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# PREPARING REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS FOR RE-INTEGRATION : A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Refugee Council  
Registered address:  
3 Bondway  
London  
SW8 1SJ

Charity no. 1014576  
Company no. 2727514

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**Deng Yai**  
**Aghileh Djafari Marbini**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores whether productive activities can assist asylum seekers and refugees reintegrate if they return to their countries of origin. It highlights policy considerations which affect voluntary return and forced returns, discusses factors which facilitate the re-integration of asylum seekers and refugees in countries of origin, and suggests how asylum seekers and refugees can be prepared for reintegration into the labour markets there.

The study was undertaken as part of the work of ASSET UK Development Partnership<sup>1</sup> a national EQUAL project which supported the vocational and social integration of asylum seekers in the UK, through testing new ways of English language teaching, advice and guidance, on-line support, identifying asylum seekers' skills, and engaging employers in work placements and volunteering opportunities.

The paper draws on studies of return and re-integration, views of asylum seeker clients on ASSET UK services they used and their relevance to re-integration in their home countries, and case studies and interviews with those engaged in voluntary return and re-integration projects.

The paper is designed to stimulate discussion into how policy and practice in preparing asylum seekers and refugees for re-integration could be improved.

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<sup>1</sup> The partnership is partly funded by European Social Fund (ESF) through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The National Learning and Skills Council is also co-funding the mainstreaming phase of the project. Further information is available on the website of ASSET UK Development Partnership. <http://www.asset-uk.org.uk>

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## 2. RETURN OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

### 2.1 VOLUNTARY RETURN OF REFUGEES

This section provides background information on refugees who return home voluntarily, both internationally and through UK and European programmes.

Voluntary repatriation (the term UNHCR favours) is an option for refugees. UNHCR reported<sup>2</sup> that the majority of the 1, 082, 541 returnees in 2003 were refugees in their neighbouring countries. The figures of returnees world-wide in 2003 (see Table 1) suggest that significant numbers of these refugees are ready to return home.

**Table (1):**

| <b>Major Voluntary Repatriation 2003</b> |                  |
|--|------------------|
| <b>Country</b>                           | <b>Returnees</b> |
| <i>Afghanistan</i>                       | <i>644,917</i>   |
| <i>Angola</i>                            | <i>132,964</i>   |
| <i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>            | <i>11,044</i>    |
| <i>Burundi</i>                           | <i>82,067</i>    |
| <i>Central African Republic</i>          | <i>4,749</i>     |
| <i>Congo</i>                             | <i>1,677</i>     |
| <i>Cote d'voire</i>                      | <i>16,500</i>    |
| <i>Croatia</i>                           | <i>9,866</i>     |
| <i>Dem. Rep. of Congo</i>                | <i>2,506</i>     |
| <i>Eritrea</i>                           | <i>9,444</i>     |
| <i>FYR Macedonia</i>                     | <i>2,200</i>     |
| <i>Iraq</i>                              | <i>55,048</i>    |
| <i>Iran</i>                              | <i>3,800</i>     |
| <i>Liberia</i>                           | <i>21,000</i>    |
| <i>Myanmar</i>                           | <i>3,231</i>     |
| <i>Rwanda</i>                            | <i>22,932</i>    |
| <i>Serbia and Montenegro</i>             | <i>7,302</i>     |
| <i>Sierra Leone</i>                      | <i>32,727</i>    |
| <i>Somalia</i>                           | <i>9,953</i>     |
| <i>Sri Lanka</i>                         | <i>4,527</i>     |
| <i>Uganda</i>                            | <i>4,087</i>     |
| <b>Total</b>                             | <b>1,082,541</b> |

Voluntary returns of refugees, however, are by no means trouble-free. Evidence of refugee returns to Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>, Iraq<sup>4</sup>, Angola<sup>5</sup> and Liberia suggest there are many

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2004) 2003 Global Refugee Trends. UNHCR, Geneva. Also available on the UNHCR website [www.unhcr.ch/statistics](http://www.unhcr.ch/statistics)

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (2004) Afghanistan- Challenges of Return. UNHCR, Geneva.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2004) UN Refugee Agency Says Forced Returns to Iraq are Premature. [www.unhcr.org.uk/](http://www.unhcr.org.uk/) and Times Online (November 17, 2004) "Return will be a death trap" on [www.timesonline.co.uk](http://www.timesonline.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2003) Angolan Returns Cross 40,000 Mark Despite Obstacles and Rains. [www.unhcr.ch/](http://www.unhcr.ch/) and <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/angola0305/3.htm>

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challenges involved. The theory of voluntary return as freely exercised choice without coercion or incentives may not be matched in reality. In addition there are challenges on return, for example in Afghanistan:

“security and political instability, the perceived weakness and partiality of the administration in Kabul, absence of functioning legal and judicial systems to ensure basic human rights, vulnerability to local commanders, slow economic and social progress especially in rural areas, limited employment opportunities, insufficient access to land and water, conservative customs and attitudes, opportunities for former civil servants and professionals, limited reach and impact of reconstruction programmes”<sup>6</sup>.

Some experts on return and re-integration of asylum seekers and refugees, whom we interviewed, stressed the need to ensure the safety and security for the individual returnee; the sustainability of returns and the genuinely voluntary nature of returns.

UNHCR provided assistance to 704, 276 of these refugees to enable them to go back to their home countries. The voluntary nature of these returns gives the returnees the right to choose when to return home and contributes to sustainability of return.

Voluntary return of refugees has become increasingly important. It is not only one of the durable solutions to the issue of forced migration identified by UNHCR (the others being integration and resettlement), but also has become important in the immigration and asylum debate in Europe. Many EU member states have developed schemes to provide assistance to refugees who wish to return voluntarily to their home countries.

In 2002, the British government announced a package of financial assistance for voluntary returnees to Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>. The Home Office is also funding a number of voluntary return projects to help refugees with information, advice or practical assistance about returning home, discussed in the case studies in this paper.

The Home Office funds the Refugee Council to run a voluntary return project that provides information to asylum seekers and refugees who are considering or wish to return to their home countries.

**Case Study (1):  
The Refugee Council's Voluntary Returns Project**

The Voluntary Returns Project (VRP) is funded by the Home Office to contribute to the development of voluntary return programmes, to co-ordinate and produce information relevant to voluntary return and to resource and facilitate implementation groups of agencies involved in voluntary return programmes.

The VRP has a significant input to the development of programmes as well as contributing actively to the wider debate. The project works to assist the input of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) into voluntary return policies and programmes.

The VRP participates in the Home Office's Voluntary Returns Steering Group. The project also aims to raise awareness of the Europe-wide debate on voluntary returns, and seeks to create channels for Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) to contribute to the debate on good practice in voluntary return.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p2

<sup>7</sup> Click on [www.pm.gov.uk/outputs/page5917.asp](http://www.pm.gov.uk/outputs/page5917.asp)

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Refugee Action, another leading refugee support agency in the UK, runs a voluntary return project in partnership with IOM called "Choices" with funding from the Home Office.

**Case Study (2):  
Refugee Action's "Choices" Project**

The Voluntary Return Project was set up by Refugee Action in January 1998. Choices has offices in Leeds, Leicester, London and Manchester. In addition to providing advice and counselling about return to clients, Choices is active in a number of other areas such as research, second tier advice to other advisors, providing training, developing a handbook and contributing to policy development.

It has fielded 3108 enquiries since February 2002, most originating in the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside regions. By far the highest numbers of enquiries have come from Iraqis, but Choices' advice and information sessions with clients revealed similar concerns across nationalities including immigration issues; travel assistance; travel documentation; support issues in the UK – including referral to other services; conditions in country of origin and return packages available.

Through contact with its client groups, "Choices" identified the importance for clients for skilled, impartial advice; trust in the advisers; provisions for return (resettlement grant, training, employment); the availability of "Look and See" options; and the need for special provision for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the sick, women and children.

"Choices" highlights number of crucial issues from its involvement in voluntary return (Refugee Council, p12)<sup>8</sup>:

- Voluntary return is a very complex issue and cannot be neatly encapsulated
- Sound principles and credibility are prerequisites for involvement in voluntary return
- Good practice is crucial
- Partnerships are vital to the success of voluntary return programmes
- Flexibility is essential to respond to a changing environment
- Long-term development should be the goal [of returns] rather than short-term expediency

In addition, a number of agencies are working together on voluntary return and re-integration of refugees<sup>9</sup> in the UK and other EU member states to pool their accumulated knowledge and experience in this important area of refugee studies.

**Case Study (3):  
European Voluntary Return Project**

The European Voluntary Returns Project (EVRP) funded by the European Refugee Fund (ERF) was co-ordinated by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and other European partners included Asylkoordination from Austria, Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), Italian Refugee Council (CIR), and Overlegcentrum Integratie Van Vluchtelingen (OCIV) from Belgium and the British Refugee Council (RC).

The purpose of EVRP is to enable Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) to become more aware of European policies and programmes in the field of voluntary returns, and

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<sup>8</sup> The Refugee Council (2004) European Voluntary Returns Project – Conference Report. The Refugee Council, London

<sup>9</sup> The Refugee Council (2004) European Voluntary Returns Project – Conference Report. The Refugee Council, London.

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to create a channel for communication so that refugee voices can add to the debate. It aimed to examine how RCOs and NGOs can together promote good practice in voluntary return. It also enabled the European partners to work together to exchange information and knowledge about how to develop expertise in the provision of training for RCOs and working with RCOs.

At the end of the project an electronic handbook on voluntary return will be produced from the findings of the programme. This will be available on [www.ecre.org](http://www.ecre.org)

Recent research evidence and experience of voluntary sector organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees suggest that there are numerous issues and challenges involved in return of asylum seekers and refugees in both the host countries and their countries of origin. The Refugee Council's returns policy<sup>10</sup> also provides valuable advice and could be the basis for developing a principled, sensitive, person-centred return policy. The UNHCR's handbook on voluntary returns provides guidance on ensuring safe, dignified and voluntary returns.

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<sup>10</sup> The Refugee Council (2004) The Refugee Council Return Policy. The Refugee Council, London [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

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## 2.2 INVOLUNTARY RETURN OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

This section focuses on the return of asylum seekers, often removed against their will or pressured into returning. The increasing emphasis on return of asylum seekers, whose cases have failed, raises a number of concerns for voluntary sector and human rights agencies. Although they do not deny that return can play a part in an asylum strategy, this is only acceptable if appropriate safeguards are in place, initial decisions and legal processes are fair and people are returned in safety and with dignity (Refugees: Renewing the Vision Refugee Council et al. 2004).

The government has been criticised on the other hand by the Home Affairs Select Committee and the National Audit Office for what is seen to be its failure to remove rejected asylum seekers from the UK<sup>11</sup>. They report “widespread criticism” mainly due to “the disparity between the numbers of people refused asylum or leave to remain...and the numbers recorded as having left, whether voluntarily or through removal by the Immigration Service”<sup>12</sup>. According to the report, this failure “strikes at the credibility of the asylum system”. The Government’s five year strategy on immigration and asylum has an increased emphasis on return: “Swift removal is central to the credibility of our immigration system”<sup>13</sup>.

Removal of rejected asylum seekers is fraught with difficulties, both for the Home Office and the asylum seekers. According to the Home Affairs Select Committee’s report<sup>14</sup>:

What is not widely understood is the practical difficulty of removing people who may have lived in this country for years, whose country of origin may not be willing to readmit them, whose national airline may not be willing to carry them and who, in the case of families, may have children (including some born here) who may know no other life but this.

Removal comes at the end of the asylum determination process and therefore, the quality of initial decisions plays a key role. An increasing proportion of initial decisions on asylum claims in recent years resulted in refusal of both asylum and limited protection to significant numbers of people. About 20% of initial refusals are overturned on appeal, and for nationals of some countries this rises to 40%. The key to fair removals, both the Home Affairs Select Committee and human rights advocates argue, is to get the initial decision right<sup>15</sup>.

**Table (2)**

| Initial Decisions<br>(No. of Cases) | 1999   | 2000    | 2001    | 2002   | 2003   |
|-------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|
|                                     | 33,700 | 109,205 | 119,015 | 83,540 | 64,605 |
| % of Refusals                       | 52%    | 78%     | 74%     | 66%    | 83%    |

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<sup>11</sup> Her Majesty Stationary Office (2003) Select Committee on Home Affairs Fourth Report. HMSO, London, paragraph 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Paragraph 7.

<sup>13</sup> The Stationary Office (2005) Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain – Five Year Strategy for Asylum and Immigration. TSO, Norwich. P.29

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Paragraph 4.

<sup>15</sup> The Stationary Office (2003) House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Fourth Report. TSO, London; Paragraph 33.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) has argued that fair and efficient asylum procedures must be a pre-requisite to return: "the credibility of a removal system and an asylum system is fundamentally undermined if it fails to protect those in need of international protection"<sup>16</sup>.

In spite of the many difficulties, the Home Office Asylum Statistics (2004) show increasing numbers of asylum seekers removed:

**Table (3)**

|   | 2001          | 2002          | 2003          |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <i>Total principal applicants removed</i> | <b>9,285</b>  | <b>10,740</b> | <b>13,005</b> |
| <i>Including dependants</i>               | <b>1,495</b>  | <b>3,170</b>  | <b>4,890</b>  |
| <i>Total removed</i>                      | <b>10,780</b> | <b>13,910</b> | <b>17,895</b> |

Removal of rejected asylum seekers from the UK and other European countries is causing concern to many refugee agencies and human rights advocates for a number of reasons. First, the new emphasis on setting targets for removal of rejected asylum seekers from the EU member states raises questions as to whether these countries are committed to protection of asylum seekers under the 1951 Geneva Convention or whether they are more concerned with protecting their borders against asylum seekers<sup>17</sup>. The Select Committee's report also recognises that the pressure on the Home Office to remove more asylum seekers "could endanger the rights and dignity of those being removed"<sup>18</sup>. Second, force continues to be used in the process of removal of rejected asylum seekers. This is in spite of its disastrous consequences to individuals and embarrassment to EU member states<sup>19</sup>. Threat of using force is also used to oblige rejected asylum seekers to 'voluntarily' return to their countries of origin or rather return to danger<sup>20</sup>. Third, removal of rejected asylum seekers, especially vulnerable groups of asylum seekers such as children and those subject to human rights abuses in Europe such as Roma asylum seekers, has courted controversy in the UK and other EU member states. It forced many organisations and individuals, including Members of the Parliament, to ask for assurances from the British government that removals will be carried out sensitively and humanely. Lord Avebury urged that<sup>21</sup>

People should connect the influx of Romany asylum seekers with the failure of the states concerned to eliminate inequality. If countries eliminated violence and discrimination, people wouldn't be asking for asylum.

The response to these concerns has not been adequate. The Home Office's response to the issue of deportation of families and children sounded reassuring: "It is important that we have a policy for returners that is sensitive to their needs, that is

<sup>16</sup> ECRE (2005) *The Way Forward*. Europe's role in the global refugee protection system. The return of asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected pp1-2

<sup>17</sup> Fekete, Liz (2005) *The Deportation Machine: Europe, Asylum and Human Rights*. Institute of Race Relations, London, pp9-10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Paragraph 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p14

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p23

<sup>21</sup> Branigan, T (2003). *MPs Attack Removal of Roma Asylum Seekers*. The Guardian, London

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effective and determined..."<sup>22</sup>. However, the reality of removals is a harsh one; forcible returns do often go disastrously wrong<sup>23</sup>. In addition, there is inadequate monitoring of returnees and their safety cannot be guaranteed. Attitudes of EU member states to monitoring returns are reported to be negligent<sup>24</sup>. Returnees are also reported to be at risk of being targets for violence<sup>25</sup>. The killing of the Iraqi Shia cleric Sayed Abdul Majid al-Khoei<sup>26</sup> is a clear example.

Voluntary returns, according to the Home Office, "are inherently preferable to enforced returns" and constitute "a vital component" of its returns policy. In addition, a recent evaluation report suggests "VARP [Voluntary Assisted Return Project] provided significant cost-savings for IND in comparison with the alternative of removing unsuccessful asylum seekers following the completion of the asylum process"<sup>27</sup>. The National Audit Office report<sup>28</sup> states that "in 2003-04 the average cost of a voluntary return was £1100 whereas the average cost of an enforced return was £11,000".

However, it is evident that the Home Office will continue to be expected to enforce removals from the UK as long as significant numbers of asylum seekers continue to be refused asylum. For this reason, the government is planning to ensure "the monthly rate of removals...exceed[s] the number of unfounded applications" by the end of 2005<sup>29</sup>.

All this has important implications for our study. The ever-present fear of enforced removal makes it more difficult for asylum seekers to discuss the issue of return to their country of origin and for work experience and volunteering to be seen as preparation for return as well as preparation for integration in the UK.

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<sup>22</sup> House of Commons (2002) Hansard 4 Feb 2002: Column 595, HMSO, London

<sup>23</sup> Fekete, Liz (2005) *The Deportation Machine: Europe, Asylum and Human Rights*. Institute of Race Relations, London

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p25

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p29

<sup>26</sup> Wastell, David (2004) *Investigation into Killing of Iraqi Cleric Switches to Britain*. The Daily Telegraph, London.

<sup>27</sup> Home Office (2003) *The Voluntary Assisted Returns Programme: An Evaluation*. The Home Office, London. Also available on [www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk)

<sup>28</sup> National Audit Office (2005) *Returning Failed Asylum Seekers*

<sup>29</sup> The Stationary Office (2005) *Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain – Five Year Strategy for Asylum and Immigration*. TSO, Norwich. P.29

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## 3 PREPARING ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES FOR RE-INTEGRATION

### 3.1 PRE-RETURN PREPARATION FOR RE-INTEGRATION

Re-integration preparation programmes for asylum seekers and refugees aim to support the socio-economic sustainability of return of the target group(s). Socio-economic sustainability is “defined ...as involving levels of well-being, with a particular emphasis on employment, income, assets, and housing, as well as the extent to which individuals were reliant on others to satisfy their needs”<sup>30</sup>. It is vital that they improve the employability of the would-be returnee to access employment or self-employment in the country of origin. In addition programmes should address the needs of those who are not breadwinners, including the elderly, the sick, children and carers.

Such programmes should also take into consideration factors linked to employment, which affect the socio-economic sustainability of returns. Research by Black et al. in "Understanding voluntary returns" suggests that such factors include “gender, pre-war education, pre-war employment, whether asylum was sought alone, education in asylum country, employment in asylum country, accommodation in asylum country, whether living in pre-war home, receipt of return assistance, willingness to return and reasons for return”<sup>31</sup>. Such factors as education, the receipt of assistance to return home and the reason for return “appeared to correlate clearly with income levels since return”<sup>32</sup>. Those refugees “who returned willingly, and because they wanted to be at home, were more likely to have found employment and were less poor since their return”. “Over half of those who had just primary schooling before seeking asylum were now extremely poor, compared to only just over a quarter of those who had gone on to a higher level of education (and none of those who had been to university either before or during exile)”<sup>33</sup>.

Learning English language in the UK prior to departure should benefit returnees, too. Recent evidence suggests that “three-quarters of those who had taken language classes were working on their return, compared to just half of those who had not received any education whilst they were abroad”<sup>34</sup>.

Also work experience gained in the country of asylum benefits returnees in their home countries: “two-thirds of those who had worked in the asylum country were now working on their return”<sup>35</sup>. Yet, the Home Office decided to withdraw the right to work for asylum seekers in July 2002.

Some EQUAL projects<sup>36</sup> are currently helping asylum seekers to prepare for integration in the United Kingdom or re-integration in their countries of origin. The following case study provides further information about one of these projects.

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<sup>30</sup> Black, R et al (2004) Understanding Voluntary Return. Home Office, London, p30

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.p38

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.p38

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.p.38

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.p38

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.p38

<sup>36</sup> Further information is available on the website. Click on the hyperlink for details.  
[www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/themes/i\\_asylum.asp](http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/themes/i_asylum.asp)

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Case Study (4):  
Asset UK Development Partnership

ASSET UK Development Partnership (DP) has supported and empowered many asylum seekers. It helped 246 asylum seekers to acquire the essential basic skills that are a prerequisite to mobility, orientation and the seeking of job opportunities in the UK or elsewhere by developing, testing and evaluating innovative ways of delivering basic skills and ESOL in comparative settings.

It provided 65 asylum seekers in comparative dispersal areas with high quality advice and guidance through access to online orientation and information resource packs. It also delivered training to over 160 advisers and lecturers in the English regions.

The DP also undertook a baseline audit of the skills and qualifications of 668 asylum seekers on arrival in dispersal areas of the East Midlands and Northern Ireland, and facilitated appropriate opportunities for volunteering and labour market orientation alongside learning support. The partnership also created 100 opportunities for asylum seekers to undertake volunteering so that they have basic work experience and have initial exposure to UK employers and the labour market. In so doing, it also worked with target groups of employers to facilitate better mutual understanding between asylum seekers and employers of each others needs.

The DP also developed the skills of 351 teachers (both paid and unpaid) to deliver the new ESOL curriculum to asylum seekers using a range of new materials and raised their awareness of the barriers which asylum seekers face.

ASSET UK Development Partnership organised a focus group with some of its beneficiaries in 2005 from a wide range of backgrounds. The topic of returning is a difficult and sensitive one to discuss with individuals who might be facing this as an imminent prospect. However, they mainly agreed that there was much that was positive from their involvement; many had found new career paths or significantly improved their work experience through the opportunities they had accessed through the programme.

They were asked if they believed their participation in the activities would help them develop the skills they needed in order to obtain employment in their countries of origin. Beneficiaries' statements supported the view that the vocational skills they had gained would be helpful if they are required to return:

- In my country English is second language. Nowadays people learn it in primary school. So learning English was an improvement and beneficial for me.
- If [*your home country*] has been a British colony, qualifications [*gained here*] have more prestige.
- I believe that I can get a job easily here in UK, I have worked with a lot of international firms. I just need to improve my communication, although it's good to improve English and it's beneficial if I am required to go back.

When asked about the help they would need to find a job if they were returned to their home country, asylum seekers who attended the focus group said that:

- English qualification should help with promotion assuming there are no political problems.
- Voluntary work in the UK can help asylum seekers gain more work experience and help secure references.
- British Government should ask the country we are coming from what skills they need to prepare us to go back

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However, it was acknowledged that the situation of the labour market in the country of origin is a key factor in securing a job. One participant in the focus group observed that it is “Very difficult to get a job, many people with qualifications do not have jobs” in his home country. Labour market situation is by no means the sole factor that influences access to jobs in the countries of origin. Other barriers cited include political and cultural factors:

- In my country there is a war. The job I was doing working with children, helping them to be somebody. It's difficult because of political problems. There is no proper job market; you have to know somebody in order to get the job.
- Obtaining qualifications in England should be helpful, but because of conflicts/civil wars is not of much help.
- It might help, but situation won't let it help. I am from Sikh minority, we were 1% in Afghanistan, now it's impossible for these families to exist, let alone to work. There is a new Government, but they haven't learned anything.
- Most of the barriers are political. The more you learn, the more you diversify your luck. Even if it's just one word.
- Not everyone in my country would be happy with me to come back after period I've spent in England. People hate those who have been outside. There is a hard life back home and they believe we have an easy life in England.
- In my country young people get the job easier than old people. Ugly people can't get a job even if you have qualifications/experience. If you are older than 30 and especially if you are woman. There are not enough jobs there. Only people who can get a job are rich people or people who have friends on the influential positions.

One of the experts we interviewed stressed that acquisition of the language of the country of asylum is one of the skills that can be helpful. English in particular is a language which is highly valued in many societies. As for vocational training, if this is done in a particular occupational area that the individual is able to continue working in when she/he returns home, then this can be very helpful. European qualifications tend to be valued.

The European Voluntary Return Project participants debated the factors that would be influential in the reintegration process. From one point of view, the more skills and education one has the more one is likely to lose in returning and arguably one is more integrated in the host country. But it is also true that with more skills and education one would feel more responsible in rebuilding one's country. It is, however, apparent that with the skills acquired the level of the individual's confidence rises and although the particular skills might not be directly helpful in the home country, the confidence motivates people to do better in reintegration. If asylum seekers had permission to work in the UK, the skills that they would acquire would increase the chances of a more successful voluntary return.

However, as refugees in the UK are often employed in jobs that do not reflect their abilities, it is also important that individual skills are nourished. For example, if an asylum seeker who is a dentist ends up stacking shelves in a supermarket, they not

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only get demoralised and their skills wasted, but there would be no specific benefit for them in terms of their reintegration back home. However, if they learnt IT or general CV writing skills, this could be more beneficial in terms of reintegration.

As part of ASSET UK the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has been running a project that audited the skills of asylum seekers and helped them to gain UK work experience. This is an example of what can be done to prepare asylum seekers for re-integration in their home countries. Even if these skills are not directly used, it is very important in terms of personal development and confidence building.

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## 3.2 POST-RETURN ASSISTANCE WITH RE-INTEGRATION

Recent evidence from IOM's self-evaluation study suggests refugee returnees benefit from assistance with re-integration on arrival in their home country, too <sup>37</sup>.

### Case Study (5):

#### IOM Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme

IOM operates a Voluntary Assisted Return and Re-integration Programme (VARRP). It reported that "a total of 1,532 returnees applied for re-integration assistance" in the period between March 2003 and February 2004<sup>38</sup>. In 2004, 717 returnees applied for re-integration assistance. Afghan refugees were over-represented in the application stage; they submitted 272 applications for assistance.

IOM assisted 346 applicants from diverse nationalities or countries with reintegration in 2003. In 2004, IOM assisted returns from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Albania, Colombia and other countries.

The assistance sought by, and given by IOM to, the returnees were mainly in the areas of business schemes and vocational training (96 returnees were assisted after their return). The business schemes focused on "the establishment of small businesses" in most countries of return<sup>39</sup>. IOM assisted 162 returnees to establish small businesses including food shops; printing business; farming; tailoring; construction business; plumbing business; shoe-making business; photography; advertising and hi-fi repair shop.

In 2004, IOM's business schemes benefited 585 returnees. Its vocational training programmes were attended by 122 returnees. IOM gave almost the same kind of assistance to male and female returnees. However, male returnees constituted 80 per cent of those assisted. Only 99 women attended the business schemes and 29 others followed the vocational training options.

Vocational training "provides the ground work for returnees to gain the necessary skills, or further expand on already existing skills that increase their chance of finding a job"<sup>40</sup>. Vocational training schemes included IT training; language courses; accounting and business management; hairdressing training and carpentry training.

Other assistance given to returnees included job apprenticeships to help returnees to learn a new skill, and earn an income. Equally popular was assistance with education for families with children. Also adult returnees had access to education opportunities provided through universities and colleges and enhanced their skills<sup>41</sup>.

IOM reported that most returnees had secondary level education, and were male (60-62%). However, there were not many returnees with higher-level education and university degrees. The skills that people have are only useful if people are able to carry on in their particular skills areas. For example, if a plumber goes back home and cannot or is not able to carry on with that trade, then the training has not been particularly helpful. However, generic set of skills for instance English language can often be helpful. But IOM does not ask them about their skills when considering their

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<sup>37</sup> International Organization for Migration (2004) Re-integration Self-Evaluation Results. IOM, London.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.p7

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.p7

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.p8

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applications. They only ask about work experience, which some of them have. Most returnees IOM assisted want to set up small businesses.

According to UNHCR, activities intended to prepare returnees to achieve self-reliance should be informed by the following principles<sup>42</sup>:

Self-reliance in asylum can lead to durable solutions and should be based on the following principles:

- Target populations, including refugees and host communities, should participate in identifying and prioritizing activities;
- Local communities should provide appropriate support (resources, facilities, networks and institutions) to refugees to assist their progress towards self-reliance;
- Livelihood interventions or skills and vocational training must correspond to market demands;
- Communities must contribute labour and/or locally available materials to communal infrastructure development;
- Appropriate legal provisions and/or a conducive environment should be in place to allow refugees to pursue self-reliance activities;
- Refugees and local communities should benefit from capacity-building opportunities;
- “Win-win” solutions are good for host communities and refugees;
- Sustainable coping mechanisms and income strategies in areas of return should factor into programme design;
- A community-based and environmentally friendly approach should be built into programmes;
- Cultural awareness and gender balance are necessary in all stages of the programme; and
- Early planning with development actors should be based on market access to ensure sustainability.

Self-reliance activities should, however, fit into the wider plans to ensure sustainability of re-integration of returnees, which includes development support to the countries of origin. The UNHCR experience in Afghanistan, Burundi, Eritrea and Sri Lanka has yielded a number of key lessons<sup>43</sup>. First, the need to develop a comprehensive national re-integration strategy for returnees, host communities and others. Second, integrated planning at country-level needs to be promoted especially in post-conflict countries. Third, it is vital to ensure involvement of all stakeholders from the start. Fourth, ownership of the whole process by the authorities in the country of origin is critical to the successful implementation. Fifth, it is equally important to ensure donors are effectively engaged.

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<sup>42</sup> UNHCR (2004) Handbook for Repatriation and Re-integration Activities. UNHCR, Geneva. P134

<sup>43</sup> UNHCR (2004) Sustainable Re-integration of Returnees and Displaced Populations in Africa (Discussion Paper No.2). UNHCR, Geneva.

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## 4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS ON RETURN AND RE-INTEGRATION

Whilst many refugees are keen to return home, there are many challenges that need to be addressed. These obstacles make voluntary return a major undertaking and refugees need and they should be given assistance to return to their countries of origin in safety and with dignity. Well planned, well managed, and highly responsive voluntary assisted return programmes can help achieve this end. In the long-term, it is vital that the Home Office ensures its return strategy is based on the guidance from the UNHCR especially its handbook on voluntary repatriation.

The culture of annual removal targets could have serious repercussions on asylum seekers. Voluntary return, on the other hand, is a more cost-effective, sensitive and humane approach to achieving sustainable returns. It is a viable and better alternative to removals. More needs to be done to ensure as many asylum seekers as possible have the opportunity to return voluntarily, if conditions are safe.

The research and experience quoted suggest a need for partnership working to facilitate voluntary returns; a team approach could yield better results. The contracting parties (countries of asylum and countries of origin), UNHCR, Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), voluntary sector organisations, refugee agencies and other key stakeholders need to work in partnership to overcome the obstacles to voluntary return of refugees and asylum seekers and ensure sustainability of returns.

The research studies, interviews with experts, the focus group and the case studies of projects outlined in this study suggest the following are critical factors in the process of re-integration for returnees:

- (a) Potential returnees need access to current, accurate and adequate information about the situation in their countries of origin to be able to make informed decisions about return and explore the possibilities for their re-integration.
- (b) Assistance is needed to ensure returnees have adequate re-integration preparation in the UK and home countries upon their arrival to improve their employment prospects, access employment or self-employment in the home countries and promote their socio-economic sustainability.
- (c) Re-integration of refugees, asylum seekers and other groups of concern to UNHCR, such as Internally Displaced People (IDPs), needs to be well planned, resourced and co-ordinated. Some countries that have experienced civil wars, such as Afghanistan<sup>44</sup>, Sudan<sup>45</sup> and Liberia<sup>46</sup>, have started to put

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<sup>44</sup> Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan (2003) National Return, Displacement and Reintegration Strategy for The Year 1382. Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, Kabul.

<sup>45</sup> International Rescue Committee (2004) Freedom from Fear: Promoting Human Security for The Return and Reintegration of Displaced Persons in Sudan. International Rescue Committee, Khartoum.

<sup>46</sup> UNHCR (August 2004) Regional Multi-Year Operations Plan for the Repatriation and Reintegration of Liberian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (2004 – 2007)

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in place strategies for return and re-integration of refugees and IDPs. These strategies are examples of a productive, proactive and collaborative approach to return and re-integration.

- (d) Strategic leadership and co-ordination or liaison between the UK and the returnees' home countries on the one hand and between the authorities and the other key players, especially UNHCR, within these countries on the other is crucial; and
- (e) There is also a need for incentives and development assistance to countries of origin to aid re-integration. It is imperative for host countries to allocate resources for voluntary assisted returns and in addition, home countries need to engage donors effectively in the development, implementation and review of their return and re-integration strategies.

The feedback from the beneficiaries of ASSET UK Development Partnership highlight a number of issues that are worth summarising.

First, the activities undertaken by the beneficiaries through ASSET UK DP have proved very valid in terms of gaining experience, increasing knowledge and achievements.

Second, beneficiaries returning to their own country may be facing very different and more challenging barriers than in the UK. These barriers include civil war; underdevelopment in the country resulting in lack of resources; political problems; different culture and work ethics; lack of relevant work and the very important fact that volunteering holds different meanings in different cultures or does not exist at all. Voluntary activities and work placements undertaken in the UK will not automatically be recognised in another country, so skills audits and preparation of CVs would help make the benefits transferable.

Third, it must also be acknowledged that some were anxious about returning to their country having gained education and experience from the UK due to jealousy or perceived competition with others, who have not had these same opportunities, trying to find work.

Fourth, equal opportunities is a concept that does not exist in some countries, where women will not be able to access the job market due to legal constraints or cultural expectations of them as a home-maker and mother.

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## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study indicates that skills, knowledge and work experience gained in the host countries could impact on a refugee or asylum seeker's ability to generate income in his/her home country. However, much more research is needed to investigate how such skills, knowledge and experience interact with the labour market factors in the countries of origin.

The Home Office should draw on the lessons from the experience of the ASSET UK Development Partnership and encourage asylum seekers to volunteer and gain UK work experience, learn English language, and vocational skills. These opportunities may help them to generate income when they return to their home countries after they are refused asylum or will help them to integrate into the UK labour market once they are granted leave to remain in the country.

The experience of the ASSET UK Development Partnership suggests that asylum seekers can have a more productive reception period in the UK and could prepare better for re-integration if they were able to have more extensive work experience and in particular take up paid employment in the UK. We would like to see the Home Office allow all asylum seekers who are 16-years old or over to work, gain UK work experience, support themselves and contribute to the UK economic growth. This will enable them to re-integrate into the labour markets in their home countries if they return or integrate into the UK labour market once they are granted leave to remain in the UK.

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