over one million Naira

⁴⁹ The New Humanitarian, [Nigerians returned from Europe face stigma and growing hardship](#), 2020; IOM, [Return and reintegration key highlights](#), 2019

⁵⁰ Global Compact for Migration

⁵¹ IOM, [2019 Return and Reintegration Highlights](#), 2020

⁵² IOM Nigeria RSS data

⁵³ Digidiki, V., Bhabha, J. [Returning Home: The reintegration challenges facing child and youth returnees from Libya to Nigeria](#), 2019

(over 2,500 USD) to finance his attempted trip to Kyrgyzstan, had hoped he would be able to use the start-up business assistance to repay some of his debts. However, strategies are in place to ensure that this assistance is used solely for business. “They didn't pay us in cash,” explained Eseosa. “They paid our vendor who gave us the products we wanted to sell.” Tolu and his group, who started a business selling electrical equipment, had a similar experience: “we got an invoice for whatever we wanted and they made the necessary arrangement”, he said. “They bought the goods and rented a shop for us.”

Despite efforts to optimise business success and sustainability, many returnees noted that the groups formed were sometimes short-lived, and that they would have preferred to receive individual assistance. “After the first sales, my group members said that they were not interested anymore and they collected their money. Everybody split and the business collapsed,” said Eseosa. “I wish they had empowered me personally. I would have been able to start something by myself.” Yemisi's experience was more negative still: “I was paired with someone to start a fishpond business, but this person absconded with my money to Libya,” she said.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for returnees is the delay between the initial cash grant and the start-up assistance; in the interval, many returnees find themselves destitute. “By the time I paid for the house rent, the money had finished and I didn't have anything again,” said Benson. Bureaucratic procedures required to receive start-up assistance, likely imposed to ensure transparency, not only take time but cost money. “It's been over a year now since we finished the training and they have not given us what they promised,” complained Efosa. “We have borrowed money to print documents and go through the process of getting this support.” Nosa experienced similar hurdles:

“The process of getting the financial support took us one year plus. By moving about to print documents, I already spent half the money they promised us. [...] At the end of the day, three of us were given one million naira to start a business. [...] This didn't help us at all because of the expenses I made to print agreement documents and also getting a lawyer to sign it. The process and stress I went through already was more than what was given to us.” Nosa

Even once start-up assistance has been provided, the inevitable delay between the launch of the business and the first profits can be challenging for returnees. “It was difficult to start the business, feed ourselves and pay house rent with the money that was given to us,” shared Ivie. “The business couldn't possibly yield enough at that time to cater for all my needs.”

Since data collection for this study took place between August and September 2020, many respondents highlighted the negative impact of Covid-19 on their attempted reintegration. On the one hand, respondents who had only recently returned to Nigeria often found their vocational training

interrupted. “I started masonry and bricklayer courses before the pandemic, but the course was suspended till further notice and we are yet to resume,” said Abiodun. On the other hand, respondents who had already received start-up assistance found their businesses impacted by the lockdown. “I opened a business and the business was doing well,” said Bola. “But the pandemic spoilt everything.”

The assistance provided, however, has benefits which transcend economics. “I was in a group with three ladies and we started a catering business,” said Bukola. Although the business fell apart due to personality clashes, the experience was empowering, she felt. “I was hopeless and didn’t know what to do, so it helped. I was able to go out and mingle and associate with other people. I was already traumatised by the whole Libya experience and I was free as a returnee, so it really helped me come out of my shell and to relate with people.”

Assistance from Edo State

Although most returnees were assisted by IOM, some respondents in Edo State reported having received support directly from the State. “It was when we got to the airport that the Edo State government sent some people to welcome us and lodge us in a hotel,” said Itohan, who was deported from Libya. “We were fed and they gave us a token of money, 41,500 Naira (approximately 110 USD). The next morning, they took us in a bus to Edo and lodged us in another hotel. They brought doctors and they treated some of us. The Edo state Governor also promised to pay us 20,000 Naira (approximately 52 USD) each for three months, and they opened a bank account for us.” Upon arrival back in Nigeria, however, Itohan was sick, and spent most of this assistance on healthcare.

Osahon, returning from Morocco, applied for assistance at the Attorney General’s Office upon arrival in Edo State. “She asked what my interests were. I told her that since I was young I’d always had the dream of becoming a farmer. Not just any farmer but a ruminant farmer. Rearing of

Social and psychological reintegration

The psychosocial empowerment felt by Bukola as a result of her training is an integral component to effective reintegration. Indeed, the shame and stigma experienced by many returning migrants can represent an important barrier to reintegration.

Over forty percent of returnees surveyed by IOM report receiving financial support from their family.⁵⁴ However, returnees who have faced abuse or other traumas can be stigmatised and require specialised assistance; families may

⁵⁴ IOM Nigeria RSS data

also blame returnees for their failed migration projects, for which they are often perceived to carry individual responsibility.⁵⁵ “They made jest of me, saying I sold our land to travel abroad with nothing to show for it”, said Osose. Similarly, Isoken felt unable to return to live with her family after return. “I couldn't go back because of the shame,” she said. “Many persons in my street already knew I travelled to Libya and there's this perspective they have about returned migrants. Especially if it has to do with Libya. There's the bad omen. So, I couldn't go back. [...] I was ashamed of myself so I couldn't face the shame and the gossip.”

Among returnees surveyed by IOM, although 85% agree or somewhat agree that they feel part of the community where they currently live, over half report experiencing at least occasional discrimination, though no-one reported experiencing discrimination all the time.⁵⁶ Returnees who returned via AVRR were more likely to have experienced discrimination than those who returned via the VHR programme or through non-IOM channels. The impact of discrimination is seen among the participants in this current study; it contributes to feelings of shame among returnees, undermining their psychosocial wellbeing and their prospects for successful reintegration. “Whenever I step out, my head is always down because of the shame,” said Aisosa.

Given these feelings of stigma and shame, the social and psychological dimensions of reintegration are considered on par with the economic dimension.⁵⁷ Alongside business training, Ademola and his peers were taught about “having a positive mindset and not seeing ourselves as outcasts.”

In their words

Dele: overcoming homelessness

I left Libya because I was deceived by people who led me there; they filled my head with so many lies that jobs were available but I was surprised when I met the opposite of my expectations. It was so terrible. I was so happy when I was told that I would be going back to Nigeria

It was the IOM who provided a flight to pick us. The IOM supported me with business. It was a partnership, but unfortunately my partners said they didn't want to continue the business. The two ladies who were my partners have returned to Libya because they said they were facing terrible challenges with their family. We had to share the money we made and I used my share to start a small salon, that's what I have been surviving on here in Lagos.

⁵⁵ Digidiki, V., Bhabha, J. [Returning Home: The reintegration challenges facing child and youth returnees from Libya to Nigeria](#), 2019

⁵⁶ IOM Nigeria RSS data

⁵⁷ EU-IOM, [Mapping and Socio-economic Profiling of Communities of Return in Nigeria](#), 2018

When I returned to Nigeria it wasn't that good but it was better than when I was in Libya. I was like a newborn baby because I was broke. I stayed with a friend when I got back but his landlord sent him packing and I had nowhere to go, so I slept in metal containers at night and went to work at building sites in the morning.

I had to make sure I worked to keep myself comfortable and I didn't give up; I believe that since I am still alive, things will definitely work out. I was able to earn some money and then the IOM called to support me to start my barber salon. Now have a salon and I am managing. I believe that one day things will get better.

Banji: starting life again

I received information that the Nigerian Embassy was giving the opportunity for anyone who wants to return to Nigeria to come and register for free. Everything started from the Nigerian embassy in Tripoli. They registered us and helped me with a free flight to come back to Nigeria. A distance which took me four months to travel, it took half a day to travel back.

Arriving in Nigeria they lodged us in a hotel, gave us a phone, gave us food. A week or two after we started training and they taught us how to do all types of businesses. I looked at it as another opportunity to start life again.

After the training, they allocated some money to us. Right now I sell electrical parts, I also service electrical appliances and I'm doing wiring and house installation. Right now I am okay, I thank God for all their support. I want to establish the business more and establish a company where I will be training young guys as a technician.

I have gotten to the stage of settling down and I really want to concentrate. The motivation that IOM has given to me has given me an ability to stand on my own in Nigeria no matter how tough it is.

Sustainability of reintegration

According to IOM, "reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity."⁵⁸

Based on this definition of sustainable reintegration, IOM has developed a reintegration score drawing upon reintegration sustainability survey data. Preliminary analysis of global data suggests that returnees who benefit from

⁵⁸ IOM, [Reintegration handbook](#), 2019

reintegration assistance, in particular microbusiness support, are likely to display higher reintegration scores; the data also indicates that reintegration scores improve gradually over time, following return to the country of origin.⁵⁹ Nigeria has a middle-tier reintegration score of 0.67.⁶⁰

Of the Nigerian returnees who participated in this study, few appeared to have yet achieved sustainable reintegration. Many were experiencing unemployment, and some had been internally displaced following their return. Others, unable to make ends meet in Nigeria, were considering migrating abroad once more. Thirty-four per cent of respondents reported intentions to migrate in the future. Folake is a notable exception:

“My life in Lagos is good. We are eating and we are fine and we are not sick. We are okay. I wake up and go to shop, I come back, eat and go to bed. I meet my needs. I pay for the shop rent. I pay my apprentice and I assist my mum if she asks me for money.” – Folake

Unemployment

Financial difficulties are amongst the most crucial challenges experienced by returning migrants in Nigeria, which is reflected in the results of this study.⁶¹ “I have been at home for almost a year now doing nothing, but I have no job, I’m just idle,” said Abubakar, who had been deported from Algeria.

Nationwide, unemployment is estimated to affect around 8.5% of the labour force.⁶² Returnees, however, find themselves disproportionately affected. Over a quarter of all Nigerian returnees surveyed by IOM were out of work, with AVRR returnees more likely to be out of work than VHR or non-IOM returnees.⁶³ Previous studies have found higher rates of unemployment; one by Harvard University in 2019 found that 61.3% of research participants were not working, and an additional 16.8% only worked for short periods of time insufficient to generate a stable source of income.⁶⁴

In the absence of regular employment, many returnees rely on daily labour; Osaretin, who has been unable to find a stable job since returning from Libya, occasionally finds work as a bricklayer. As a result of limited opportunities for income generation, around a quarter of returnees surveyed by IOM reported often having to reduce the quantity or quality of food they ate, and a similar percentage were occasionally forced to borrow money.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ IOM, [Sustainable reintegration knowledge bite series #1](#), 2020

⁶⁰ IOM, [Mentoring returnees: study on reintegration outcomes through a comparative lens](#), 2020

⁶¹ Digidiki, V. and Bhabha, J./IOM [Returning home: the reintegration challenges facing child and youth returnees from Libya to Nigeria](#), 2019

⁶² World Bank, Unemployment, % of total labour force, national estimate, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.NE.ZS?locations=NG>

⁶³ IOM Nigeria RSS data

⁶⁴ Digidiki, V. and Bhabha, J./IOM, [Returning home: the reintegration challenges facing child and youth returnees from Libya to Nigeria](#), 2019

⁶⁵ IOM Nigeria RSS data

Risk of internal displacement

Poverty and unemployment can increase the risk of internal displacement for returning migrants, who may find themselves living in more affordable areas exposed to insecurity or natural hazards. Isoken, for example, was forced to relocate because of floods and thieves in the neighbourhood where she settled following her return from Libya. Other returnees may find themselves at risk of eviction if they are unable to pay rent. “We were owing two months and then they came with thugs”, said Aisosa. “I had to move to my uncle's place.” Family, however, is not always able to provide long-term accommodation. “I left my aunt's house because the responsibility was too much on her family and her husband asked me to leave,” explained Itohan.

Insecurity in areas of origin, such as Borno State, can also exacerbate the risk of internal displacement. Many returnees are unable to go back to their areas of origin because of continued security threats.⁶⁶ “We haven't gone back to our village because it is dangerous, so we live in the IDP camp,” said Ali. While Ali had been displaced by Boko Haram prior to migrating to Cameroon, returning migrants are not exempt from the risk of subsequent internal displacement: Abba had moved to Niger for business, yet he too has been living in an IDP camp in Maiduguri since his return to Nigeria due to insecurity in his village of origin.

At least thirteen respondents reported having been internally displaced for various reasons following their return to Nigeria, including eight respondents in Borno. How we understand internal displacement, however, matters. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework on durable solutions for internally displaced persons, “a durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement.”⁶⁷ Were this definition to be applied to returning migrants, many more would be considered internally displaced: many have continued assistance and protection needs linked to their migration, and numerous are those who face discrimination.

Previous studies have shown that the type of return can impact the success of reintegration.⁶⁸ It follows, therefore, that modalities of return may also influence the risk of subsequent internal displacement. If reintegration assistance, and in particular start-up funding for new businesses, can enhance the sustainability of return, are returnees at greater risk of internal displacement if they do not benefit from such support? If so, are returning migrants at lower risk of internal displacement if they take part in assisted return schemes, compared to those

⁶⁶ Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020; Black, R. and Koser, K. Chapter 1, *The End of the Refugee Cycle?: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*, 1999

⁶⁷ IASC, [Framework on durable solutions for Internally Displaced Persons](#), 2010

⁶⁸ Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020

return spontaneously, wasting precious financial resources on the return journey? Is the risk of internal displacement higher for deported migrants who do not benefit from reintegration assistance?

Data is lacking to provide a satisfactory answer to these questions. However, among Nigerian returnees surveyed by IOM, 31% of non-IOM returnees report sometimes, often or very often borrowing money, compared to 26% of those who took part in IOM's VHR or AVRR programmes.⁶⁹ Furthermore, at a global level, returnees having taken part in AVRR and VHR programmes score higher sustainable reintegration scores, on average, than non-IOM returnees.⁷⁰ Although these represent imperfect proxies, it would appear likely that the provision of reintegration assistance may, indeed, influence the risk of internal displacement.

Aspirations for future migration

Disillusioned and disenfranchised by the challenges they face upon return, or simply disappointed by the failure of their migration project, many returning migrants aspire to leave the country once again.⁷¹ "My destination is Europe. It has and it always will be," said Aisosa, who spent almost ten years in Morocco. "I've tasted a life outside this country that is far better than here. If I travel out, the little skills I have I can put into practice in another country. But here they just kill your spirit and laugh at you."

Although 92% of returnees surveyed by IOM said that they felt able to stay and live in Nigeria, with no large difference based on return modality, previous research had found that around 62% wanted to leave the country again.⁷² Among returnees interviewed for this current study, close to a third said they planned to travel abroad once more in the future; if we also include those who said they would *maybe* migrate, the percentage increases to over half of respondents.

Surprisingly, many returnees seem relatively undeterred by the abuses experienced during migration. "Since I survived in Libya, I don't think there is anywhere that I cannot survive," said Tola. Among the respondents aspiring to travel abroad once again, the majority had experienced detention and three had suffered from sexual exploitation. Neither are returnees swayed by the provision of reintegration support; on the contrary, many perceive this assistance as a means to finance future travel. "If I am empowered and I make my money, I can travel legally to any country and not through illegitimate means," explained Osato.

⁶⁹ IOM Nigeria RSS data

⁷⁰ IOM, [Sustainable reintegration: Knowledge Bite 1](#), 2020

⁷¹ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

⁷² IOM Nigeria RSS data; EU-IOM, [Mapping and Socio-economic Profiling of Communities of Return in Nigeria](#), 2018.

Despite widespread aspirations for repeat migration, many returnees note that they would travel again only if they are able to do so through regular means, reflecting findings of previous studies.⁷³ “I’m wiser now after that experience”, said Bankole. “I know what to do. You have to go to the embassy directly for your papers and if you don’t have any, don’t go through any shortcut. Until I have enough financial capacity to do that, I am not traveling anywhere.” Tokunbo had been taking steps to travel to Dubai, but cancelled his plans when he became suspicious of his prospective employers. “I don’t want a repeat of what happened to me in Libya. I don’t want to be stuck anywhere again,” he said.

Conversely, some returnees are adamant that they will never leave Nigeria again. “I don’t want to face the same stress and difficulty I went through again,” explained Ese. Traumatic experiences can represent a significant barrier to re-migration. “I’m still yet to recover from the shock,” said Eseosa, who was kidnapped and detained in Libya multiple times. “I’m still trying to put myself together. I’m still trying to recover from it. I told someone that even if I’m given 10 million Naira to embark on that journey, I’m not going to go because I can’t risk my life. I have come to realise that my life is so important and valuable to me.” Inspired by their difficult experiences, some returning migrants actively attempt to dissuade others from undertaking the journey. Osaze, for example, has been canvassing for a local NGO, “so that other people do not make the same mistake.”

Conclusion

The arrival of large numbers of Nigerians in Europe during the height of the so-called migrant crisis prompted the EU to take action to reduce the scale of irregular migration from the country. New policies, spearheaded by the Partnership Framework of 2016, promoted efforts to return migrants to their country of origin. In 2019, over 5,600 migrants returned to Nigeria through assisted return programmes; around 3,000 more were deported from Europe following an order to leave.⁷⁴ There is a risk, however, that these returning migrants may be exposed to subsequent migration or displacement.

As this report has shown, many returning migrants arrive back in Nigeria having experienced traumatic experiences of abuse; they are also frequently destitute, having accrued significant debts to finance their travel. Although returning migrants often receive reintegration assistance if they have returned through assisted return programmes, many nonetheless remain unable to make ends meet. “There is no support that will not be useful, but I don’t know if there is any support that can meet one’s demand,” reflected Bola.

⁷³ IOM, [Assessing the risks of migration along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries](#), 2016

⁷⁴ IOM, [2019 Return and Reintegration Highlights](#), 2020; IOM, [2019 Return and Reintegration Highlights: Annexes](#), 2020; Eurostat, [Third country nationals returned following an order to leave - annual data \(rounded\)](#)

Unemployment among returnees is widespread, exposing them to a risk of eviction; those who do not receive any reintegration assistance are likely to be even more vulnerable. In other cases, insecurity may prevent them from regaining their places of origin altogether.

In order to enhance the sustainability of return, previous studies have called for policy responses to take into account protection concerns in places of origin, and commit to broader, longer-term, development-oriented reintegration assistance.⁷⁵ Such measures, if extended to all returnees irrespective of their modalities of return, would also contribute to limiting the risk of secondary migration or displacement.

In the short-term, returnees who participated in this study have three practical recommendations to improve the effectiveness of reintegration assistance:

Provide housing assistance pending income generation

“It’s difficult to settle down immediately so accommodation and shelter is very vital”, argued Bankole. The gap between the initial cash hand-out and the provision of start-up funding leaves many returnees struggling to meet ends meet, dependent on family and friends for shelter. Some returnees are evicted and may find themselves homeless. Even after the launch of the new business, housing assistance may be warranted until returnees are able to generate a profit. “I would have loved if they also supported us with accommodation”, said Ivie. “The business couldn’t possibly yield enough at that time to cater for all my needs.”

Minimise costs and delays in obtaining start-up funding

Although the provision of in-kind assistance ensures that funds are channelled directly into the new business, many returnees report that the paperwork required is both costly and cumbersome, representing a barrier to assistance. “We have borrowed money to print documents and go through the process of getting the support”, said Efosa. The lengthy procedures can be disheartening for vulnerable returnees. “There were some people who didn’t get support immediately who committed suicide because they were doing well before they left and after they came back they had to start from square one”, shared Bola.

Offer individual rather than group-based business support

⁷⁵ Alpes, J. [Emergency returns by IOM from Libya and Niger: a protection response or a source of protection concerns?](#), 2020; Newland, K., Salant, B. [Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration](#). Migration Policy Institute, 2018

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Many returnees having benefited from reintegration assistance noted that they would have preferred to start their own business, rather than to partner with other returnees. “Every returnee comes from different backgrounds. We have different knowledge, dreams and goals for life”, explained Nosa. “I would have loved them to help us individually.” In many cases, the groups formed during training fall apart, leaving each returnee to fend for themselves. Businesses would be more sustainable, returnees feel, if they were set up individually.

By heeding returnees’ recommendations, reintegration assistance could play an even greater role in reducing returning migrants’ risk of secondary migration or displacement, and optimising the sustainability of return.