



To Leave or Stay?

Examining the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in the return decision-making of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands

Ravenna Sohst
Camille Le Coz
Hanne Beirens

Executive Summary

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In the Netherlands and across the European Union, only a small fraction of third-country nationals who receive an order to leave from their host state comply and depart. In 2023, approximately 436,000 non-EU citizens were issued return orders by EU countries, while 85,000 returned to third countries—a return rate of 19 per cent. In the Netherlands, the return rate reached no higher than 34 per cent between 2020 and 2023, despite the country's Repatriation and Departure Service (DTenV) and its partners managing an increasing number of cases as Dutch return policy has evolved.

EU and Member State policymakers consider enforcing these decisions essential to maintaining the effectiveness and integrity of asylum and migration management systems, particularly within the framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The procedures outlined in the pact, in fact, depend significantly on Member States' capacity to carry out swift returns when asylum applications are rejected. Policymakers also consider effective return operations crucial to upholding public trust in migration policies, or at the very least, to prevent further erosion of trust in governments' ability to manage migration into, within, and out of their countries. This is particularly evident in those EU countries, including the Netherlands, where policymakers are struggling to address persistent pressures on national reception systems.

The core challenges involved in ensuring that migrants ordered to leave do so are well-known. National authorities' limited capacity can delay return decisions and their enforcement. Additionally, some countries issue return orders for third-country nationals even when it will not be possible to enforce them, often due to a lack of diplomatic relations with the relevant government. Moreover, cooperation with migrants' origin countries remains difficult—some do not have readmission agreements with European countries, and those agreements that exist may not be effectively enforced—complicating the issuance of identity and travel documents for returnees. Finally, individual migrants' reluctance to return to their country of origin further weakens efforts to enforce compliance with return orders.

The issue of return has garnered significant attention in Dutch national debates in recent years, though this focus is not new. Acknowledging that assisted return is the preferred option, compared to forced return, for migrants and countries of origin and destination because it is more dignified, less expensive, and less logistically complex, Dutch policymakers have increased investments in counselling and reintegration assistance to encourage this form of return. Similar efforts have been made at the EU level. In 2021, the European Commission launched its first-ever Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, highlighting the importance of counselling and reintegration support, and the 2025 proposal for a Return Regulation further suggests enshrining counselling as a fixed component in Member States' return efforts. The European Union

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has also allocated additional resources to building up counselling and reintegration assistance across the bloc, with new actors joining in to provide training for EU Member State staff and stronger emphasis on providing diverse forms of reintegration support.

In light of this increased focus on counselling and reintegration assistance, a critical question for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers is whether these tools effectively lead to higher assisted return numbers and achieve broader policy goals such as sustainable reintegration, enhanced social cohesion in communities of origin, and cost effectiveness. Gaining a deeper understanding of how these measures can inform and influence decision-making among individuals facing return orders is essential to answering this question. Such insights could also support better-targeted investments and the use of more impactful approaches. In terms of counselling, significant knowledge gaps remain around how various techniques and the involvement of different state and nonstate actors influence migrants' decisions about return. The extent to which migrants view reintegration assistance as an incentive to return is similarly unclear, as is how perceptions may vary based on the type of support offered, eligibility criteria, and conditions in migrants' countries of origin.

This Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) study examines the role counselling and reintegration assistance play in the decision-making processes of migrants with return orders, taking the Netherlands as a case study. Supported by a grant from the Research and Data Centre of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, the research benefitted from access to nonpublic administrative data and to government officials and facilities. The study draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to provide fresh insights into the complexities of return decision-making (see Box 1 for details). The Netherlands offers a compelling case study as the Dutch government has experimented with different counselling methodologies and collaborated with different partner organisations to deliver reintegration support.

BOX 1 **About this study and its methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods design. The MPI Europe research team gathered qualitative data through interviews with 50 individuals in Europe and beyond. They began by interviewing return and reintegration policymakers and practitioners in the Netherlands, including 15 staff members from the Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service (DTenV) in both strategic and operational roles. The team visited two Dutch reception centres—one general centre and one with a dedicated family section—where they interviewed DTenV departure supervisors and observed two return counselling sessions. The researchers also interviewed nine representatives of nongovernmental actors involved in counselling and reintegration assistance (three from the Dutch Refugee Council, two from the International Organisation for Migration [IOM] Netherlands, and one each from the Goedwerk Foundation, IOM Nigeria, IRARA, and the Patriotic Citizens Initiative) and ten EU and Member State officials involved in return and reintegration efforts.

Simultaneously, the researchers selected two origin countries in which to interview returnees, based on five criteria: the number of returnees from the Netherlands, the availability of reintegration support for returnees, the existence of diplomatic relations that could facilitate the research, returnee profiles that were not overly specific, and the availability of IOM support to reach out to potential interviewees. Iraq and Nigeria were chosen, representing two distinct return contexts and returnee population profiles. In addition, while Nigeria has had a high level of cooperation with the Netherlands on both assisted and forced

BOX 1 (cont.)**About this study and its methodology**

returns in recent years, Iraq has engaged more selectively, especially on forced returns. The research team conducted 16 phone interviews with Iraqi and Nigerian migrants who had returned from the Netherlands following a departure order.

Finally, the quantitative segment of the study involved analysis of almost 118,000 records provided to the researchers by DTenV, marking the first time this dataset has been examined. The data come from the DTenV case management system and cover all cases that ended (through return, a grant of temporary or permanent status, a migrant absconding, or otherwise) between 2017 and 2023. The analysis yielded descriptive statistics that shed light on the role of assisted return within DTenV operations. In addition, regression analyses explored factors linked to the uptake of assisted return and whether origin-country cooperation in forced returns encourages those countries' nationals to accept assisted return to avoid deportation.

What role do counselling and reintegration assistance play in migrant decision-making?

After receiving a return order, a wide range of factors can shape migrants' decisions about whether to depart for their origin country or attempt to remain in the host country. Family and community expectations, care obligations, origin-country conditions, and the existence of support networks strongly influenced the decisions of the Nigerian and Iraqi returnees interviewed. These findings are in line with prior research, which also emphasises hopes migrants may have of overturning a return order and security legal status. Family can play a particularly important, and varied, role. Some migrants return due to a desire to reunite with family members or to care for ill relatives, while others hesitate out of fear of disappointing their loved ones or lacking support upon arrival. Many consult their families or other community members when contemplating return, and in some cases, the decision is made collectively rather than individually.

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Counselling and reintegration assistance, the study found, play an overall limited role in influencing migrants' decisions to return, given the multitude of other relevant factors, but they can serve several other critical functions—strengthening informed decision-making, providing logistical support for those who choose to depart, and meeting urgent needs after return. The study's analysis of case data and interview insights resulted in the following key findings:

- ▶ **Iraqi and Nigerian returnees repeatedly stressed that deciding to return was a pivotal moment in their lives, and a choice often made under significant constraints.** These decisions occurred along a spectrum of agency, ranging from high-agency situations where migrants want to return due to personal reasons such as their own health or family needs, to low-agency situations in which the

decision to return is made under significant coercion, such as detention or the threat of deportation. Between these extremes, migrants may opt for return out of a sense of acceptance of their legal situation or hopelessness, often driven by exhaustion from prolonged irregular stays. While a small group of migrants decide to return on their own due to personal reasons, most only consider assisted return after exhausting all prospects for obtaining a legal status.

- ▶ **Where a person stands on the spectrum of agency influences the extent to which counselling and reintegration support can affect return decision-making.** Specifically, it influences which types of actors and counselling methods are most likely to foster a genuine conversation about return. Migrants with high agency and a desire to return generally require minimal support, primarily focused on information and logistical assistance for their return journey. In contrast, migrants who have spent prolonged periods living without legal status typically need more comprehensive support. As documented in previous research, helping such migrants address basic needs such as shelter, medical or mental health care, and addiction can lead to more constructive conversations about the future. This population is also more likely to avoid government-led counselling, often due to prior negative experiences with the police or other authorities. Instead, civil society tends to be better positioned to build trust with such migrants and engage in conversations about return and other potential options.
- ▶ **Prolonged stays without legal status reduce the likelihood of migrants opting for assisted return.** Analysis of DTenV case data shows a significant relationship between the number of records a migrant has (indicating repeated return procedures) and a reduced likelihood of choosing assisted return. For example, based on a statistical model developed through this analysis, one could expect 19 per cent of migrants who have had only one return procedure to depart via assisted return, compared to 9 per cent of those who have had three procedures and 2 per cent of those with six procedures. These findings align with prior research suggesting that extended stays in a host country can decrease both the willingness and ability to return. Over time, migrants may build stronger ties in the country, come to view return as a less viable, or disengage from authorities due to distrust, fatigue, or (mental) health issues. This confirms the value of early and sustained engagement between counsellors and migrants likely to receive a return order and of dedicated approaches for working with migrants who have spent years in irregularity.
- ▶ **Reintegration assistance is rarely the primary driver of migrants' uptake of assisted return offers, but it can provide valued support upon return and serve broader policy objectives.** Interviews with returnees and counsellors indicated that while reintegration assistance does not significantly influence migrants' decisions to return, it can help reassure those considering return that they will have some modest support as they re-establish themselves. Reintegration assistance also tends to hold more weight for migrants from nearby regions, who often have spent less to make the journey in the first place. Beyond its role in individual decision-making, reintegration assistance can facilitate origin-country cooperation in returns and help avoid placing excessive strain on communities receiving returnees. Nonetheless, challenges persist, with many returnees reporting difficulties in implementing their initial reintegration plans (e.g., finding work or starting a business) and experiences with stigma and migration-related trauma, highlighting the need for more tailored and flexible support mechanisms.

- ▶ **The relationship between the threat of forced return and uptake of assisted return is more nuanced than often assumed.** Analysis of DTenV case data shows that a credible threat of deportation can increase the likelihood of migrants choosing assisted return, even if the effect is relatively small. For example, a model developed as part of this analysis predicts that 11 per cent of migrants from countries that cooperate extensively with the Netherlands on forced returns would choose assisted return, versus 5 per cent of those from countries with little cooperation and to which forced returns are rare, making the threat of deportation less credible. However, the effect is not uniform. For example, the share of DTenV cases that ended in assisted return between 2017 and 2023 was lower for Nigerians than Iraqis, despite Nigeria cooperating more extensively on forced returns. This indicates that while the threat of deportation may play a role in return decisions, other factors (such as conditions in the origin country) also shape these choices.

Conclusions and recommendations

While counselling and reintegration assistance rarely determine, on their own, whether a migrant opts for assisted return, this research shows they can make distinct contributions that justify sustained investment. Both measures offer added value by supporting informed decision-making, reducing vulnerability upon return, and enhancing perceptions of procedural fairness. These benefits should be recognised and assessed independently of these mechanisms' effect on return rates. In addition, for migrants whose forced removal is difficult to implement, they often represent the only viable way to encourage return. These findings point to the importance of expanding (or at least maintaining) these measures and of strategically targeting investments in nongovernmental actors that serve as partners in this space, in counsellor training, and in multifaced reintegration assistance.

Beyond this overarching takeaway, there are specific steps that could be taken to further improve counselling and reintegration assistance in ways that enhance their role in return decision-making and their other contributions (e.g., reducing vulnerabilities). These practical recommendations include:

- ▶ **Making counselling timely, personal, and well-informed.** Migrants often face one of the most difficult and consequential decisions of their lives when considering return. For counselling to play a positive role in these decisions, it must be offered at the right moments and in the right environment. It should occur in a setting that acknowledges the emotional weight of return decisions and that fosters open, trust-based dialogue. Timing also appears to be of critical importance, with counselling sessions ideally aligned with key decision-making junctures (such as after a final negative asylum decision or an order to leave), when migrants may be more receptive. Early discussions may be most productive if they focus on information-sharing and clarifying an individual's legal options, while more direct conversations about return can follow once those options have narrowed. Counselling is also more effective when counsellors possess strong knowledge of migrants' backgrounds, particularly about origin-country conditions and diaspora networks, and use it to tailor their approach. Some countries such as Denmark have reportedly found that migrants are more open to the idea of return when counsellors have this kind of contextual knowledge. Ensuring that counselling takes place in a humane setting, with strategic timing, and backed by cultural expertise, can make it more relevant and constructive.

- ▶ **Strengthening host-country systems' capacity to deliver timely decisions and networks for coordinated outreach.** Maximising the potential of assisted return requires both efficient legal processes and diverse, well-coordinated counselling networks. Lengthy asylum and related legal procedures prolong uncertainty, negatively affect mental health, and are associated with lower uptake of assisted return. Reducing wait times, while safeguarding due process, would help ensure that migrants reach key decision points sooner and have more meaningful opportunities to consider return. At the same time, maintaining and enhancing a multi-partner counselling network will be essential to reach migrants with different profiles and needs. Counsellors from the government, nongovernmental organisations, and international organisations bring complementary strengths, whether in long-term relationship-building or access to different migrant groups. Coordinating these roles while preserving the independence of nonstate actors can help ensure the provision of consistent and accurate information and that counselling is accessible, credible, and responsive to the realities of diverse migrant populations.
- ▶ **Stepping up monitoring and evaluation of counselling methods.** As investments in this area grow, there is a need to expand efforts to track the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches used by counsellors within DTenV and other organisations. Work has already been done to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for outreach and counselling (e.g., via the EU-funded Reaching Undocumented Migrants project), including a set of monitoring indicators that Member States and Frontex could utilise. Such tools could prove especially beneficial as Frontex and EU-supported initiatives are in the process of creating additional training tools for counsellors across Europe, and as EU investments aim to expand the pool of counsellors in Member States that lack prior experience in this area. At the same time, further discussions are needed to clarify goals and enhance coordination at the EU level to maximise the benefits of these investments. Finally, aligning this work with ongoing research in the field is crucial and could be done by supporting policy dialogues and practitioner groups to facilitate the exchange of best practices and collaboration with researchers.
- ▶ **Bringing trusted origin-country partners into conversations about return to support informed decisions and improve reintegration prospects.** Having connections to trusted actors in one's country of origin, primarily through a professional reintegration service provider, can shape migrants' willingness to return and improve their reintegration prospects. Local partners bring cultural familiarity, language skills, and on-the-ground knowledge of economic and social conditions in the country, helping to ensure that counselling and reintegration planning reflect real opportunities and constraints. Where appropriate, family or community members can also be involved in the return decision-making process; they may sometimes lend support for return and reintegration, but in other cases they may pressure the individual to stay in the host country. Such engagement must be carefully assessed and managed to avoid creating additional risks (e.g., in cases where migrants' families may be involved in their trafficking). Overall, strengthening these connections requires deliberate investment: funding should support reintegration partner organisations' involvement not only after return but also during predeparture counselling, and exchanges between destination-country counsellors and origin-country partners should be systematised.

While these recommendations have the potential to enhance the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in return decision-making, they alone cannot address the full range of challenges associated with return. Broader engagement between destination and origin countries is essential to create conditions that prevent dangerous, irregular migration journeys, facilitate sustainable return, and support long-term opportunities for returnees and their communities. This requires both improving conditions in origin countries and providing safe, regular migration pathways, including options after return.

Investments in origin countries, for example, could help develop or strengthen integrated systems of support for returnees and broader communities. This includes strengthening governance, promoting economic development, enhancing security, and supporting climate adaptation—all of which are in line with EU and Member State official development assistance priorities. While many such initiatives are already underway, sustaining them and launching future projects may become increasingly challenging amid growing pressure on development budgets.

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Safe, regular migration options, meanwhile, are not often explored in reintegration planning, though there is an argument for doing so. Some returnees may wish to move again in the future and would benefit from reliable information about alternatives to irregular migration. Initiatives such as Germany's Centres for Migration and Development illustrate how returnees can receive guidance on reintegration alongside information on legal migration opportunities. Though still in the early stages and constrained by political sensitivities at the EU and Member State levels, such programmes could meaningfully increase opportunities for returning migrants and their communities.

Return and reintegration policies are evolving rapidly. As this study's findings demonstrate, their effectiveness depends on a multitude of factors, including conditions in origin countries and individual migrants' personal circumstances. Drawing on the Dutch experience, the study highlights opportunities to enhance the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in return decision-making, while urging that such measures be understood realistically: their main value may lie not in incentivising return, but in supporting migrants as they navigate complex legal procedures, increasing the efficiency and perceived fairness of those processes, and providing practical support upon return. These are important policy aims in their own right, even if this necessitates a shift in conventional wisdom.

To read the full report, see:

www.migrationpolicy.org/research/return-decision-making-netherlands

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Inquiries can also be directed to communications@migrationpolicy.org.