

# Pathways to reintegration in Senegal and Nigeria promoted by Italian Assisted Voluntary Return programmes

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## Abstract

This article presents the main findings of a research study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of pathways to reintegration for citizens repatriated from Italy to Senegal and Nigeria through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes. Based on the scientific debate on the subject, the article begins by offering an in-depth exploration of the issue of whether or not AVRR is truly voluntary, as well as the meaning of the term 'reintegration'. It then illustrates the Italian AVRR system before presenting the methodology and results of the research carried out. In particular, the aim is to identify and analyse the main factors upon which the result of the reintegration of citizens who have used AVRR programmes depends, perhaps most notably the type of reception given to the returnee by friends and relatives who remained in their home country.

## INTRODUCTION

This article<sup>1</sup> presents the main findings of a research study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of pathways to reintegration for citizens repatriated from Italy to their countries of origin through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes. In particular, the study carried out focussed on repatriations performed over two successive periods of time, first to Senegal and then to Nigeria.

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Whilst over the years, there has—at least in Europe—been growing attention at both the political and scientific levels on Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes and, at the scientific level specifically, over the last 20 years, the research into return migration has come on in leaps and bounds (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 1); however, the outcomes of pathways to reintegration that are often supported and funded within the framework of AVRR programmes still remain insufficiently explored (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 11; Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021: 141). Not only this, but the very idea of reintegration itself changes according to the characteristics of the returnee, such as whether they had migrated for study or work, for example, or as a refugee (Kuschminder, 2022: 200), and AVR undoubtedly constitutes a very particular form of return migration. As such, this study aims to address this dearth of information—which appears to be even more substantial in relation to the AVRR programmes implemented by Italy—by exploring the trajectories of reintegration beyond the rather limited time frame (a maximum of 6 months in Italy) usually established by the monitoring activities included in the AVRR projects themselves.

More specifically, the questions that guided this research path were as follows: (a) to what extent did the reintegration plan established in Italy before the returnees' departure correspond with the measures actually implemented after their return? (b) how effective did the reintegration programme prove to be for returnees in the medium term? (c) to what extent did the support offered to citizens who took part in AVRR programmes prove to be adequate for their needs and their situation in the destination country? (d) what were the key determining factors of the success or failure of the pathways to reintegration?

The subsequent sections of the article will then present some of the issues emerging from the literature on the topic of AVRR as a whole, before moving on to a presentation of the Italian AVRR system as it stands. The methodology used over the course of the research and the main results of the two phases of the study carried out will then be described, followed by an in-depth commentary. Finally, in the light of the fact that understanding pathways to reintegration 'is of significance for developing policies and programmes to assist returnees' (Kuschminder, 2022: 200), some policy guidance on AVRR will also be offered based on the findings of the study.

## CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN AND PATHWAYS TO REINTEGRATION

As of the 1990s, international migration began to be perceived as a significant issue in Europe. This quickly began to spark reflections in both the political and academic spheres on the issue of repatriation and, around the same time, AVR programmes started becoming increasingly common, with AVR being considered—as a means of dealing with foreign citizens illegally residing in a given country—a more humane but also less costly alternative to Forced Returns (Black & Gent, 2006; Lietaert et al., 2017: 962–964; Noll, 1999).

In line with this consideration, the European Union encouraged its Member States—as laid out in the *Return Directive*<sup>ii</sup> which came into force in 2010—to favour AVR over Forced Return, as well as to promote reintegration programmes for repatriated migrants so as to make their AVR programmes a more appealing prospect, thus turning them into AVRR programmes (Latek, 2017).

The guidelines had the intended effect, with AVR and AVRR programmes starting to be implemented by most EU countries as of the early 2000s (Lietaert et al., 2017: 964; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010), although the ways in which these programmes were run varied quite significantly between countries (Caselli et al., 2022). As the measure became more common, scientific reflections on it also began to develop, leading to light being shed on the potential benefits as well as—perhaps more importantly—some particularly problematic features of AVR, a selection of which will be discussed below.

## To what extent can AVR and AVRR truly be considered voluntary?

One leading concern brought up by scientific reflections on AVR and AVRR programmes has to do with whether or not they are genuinely voluntary. Theoretically speaking, a choice can only be considered voluntary if the person making it has realistic, acceptable alternative options open to them (Olsaretti, 1998; Shaidrova, 2023: 504). Options which, however, are often in short supply for those who participate in AVR or AVRR programmes which many countries offer either exclusively or as a priority to people who have never had, have lost, or are at risk of losing their right to legally reside in the country. As a consequence, not all migrants participating in AVR and AVRR schemes truly want to return to their home countries, and only decide to acquiesce to the request because the alternatives are life as an illegal immigrant or a forced return without any benefits (Dünnwald, 2013: 229; Erdal & Oeppen, 2022; Noll, 1999; Webber, 2011).

On this matter, Cassarino (2008a: 12) distinguishes between *decided* and *compelled* returns, with AVRs more often than not being deemed *compelled* (Kuschminder, 2017: 6). The logical conclusion to this is that many authors consider AVR to be nothing more than a form of 'soft deportation' (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021: 3; Kalir, 2017; Leerkes et al., 2017), in which the use of the term *voluntary* is simply a means to lend a veil of legitimacy to returns that are, to all intents and purposes, forced (Erdal & Oeppen, 2022: 75). Consequently, some countries and authors prefer not to refer to AVR, as such, and instead use the term *Assisted Return* (Lietaert, 2022: 110; Marino et al., 2022).

Whilst the accuracy of the term *voluntary* may therefore be debatable, some contributors point out that, in the case of repatriation, there is not necessarily a clear distinction between *voluntary* and *forced*, as there is a sizeable grey area of situations that fall somewhere between the two (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 13), in much the same way that migration itself exists on a continuum between voluntary and forced (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). There are also some who, whilst acknowledging the problematic nature of the term *voluntary*, believe that it can have a positive effect on migrants who, as a result, acquire a sense of control over their own lives and decisions (Lietaert, 2022: 110).

In the light of these considerations, please note that this article nonetheless continues to use the expression AVRR, both because it is still widely used in the literature and, perhaps more importantly, because it remains the expression that is officially used for the situation in Italy, which is explored in depth here. What is more, it is also worth bearing in mind that the situation in Italy—as will be discussed at length over the following pages—is unusual in that its AVRR programmes are also open to foreign citizens who are legally resident in Italy, for whom the option to avail themselves of the programme appears to be a genuinely voluntary decision, at least in part.

In connection with the issue of whether or not AVR is truly voluntary, the literature also reveals a certain ambivalence regarding the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the implementation of AVR policies. Indeed, over the past few decades, NGOs have seen an ever-growing degree of involvement in the management of countries' migration policies and AVR programmes (Vandevoordt, 2017: 1907–1908). For the implementation of said programmes, in particular, NGOs receive government funding which, in the case of Italy, for example, is proportional to the number of migrants who agree to the measure (Marino et al., 2022: 18). This results in migrants to be repatriated becoming a 'desired category' for NGOs (Shaidrova, 2023: 510), which could force migrants to accept AVR, thus making the decision even less voluntary in reality (Marino et al., 2022: 18). This means that NGOs are caught between, on the one hand, their moral imperative to assist migrants—which also involves respecting their full autonomy and freedom of choice—and, on the other, the priorities of those holding the purse strings, which tend to be geared towards restricting the flow and presence of migrants (Vandevoordt, 2017: 1907).

## The issue of reintegration

Given the specific objective of this article, particular attention must be paid to the reflections around programmes for the reintegration of citizens who return to their homeland by means of AVR. In this regard, it should be noted that, whilst the AVR programmes in Italy always also include a reintegration component, the same does not necessarily hold true for other countries (Caselli et al., 2022).

One initial element to consider in this regard is that, as previously mentioned in the introduction, AVRR programmes have thus far paid relatively little attention to what actually happens to the returnee once they have left the country to which they originally immigrated. This oversight can largely be attributed to the fact that the prevailing interest behind AVRR programmes is that of the host country, the promoter of said programmes, which wishes to use them to encourage foreign nationals who are not (or no longer) welcome within its borders to return to their homeland. In the light of this, it becomes clear why the issue of reintegration tends to languish towards the bottom end of the scale of priorities (Cassarino, 2008b; Lietaert, 2017: 171). Countries want to encourage and facilitate repatriations as much as possible. And if, as previously explained, AVR serves to make repatriation more acceptable from an ethical perspective, as well as in terms of reducing the costs and social tensions associated with them, then combining AVR with reintegration programmes serves to make the measure even more palatable for potential returnees, but also to obtain the cooperation—which, whilst necessary, can by no means be taken for granted—of the countries to which these repatriations are made (Dünnwald, 2013: 232). From this perspective, the effectiveness of AVRR as a measure is, in any case, assessed based on the number of citizens repatriated, leading to a distinct lack of interest in the results of reintegration programmes (Lietaert et al., 2017: 973).

A second problematic aspect that emerges from the literature on reintegration programmes relates to the concept of reintegration itself and therefore what the goal of such policies should actually be, in concrete terms. Reintegration is considered to be a 'slippery' concept (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 13), which takes on a different meaning depending on whether it is used, for example, by migrants, researchers or policymakers (Vathi et al., 2023: 371) and which, consequently, is often used without a clear, explicit definition being provided (Marino & Lietaert, 2022: 172). What is more, the lack of any such definition sparks doubts as to whether AVRR programmes can actually contribute to said reintegration, whatever it may look like (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Lietaert, 2017: 160; Van Houte, 2014). This uncertainty regarding the definition of reintegration then expands to include another closely related concept, namely that of the *sustainability* of the return and the reintegration itself. In actual fact, the focus on the sustainability of the return is prioritised over the focus on reintegration and has long been measured by whether or not returnees migrate again (Marino & Lietaert, 2022: 171–172)—specifically to the country from which they had returned. This perspective is also consistent with the fact alluded to above that for policymakers, the main (if not exclusive) function of AVRR programmes is to remove undesirable foreign citizens from within their borders. However, in the debate on the issue—which is driven mainly by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Marino & Lietaert, 2022: 177)—there has been at least a partial shift in focus from sustainability in its narrowest sense to the sustainability of the reintegration in a broader sense (Vathi et al., 2023: 372). From the perspective of sustainable reintegration, the returnee migrating again is no longer necessarily seen as a failure of the return and reintegration itself, as long as this secondary migration occurs through lawful channels and is a decision made voluntarily rather than out of necessity (IOM, 2017: 3; Marino & Lietaert, 2022: 177; Majidi et al., 2023: 564).

So how, then, can reintegration actually be defined? On this subject, Kuschminder (2022: 201) offers the definition proposed by Cassarino (2008a: 134), namely 'the process through which a return migrant participates in the social, cultural, economic and political life in the country of origin': a definition largely accepted by Latek (2017: 3), amongst others. However, this definition seems—at least in our opinion—to be excessively demanding, and the question may arise, given that we are talking about reintegration, to what extent it applied to the migrant before they originally left their homeland, or indeed applies to their compatriots who have never left their community of origin. In the light of this, perhaps a less stringent definition could be proposed:

Returnees can be considered to have reintegrated if they manage to live without any particular issues meeting their basic needs and aspirations, if they personally consider themselves happy with the path they took upon their return, if they have no regrets about having made use of the AVRR programme and—given that reintegration is a two-way process, as will be discussed in greater depth below—if they feel accepted by the society to which they have returned to make a life.

A third and final aspect that recurs in the debate on reintegration is the problematic nature of the process itself and its results. Indeed, however one may wish to define it—and even accepting the less demanding definition proposed above—reintegration is unquestionably a complex process whose results depend upon a multitude of variables at the individual, social and structural levels, including location, age, gender, reasons and methods of migration and return, social networks, family composition, and many more besides. Depending on how these factors present themselves and combine with one another, the results of the reintegration process can vary wildly (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021: 140–141; Van Meeteren et al., 2014). However, before we take a closer look at some of the factors that influence the results of the reintegration, we must first consider a few additional points about the nature of the process itself. The first is that the concept of reintegration seems to be based on the assumption that, before leaving their homeland, the migrant was well-integrated into their community of origin in the first place. But this is, of course, not necessarily true, as many (but not all) of those who migrate are people who leave their home countries because they are not satisfied with the social and economic situation they find themselves in, and feel that they have no other way of achieving their aspirations (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021: 141–142). In any case, regardless of the conditions at the start of their migration journey, the process of reintegration is, to a fairly considerable extent, simply a process of integration tout court, given that they will be forced to find a place for themselves in a situation that has changed compared to when they left it, much as the returnees themselves will have (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 16; Kuschminder, 2017: 13). In this respect, there are some who point out that returning can result in depression and a sense of isolation, because when many people make the decision to return, they fail to take into account how much their homeland may have changed whilst they were away (Bilecen, 2022: 378). The second consideration is that, regardless of whether or not it could truly be considered voluntary—an issue we have previously addressed—AVR is nonetheless an option that was not part of the original migration plan for those who later ended up using it, meaning that it therefore constitutes a failure of the plan itself in some capacity (Majidi et al., 2023). This is another reason why people who return to their homeland through AVR and AVRR programmes are, in at least some respects, vulnerable individuals (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 14) who, for this very reason, will find it more difficult to reintegrate.

With these elements in mind, the main factor that determines the result of a returning migrant's reintegration is most probably the quality and characteristics of the family and community network that awaits them upon their return—a network that can have both positive and negative effects. After all, reintegration is—just like integration—a two-way process: anyone returning to their homeland cannot possibly hope to reintegrate if they are not accepted by the society they intend to rejoin (Kuschminder, 2017: 17). The positive option is that this network constitutes a source of social capital available to a returnee that can facilitate their reintegration by providing, amongst other things, information, housing, employment and business opportunities. What is more, it can also be a source of support for their mental health and well-being in terms of how satisfied they feel with their decision to return (Kuschminder, 2017: 38–39): indeed, the challenge of returning is not limited to the material problems they may face—such as, above all, finding a source of income—but often also involves a degree of emotional distress associated with the need to re-establish their plans, dreams and family goals, which necessarily takes time (Lietaert, 2022: 118). Negatively speaking, it is important to bear in mind that those who return under AVR and AVRR programmes, as well as those who have been subjected to a forced return, may be given a frosty reception by friends and relatives. As several studies have already shown (Vathi et al., 2023: 376), the returnee is often faced with the shame and stigma of their migration journey having failed, at least in the eyes of others (Majidi et al., 2023: 566). This stigma can also be intensified in the remarkably common event that before leaving, the migrant took on debts to fund their plans for migration: debts

that they have been and still remain unable to repay (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 12). As a consequence of this stigma, the returnee may not only receive no support from their network of family and friends, but even find themselves rejected outright by their loved ones.

According to the findings from the literature, a further element that can affect the result of a reintegration attempt is whether or not a migrant returning under an AVRR programme has truly done so voluntarily. Citizens who have developed a genuine desire to return home will undoubtedly have greater motivation on their path to reintegration and find it significantly easier. Conversely, those who only took part in the programme as a last resort due to a lack of realistic alternative options will encounter greater difficulties upon their return, and will most likely look for opportunities to leave again (Flahaux, 2021: 160).

Finally, proper preparation for the return increases the likelihood of it being successful (Flahaux, 2021: 149–150), and this includes the migrant having sufficient time to decide whether or not to make use of the AVR and AVRR programmes available. This is far from a given, as many countries tend to rush their AVR procedures and reduce the time available for people to make their decision, thus increasing migrants' level of vulnerability following their return, along with the probability of their reintegration failing (Lietaert, 2022: 118).

## THE ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN SYSTEM IN ITALY

Although, as previously mentioned, there is a considerable push to promote AVRR programmes at the EU level, the way in which they are implemented varies significantly between individual countries (Caselli et al., 2022). Despite the wide variety of potential experiences in Europe, there are at least two identifiable models for how AVRR policy is managed, with opposing approaches in some respects. On the one hand, there is the model adopted by France and Germany, for example, under which there is a unified approach to the management of Assisted Voluntary Return operations—delegated to the IOM in Germany and the OFII<sup>iii</sup> in France—with a more or less vast network of other public and/or non-governmental actors involved in orchestrating the communication, information and awareness-raising actions within the country, as well as supporting avenues towards reintegration or managing special programmes (Grote, 2015; IOM, 2014; OFII, 2021). On the other hand, there is the model used in Italy and Spain: countries where Assisted Voluntary Return operations are handled by multiple organisations, periodically selected by means of competitive calls for proposals (EMN, 2009; Pontieri, 2021). An analysis of the AVRR policies of these countries seems to suggest that the former model is more effective, at least in terms of the number of returns successfully completed (Caselli et al., 2022) and the measure continuing to be implemented consistently over the years<sup>iv</sup>: indeed, France and Germany have a well-established tradition of running these programmes and funds regularly earmarked for these policies (Barbau, 2012; IOM, 2014). In Italy, meanwhile, the implementation of AVRR programmes is tied to the more sporadic availability of funds provided mainly by EU institutions (Pontieri, 2021), as will be explored in more detail below.

As a practice, AVRR from Italy has a fairly recent history, having taken off in 2009 thanks to the support offered by the European Return Fund (EU SOLID programming), which funded all of Italy's AVRR projects up to 2015. Following a hiatus of about a year, Italy reactivated its AVRR programmes as of the second half of 2016, thanks to the new EU AMIF programming for 2014–2020 (Pontieri, 2021), which continued to support its AVRR activities until the first half of 2023.<sup>v</sup> When the AMIF programme for 2014–2020 came to an end, AVRRs were suspended once again, awaiting the new AMIF programming for 2021–2027 in order to resume.<sup>vi</sup> All of Italy's AVRR-related activities—including with regard to the information it provides—has always been financially supported by EU programming and implemented by means of projects assigned and funded based on periodic competitive calls for proposals. The only exception to the use of EU programming funds was the 2017 implementation of a plan for AVRR activities involving reintegration and information in the local area, the implementation of which was directly entrusted to the IOM and the funding for which came from national resources that were made available as an exceptional measure. This project was then continued the following year with a similar extraordinary

initiative, also entrusted to the IOM and funded by the AMIF, but through the Emergency Measures rather than the National Plan (Pontieri, 2021).

Repatriation from Italy is managed by the Ministry of the Interior through the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration and, as previously mentioned, is financially supported by EU funds. Over the course of the AMIF programming for 2014–2020, which was referred to as part of the research presented in this article, five AVR projects were funded through a competitive call for proposals launched in the second half of 2016 and closed in the first half of 2018. At the same time as these, as noted above, two additional projects funded outside the confines of the national AMIF programming were implemented between 2017 and the first few months of 2019. A further six projects—which, after a series of extensions, finally finished between 2022 and 2023—were then launched in spring of 2019 (Pontieri, 2021); these were also financed through a competitive call for proposals which, much like the previous one, laid down the conditions for eligibility, methods of implementation and economic support to be granted for each AVRR actually put into practice.

Specifically, as per the conditions set out in this second call for proposals, in order to be eligible for AVRR in Italy, applicants had to be non-EU citizens who: (a) were legally residing in Italy and intended to make use of the measure, (b) either did not have or had lost the right to legally reside on Italian territory, and (c) had not yet received a final negative response to their application for residency or international protection. As such, EU citizens and nationals of visa-exempt countries were not eligible. As already mentioned in the previous paragraph, one unusual aspect about the AVRR system in Italy is that it is also open to migrants residing lawfully within the country, and who therefore have no need to fear the possibility of being deported or forcibly repatriated.

Non-EU citizens who took advantage of this opportunity were offered: (a) a personalised service guiding them through the measure, also including the drafting of a plan for their reintegration into their destination country; (b) support with the process and coverage of the expenses for obtaining the necessary documents for repatriation; (c) organisation of the trip itself and coverage of the associated costs; (d) if necessary, medical accompaniment to their destination; (e) a €400 cash contribution to cover their initial accommodation needs upon arrival in their destination country; (f) a contribution in goods and services up to the value of €2000 to support their socio-economic integration into their destination country.<sup>vii</sup>

Each repatriated migrant had a plan for reintegration into their country of origin drawn up for them before their departure, usually involving their engaging in some kind of business activity supported by the scheme's resources. Following their return, migrants were then guided through the development and implementation of their project for a period of 6 months, after which a form regarding the progress of their reintegration process was filled in. The partner organisations active in the countries to which the migrants returned provided local assistance and filled in the progress monitoring forms.

In Italy, the execution of AVRR is delegated to non-profit institutions or international organisations. As such, in Italy, the IOM—which plays a central role in the implementation of AVRR policies in many EU countries (IOM, 2022; Latek, 2017: 6)—is merely one of multiple organisations charged with implementing AVRRs, although it should be noted that it was later entrusted with the projects funded on an extraordinary basis between 2017 and 2018. It is also worth mentioning that the IOM did not put itself forward for the second call for funding for AVRR projects under the AMIF National Plan for 2014–2020 and, as such, no longer performed AVRRs from Italy until the end of 2023.<sup>viii</sup>

Quantitatively speaking, over the period spanning 2016–2022, the trend in AVRRs was fairly erratic, with a high of 1126 AVRRs in 2018 and a low of just 145 in 2016 (when, due to the transition to the new programming, AVRRs were only possible for the last few months of the year), 321 in 2020, when the impact of the pandemic was most evident, and 147 in 2022, due again to the forthcoming transition to the new programming. These figures were, by and large, considered unsatisfactory by the ministerial representatives we interviewed, and significantly lower than countries such as Germany and France which, in 2019 alone—the year before the pandemic broke out—carried out 13,053 and 8781 AVRRs respectively (IOM, 2020, 2023; OFII, 2020, 2023): see Table 1 for more details.

TABLE 1 Assisted voluntary returns from France, Germany and Italy (2016–2022).

	France	Germany	Italy
2022	4981	7874	147
2021	4677	6785	354
2020	4519	5723	321
2019	8781	13,053	344
2018	10,678	15,942	1126
2017	7114	29,522	930
2016	4774	54,006	145

Source: Caselli et al. (2022); IOM (2023); OFII (2023); data provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior.

Moving to an analysis of the destinations, in recent years, AVRRs from Italy have been concentrated mainly, although not exclusively, towards Sub-Saharan African countries; a significant flow of AVRRs to Peru is also noteworthy, though as of 2019, this was no longer been possible given Italy's decision to close the programme to citizens of visa-exempt countries.<sup>ix</sup>

## THE RESEARCH PATH

Under the AMIF National Programme for 2014–2020, AVRR projects in Italy were therefore funded by means of two separate calls, the first posted in 2016 and the second in 2018. As previously mentioned, a study was carried out examining the pathways to reintegration of citizens repatriated to two different destination countries by means of these projects. Senegal was chosen for the first call, as it is the country to which—after Nigeria—the highest number of AVRRs was performed from Italy. For the second call, meanwhile, Nigeria itself was chosen, given that it once again proved to be the country to which the highest number of AVRRs was performed. Specifically, Nigeria was studied in relation to the second call and not the first as in the second call, it was explicitly mentioned as one of the priority countries towards which AVRR activity should be focused.

With regard to the first call, AVRRs carried out over the course of the entire period of activity of the projects were taken into account, that is, between 2016 and 2018; over this timeframe, there were 78 AVRRs to Senegal. For the second call, meanwhile, all AVRRs performed from the start of the projects, in 2019, up to 30 June 2021 were taken into account<sup>x</sup>; over this period, 206 AVRRs were made to Nigeria.

With a view to analysing pathways to reintegration, Gmelch (1980) proposes two possible study perspectives: one based on the socio-economic data and another based on the self-perception of the returnee (Kuschminder, 2017: 10). In this research, we attempted to pursue and combine both these strategies, complementing them with a third perspective, namely the perception of other actors actively involved in facilitating these pathways to reintegration.

Specifically, the study of pathways to reintegration in Senegal was based on an analysis of all reintegration plans drawn up for each migrant before their departure from Italy, as well as all the monitoring forms completed by the organisations responsible for the AVRR projects within 6 months of the migrant's return. The study also analysed the Final Assessments for the three projects which performed the AVRRs to Senegal over the period in question, the final Evaluation Report completed as part of one of these three projects, and the *Report on the analysis of reintegration plans* for citizens repatriated under the first AVRR call, implemented by the Italian branch of the IOM (OIM, 2019): although the latter two documents do not include any in-depth information on the specific countries of return, they nonetheless offer some useful insights into how the AVRR process functions. Following this, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted either over the phone or online. Of these, nine were carried



out with representatives from the organisations responsible for the AVR projects or their partners, three of whom were directly involved in assisting and monitoring reintegration journeys on the ground in Senegal. The remaining 10 interviews, meanwhile, were conducted with the repatriated migrants anywhere between 2 and 3 years after the date they returned. As these were performed by Senegalese interviewers, they were intended to be conducted in person, thus allowing them to be combined with a direct observation of the activities carried out under the reintegration plans; however, this ultimately proved to be impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic which, at the time of the investigation, was at one of its most severe stages. The Senegalese citizens interviewed were selected through a subdivision criterion (Bichi, 2002) which took the following variables into account: environment returned to (urban or rural), field of business started with the support of the AVR project (agriculture, livestock farming, commercial trade), self-assessed opinion of their reintegration journey 6 months after return (positive, negative, uncertain).

Similarly, the study of pathways to reintegration in Nigeria was also based on an analysis of all reintegration plans drawn up for each migrant before their departure from Italy, as well as all the monitoring forms completed by the organisations responsible for the AVR projects within 6 months of the migrant's return. Once again, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with a representative from each of the six organisations responsible for the AVR projects funded by the second call and two with representatives of the Nigerian partner organisations involved in guiding and monitoring the pathways to reintegration: these first eight interviews were carried out over the phone or online. The other 11 interviews were conducted with the repatriated migrants, anywhere between two and two and a half years after the date they returned to their homeland: 10 of these were conducted in person at the respondent's home or place of business, whilst only one was conducted over the phone due to some logistical issues. All the interviews with returnees were performed by Nigerian interviewers. The repatriated migrants selected for interview were, once again, selected based on a series of variables, which differed somewhat from those used for Senegal as there were some significant differences in the composition of the two samples studied: gender,<sup>xi</sup> city returned to, availability of personal resources in addition to those provided by the project to start their own business.

For both these investigations, interviews were also conducted (repeated over time) with the Ministry of the Interior's representative for the implementation of AVR programmes, the head of the AMIF National Plan, and a manager of the IOM's Italian office. Finally, a focus group was also assembled in 2021 consisting of the representatives for all six of the projects active at the time in order to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their AVR activities.

## RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

### Returns to Senegal

Over the period of time in question (2016–2018), as part of three of the five projects active at the time,<sup>xii</sup> 78 AVRs were performed to Senegal. The people repatriated consisted of 77 men and only one woman. The average age of the Senegalese returnees was approximately 50, which is significantly higher than the average age of 38 for all returnees from Italy who used its AVR programmes over the same period (OIM, 2019). With regard to the destination areas of the AVRs to Senegal, 50 people returned to an urban environment (including 23 to the Dakar area and 18 to Touba, the country's two main cities) and 19 to a rural environment.<sup>xiii</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, the reintegration plans drawn up in Italy before the migrants' departure involved their establishing a business of some kind, which the entire reintegration grant provided by the project was earmarked for. Although the option was available, only 10 of the 78 people's reintegration plans provided for expenses of a different nature, such as housing needs, medical treatment, basic necessities and education costs for themselves or their children. However, once they arrived in Senegal, only four people actually used the grant

for expenses other than those involved in starting a business. With regard to the lines of business chosen, the returnees almost always opted for investments that were not very innovative but capable—at least on paper—of minimising the business risk they were exposed to: for example, some people who grew up in and returned to rural environments purchased livestock, whilst others returning to an urban environment set up general trading businesses. At a more granular level, the reintegration plans specified investment in agriculture, fishing and livestock farming in 33 cases, commercial trade in 23 cases and services in 19 cases.<sup>xiv</sup>

However, upon their return to Senegal, the reintegration plan was adjusted by just under two-thirds of the migrants. This figure is unsurprising, given that when the plans were originally being drawn up, many citizens stated that they were not able to give a precise idea in advance of what business they could go into upon their return to their homeland. This was compounded by the fact that, as these were predominantly people who had been away from their homeland for many years, they did not have a perfectly clear picture of the circumstances they would find upon their return. This situation of uncertainty was only partially resolved by contact with their family members and the projects' partner organisations in Senegal when establishing the plan.

I had exchanges with my family on the topic of my definitive return. I explained them my project and we discussed the best way to invest. They advised me to abandon the chicken coop project, which would not be profitable, and open a money transfer shop. Now, the shop is run by my two sons and my nephew, and I opened a cosmetics shop which I manage directly

(Returnee to Senegal)

Even when no changes were made to the plan, in some cases, it was only possible for the returnees to go into their expected line of business with the use of additional resources other than the grant provided under the programme.

The AVRR projects then involved a final period of guidance and monitoring lasting for 6 months from the original point of return, with a view to verifying the short-term success of the reintegration journey. Based on this monitoring, it was found that after this initial 6-month period, 65 out of the 78 returnees had launched their planned business, with the remaining 13 failing to do so. However, despite the 65 cases in which a business had been launched, only 29 of these people found that it was able to produce enough income to further develop the business (10 cases) or, at the very least, to maintain their basic needs (19 cases). In 26 cases, however, the business yielded an intermittent or otherwise insufficient income to reliably survive on, which therefore had to be supplemented by savings or support from the returnees' networks of friends and family. Finally, in 10 cases, it was considered too early to provide a meaningful assessment of the outcome of the activity. As against the total number of citizens repatriated to Senegal, then, the reintegration programme can only be said to have been effective, 6 months after their return, in just over a third (29 out of 78) of cases.

The sample of people interviewed between 2 and 3 years after their return is not significant enough to paint an exhaustive picture of the medium-term results of pathways to reintegration in Senegal for everyone who has made use of AVRR programmes, but it nonetheless offers an idea of what trajectories are possible in this regard. With this in mind, of the 10 people interviewed, six were still engaged in the business that they had initiated thanks to the AVRR project. Three of these had started a business that proved to be sustainable over time, economically viable, and capable of allowing the returnee to support both themselves and their family.

I can say that I am satisfied with my project, since it allows me to solve my financial difficulties. This business allows me to support my family and face certain needs, so thank God. I find my balance there, you can say

(Returnee to Senegal)

One of these people—who invested their own savings in their business project in addition to the grant funds—managed to grow their business significantly over time. The other three, meanwhile, had gone into the fields of

agriculture or livestock farming. One of these—a livestock farming business that continued their family's long-standing tradition in the sector—grew over time, with the number of animals being raised increasing; however, the owner reported a need for resources for further investment, specifically in order to build a well so as to protect the business from the risks associated with Senegal's unstable climate conditions. In the remaining two cases, the business continued operating, but provided only a scant living: here, again, further investment would be required to consolidate the businesses, but there are no available resources to make this possible. In four cases, however, the businesses that the returnees had started (commercial trade in three cases, agriculture in the remaining case) failed or provided insufficient income to support their basic needs for survival, resulting in their having to turn to their families for support. The causes of these failures are likely attributable to the returnees having little or even no previous experience in the fields they decided to enter, leading them to make ill-advised investments or fall victim to outright scams.

As I told you, I stopped this project because it was slowing down due to slowness in the sale of products. I had made a poor choice in purchasing the merchandise to sell. Instead of buying other products like cements and tiles, which are more in demand, I bought locks, lamps, and others but they were not selling very quickly. This choice somewhat reflects my lack of experience in this field  
(Returnee to Senegal)

## Returns to Nigeria

Within the context of the six projects active over the period of time in question (2019–2021), a total of 206 AVRRs were performed to Nigeria, including nine minors who travelled back to their homeland with their families. Although the group of returnees remains predominantly male in composition, in comparison to the Senegalese case, the female contingent is markedly higher, with 29 women repatriated—including some trafficking victims—as against 177 men. The average age of the Nigerian adults who were repatriated was 34: much lower than the average age for Senegalese returnees over the previous period. As for the destination areas of the AVRRs to Nigeria, almost all returnees travelled to urban environments, with a particular concentration in Benin City (37%), which is also the main point of departure for migration routes to Italy (Effevoitu, 2021).

The pre-departure reintegration plans drawn up in Italy were all focused on returnees engaging in self-employment, with projects that proved to be structured better than those seen in the case of Senegal. This is largely attributable to the fact that, for the projects funded by the second call for AVRR operators, they were required to engage in a more extensive dialogue with the partner organisations operating in the returnees' destination countries when drawing up the reintegration plans. More specifically, the kinds of employment planned at the pre-departure stage mainly involved opening retail businesses (83 cases), purchasing a means of transport to provide transportation services for goods or passengers (43 cases), agriculture and livestock farming (13 cases), personal services (beauticians, hairdressers: 12 cases), restaurants and catering (six cases), crafts and other services (29 cases).<sup>xv</sup> However, in 76 cases (over a third of the total), returnees planned to use part of the grant to pay their rent. This figure provides an insight into a key difference with the Senegalese case, and can at least partly be explained by the internal migration journeys experienced by the Nigerians before originally leaving for Italy: indeed, many of the repatriated Nigerians did not go back to live with their family of origin, who may have lived in remote or rural areas, because they had already previously migrated to one of the larger cities – specifically Lagos and Benin City – in the hopes of taking advantage of the more extensive opportunities for employment there. But another reason could be rooted in the shame of showing their faces to their family members after coming back to their homeland without having saved up enough money and, as such, they require more time before facing their community of origin.

My family was not happy, especially my brother who is a carpenter. He said he was working on a roof when I called him: immediately, as soon as I told him I was in Nigeria, the phone fell out of his hand. My parents cried but were happy that I was alive [...] I decided not to go back to the family home because I was ashamed. Everyone in the area knew I had travelled abroad

(Returnee to Nigeria)

What is more, 13 people planned to use part of the grant to pay medical expenses and 10 earmarked it for their children's school expenses.

Once they had returned to Nigeria, these plans were changed in approximately 40% of cases. Whilst it may be much lower than in the case of Senegal, this figure nonetheless remains fairly significant in its own right, reflecting the returnees' struggle to accurately envisage an environment that they have been away from for many years. This improvement is largely attributable to the AVRR operators' increased pre-departure dialogue—as previously mentioned—with their local counterparts in the projects funded under the second call for proposals.

In this case, too, the returnees were given assistance—which, however, due to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the complexity of Nigeria as a country, proved to be less frequent than in the case of Senegal—as well as a final check-up 6 months after their return to their homeland. Based on this monitoring, it emerged that, 6 months after their repatriation, 174 of the 197 migrants<sup>xvi</sup> had started their business and it was still fully functioning, whilst in 11 cases it had been started but had already failed; this figure was not recorded in the remaining 12 cases. Unfortunately, only one of the AVRR projects funded by the call also noted whether, at the time of this final check-up, the business that the returnee had launched allowed them to be financially self-sufficient: a question that 32 of the 71 subjects interviewed responded to in the negative. Although to a lesser extent than in the case of Senegal, the level of short-term success of the pathways to reintegration for Nigerian returnees proved to be fairly unsatisfactory.

Here, again, the sample of individuals interviewed more than 2 years after their return offers a few suggestions as to the possible medium-term results of these reintegration journeys. What emerged from this round of interviews was that of the 11 respondents (four women and seven men), five were still engaged in the business they had started thanks to the AVRR project, although in only two of these cases (one woman and one man) did the business seem to be capable of offering the owner full financial stability. Of the remaining six cases, two had started a different business from their original plan (one of whom did so after having emigrated to another African country), two were employed in another job and the last two were unemployed. The limited success of these pathways to reintegration was undoubtedly attributable in part to the returnees' reluctance to ask for support from family who had remained in Nigeria, but also to the general crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I got a bigger plantation in a government reserve but had to leave due to COVID-19. Immediately after planting, there were restrictions on movement due to the total lockdown in the pandemic [...] When the lockdown ended, the crop was already destroyed by weeds. I wanted to visit the land this year, but I had hernia surgery. I pray that Covid doesn't happen again because it hit me a lot

(Returnee to Nigeria)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is fairly broadly accepted that the reintegration of migrants into their country of origin—regardless of how they return and the circumstances surrounding it—is a long-term process in which issues can sometimes only emerge months or even years after their actual date of return (Hammond, 1999; Kuschminder, 2022: 200). With this in mind, this research project saw fit to investigate the outcomes of AVRR journeys from Italy even further down the line than the final monitoring forms provided for by the AVRR projects (filled in after 6 months), although at

a point that was most likely not yet sufficient to allow for a truly comprehensive assessment of the situation. In particular, as mentioned in the Introduction, the study presented here posed four questions, which will be briefly answered in this concluding section.

The first question asked to what extent the reintegration plan established in Italy before the returnees' departure corresponded with the measures actually implemented after their return. As seen in the previous section, 6 months after the migrants' return, many of these plans had to be adjusted: just under two-thirds for Senegalese returnees and around 40% in Nigeria. These figures seem to confirm some of the elements that have already emerged from the theoretical reflections as previously detailed herein, namely the fact that the people returning are not fully informed about the environments that they will have to reintegrate into, given that they have changed over the course of their absence (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 26), but also that better pre-departure preparation—as provided for returnees to Nigeria in comparison with those going back to Senegal—makes their return and reintegration a significantly smoother process (Flahaux, 2021: 149–150). At the same time, these figures—along with others that have emerged from the research—are evidence that the challenge repatriated migrants are faced with is more an integration from scratch than a reintegration, given that they not only have to deal with a society that has evolved, as previously mentioned, but they also have to do so by working in fields in which, in many cases, they have little or no experience.

The second question asked how effective the reintegration programmes offered by the AVR projects promoted by Italy proved to be for returnees in the medium term. As highlighted in the presentation of the results, the sample of migrants studied between 2 and 3 years from the point of their return is not large enough to provide a comprehensive and fully representative response to this question, but it nonetheless casts light on a handful of elements worthy of analysis and reflection. Based on these findings, it would be reasonable to say that only in a minority of cases did the reintegration journey prove to be fully successful, leading to what we could define—with reference to an expressed discussion earlier on—as sustainable reintegration. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the abundantly clear issues encountered during reintegration journeys, as well as the often vulnerable nature, from various perspectives, of citizens participating in AVR programmes (King & Kuschminder, 2022: 14).

Indeed, this idea also relates to the third and fourth questions, which examined the adequacy of the support offered to citizens who took part in AVR programmes, as well as the key determining factors of the success or failure of their pathways to reintegration. With regard to the adequacy of the support provided to returnees, both economic and in terms of assistance upon their return, the response can only be negative. What is more, it is important to consider that a migrant returning under an AVR programme is, at worst, someone who ran up debts that they may not have finished repaying in order to leave their country or, at best, someone who used to send home money when they lived abroad and will now have to survive without that income (Lietaert, 2022: 109). As such, if we are considering the purely financial support received through the AVR programme, then this is not enough to fully compensate for these losses.

I came close to dying in Libya, I can't be happy to have returned to Nigeria with only 2,000 euros  
(Returnee to Nigeria)

However, the picture becomes markedly more positive in cases in which the support provided by the AVR programmes is not the only resource available to the migrant for their reintegration, and instead supplements other resources that they can rely on. And the presence—or, indeed, absence—of these additional resources is, according to the findings of this research project, the main deciding factor in determining the results of a reintegration journey. But what form do these potential additional resources take? Perhaps the most important of these are certain personal skills, especially professional skills, whether these were acquired during the migrant's time abroad or whether they predated their original migration. Any personal savings accumulated during the migration experience can also play an important role. However, the element that consistently seems to have the greatest impact is the social capital available to the returnee and, consequently, the type of reception that their family and wider community give them upon their

return. This is, as we have seen, a subject that has been discussed at length in the literature and which the research carried out here seems to confirm at every opportunity. Time and again, the matter of whether or not a returnee has social capital proves decisive to the outcome of the reintegration journey (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021: 145), especially in the very earliest stages following their repatriation, in that friends and family can offer accommodation and financial support, but also emotional support, guidance and advice on starting a business or seeking employment. If, on the other hand, the returnee's family and community do not accept their return, then the situation can turn out to be truly dramatic. In these cases, the challenges normally associated with starting a social life and a business in a new environment are compounded by the shame and hostility of those who should, in theory, be the most supportive. This hostility, as highlighted in the literature, stems from the fact that the returnee's family and acquaintances perceive their return as a failed migration and a betrayal of the trust—as well as, quite often, the financial investment—that the community had placed in the migrant.

But for the people of my village, the view is different. Some form a sort of social idea according to which all emigrants who return to the country must necessarily have money. Here in the village, after my return, some say that I have no money because I didn't want to work in Italy. On the contrary, some say that I came with a lot of money, but I hide it. Nobody helps me, in fact they give off negative perceptions about me

(Returnee to Senegal)

As a result, the stigmatisation of returnees—or even simply the fear of this being a possibility—can prompt them to take up residence in a different part of their country of origin (Alpes, 2017; Eborka & Oyefara, 2016; Shaidrova, 2023: 505), a situation that has been seen multiple times in our study, especially amongst Nigerian returnees. This obviously brings with it additional problems affecting the chances of successful integration, as a portion of the available resources will have to be used for housing and cannot therefore be dedicated to starting the business to be developed with the support of the AVRR programme. Alternatively, the migrant could hide the fact that their return is permanent rather than merely temporary from their friends and family, though this would place an emotional strain on them that could quickly become untenable.

Until the moment I actually speak to them, nobody knows if I have come back to the country for good or if it is only temporary. I haven't said anything to anyone - not to my family, not to the people in my village.

(Returnee to Senegal)

Finally, an additional element that can facilitate a returnee's integration is the guidance and assistance provided by local partner organisations of AVRR projects. With regard to this, the research carried out demonstrated that the six-month period of assistance provided by the projects promoted by Italy proved to be too short, as well as too superficial in nature—also in part due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—with the type of guidance offered often being limited to a handful of advisory meetings.

Moving beyond the initial research questions, we can develop a further concluding reflection on how the issue of repatriation is increasingly being associated with the idea that returning migrants can contribute significantly to the development of their country of origin. The relationship between return migration and development is now supported by a variety of empirical evidence (Faist et al., 2011) and is sometimes brought up by policymakers as an additional incentive to promote AVRR programmes, as well as garner the cooperation of recipient countries in implementing them (Marino et al., 2022: 2). However, in the specific case of AVRR, this link – if indeed it exists at all – is incredibly tenuous, as our research project also revealed. Those who are truly capable of contributing to the development of their country of origin in a significant way are migrants who return after having completed a successful migration journey, one which allows them to acquire professional

skills and capital abroad which they can then invest and reap the rewards of in their motherland. The crucial difference is that these are successful migrants who, as such, do not require AVRR programmes in order to return to their homeland. Indeed, as already emphasised, those who return home under AVRR programmes are generally vulnerable people with very limited resources and professional and entrepreneurial skills at their disposal; at the most, they will—as confirmed by our study—make use of these programmes to set up small businesses which, apart from rare exceptions, can at best provide for the returnee's basic essentials for survival (Marino et al., 2022: 2).

[We have often helped] people who have recently left reception centres because the period has expired. Even people who were simply tired of remaining in Italy after so many years because they no longer saw a future, there was no work, they were on the streets or in reception centres and, when they learned of the AVRR opportunity, they thought about it seriously. People who had been trying to reunite with their family in Nigeria for years, but not having any type of economic possibility or financial support, were unable even to simply purchase a plane ticket. People – it is strong enough to say – who are simply elderly or in any case, if not elderly, reduced to terrible conditions, who have told us: 'We want to go and die in our country'. Therefore, people even with serious pathologies, for which reintegration resulted in medical treatment

(Coordinator of an AVRR Project)

In conclusion, this research has highlighted a few simple guidelines for policy development which, although specifically addressing the issues in Italy's approach to AVRR, can nonetheless offer food for thought in a wider context. The first is that the reintegration grant should be increased, whilst also following the example of other European countries (Caselli et al., 2022) in distinguishing between the resources to be used to start a business and those required to cover other reintegration needs, such as housing costs, education expenses for any children, or medical care. The second is to further bolster the pre-departure dialogue between the migrant and the contact persons for the project located in the country to which they are returning. The third is to extend the assistance and monitoring elements of the reintegration process beyond the current period of 6 months, potentially by implementing tailored projects outside the scope of the AVRR projects themselves. Finally, providing psychological support and assistance for returnees struggling to reintegrate into their social and family situations.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors of this article have no conflicts of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13229>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> In this article, Oana Marcu contributed to writing the sections entitled *Results of the research* and *Discussion and conclusions*.
- <sup>ii</sup> Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals.
- <sup>iii</sup> French Office for Immigration and Integration.
- <sup>iv</sup> However, there is not sufficient empirical evidence to evaluate which of the two models is more effective in terms of the success of reintegration paths after return. This article aims to help fill this gap.
- <sup>v</sup> Under the 2014–2020 AMIF programme, 2020 was the deadline for the launch of any projects it funded, though they could then continue for up to 3 years, that is, until 2023. However, it should be noted that—as reported in interviews with managers of the organisations charged with implementing the AVRR programmes—only a small number of projects actually remained active until 2023, thanks to subsequent extensions.
- <sup>vi</sup> A first call for proposals on AVRR funded by the new AMIF programme for 2021–2027 was posted on 20 April 2023 with a deadline of 29 May, later extended to 13 June 2023. An important new feature of this latest call for proposals, as compared to past calls, is that it intends to assign all of the country's AVRR activities, for a period of up to 3 years, to a single implementing entity (which can take the form of a consortium made up of multiple organisations): [https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-05/fami\\_decreto\\_proroga\\_avviso\\_rva\\_def\\_pubb.pdf](https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-05/fami_decreto_proroga_avviso_rva_def_pubb.pdf).
- <sup>vii</sup> See <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/rimpatrio-volontario-assistito-0> and the text of the call for proposals at <https://fami.dlci.interno.it/fami/>.
- <sup>viii</sup> When interviewed on this subject, a member of IOM staff responsible for AVRR activities from Italy stated that the IOM did not participate in the last call for proposals because it believed that the requirements asked of implementing agencies by the call itself were not suitable. Anyway, IOM applied again for the new call for proposals for AVRR posted in 2023.
- <sup>ix</sup> It should be noted that the provisions laid out in the new call for proposals for AVRR posted in 2023, as mentioned above, no longer exclude citizens of visa-exempt countries from eligibility for the measure.
- <sup>x</sup> We did not wait for the projects funded by the call to be concluded, as these projects were extended multiple times following a decision by the Ministry of the Interior, which preferred this option to issuing a new call, as was initially planned.
- <sup>xi</sup> In the case of Senegal, gender was not taken into account as a variable because, as will be explained in the next section, almost all the returnees were male.
- <sup>xii</sup> In the remaining two projects, no AVRRs were carried out to Senegal.
- <sup>xiii</sup> In nine cases, this information was missing.
- <sup>xiv</sup> In three cases, this information was missing.
- <sup>xv</sup> In 11 cases, this information was not available.
- <sup>xvi</sup> A total of 197 adult migrants were repatriated, in addition to nine minors.

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