To Leave or Stay?

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

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December 2025

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Executive Summary

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

1 Introduction

In the Netherlands and throughout the European Union, only a small proportion of third-country nationals who are issued an order to leave by their host state actually comply and depart. In 2023, around 436,000 non-EU citizens were ordered to leave the European Union, while 85,000 returned to third countries—a ratio of 19 per cent between return orders and returns.[1] And yet, policymakers across countries view enforcing these decisions as crucial for the effectiveness and integrity of their asylum and migration management systems,[2] especially within the context of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Indeed, the new framework relies heavily on the ability of Member States to conduct swift returns after the processing of certain protection claims at the border.[3] Additionally, policymakers view follow-through on return orders as essential to maintain, or at least prevent the further erosion of, public trust in migration policies and the capacity of governments to manage migration into, within, and out of their countries.[4]

The underlying challenges are well known. First, limited capacity within European countries' courts and migration authorities can delay the issuance of return decisions and hinder their enforcement.[5] In addition, some countries issue return orders for third-country nationals even when these cannot be carried out, sometimes due to the absence of diplomatic relations with the relevant government.[6] This contributes to a growing backlog of unresolved return orders.[7] Furthermore, cooperation with migrants' origin countries is frequently challenging due to the absence or non-enforcement of readmission agreements, which can make

1 After a decrease in return orders following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of non-EU citizens ordered to leave the European Union has increased; 357,060 such orders were issued in 2021, increasing to 472,540 in 2022 and 489,335 in 2023, before dipping slightly to 453,380 in 2024. The number of returns has also increased over this period. In 2021, 66,260 migrants were returned to third countries (a rate of 19 per cent), as were 72,105 in 2022 (a rate of 15 per cent), 92,450 in 2023 (a rate of 19 per cent), and 110,385 in 2024 (a rate of 24 per cent). Note that there is some variation in annual assessments of return rates given that some return orders are not enforced within the same year. See Eurostat, 'Third Country Nationals Ordered to Leave - Annual Data (Rounded)', accessed 18 August 2025; Eurostat, 'Third-Country Nationals Returned Following an Order to Leave - Annual Data (Rounded)', accessed 18 August 2025.

2 Recent policy reforms and political declarations in EU Member States emphasise the importance of enhancing the efficiency of return procedures for non-EU citizens to uphold the integrity of the asylum and migration management system. For example, the Netherlands and Austria have advocated for a comprehensive overhaul of the European Union's migrant return policy, calling in October 2024 for reforms to expedite and facilitate returns through a new legal framework. See Anne-Laure Dufeal, 'Netherlands and Austria Push for EU Migrant Return Overhaul', Brussels Signal, 8 October 2024; Costica Dumbrava and Anja Radjenovic, 'Common Approach on Return Policy' (briefing note, European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2024); French Prime Minister, 'Déclaration du Gouvernement sur la politique migratoire de la France et de l'Europe', updated 7 October 2019.

3 Philippe De Bruycker, 'Genealogy of and Futurology on the Pact on Migration and Asylum', EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy (blog), 6 May 2024; Olivia Sundberg Diez, Florian Trauner, and Marie De Somer, 'Return Sponsorships in the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum: High Stakes, Low Gains', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 23, no. 3 (2021): 219–244; Council of the European Union, 'The Council Adopts the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum' (press release, 14 May 2024); Madalina Moraru, 'The New Design of the EU's Return System under the Pact on Asylum and Migration', EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy (blog), 14 January 2021.

4 Lucía Salgado, Radu-Mihai Triculescu, Camille Le Coz, and Hanne Beirens, *Putting Migrant Reintegration Programmes to the Test: A Road Map to a Monitoring System* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2022). For an example of this type of political declaration, see: French Ministries of the Interior and Justice, 'Instruction relative à la lutte contre les filières d'exploitation des étrangers en situation irrégulière', updated 19 February 2024.

5 See, for instance, French Court of Auditors, *La Politique de Lutte Contre l'Immigration Irrégulière* (Paris: French Court of Auditors, 2024); Camille Le Coz, 'Migrations: une nouvelle boussole pour le retour', La Grande Conversation, 4 September 2024.

6 European Court of Auditors, *EU Readmission Cooperation with Third Countries: Relevant Actions Yielded Limited Results* (Luxembourg: European Court of Auditors, 2021); Le Coz, 'Migrations: une nouvelle boussole pour le retour'.

7 In France, less than 10 per cent of return decisions are enforced every year. See French Court of Auditors, *La Politique de Lutte Contre l'Immigration Irrégulière*; Le Coz, 'Migrations: une nouvelle boussole pour le retour'.

it difficult to obtain identity and travel documents for returnees.[8] Finally, many migrants who receive return orders are unwilling to return to their country of origin, undermining efforts to ensure compliance with those orders.[9]

Additional challenges can arise in the context of forced returns, which involve host-country actions to enforce compliance with a return order. Origin countries may refuse to cooperate with these operations,[10] and some migrants may abscond before a forced return can be executed.[11] Compared to assisted returns, forced returns are also more complex to organise, requiring the coordination of multiple administrative services (e.g., national ministries of the interior, foreign affairs, and justice and municipal authorities), and more expensive.[12] Moreover, forced returns are less dignified, leaving migrants more vulnerable upon their return and complicating their subsequent reintegration into local communities.[13] This, in turn, increases the likelihood that returnees will attempt to migrate again, often through irregular and dangerous means.[14]

Compared to assisted returns, forced returns are also more complex to organise... and more expensive.

8 French Court of Auditors, *La Politique de Lutte Contre l'Immigration Irrégulière*; European Court of Auditors, *EU Readmission Cooperation with Third Countries*; Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen, 'Theorising Voluntariness in Return', in *Handbook of Return Migration*, eds. Russell King and Katie Kuschminder (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022); European Migration Network, *Challenges and Practices for Establishing the Identity of Third-Country Nationals in Migration Procedures* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2018).

9 French Court of Auditors, *La Politique de Lutte Contre l'Immigration Irrégulière*; Yuliya Byelikova and Mohammed Taukeer, 'Return Intention Outcomes of Forced Migrants', *Border Crossing* 14, no. 2 (2024): 151–165; Cris Beauchemin et al., 'Socioeconomic Reintegration of Return Migrants and the Varieties of Legal Status Trajectory in Europe', *Population, Space, and Place* 28, no. 7 (2022): e2565; Jean-Pierre Cassarino, 'Voluntary and Forced Return Migration under a Pandemic Crisis', *Migration and Pandemics: Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022): 185–206.

10 Clara Lecadet, 'Accords de réadmission : tensions et ripostes', *Plein Droit* 3, no. 114 (2017): 15–18; Clara Lecadet, *Les expulsés, sujets politiques* (Paris: Éditions de la Maisons des Sciences de l'Homme, 2023).

11 Although detention is meant to be a last-resort measure under EU and international law, in practice many Member States rely on it as a default or frequent tool for enforcing returns. Scholars and civil-society organisations have documented how this de facto reliance on detention can lead to prolonged confinement, legal uncertainty, and adverse physical and mental health impacts on migrants. See European Migration Network, *Detention and Alternatives to Detention in International Protection and Return Procedures* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2022); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 'The Recast Return Directive and Its Fundamental Rights Implications' (FRA Opinion 1/2019, 10 January 2019); Global Detention Project, *Crossing the Red Line: How EU Countries Undermine the Right to Liberty by Expanding the Use of Detention of Asylum Seekers upon Entry* (Budapest: Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2019).

12 For example, forced removals from France are estimated to cost on average 13,000–13,800 euros per person, compared to 2,500–4,000 euros for assisted voluntary returns. See French National Assembly, *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission des finances, de l'économie générale et du contrôle budgétaire sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2020 (n° 2772)* (Paris: French National Assembly, 2019); French Court of Auditors, *La Politique de Lutte Contre l'Immigration Irrégulière*.

13 A 'dignified' return generally refers to procedures that minimise stigma, avoid treating individuals like criminals, and acknowledge the potential for lasting trauma, particularly in cases of forced return. Research has shown that being forcibly removed can create deep psychological and social scars, including shame and ongoing trauma, which can undermine returnees' ability to reintegrate. See Eleni Diker et al., *Comparative Reintegration Outcomes between Forced and Voluntary Return and through a Gender Perspective* (Geneva: International Organisation for Migration, 2021); International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 'Coming Home Can Be Harder than Leaving: The Psychosocial Challenges of Being a Returnee', accessed 8 February 2025; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Deportation Is an Unworkable Solution to Migration', updated 16 July 2018; Haykanush Chobanyan, *Challenges of Reintegration for Forced Returnees in Eastern Europe* (San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy: European University Institute, 2013).

14 This repeat migration may be linked to economic precarity, political instability in countries of origin, stigma faced upon return, and/or migrants' aspirations and social ties abroad. See Marta Latek, 'Reintegration of Returning Migrants' (briefing note, European Parliamentary Research Service, 10 March 2017); Shahram Khosravi, ed., *After Deportation: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Jean-Pierre Cassarino, ed., *Return Migrants to the Maghreb Countries: Reintegration and Development Challenges* (San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy: European University Institute, 2008).

As in many European countries, the issue of migrant returns has attracted considerable attention in the Netherlands. Dutch policymakers are grappling with how best to address persistent pressures on the country's reception system and looking for ways to increase returns.[15] This focus is not new,[16] though policies in this area have evolved over time. For instance, the landmark 2018 Dutch Agenda on Migration underscored return as a top priority.[17] Efforts to establish readmission agreements with origin countries, led by the Ministry of Justice and Security,[18] have also prioritised increasing the rate of returns. Still, the proportion of individuals confirmed as having returned to their origin countries, compared to the annual caseload of migrants ordered returned, did not exceed 34 per cent between 2020 and 2023; this is despite a growing number of cases being handled by the Repatriation and Departure Service (DTenV), which is responsible for implementing Dutch return policy with its partners.[19] Recognising that assisted return is more dignified,[20] cost efficient, and strategic in ways that extend beyond mere budgetary allocations, DTenV and ministerial staff report increased investments in mechanisms to support assisted returns, including return counselling and reintegration assistance.[21]

As in many European countries, the issue of migrant returns has attracted considerable attention in the Netherlands.

Similar investments have been made at the EU level. In 2021, the European Commission introduced its first-ever Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, emphasising the importance of enhancing counselling

15 NL Times, 'New Cabinet: All Parties Want Stricter Return Policy for Asylum Seekers', NL Times, 4 November 2023; NL Times, 'Dutch Cabinet Pleased with New Strict Asylum Measures; Plan Set to Go to Parliament', NL Times, 20 December 2024; Bruno Waterfield and Jane Flanagan, 'Netherlands in Talks to Deport Failed Asylum Seekers to Uganda', The Times, 17 October 2024.

16 Since the 1980s, successive governments have introduced or revised return policies, as is discussed in Section 4. See also Maria Bruquetas-Callejo, Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, Rinus Penninx, and Peter Scholten, 'Policymaking Related to Immigration and Integration. The Dutch Case' (IMISCOE Working Paper No. 15, 2007); Richard Staring and Mieke Kox, *Hulp bij terugkeer. Vice Versa 4.0 van Stichting ROS nader bekeken* (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2020); Joanne Van Der Leun and Harmen Bouter, 'Gimme Shelter: Inclusion and Exclusion of Irregular Immigrants in Dutch Civil Society', *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 13, no. 2 (2015): 135–155.

17 Dutch Directorate-General for Migration, *Concerning Comprehensive Agenda on Migration* (The Hague: Dutch Directorate General for Migration, 2018).

18 Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, *Beleidsdoorlichting begrotingsartikel 37.3, De terugkeer van vreemdelingen* (The Hague: Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, 2019).

19 According to Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security data, 17,670 persons entered the Repatriation and Departure Service (DTenV) caseload in 2023 while 5,740 were verified to have returned (a return rate of 32 per cent). In 2022, 12,620 persons entered the DTenV caseload while 4,300 returned (34 per cent). In 2021, 13,840 persons entered the caseload while 3,730 returned (27 per cent). And in 2020, 14,670 persons entered the caseload while 4,280 returned (29 per cent). See Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, 'Instroom- en vertrekcijfers', accessed 9 December 2024.

20 While policymakers' priorities are often increasing returns and limiting re-migration, many European-level policy documents highlight the importance of dignified return. See, for example, European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration' (COM [2021] 120 final, 27 April 2021); European Union, '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', *Official Journal of the European Union* L 348/98, 24 December 2008; European Commission, 'Annex 1 to the Commission Recommendation Establishing a Common "Return Handbook" to Be Used by Member States' Competent Authorities When Carrying out Return-Related Tasks' (C [2017] 6505, 2017).

21 Author interviews with staff at the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security and the DTenV, 6 May 2024.

and reintegration assistance.[22] Greater resources have also been directed to reintegration support, to move towards a multidimensional approach to the assistance provided and to bolster development programmes' work strengthening these efforts.[23] Frontex's mandate has been expanded to assist Member States with these priorities. In 2022, the agency launched its EU Reintegration Programme, available to all Member States seeking to utilise its services.[24] In the area of return counselling, Frontex and actors such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development have supported training and the deployment of staff to support national efforts.[25]

Despite this work to strengthen return governance across Europe and in the Netherlands, significant knowledge gaps remain about how various counselling techniques and the involvement of different state and nonstate actors influence migrants' decision-making.[26] It is also unclear the extent to which migrants view reintegration assistance as an incentive to return, and how this perception may vary based on the type of support offered, eligibility criteria, and conditions in migrants' countries of origin.[27]

Therefore, a critical question for policymakers and practitioners, and the research question motivating this study, is what role return counselling[28] and reintegration assistance[29] play in the return decision-making process. More specifically, this study by researchers from the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) explores how the timing, method, location, and actors involved in counselling shape its potential

22 This shift was driven by recognition that people forced to return to their origin countries often face logistic, financial, and other challenges to reintegration, whereas assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes have proven more effective in ensuring dignified and sustainable outcomes. See European Commission, 'The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration'; María Belén Zanzuchi and Bertrand Steiner, *No One-Size-Fits-All: Outreach and Counselling for Irregular Migrants* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2025). These findings were corroborated by Member State representatives who participated in workshops organised by the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) in the context of the project 'Study on the Gaps and Needs of EU Law in the Area of Return', funded by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 23 January 2025.

23 See, for instance, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 'Programme Gouvernance Stratégie Migration Tunisienne, ProGreS Migration - Phase II' (action fiche, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, Brussels, March 2023); International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 'Local Ownership for Sustainable Reintegration in Armenia' (fact sheet, Return and Reintegration Facility, ICMPD, Vienna, July 2023).

24 Frontex, 'Reintegration Assistance', accessed 8 August 2025.

25 See, for instance, ICMPD, 'RRF – Counselling Lab', accessed 9 December 2024.

26 Research suggests policy interventions may have a limited impact on return decision-making, and that other factors (such as personal circumstances, structural constraints, and broader socio-political contexts) often play a more deciding role. These insights, which are also explored in the present study, highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which return assistance can be effective. See Michael Sinnige, Laura Cleton, and Arjen Leerkes, 'Determinants of Enforced Return: A Quantitative Analysis of the Spectrum of (In)voluntariness among Rejected Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands', *Population, Space, and Place* 31, no. 2 (2025): e2886.

27 European Migration Network, 'Policies and Practices on Return Counselling for Migrants in EU Member States and Norway' (issue brief, European Migration Network, Brussels, 2019); IOM, *Return Counselling Toolkit* (Geneva: IOM, 2022); Latek, 'Reintegration of Returning Migrants'; Laura Cleton and Reinhard Schweitzer, '"Our Aim Is to Assist Migrants in Making a Well-Informed Decision": How Return Counsellors in Austria and the Netherlands Manage the Aspirations of Unwanted Non-Citizens', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 17 (2021): 3846–3863.

28 Counselling is a broad term that is applied to different types of engagement, from sessions to help migrants explore various options to stay or return, to those focused solely on encouraging return, to those designed to help migrants prepare for return before departure. See Section 4 and Box 4 for further details.

29 Reintegration assistance refers to economic, social, and/or psychological assistance provided to migrants returning to their country of origin to support their sustainable reintegration. While many policymakers hope such assistance will reduce irregular re-migration, a returnee choosing to migrate again is not in itself problematic; rather, the focus of reintegration assistance is generally on helping returnees avoid being compelled to leave again through irregular means because of the conditions they face in their countries of origin. See European Commission, 'An Effective, Firm and Fair EU Return and Readmission Policy', accessed 6 March 2025; IOM, *Glossary on Migration* (Geneva: IOM, 2019).

influence on migrants' decision-making. The study was supported by a grant from the Research and Data Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security of the Netherlands and benefitted from access to unpublished DTenV case management data. As such, it focuses particularly on the decision-making process of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands, while also drawing on insights from other countries.

The report begins with a brief overview of the evidence available on return decision-making and the theoretical models that can help conceptualise these decisions (Section 2). Section 3 then describes the mixed-methods approach employed in this study, including qualitative interviews and analysis of quantitative data collected by Dutch authorities between 2017 and 2023. To provide additional background on the Dutch context, Section 4 discusses the country's counselling and reintegration programming. The next two sections present the results of the study, first those of the quantitative data analysis that sheds light on return trends from the Netherlands (Section 5), followed by findings that emerged from interviews with migrants, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Section 6). The report concludes in Section 7 with a set of recommendations for Dutch and European policymakers as well as return and reintegration professionals.

The Netherlands offers a compelling case study because the Dutch government has experimented with counselling methodologies and collaborated with different partners to deliver counselling and reintegration support.

The Netherlands offers a compelling case study because the Dutch government has experimented with counselling methodologies and collaborated with different partners to deliver counselling and reintegration support. Insights gained from this analysis could help policymakers—in the Netherlands and beyond—improve the targeting of their investments and the selection of high-value methodologies for counselling and reintegration support.

2 What Is Known about How Migrants Make Decisions about Return?

Understanding how counselling and reintegration assistance affect migrants' return decision-making requires situating this decision within the broader migration journey. While there is a large and growing body of literature on how people make decisions about first-time migration, less focus has been devoted to return decision-making—a choice that is different in that those individuals already possess migration experience and would be returning to a place they know, at least to some extent.[30] Even less theoretical or empirical research focuses specifically on the relatively small group of migrants who are returning via

30 See, for instance, Simona Vezzoli, Lucia Mýtna Kureková, and Kerilyn Schewel, 'Researching Decisions to Stay and Migrate: A Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework' (IMI Working Paper 24-178/PACES Project Working Paper 1, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, January 2024); Mathias Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht, 'Migration Drivers: Why Do People Migrate?', in *Introduction to Migration Studies*, ed. Peter Scholten (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 49–82; Stefanie Kley, 'Facilitators and Constraints at Each Stage of the Migration Decision Process', *Population Studies* 71, Sup. 1 (2017): 35–49.

assisted return programmes, such as those offered in the Netherlands by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Frontex, and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to persons who either do not have a legal right to stay in the country or who do but decide they want to return to their origin country.[31]

Given the limited extent of research on decisions about return, it is helpful to revisit well-established models of migration decision-making and to identify which elements are relevant for understanding return in the context of assisted return programmes. One such model, the push-pull framework, has helped structure thinking about migration motivations by identifying factors that drive people to leave or stay. While the model is limited in some ways (notably, it does not provide answers as to how various potentially relevant factors should be prioritised, or why some factors resonate more strongly with certain individuals), it still provides a useful starting point.

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Broadly speaking, the push-pull framework points to four groups of factors that can influence return decision-making: conditions in the country of origin, conditions in the host country, personal circumstances, and policy interventions.[32] First, structural conditions in the origin country (such as limited economic opportunities or security concerns) are shown to pose substantial obstacles to return, particularly when these are the same factors that originally motivated migration.[33] Evidence on the influence of the second set of factors, host-country conditions, is more mixed. Despite intensified efforts across Europe, including in the Netherlands, to incentivise cooperation on return, studies focusing on individuals whose asylum claims have been refused and other migrants without legal status show widespread reluctance to depart, even in the face of social exclusion, the absence of formal work opportunities, and a lack of secure housing.[34] Nonetheless, some studies have found that severe marginalisation or detention can push some individuals into a state of hopelessness that ultimately leads them to accept return, while others continue to perceive

31 See, for instance, Richard Black et al., *Understanding Voluntary Return* (London: UK Home Office, 2004); Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants* (Geneva: IOM, 2015); Arne Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo: A Comparative Evaluation of Effectiveness and Outcomes* (Bergen, Norway: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2016); Katie Kuschminder and Talitha Dubow, 'Moral Exclusion, Dehumanisation, and Continued Resistance to Return: Experiences of Refused Afghan Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands', *Geopolitics* 28, no. 3 (2022): 1057–78; Mieke Kox, *Unravelling Unauthorized Migrants' Legal Consciousness Processes* (The Hague: Eleven International Publishing, 2024).

32 It is common to categorise the drivers of migration into micro, meso, and macro drivers. This section highlights specifically the role of policy interventions, given the report's focus on the potential impact of two types of policy measures: counselling and reintegration assistance.

33 Black et al., *Understanding Voluntary Return*; Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return*. In addition, practitioner reports and emerging research point to climate change and environmental degradation as playing increasing roles as obstacles to return. See IOM, *The Impact of Conflict, Climate and the Economy on Agriculture in Districts of Return in Iraq* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq, 2023); Camille Le Coz and Ravenna Sohst, *Green Reintegration: Supporting Returning Migrants in Climate-Affected Communities* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2023); Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*.

34 Mieke Kox, Miranda Boone, and Richard Staring, 'The Pains of Being Unauthorized in the Netherlands', *Punishment and Society* 22, no. 4 (2020): 534–552; Alice Bloch, 'Living in Fear: Rejected Asylum Seekers Living as Irregular Migrants in England', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 10 (2013): 1507–25; Kuschminder and Dubow, 'Moral Exclusion'; Kox, *Unravelling Unauthorized Migrants' Legal Consciousness Processes*.

their prospects in the host country as more favourable than in their country of origin.[35] A variety of personal circumstances form the third category of factors that can shape the uptake of assisted return, including family responsibilities, indebtedness, personal characteristics, gender dynamics, and personal goals and aspirations.[36]

When it comes to the final set of factors—policy interventions—many questions remain about how they interact with return decisions. Previous research has documented substantial differences in how countries respond to the presence of migrants without a legal status and in the policy instruments governments use to incentivise return.[37] Targeted policy interventions such as counselling and reintegration assistance have generally been found to have a limited impact on return decision-making. However, many gaps in knowledge remain,[38] and such measures may influence decisions under certain conditions. For example, in a survey of participants in Germany's assisted return and reintegration programme StarthilfePlus, 30.2 per cent of respondents reported that counselling strongly influenced their decision to return, and an additional 29.3 per cent reported it was somewhat influential.[39] Even in cases where counselling is not the deciding factor, it can support decision-making by providing clarity about individuals' legal status options and available support, especially for those already considering a return. Similarly, the general consensus among experts is that reintegration support and travel assistance (including help with obtaining travel documents and covering travel expenses) are rarely the deciding factors in migrants' return decisions, but people usually welcome the measures as they provide valuable support during the return process.[40] In addition, counsellors and other practitioners often view the availability of reintegration support as a helpful tool in facilitating discussions about return, and some have suggested that offering higher amounts of

35 Strand et al., *Programmes for Assisted Return*.

36 Jelmer Brouwer, *Family Matters: A Study into the Factors Hampering Voluntary Return of Migrants Residing at Family Locations* (Geneva: IOM, 2018); Laura Peitz, *Wege aus der Ausreisepflicht nach ablehnender Asylentscheidung* (Nuremberg: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2023); Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, *Beleidsdoorlichting begrotingsartikel 37.3*; Samuel Hall and IOM, *Health and Reintegration: Returning to Space but Not to Time: A Life Course Approach to Migrants' Health, Continuity of Care and Impact on Reintegration Outcomes* (Geneva: IOM, 2022); Jane Freedman, *Gendered Reintegration Experiences and Gender-Sensitive/Responsive/Transformative Approaches to Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva: IOM, 2023); Diker et al, *Comparative Reintegration Outcomes*; Luzia Jurt and Eveline Odermatt, 'Le Rôle Du Genre Dans Le Retour et La Réintégration' (policy brief, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2023).

37 Arjen Leerkes and Marieke van Houte, 'Beyond the Deportation Regime: Differential State Interests and Capacities in Dealing with (Non-) Deportability in Europe', *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 3 (2020): 319–38; Marieke van Houte and Arjen Leerkes, 'Dealing with (Non-)Deportability: A Comparative Policy Analysis of the Post-Entry Migration Enforcement Regimes of Western European Countries' (report for the Van Zwol Committee, UNU-MERIT, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht, 13 May 2019); Sherry Ebrahim and Tineke Strik, *Legal and Policy Infrastructures of Returns in the Netherlands* (Nijmegen, Netherlands: Stichting Radboud University, 2024).

38 For example, little is known about the relative influence of counselling programmes with different aims, conducted in different settings, using different techniques, and involving different types of actors (e.g., state and nonstate). See European Migration Network, 'Policies and Practices on Return Counselling'; Latek, 'Reintegration of Returning Migrants'. One notable resource is the Return Counselling Toolkit developed by the IOM, which can be used to create a more consistent understanding of return among counsellors and other stakeholders, including national and local authorities and civil society. See IOM, *Return Counselling Toolkit*.

39 Martin Schmitt, Maria Bitterwolf, and Tatjana Baraulina, *Geförderte Rückkehr aus Deutschland: Motive und Reintegration Zentrale Ergebnisse der Begleitstudie zum Bundesprogramm StarthilfePlus* (Nuremberg: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2019).

40 Koser and Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return*; Black et al., *Understanding Voluntary Return*; Jan-Paul Brekke, *Why Go Back? Assisted Return from Norway* (Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2016), 93; Marieke van Houte, 'The Return Industry: The Case of the Netherlands,' in *Handbook of Return Migration*, eds. Russell King and Katie Kuschminder (Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

reintegration assistance could help increase the uptake of assisted return, though the empirical evidence remains inconclusive on this point.[41]

These insights suggest that return decisions are rarely driven by a single factor or a fixed set of causes. Instead, they reflect the interplay of diverse factors that vary from individual to individual and across communities within the same host country. Furthermore, return is not an isolated act triggered solely by a rejected asylum or residence claim; rather, it is one step in a longer mobility trajectory shaped by migrants' initial motivations, experiences along the migration route and after arrival, and future aspirations.[42] As such, the push-pull model is best seen as a foundation to be complemented with analytical insights from other theoretical models.

These insights suggest that return decisions are rarely driven by a single factor or a fixed set of causes.

The aspirations-capability framework is one such model that offers useful additions to the often-critiqued push-pull model, in this case by focusing on how individuals translate their migration-related aspirations into action.[43] It distinguishes between the desire to migrate or return and one's ability to actually do so, drawing attention to the structural, legal, and personal factors that enable or constrain agency. In the context of return, this framework helps explain why some migrants may wish to go back to their origin countries but feel unable to do so—due to safety concerns, family expectations, or lack of resources, for example—while others may be compelled to return despite wishing to stay.[44] It underscores the importance of understanding return not simply as a binary choice, but as the outcome of evolving aspirations and changing capabilities over time.

Life-cycle approaches to understanding migration further affirm this dynamic aspect of return decision-making. One example is the migration decision-making framework developed by Czaika, Bijak, and Prike, which emphasises the role of aspirations as a precursor to mobility and highlights the impact uncertainty can have throughout the decision-making process (for example, uncertainty about future opportunities in the origin or host country).[45] Crucially, studies highlight the ways in which aspirations vary across individuals and communities. While some people migrate with the idea of settling permanently abroad, others hope to stay for a limited time (for instance, to earn money to support their families) and then return.[46] Life

41 Cleton and Schweitzer, "'Our Aim Is to Assist Migrants'"; Danish Refugee Council, 'The Methodology Employed by DRC When Counselling Rejected Asylum Seekers in Denmark about Return' (return counselling methodology brief, Danish Refugee Council, Copenhagen, 2021).

42 Samuel Hall and IOM, *Health and Reintegration*; Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Gemma Hennessey, and Caterina Mazzilli, 'Subjective and Intangible Factors in Migration Decision-Making: A Review of Side-Lined Literature', *Migration Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 2023): 349–359.

43 See, for instance, Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, 'Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2017): 945–963; Hein de Haas, 'A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 8 (2021); Mathias Czaika and Zina Weisner, 'Migration Aspirations and Their Realisation: A Configurational Driver Analysis of 26 African and Asian Research Areas', *Comparative Migration Studies* 13, no. 8 (2025).

44 In a related manner, see the literature on involuntary immobility, such as Jørgen Carling, 'Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 5–42.

45 Mathias Czaika, Jakub Bijak, and Toby Prike, 'Migration Decision-Making and Its Key Dimensions', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 697, no. 1 (2021): 15–31.

46 See, for instance, Masja van Meeteren, *Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands: Aspirations and Incorporation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

aspirations also typically change over time, including as people compare their life situation to that of others and are exposed to new information (whether shared by family or friends, transmitted by social media, or otherwise).[47] These evolving aspirations and persistent uncertainty can prolong indecision, prompt migrants to repeatedly reassess their options, and in some cases decide to delay return.

Life aspirations also typically change over time, including as people compare their life situation to that of others and are exposed to new information.

Insights from another theoretical model—compliance theory—help contextualise return decision-making from the perspective of host states, particularly those such as the Netherlands that demonstrate both high political will and capacity to enforce return. This body of literature focuses on the behavioural dimension of enforcing laws and regulations, often aiming to understand what measures can secure compliance with return orders.[48] While this model pays limited attention to individual agency or motivations, it offers a useful complement to migrant-centred approaches by identifying how states aim to shape migrants' decision-making environment. Specifically, compliance theory highlights three main categories of influence: material, normative, and psychological.[49] Material considerations include incentives and deterrents such as return assistance or the loss of access to state-provided services. Normative considerations relate to how migrants perceive the legitimacy of legal decisions (for example, whether they feel their individual case has been fairly assessed). Finally, psychological factors, such as trust in authorities or fear of stigma upon return, can shape how migrants perceive their options.

Helpful though these insights are, compliance theory's narrow focus on state-led compliance mechanisms limits its ability to fully capture the complexities of migrants' decision-making. This model is particularly challenging to apply in cases where migrants have resisted compliance with return orders for extended periods. For these individuals who continue to live in a country without legal status, decision-making frameworks that account for uncertainty, ambiguity, and the weighing of future risks and opportunities may provide a more suitable lens for understanding their choices. Similar considerations are also important in cases where migrants view the state's policies and expectations as illegitimate. Ethnographic research in the Netherlands shows how irregular migrants frequently challenge the legitimacy of state policies, illustrating how compliance theory can fail to capture such migrants' moral and practical concerns as well as the complexity of their day-to-day experiences.[50]

47 Paolo Boccagni, 'Aspirations and the Subjective Future of Migration: Comparing Views and Desires of the "Time Ahead" through the Narratives of Immigrant Domestic Workers', *Comparative Migration Studies 5*, no. 4 (2017).

48 Daniel Peat, 'Perception and Process: Towards a Behavioural Theory of Compliance', *Journal of International Dispute Settlement* 13, no. 2 (2022): 179–209; Nicoletta Rangone, 'Making Law Effective: Behavioural Insights into Compliance', *European Journal of Risk Regulation* 9, no. 3 (2018): 483–501.

49 Daniel Peat, Veronika Fikfak, and Eva van der Zee, 'Behavioural Compliance Theory', *Journal of International Dispute Settlement* 13, no. 2 (2022): 167–178. Note also that previous research has used the terms 'regulative' (coercion/rewards), 'normative' (moral considerations), and 'cultural-cognitive' (group standards) to categorise the reasons persons comply with rules. This framework was developed by W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organisations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014) and later used in an analysis of DTenV caseworkers, see Michael Sinnige, Marieke van Houte, and Arjen Leerkes, 'Talking about Return: Governmental Caseworkers' Regulative, Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Strategies during "Return Conversations" with Irregular Migrants', *International Migration* 61, no. 1 (2023): 288–303.

50 Mieke Kox, '"Where Is the Justice?" Unauthorized Migrants' Perceptions of the Legitimacy of the Dutch Immigration System', *The British Journal of Criminology* (2024): azae076.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a useful foundation for examining the multiple, evolving factors that shape return decision-making. While the aim of this study is not to further develop such models, these frameworks informed the design of the study's interview questionnaires and, therefore, have helped ground this empirical research in the latest conceptual thinking.

3 This Study's Methodology for Examining Migrants' Return Decision-Making

This study employs a mixed-methods design to examine the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in migrants' return decision-making. The quantitative segment of the study involves the first-ever analysis of 2017–23 DTenV administrative case management data shared with the researchers by the agency, in order to identify patterns among returns from the Netherlands. The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with migrants, policymakers, counsellors, and other practitioners in the Netherlands, other EU countries, and two countries of origin (Iraq and Nigeria). Throughout this study, the MPI Europe research team benefited from the insights of a project steering committee composed of governmental and academic experts.[51] This section provides further detail on the methods used and their limitations.

A. Quantitative analysis of administrative return data

To analyse patterns of return and factors associated with the uptake of assisted return, MPI Europe researchers first conducted a quantitative analysis of case management data provided by DTenV and covering the period 2017–23. It is the first time this dataset of 117,813 observed case outflows was shared with researchers and analysed for this purpose.[52] Outflows in this context refer to any recorded closure of a return procedure, including assisted returns, forced removals, obtaining a temporary or permanent legal status (such as asylum), and cases in which individuals absconded. Because individuals may undergo multiple return procedures during their stay in the Netherlands, the unit of analysis is cases not unique individuals. The dataset was fully anonymised but includes a unique identifier for each individual, making it possible to track repeat procedures across time.

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The dataset includes basic demographic and procedural variables, such as gender, nationality, date of first DTenV return procedure, age at in- and outflow, and the reason for initiating the return procedure. It also contains a limited indicator of engagement with return counselling: specifically, the number of counselling

51 The project steering committee, which was created by the Research and Data Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security of the Netherlands prior to the launch of this study, included Casper van Nassau from WODC; Claudia van der Horst from the DTenV; Mieke Kox from the Erasmus School of Law, Rotterdam; Marieke van Houte from the Radbound University, Nijmegen; and Anja van Heelsum from the University of Amsterdam.

52 Importantly, the dataset does not include procedures that were ongoing at the end of 2023. An empirical study published earlier in 2025 assesses DTenV case management data from an earlier period (2005–10) to explore determinants of return from the Netherlands. See Sinnige, Cleton, and Leerkes, 'Determinants of Enforced Return'.

sessions provided by DTenV. This variable does not capture counselling provided by IOM or NGOs, nor does it provide information on the duration, content, or outcome of the sessions. As such the recorded counselling sessions range from extended conversations to very brief encounters, such as a migrant declining to engage with a counsellor.

To prepare the data for analysis, MPI Europe researchers created a set of derived variables, recoding the various outflow types to enable both binary and more detailed categorical analyses. First, the researchers constructed a binary variable indicating whether a person left the Netherlands through an assisted return programme. This variable served as the dependent variable in several parts of the analysis, allowing for comparisons between assisted return and the other outcomes. The dataset does not, however, indicate which partner (IOM, an NGO, or Frontex) assisted the migrants. Second, a more granular categorical variable was created to distinguish between six main outflow types: (1) assisted return to the country of origin; (2) assisted return to a Dublin country (i.e., the first EU country an asylum seeker entered);[53] (3) forced return to the country of origin; (4) forced return to a Dublin country; (5) receipt of a temporary or permanent status in the Netherlands (e.g., through a grant of asylum or another legal status, or because the individual filed a new application and is permitted to remain in the country while it is processed); and (6) disappearance/absconding from DTenV. While the focus of this research is on assisted return, both variables are used in different parts of the statistical analysis to provide a more complete picture of DTenV return profiles and operations.

This data analysis was complemented with examination of an internal DTenV rating of bilateral cooperation on forced returns, to deepen understanding of Dutch authorities' ability to enforce return decisions. For the 20 largest nationality groups in the outflow dataset described above,[54] DTenV country experts were asked to assess the level of cooperation between the agency and countries of origin, based on their professional insights and experience. In addition, publicly available information from the DTenV website, including country profiles,[55] was used to complement the subjective expert assessment. Based on these two sources of information, MPI Europe researchers assigned countries to one of three categories: (1) there is broad cooperation on forced returns, and such returns are frequently possible; (2) cooperation on forced returns is challenging but possible in some circumstances or for certain groups; and (3) cooperation on forced returns is very difficult and hardly ever possible.

The goal of this data preparation process was to retain the richness these data sources to the greatest extent possible, while ensuring the reliability of the analysis and the different research questions. As not all variables were available for every return procedure, the statistical analyses presented below are based on different sample sizes. Observations with missing information on key variables were excluded from specific parts of the analysis but not from the dataset as a whole (e.g., information on counselling was available only for a subset of cases). The researchers conducted consistency and plausibility checks to detect and address

53 The Dublin Regulation provides procedural rules and legal basis that determine which EU Member State is responsible for processing an asylum seeker's application. See 'Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 Establishing the Criteria and Mechanisms for Determining the Member State Responsible for Examining an Application for International Protection Lodged in One of the Member States by a Third-Country National or a Stateless Person', *Official Journal of the European Union* 2013 L180/31, 26 June 2013.

54 The 20 largest nationality groups, ordered from largest to smallest, were: Morocco, Iraq, Armenia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Turkey, Nigeria, Suriname, Iran, Algeria, Sierra Leone, China, Guinea, Eritrea, Ghana, Egypt, Libya, Russia, Georgia, and Syria.

55 See DTenV, 'Alle landen', accessed 11 March 2025.

potential data entry errors; for example, when a case was dated as exiting the DTenV caseload before the date on which it entered the caseload (which was the case for 1,002 cases) or when cases were categorised inconsistently across variables (e.g., in 16,036 cases, procedures that ended due to a grant of asylum were classified as 'other' whereas they should have been categorised as 'status granted', and they were adjusted by the researchers to use that more detailed descriptor).

The analysis then proceeded in two stages. First, the MPI researchers conducted descriptive data analysis to provide an overview of the DTenV dataset as a whole, without limiting the focus to assisted return. This included cross-tabulation of key variables to explore group-level differences and trends over time. In the second stage, the researchers used logistic regression analysis to examine the factors associated with uptake of assisted return. The dependent variable in these models was the binary indicator for whether an individual departed the Netherlands via an assisted return programme. No weighting was applied in the analysis. All quantitative analyses were carried out using the statistical software Stata.

B. Qualitative analysis of return decision-making

The qualitative component of this study was designed to better understand the decision-making processes that lead some migrants in the Netherlands to accept or choose assisted return, and to explore in more detail the role of return counselling and reintegration assistance in this process. The interviews conducted by MPI Europe researchers offered insights that could not be gleaned through analysis of administrative data alone. In total, the researchers conducted interviews with 50 individuals between March 2024 and January 2025: 16 migrants returning to either Iraq or Nigeria, 15 DTenV policy advisors and operational staff, 10 actors in other EU countries, and 9 representatives of NGOs involved in return counselling, namely the Dutch Refugee Council, Goedwerk Foundation,[56] IRARA, IOM Netherlands, IOM Nigeria, and the Patriotic Citizens Initiative in Nigeria. The research team also visited two Dutch reception centres—one general centre and one with a dedicated family section—where they interviewed DTenV departure supervisors and shadowed two return counselling sessions. This diversity of perspectives allowed the researchers to explore return decision-making from both the ground up and the top down, linking individual experiences to institutional practices and the broader policy environment.

This diversity of perspectives allowed the researchers to explore return decision-making from both the ground up and the top down, linking individual experiences to institutional practices and the broader policy environment.

Iraq and Nigeria were selected as case-study countries based on five criteria: (1) they had a relatively high number of assisted returns from the Netherlands between 2022 and 2024; (2) reintegration assistance was available to individuals choosing assisted return to both countries, allowing the research team to examine whether and how such assistance influenced decision-making; (3) neither country had overly specific

56 The Goedwerk Foundation stopped its operations in April 2025 due to an ongoing investigation by the Ministry of Justice and Security into its use of subsidies for assisted return. See Andreas Kouwenhoven and Romy van der Poel, 'Terugkeerstichting voor asielzoekers opgeheven, terwijl subsidies worden onderzocht', NRC, 29 April 2025.

returnee profiles[57]; (4) outreach and interview facilitation were diplomatically feasible; and (5) IOM or NGO staff were able to support the researchers in connecting with returning migrants. The two countries also present distinct policy contexts: while Nigeria has been strongly engaged and open towards both assisted and forced returns, Iraq has engaged more selectively, particularly when it comes to forced removals.[58] Boxes 2 and 3 provide additional context on the two selected case-study countries.

BOX 2
Nigeria: Migration trends, return, and reintegration initiatives

As the most populous country on the African continent, Nigeria has long been a migration hub. In 2023, IOM Nigeria estimated that 17 million Nigerians resided abroad, a number that has grown significantly in recent years. The factors driving international migration from Nigeria are varied, from a lack of local opportunities to limited access to basic services. In a 2024 survey, for example, 67 per cent of respondents described economic conditions in the country as 'very bad'. Young Nigerians who manage to find employment often receive low salaries that are insufficient to meet their basic needs. Beyond high unemployment and poverty, violent extremism and terrorism have displaced millions of Nigerians. Human trafficking also continues to be a challenge.

A growing number of Nigerians have moved to the Netherlands in recent years, as evidenced by an increase in asylum applications as well as residence permits issued for reasons such as family reunification, education, and employment. Bilateral ties between the two countries were formalised through a migration-focused memorandum of understanding signed in 2014, which includes basic provisions on return and readmission. Since 2016, the European Union has been negotiating a readmission agreement with Nigeria, so far without results. Nigerians have since 2020 consistently been among the top five nationalities of migrants to depart from the Netherlands, according to DTenV data.

The Netherlands works with several partners to provide reintegration services to returning Nigerians, namely IOM, Frontex (via their partner IRARA), and the Dutch Refugee Council (via their local partner, the Patriotic Citizens Initiative). Still, research continues to document challenges faced by migrants returning to Nigeria, including dire economic conditions, feelings of shame and failure, and stigma and discrimination experienced in their communities.

Sources: IOM, *2023 Annual Report* (Abuja: IOM, 2023); IOM, 'Government of Nigeria, IOM, Kingdom of Netherlands Bolster Support for Sustainable Community Development through the Community Based Planning Initiative' (news release, 27 August 2024); Mina Margaret Ogbanga, 'From Push to Pull: A Critical Analysis of the Drivers of International Migration in Nigeria', *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning* 10, no. 4 (2024): 64–70; IOM, 'Human Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe' (news release, 25 September 2006); Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship [migr_resfirst]', accessed 12 December 2024; Niels Ike, Elaine Lebon-McGregor, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, and Ayşe Bala Akal, 'Should the EU Give up on Readmission Agreements as a Foreign Policy Tool?' (policy brief, MIGNEX, February 2024); Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, 'Instroom- en vertrekcijfers', accessed 19 December 2024; Kingdom of Netherlands, 'Migration Cooperation Programmes Nigeria and the Netherlands', accessed 12 December 2024; Chloe Sydney, *Nigeria: Returning Migrants at Risk of New Displacement or Secondary Migration* (Liège, Belgium: University of Liège, 2021); Ngozi Louis Uzomah, Ignatius Ani Madu, Chukwuedozie K. Ajaero, and Eberechukwu J. Ezea, 'Navigating the Complexities of Return Migration and Reintegration: Challenges and Opportunities for Nigerian Migrants from North Africa in the Context of EU Policies' (working paper 7, GAPS, November 2024); Afrobarometer, *Summary of Results – Afrobarometer Round 10 Survey in Nigeria* (Accra: Afrobarometer, 2025).

57 These decisions were made in part based on input from DTenV experts. For example, Turkey was not selected because the 2023 earthquake significantly altered the context for return, affecting both the feasibility of implementing return programmes and migrants' decision-making about return.

58 Author interviews with DTenV country specialists, 25 September 2024.

BOX 3
Iraq: Migration trends, return, and reintegration initiatives

Migration patterns in Iraq have been shaped by a complex history of conflict, political instability, and economic hardship. A string of wars and armed conflicts, starting with the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, has led to rising emigration from the country. Most recently, armed conflict against the Islamic State since 2013 has deepened and extended Iraq's displacement crisis, with 70 per cent of people displaced unable to return home for more than five years. In addition to conflict-driven displacement, many Iraqis are leaving the country due to poverty, fear of persecution, and lack of access to justice; often, these factors are deeply intertwined. In the early 2000s, Iraqi nationals primarily emigrated to neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, but migration trends have since shifted and more Iraqis are now heading to Europe and North America. As of 2024, an estimated 2.3 million international migrants from Iraq were living in other countries.

The Netherlands has emerged as an important destination for Iraqis seeking security and stability. Research conducted by IOM found that many Iraqi migrants who choose the Netherlands as their destination do so because of the presence of family and friends, the country's respect for human rights, and its safety standards. In early 2024, officials from the two countries established a special council to oversee bilateral relations, signalling their commitment to work together on topics including migration. In 2020, Iraqis were one of the largest nationality groups for migrants departing from the Netherlands, according to DTenV data.

The Netherlands collaborates with several partner organisations to facilitate Iraqis' return and to provide reintegration assistance, including IOM, the Dutch Refugee Council, the Goedwerk Foundation (now closed), Solid Road, and local partners in Iraq. Returnees receive a financial allowance and can access a range of services, including vocational training, legal counselling, and housing assistance. Since 2022, three National Referral Mechanisms have assisted Iraqis returning to the regions surrounding Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. A growing body of research on the lived experiences of Iraqi returnees highlights the many challenges they face, including economic difficulties (e.g., struggles finding employment, financial stress, accumulated debt), social issues (e.g., limited access to housing, an inadequate justice system), and psychosocial concerns (e.g., feelings of alienation, limited support networks).

Sources: IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs, and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq, 2023); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Iraq Refugee Crisis', accessed 17 December 2024; IOM, *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons behing Migration* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq, 2016); United Nations Population Division, 'International Migrant Stock 2024', accessed 19 August 2025; StatLine, 'Bevolking op eerste vd maand; geslacht, lft, migratieachtergrond; 2016-2023', accessed 17 December 2024; IOM, *Iraqi Migrants in the Netherlands* (Geneva: IOM, 2018); Rudaw, 'Iraq, Netherlands to Establish a Bilateral Cooperation Council', Rudaw, 16 February 2024; Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, 'Instroom- en vertrekcijfers', accessed 19 August 2025; RefugeeHelp by the Dutch Refugee Council, 'Return Iraq', accessed 17 December 2024; IOM, 'Third National Referral Mechanism to Aid Returnee Reintegration Opens in Iraq' (news release, 4 April 2024).

Expert and policy interviewees were selected to capture both institutional perspectives and country-specific expertise. Within DTenV, the researchers spoke with country specialists for Iraq and Nigeria and advisors working on return and reintegration policy, with the interviews facilitated by the study's point of contact at the agency. For NGO interviews, the research team pursued two complementary approaches: IOM, which has a central role in providing assisted return from the Netherlands, was engaged from the outset of the project to inform the study's design and to explore potential options for speaking to returnees. After initial outreach by IOM Nigeria to returnees in the country yielded limited responses, MPI Europe researchers contacted other NGOs involved in return counselling and reintegration support and with expertise on Iraq and Nigeria. Ultimately, the Dutch Refugee Council, Goedwerk Foundation, and IRARA participated in the

study, each contributing expert interviews and support for migrant outreach. Additional interviews were conducted with staff of IOM Netherlands and the Dutch Refugee Council who oversee the organisations' broader activities on assisted return.

When interviewing European policymakers and practitioners, the researchers sought to learn about policies and programmes that interact with the return decision-making process and to draw lessons for the Dutch context, adding a comparative element to this study. Interviewees included representatives of the State Secretariat for Migration in Switzerland (specifically, its Section on Dublin and Return, given their longstanding experience with a degressive benefits model to incentivise uptake of assisted returns; see Box 8); Fedasil, Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (with the team focusing on irregular migrants and with a counsellor); the French Office for Immigration and Integration (to discuss their use of return counselling and reintegration assistance, including a degressive model); the Swedish Migration Agency (with the unit overseeing returns and counselling development); and in Denmark, both the Danish Return Agency (with the teams working on outreach and reintegration assistance) and the Danish Refugee Council. Additional interviews were conducted with staff of the Return and Reintegration Facility, specifically the project team managing the Counselling Lab,[59] and with IRARA's EU partnerships and Nigeria operations managers.

Finally, MPI Europe researchers conducted 16 interviews with migrants who had returned from the Netherlands to Nigeria or Iraq after receiving a leaving order. These interviews were facilitated by the reintegration partner organisations involved in the return process as well as their local counterparts, who had the most complete information on returnees and how to contact them. The process for selecting and reaching returnees varied across reintegration partners and countries, reflecting different organisational setups and practical considerations. In some cases, the organisations provided a list of returnees who had consented to be contacted for research purposes, while others scheduled interviews themselves to ensure logistical feasibility and good connectivity.[60]

Overall, securing returnees' participation in interviews proved challenging. In many cases, the contact details reintegration partners had on file were outdated, and some returnees who could be reached were reluctant to participate in a study about their migration and return experiences. Those who agreed to be interviewed reported varied motivations for participating in the study. A number of Nigerian participants described a desire to have their voices heard and to draw attention to what they perceived as unfair treatment during their return from the Netherlands.[61] Others, both Nigerian and Iraqi, said they were motivated by appreciation for the support they received from local reintegration partners.

59 The Counselling Lab assists Member States with the development and operationalisation of return counselling mechanisms. See ICMPD, 'RFF – Counselling Lab'.

60 IOM Iraq shared with MPI Europe researchers a list of returnees in Iraq who had consented to be contacted for an interview, including their names and contact details. The research team then reached out to these individuals directly and scheduled one-on-one interviews via WhatsApp. In Nigeria, by contrast, IOM Nigeria contacted returnees and arranged for the interviews to take place at the IOM office in Lagos, ensuring a quiet setting and a stable internet connection. For the one Iraqi returnee identified by the Dutch Refugee Council, interview coordination was handled by the organisation's local reintegration partner, the European Technology and Training Centre and hosted at their office. In Nigeria, the Dutch Refugee Council's local partner, the Patriotic Citizens Initiative, provided MPI Europe researchers with a list of contact information for returnees they had supported and the research team approached each individual to invite them to participate in the study.

61 Author interviews with Nigerian returnees, 7 and 21 October 2024.

The research team developed a thematic interview questionnaire based on a literature review focused on decision-making models (described in Section 2) and structured chronologically, from emigration to the journey to the Netherlands, stay in the Netherlands, return decision-making, return, and finally post-return and reintegration. While particular attention was paid to interviewees' experiences with return counselling and reintegration assistance, the questionnaire also aimed to capture a broader life-cycle perspective on the return decision-making process.

Interviews with Iraqi returnees were conducted via phone by MPI Europe researchers, with the help of a translator fluent in English, Kurdish, and Arabic.[62] Eight of these interviews were organised through IOM and one through the Dutch Refugee Council and its local reintegration partner, the European Technology and Training Centre. Interviews with Nigerian returnees were conducted in English either by MPI Europe researchers via phone or by a local research partner.[63] One interview was organised through IOM; one through the Goedwerk Foundation; two through the Dutch Refugee Council and their local partner, the Patriotic Citizens Initiative; and three through IRARA. Interviews were designed to last for about an hour, although there was some variation in practice. Before each interview, the participant was informed about the purpose of the study and their right to skip questions or withdraw participation at any time. All individuals who agreed to be interviewed were engaged and completed the conversation in full. Following the interviews, the research team summarised each thematic block and compared insights on each theme across the interviews and across countries to identify patterns.

C. Limitations of the data and applied methodology

Data collection for this study faced two main limitations, both related to interviews with returnees. First, the sample size of 16 interviews (7 of returnees in Nigeria and 9 in Iraq) was relatively small. This was largely due to the difficulties involved in contacting and securing the participation of returning migrants. Consequently, the sample may be biased towards individuals who were more readily accessible to reintegration partners, potentially excluding those who have disengaged from formal support systems, had negative experiences with reintegration assistance, migrated again, or had busy schedules. Conversely, individuals who have successfully reintegrated or were never in need of support from reintegration partners may be underrepresented. Additionally, some people declined to participate due to reluctance to revisit this phase of their lives. Moreover, the sample predominantly consisted of men (there was only 1 woman among the 16 interviewees), which limited the ability to analyse gender dynamics.

A second limitation is that while organisations providing reintegration support were instrumental in facilitating researchers' connections to returnees for interviews, this approach to interviewee recruitment introduced the potential for bias in their selection and responses. For instance, the organisations may have selected migrants with more successful reintegration experiences to portray their activities in a more favourable light, or some interviewees might not have spoken entirely candidly about their experiences

62 The MPI Europe research team did not travel to Nigeria or Iraq. The translator was trained on the interview tools beforehand.
63 The local research organisation received comprehensive training on the interview tools in advance. This training covered the use of the tools, best practices for conducting interviews, and techniques to ensure accurate data collection.

with the organisations. To limit these risks, the research team conducted the interviews without the reintegration service provider present, emphasised the study's independence at the start of each conversation, and clarified that identifying information would not be shared with the organisations. Several of the people interviewed were critical of the organisations that supported their reintegration, which suggests they felt comfortable discussing challenging topics openly.

By combining individual perspectives, such as those of returning migrants and counsellors, with insights and data from national and international actors, the study offers a well-rounded picture of return decision-making.

Overall, the strength of this research lies in its diverse sources of information and methods employed. By combining individual perspectives, such as those of returning migrants and counsellors, with insights and data from national and international actors, the study offers a well-rounded picture of return decision-making.

4 Assisted Return and Reintegration from the Netherlands

Before turning to the results of this study, it is helpful to understand how counselling, return, and reintegration assistance occur within the Dutch context. At the political level, return has featured high on the agenda of successive governments.[64] The government formed in 2024 has prioritised this as a key objective and set a series of related goals. These include enhancing the overall return system and improving the effectiveness of forced returns, expanding detention capacity, imposing penalties on individuals who fail to cooperate after receiving a return decision, and advocating for reforms to the common EU framework on return.[65]

64 An early return-focused policy effort was embedded within the Ethnic Minorities Policy of the 1980s, which aimed, among other things, to encourage the return of certain migrant groups and marked a shift away from prior integration-focused policies. In the 1990s and early 2000s, funds were allocated to voluntary return programmes, and return obligations were gradually strengthened (e.g., via limits on appeals and increased immigration enforcement). The creation of the DTenV in 2007 consolidated return efforts that had been fragmented across agencies, streamlining procedures and coordination with international partners. In 2013, the *Modern Migration Policy Act* made financial support for municipalities contingent on active cooperation in enforcing returns and scaled up information campaigns to promote assisted departure. See Arjen Leerkes, Rianne van Os, and Eline Boersema, 'What Drives "Soft Deportation"? Understanding the Rise in Assisted Voluntary Return among Rejected Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands', *Population, Space, and Place* 23, no. 8 (2017): e2059; Bruquetas-Callejo, Garcés-Mascareñas, Penninx, and Scholten, 'Policymaking Related to Immigration and Integration'; Staring and Kox, *Hulp bij terugkeer*; Van Der Leun and Bouter, 'Gimme Shelter'.

65 Government of the Netherlands, *Regeerprogramm: Uitwerking van het hoofdlijnenakkoord door het kabinet* (Amsterdam: Government of the Netherlands, 2024). Other objectives outlined in this document include setting up broad strategic partnerships with third countries and exploring operational models such as return hubs.

Considering the difficulties of conducting forced returns, Dutch authorities have long emphasised strengthening assisted returns, including by improving access to counselling and reintegration support. The Netherlands has operated an assisted return scheme since 1989 and worked with IOM since 1991.[66] In 2007, the DTenV was established within the Ministry of Justice and Security to better coordinate the return of people without legal status.[67] Dutch return and repatriation policy outlines the procedures for doing so as well as the support available.[68] Third-country nationals without a valid residence permit or other permission to stay in the Netherlands are issued a return decision and have a legal obligation to leave the country on their own. After this decision is issued, DTenV steps in to discuss options for repatriation within 28 days.[69] For those who do not leave independently, DTenV takes steps to enforce their departure, including by extending the option of assisted departure to migrants who might otherwise be forcibly returned. If migrants refuse to depart and upon final court ruling, DTenV can initiative a procedure for forcible removal.

A. Return counselling

The term 'counselling' is used to describe interventions with various aims and involving different actors (see Box 4). In the Netherlands, as in other EU Member States (see Box 5), return counselling is provided by government agencies, IOM, and NGOs. These actors handle a broad spectrum of cases, including individuals whose asylum cases are unsuccessful and those in an irregular status, with growing diversification over the years.[70] One DTenV counsellor thus noted, 'Two or three years ago, we didn't talk with the kind of people we saw this morning', referring to a case the research team had observed that involved an individual who had applied for asylum in the Netherlands but had a residence permit in another EU Member State.[71] The multi-partner approach aims to achieve better outcomes for migrants who have received an order to leave, as each stakeholder has a distinct approach to counselling.

In the Netherlands, as in other EU Member States... return counselling is provided by government agencies, IOM, and NGOs.

66 Arjen Leerkes and Mieke Kox, 'Pressured into a Preference to Leave? A Study on the "Specific" Deterrent Effects and Perceived Legitimacy of Immigration Detention', *Law and Society Review* 51, no. 4 (2017): 895–929; IOM Netherlands, 'AVRR Assistance Expanded' (news release, 10 July 2023).
67 Leerkes, van Os, and Boersema, 'What Drives "Soft Deportation"?'.
68 Government of the Netherlands, 'Return Policy', accessed 10 March 2025.
69 DTenV, 'Return Assistance—Programs and Projects', accessed 20 January 2025.
70 Interviews conducted for this study indicated that individuals undergoing return proceedings may have held various legal statuses while in the Netherlands. Author interviews with DTenV staff at two reception centres, 26–27 March 2024.
71 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor at a reception centre, 27 March 2024.

BOX 4
Counselling: An umbrella term for different approaches

Across the European Union, there are varying perspectives on the objectives of counselling, its target audiences, and the most effective methods, and no harmonised terminology for these different forms of counselling. But with increasing attention to and investments in counselling efforts, it can be useful to differentiate between the following approaches to better track their applications and impacts:

- **Return counselling**: The primary goal of this type of counselling is to persuade migrants to return, with a focus on compliance. It is typically carried out by state actors, such as agencies that oversee return operations.
- **Case resolution counselling**: This is a nondirectional form of counselling that helps individuals explores various options, including applying for asylum or another form of status, return, irregular stay, or onward migration. It is typically provided by civil-society organisations, though some countries have implemented small-scale case resolution projects, such as the Dutch National Immigration Facility* and the Belgian Shelter and Orientation project.
- **Legal counselling**: While often a component of other counselling types, legal counselling is distinct because it is typically delivered by legal professionals.
- **Predeparture counselling, including reintegration counselling**: After a return decision is made, predeparture counselling focuses on helping a migrant plan and organise their return. This may involve the development of a reintegration plan to support them as they re-establish themself in their country of origin.

* The Dutch National Immigration Facility provided temporary shelter to some irregular migrants while the individuals worked with a group of stakeholders (including the DTenV, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, municipal actors, and NGOs) to explore future options, including repatriation, residency, or onward migration. The country's central government is ending its funding for the programme by 2025, but some municipalities have announced that they aim to sustain the programme via their own funds.
Sources: Erasmus School of Law, 'The Termination of the Bed-Bath-Bread Programme: A Threat to the Most Vulnerable?', updated 14 October 2024; Ruth Beeckmans et al., eds., *Annual Report on Migration and Asylum in Belgium 2022* (Brussels: European Migration Network Belgium, 2023).

DTenV return counselling

As part of DTenV's mandate to coordinate and strengthen the country's system for assisted and forced returns, the agency has been granted significant resources for counselling. In the case of an asylum procedure, DTenV staff are typically involved in at least two conversations with asylum seekers, one following an initial rejection and one after an appeal.[72] After the first asylum decision, DTenV invites the person for a conversation to inform them about their options, and to explain that they will be required to depart the Netherlands if their appeal is unsuccessful. After a negative decision in an appeal process, the DTenV counsellor explains the legal situation, the need to depart the country within 28 days, and options for assisted return.

In administrative detention centres, DTenV staff organise one counselling session per month for each person, though they can choose to meet more often if it is deemed appropriate. DTenV tracks how

72 Author interviews with DTenV staff at a reception centre, 26 March 2024.

many of these encounters occur in its case management system and keeps records of counsellor reports summarising these sessions.[73] For instance, a person may not be willing to speak with the DTenV counsellor, in which case the meeting could come to an end in a few minutes.

The introduction of Wigk marked a shift towards focusing on individuals and their personal situation, compared to the prior approach, which was more focused on the provision of information and more legalistic.

Since 2014, caseworkers have employed a specialised methodology for return counselling: the Working within a Compulsory Framework (Wigk) approach. The framework is designed to encourage migrants with an order to leave to opt for assisted return, relying on motivational interviewing, intercultural communication, and negotiations.[74] The introduction of Wigk marked a shift towards focusing on individuals and their personal situation, compared to the prior approach, which was more focused on the provision of information and more legalistic. A counsellor who went through that transition at DTenV recalled, 'That flips a switch. You have to engage in a conversation, build trust. And you realise that the person makes the decision themselves.'[75]

Counsellors have been provided guidelines and training on how to implement this methodology; however, in practice, previous research and staff interviews indicate that counsellors do not consistently adhere to the approach, instead adapting their methods based on their perception of the individual's likelihood of removal.[76] When engaging with migrants deemed highly removable (i.e., those who are open to the idea of returning or who can be returned forcibly), caseworkers primarily use a combination of threats ('sticks') and incentives ('carrots') to encourage assisted return and, if unsuccessful, resort to forced return. In contrast, for migrants who are less likely to be forcibly returned, counsellors employ arguments based on values and cultural norms. For non-removable migrants, caseworkers focus on building trust that could support constructive discussions should the individual decide they want to return in the future.[77]

IOM and NGO counselling

In parallel, IOM and several NGOs receive funding from the Ministry of Justice and Security to support assisted returns.[78] IOM is the main provider, followed by civil-society organisations of different sizes and reach, including the Dutch Refugee Council and the Goedwerk Foundation.[79] The number of organisations involved in this work has expanded over time, with different NGO partners specialising in serving specific

73 Thus, DTenV data for 2017–23 indicate that their staff and individual migrants in their caseload had between 0 to 83 instances of contact, but the database records do not contain the more detailed information available via the counsellor reports. Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

74 DTenV, 'Working within a Compulsory Framework', accessed 18 January 2025.

75 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 27 March 2024.

76 Author interviews with DTenV counsellors, 26–27 March 2024; Sinnige, van Houte, and Leerkes, 'Talking about Return'.

77 Sinnige, van Houte, and Leerkes, 'Talking about Return'.

78 Since 2000, local governments have provided financial support for NGOs working with irregular migrants, including for assisted return from the Netherlands. See Mieke Kox and Richard Staring, '"If You Don't Have Documents or a Legal Procedure, You Are Out!" Making Humanitarian Organizations Partner in Migration Control', *European Journal of Criminology* 19, no. 5 (2020): 974–993; Laura Cleton and Sébastien Chauvin, 'Performing Freedom in the Dutch Deportation Regime: Bureaucratic Persuasion and the Enforcement of "Voluntary Return"', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 297–313.

79 Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, 'Instroom- en vertrekcijfers'; author interviews with DTenV staff, 25 March 2024.

nationalities, addressing particular vulnerabilities, or offering various forms of reintegration support.[80] While the ministry provides these organisations with guidelines and other resources,[81] they have considerable flexibility in their approach.

IOM has deployed counsellors across the country, in reception centres and at the municipal level. Counsellors speak different languages, and some have a migration background and are part of diaspora networks.[82] Beyond reception centres, IOM staff also meet with migrants in a variety of other locations, including at churches or in cafés or train stations, depending on the preferences of the migrants.[83] They have a dedicated approach for working with victims of trafficking and minors, usually meeting with such individuals in their homes. In addition to IOM's own outreach, DTenV and the Dutch Refugee Council refer migrants to IOM to help them with return preparations.[84] IOM counsellors provide non-directional counselling, but its scope remains limited to facilitating return and does not aim to address migrants' wider needs. For example, IOM does not offer legal counselling, which comes under the remit of the Dutch Refugee Council.

Comprehensive case resolution counselling is primarily conducted by NGOs, although some government-funded initiatives aim to adopt this approach (as discussed in Box 4). Some NGOs are particularly well-equipped to reach and support migrants in vulnerable situations, such as those experiencing homelessness or struggling with addiction, which can take additional time and resources. For instance, counsellors from the Dutch Refugee Council are in contact with some Nigerian migrants facing these challenges.[85] Meanwhile, the Goedwerk Foundation focuses on migrants who are non-deportable, due to their personal circumstances or the context in their country of origin.[86]

Comprehensive case resolution counselling is primarily conducted by NGOs, although some government-funded initiatives aim to adopt this approach.

While these NGOs tend to have less formalised counselling techniques than, for instance, DTenV's Wigk, many of their counsellors have in-depth experience working with migrants and vulnerable groups. Many civil-society partners are also continually working to improve their counselling, including via research. For instance, in an interview, staff of the Goedwerk Foundation described an ongoing longitudinal study the organisation was conducting to better understand the impact of counselling on return decision-making.[87] However, press reports have at times questioned the NGO's working methods, particularly how it has guided migrants towards assisted returns.[88] A broader academic literature also sheds critical light on the

80 van Houte, 'The Return Industry'.
81 For example, DTenV delivers a three-day workshop on the Wigk methodology. Author interviews with DTenV staff, 26 March 2024.
82 These counsellors can be located at a reception centre for asylum seekers, in an office provided by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, or travel as needed.
83 Where they have offices, IOM staff usually have consultation hours. They may signal their presence to migrants in the area using posters hung in public places.
84 Author interview with a representative of IOM Netherlands, 6 December 2024.
85 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 10 October 2024.
86 Andreas Kouwenhoven and Romy van der Poel, 'Uitgeprocedeerd? Deze NGO belooft je duizenden euro's als je vertrekt', NRC, 23 August 2024.
87 Author interview with a representative of the Goedwerk Foundation, 25 July 2024.
88 GroenLinks Rotterdam, 'Goed Werk, slecht werk?', updated 26 September 2024.

involvement of NGOs in the return process and their sometimes ambiguous role between protection and enforcement.[89]

BOX 5
Return counselling at the EU level

Return counselling has been a focus at EU level as well, and European authorities have increased investments and developed targeted initiatives to expand the availability and quality of counselling across the bloc. In 2021, the EU framework on return counselling provided guidance to EU Member States on setting up and conducting counselling.

The Netherlands has been instrumental in these developments, notably through its leadership in previous EU-wide initiatives, such as the European Reintegration Network (ERIN) and the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), as well as through the dissemination of good practices and the implementation of such practices at the national level. For example, the training modules developed under ERIN/ERRIN largely drew on the Netherlands' Working within a Compulsory Framework (Wigk) methodology, and these modules have been taken onboard by Frontex as part of its return activities.

Frontex has also been a lead contributor to this evolution, with the deployment of return specialists to EU countries to support pre-return activities. In 2023, return specialists working for the agency delivered more than 11,000 counselling sessions, reportedly leading 5,000 people to decide to return in an assisted manner. Frontex has also delivered training to national counsellors and organised joint missions to bring reintegration providers from origin countries to EU Member States, with the goal of better linking up the pre- and post-departure phases of migrants' return. Finally, the agency has developed a handbook as a resource for counsellors.

Another important actor in this policy area has been the Counselling Lab that is part of the EU-funded Return and Reintegration Facility. The lab has been working on training models and guidelines for specialised counselling for specific groups (e.g., families with children) and specific contexts (e.g., in open return centres). Another EU-funded initiative, Strengthening Capacities for Return and Reintegration Counselling through CSOs, has supported the training of EU and non-EU civil-society organisations on how to conduct return counselling, including in Albania, Kosovo, and Moldova.

Sources: European Commission, 'The EU Framework on Return Counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool' (SWD [2021] 121 final, 27 April 2021); Frontex, 'Frontex Return Specialists' (news release, 3 October 2024); Frontex, 'Return Counselling' (news release, 2 March 2023); International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 'RFF—Counselling Lab', accessed 10 December 2024; Migration Partnership Facility, *Empowering Reintegration: Strengthening Capacities for Return and Reintegration Counselling through CSOs* (Brussels: Migration Partnership Facility, 2024); author interview with Return and Reintegration Facility staff, 29 November 2024; author interviews with DTenV staff at a reception centre, 26 March 2024.

B. Travel and reintegration assistance

As part of the programme Return and Emigration Assistance from the Netherlands (REAN), the Dutch government offers support to some people departing from the Netherlands. This includes the provision of information, travel assistance, and administrative support with obtaining travel documents, all facilitated

89 See, for instance, Kox and Staring, "'If You Don't Have Documents'"; Staring and Kox, *Hulp bij terugkeer*.

by IOM and supported by DTenV.[90] The REAN support is, however, open only to migrants of certain nationalities.[91]

After arrival in their countries of origin, returnees of eligible nationalities may have access to reintegration support, under certain conditions.[92] This reintegration assistance is delivered by IOM and NGOs, through either an NGO's own capacities, with IOM help, or via the European Reintegration Support Organisations network.[93] The nature of this support depends on the profile of the returnee (and their family) and the country of origin, and it may include support for economic, social, and psychosocial reintegration. In some cases, municipalities and NGOs expand on the standard reintegration package with additional funds.

Migrants who have left the Netherlands may also receive reintegration support from Frontex's EU Reintegration Programme, which comes with its own requirements and geographical coverage.[94] The programme has standard reintegration packages for assisted returnees all over the world, as well as for people being forcibly returned.[95] In terms of budget, REAN is co-funded by the Dutch national budget and the European Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund,[96] while Frontex covers all expenses under the EU Reintegration Programme.

A few national governments of countries with large communities abroad offer reintegration support for their returning nationals as well. The Philippines is a well-known example for their support of returning overseas workers, and Armenia runs a small state-led reintegration programme for some of its returning nationals.[97]

5 Results I: Assessing the Drivers of Assisted Return Using Administrative Data

This study's quantitative analysis of DTenV case management data sought to answer the questions: What are the patterns of return from the Netherlands? And what drives migrants to participate in assisted return? It covers all recorded outflows from the agency's caseload in the 2017–23 period (see Section 3.A. for details on this dataset). This section begins with descriptive statistics on DTenV activities to frame the findings of this study, while the second subsection looks more specifically at factors connected to the uptake of assisted return. The third and final part of the section explores the link between the threat of forced return and the decision to opt for assisted return.

90 DTenV, 'Return Assistance—Programs and Projects'.
91 DTenV, 'Landenlijst Return and Emigration Assistance from the Netherlands (REAN)', accessed 9 December 2024.
92 DTenV, 'Return Assistance—Programs and Projects'.
93 European Reintegration Support Organisations, 'About the Network', accessed 17 December 2024.
94 For the requirements for assistance under the EU Reintegration Programme, see Frontex, 'Reintegration Assistance'.
95 Under the EU Reintegration Programme, migrants departing via assisted return receive a 2,000-euro 'post return package' of assistance, and those forced to return receive assistance worth 1,000 euros. More information is available at BAMF, 'EU Reintegration Programme', updated 24 July 2025.
96 IOM, 'IOM Receives AMIF Funding for AVRR-NL Project' (news release, 24 April 2023). It should be noted that part of the budget comes from official development assistance via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See van Houte, 'The Return Industry'.
97 See Jeremiah M. Opiniano and Alvin P. Ang, 'The Philippines' Landmark Labor Export and Development Policy Enters the Next Generation', *Migration Information Source*, 3 January 2024; IOM and Migration Service of the Republic of Armenia, *Guide for Reintegration of Returnees in Armenia* (Yerevan, Albania: IOM Mission in Armenia, 2020).

A. Trajectories in the DTenV case management system

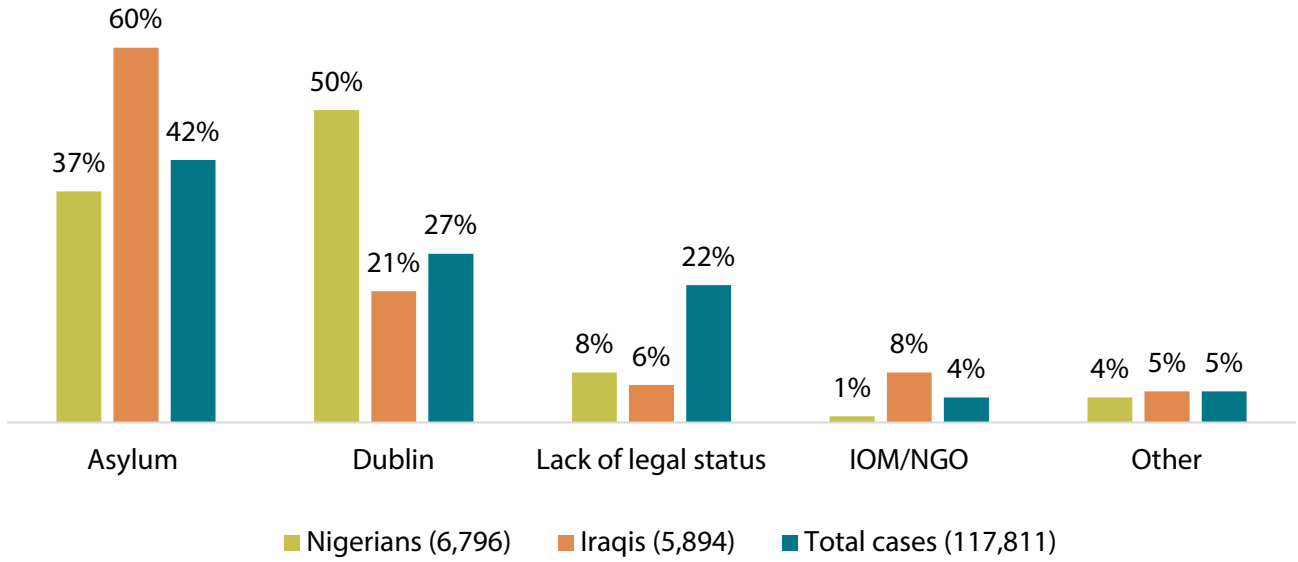
Analysis of DTenV case management data sheds light on how procedures begin and conclude, and how these processes play out. It also points to areas in which additional data are needed to support understanding of the trajectories of individuals in irregular situations in the Netherlands.

Reasons for initiating DTenV return procedures

Looking at the DTenV dataset of cases resolved in 2017–23, most originated from one of three situations: a negative asylum decision (42 per cent), a request for a Dublin transfer of an asylum seeker to the first EU country they entered (27 per cent), or the identification of a migrant without legal status, for example during a border check (22 per cent), as shown in Figure 1. Return procedures facilitated by IOM or NGOs in cooperation with DTenV, in which migrants were first in touch with IOM or an NGO and later transferred to DTenV, represented a small share of the total (4 per cent). It should be noted that this breakdown does not include returns managed by IOM alone, which are not included in the DTenV database.

FIGURE 1

Reasons for initiating DTenV return procedures among cases that ended in 2017–23



Notes: The figure shows the reason for the initiation of return procedures among all persons whose DTenV procedures were terminated between 2017 and 2023. The categories aggregate multiple reasons recorded in the DTenV database. For instance, the 'asylum' category encompasses 13 subcategories: asylum negative disposition VA; asylum negative decision AA; asylum repeat application AC; asylum permit revoked/not granted; asylum - first negative decision; asylum - from border control/art.6 (VP/Kmar); asylum - from supervision; asylum - request for mediation without fault; request for return - renunciation of asylum; request for return - withdrawal of asylum; border procedure AA; border procedure VA; and asylum - from supervision (VP/Kmar). Similarly, the 'Dublin' category consolidates the following subcategories: Dublin; negative disposition AA - Dublin; negative disposition VA - Dublin; Dublin border procedure; and Dublin - from border control/art.6 (VP/Kmar). The 'lack of legal status' category includes: illegal - in detention; illegal - under independent reporting duty; illegal - without supervision measure; illegal - from border control/art.6 (VP/Kmar); and illegal - regular. The category 'IOM/NGO' is for return procedures facilitated by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in cooperation with DTenV, in which migrants are first in touch with IOM or an NGOs and later transferred to DTenV. The 'other' category is made up of 22 smaller categories, with the two largest being 'review of return projects' (2,159 cases) and 'LVV', which is the Dutch National Immigration Facility (1,180 cases).
Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

The reasons for initiating return procedures vary by nationality, including those examined as case studies in this project. Half of Nigerian cases were initiated under the Dublin Regulation, compared to only 21 per cent of Iraqi cases. Conversely, 60 per cent of Iraqi cases stemmed from rejected asylum applications, whereas this was true of 37 per cent of Nigerian cases. Mediation through IOM and NGOs was also more common among Iraqi cases (8 per cent) than Nigerian cases (1 per cent). These patterns could be connected to several factors: For instance, the migration routes used by Iraqis and Nigerians may be different, leading to the registration of a larger share of Nigerians in other EU countries before reaching the Netherlands. Family ties can also determine whether asylum claims are heard in the Netherlands, despite first arrival in another EU country, and the extent of such ties may vary across nationality groups. Finally, cultural factors could play a role; for example, Nigerians may be more sceptical of support offered by IOM and NGOs.

Reasons for ending DTenV return procedures

While policy attention is focused on returning migrants to their countries of origin, a much larger share of cases under DTenV oversight end for other reasons, the most common being that the person absconds. Of the almost 118,000 outflows recorded in DTenV's case management system between 2017 and 2023, 50,000 (42 per cent) ended because the person absconded, meaning that authorities no longer knew where they were (see Figure 2). For the two case-study nationalities, the same was true; 44 per cent of Nigerian cases and 42 per cent of Iraqi cases ended because the person absconded. However, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of cases ending because people absconded decreased and stayed relatively lower, from 45 per cent in 2019 to 32 per cent in 2022 and 2023. Often, these persons are later identified again by authorities, in which case a new return procedure is typically started.

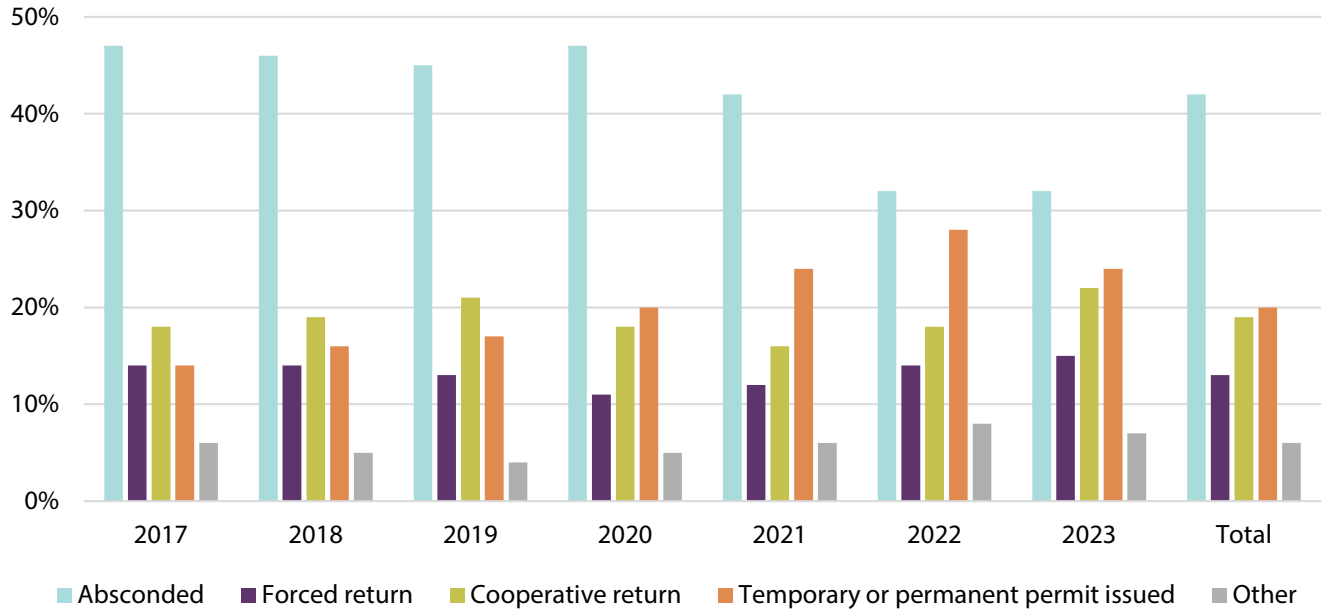
The next two most common reasons for ending cases—the grant of a permit to stay (temporarily or permanently) and cooperative return—each made up around 20 per cent of cases in 2017–23, with the latter category including cases in which the person left to another EU country via a Dublin procedure (4 per cent of total cases). Cases that ended because a temporary or permanent permit was issued increased notably as a share of cases that ended during the COVID-19 crisis: 17 per cent in 2019 to 28 per cent in 2022, followed by a small drop to 24 per cent in 2023. Of these cases, around three-quarters ended because a new asylum application was started (and applicants are allowed to stay while their case is pending), and one-quarter ended because a permanent or temporary permit was issued on humanitarian or other grounds. Notably, over the 2017–23 period, more cases ended due to the granting of temporary/permanent permits than forced removal.

BOX 6
What is cooperative return?

In this data analysis, 'cooperative return' refers to any return that is conducted without force. This includes returns assisted by IOM, NGOs, or Frontex; returns in which DTenV provides migrants with travel tickets; and returns that migrants organise and finance via their own means. Returns organised by IOM, NGOs, or Frontex are accompanied by the most comprehensive support, whereas returns organised by migrants themselves do not necessarily involve any support during travel or after the individuals arrive in their country of origin.

FIGURE 2

Reasons for ending DTenV return procedures among cases that ended in 2017–23



Notes: The 'other' category includes a range of reasons, including that DTenV ended the procedure, that the person is a citizen of the European Union, or because an extradition request was made. See Appendix Tables A–1 and A–2 for a breakdown of the data for Iraqi and Nigerian cases.
Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

The share of Nigerian and Iraqi cases that ended with the issuance of a temporary or permanent permit varied strongly across years. For example, 16 per cent of Nigerian cases ended in a grant of legal status in 2019, but 41 per cent did so in 2020. In the same years, the share of Iraqi cases ending for this reason dropped from 31 per cent in 2019 to 24 per cent in 2020 (see Appendix Tables A–1 and A–2). More research is needed to understand these changes over the years.

In contrast, over the 2017–23 period, a relatively stable share of cases ended in forced returns—either to a migrant's country of origin (7 per cent of all cases) or to an EU country via a Dublin transfer (5 per cent)—with only a small drop during the early COVID-19 years. Overall, Nigerian cases were more likely to end in forced return (9 per cent) than Iraqi cases (5 per cent). However, the share of Nigerian cases ending in forced return has slightly decreased over the years, from 15 per cent in 2017 to 8 per cent in 2023.

Overall, Iraqi cases were more likely to end in cooperative return, with 20 per cent of procedures ending this way in 2017–23. In contrast, 12 per cent of Nigerian cases ended in cooperative return during this period.

Finally, cooperative returns comprised 19 per cent of outflows from the DTenV caseload in the 2017–23 period. They saw a small drop in the early pandemic years but reached their highest level (22 per cent) in this broader period in 2023. Overall, Iraqi cases were more likely to end in cooperative return, with 20 per cent of procedures ending this way in 2017–23. In contrast, 12 per cent of Nigerian cases ended in cooperative return during this period.

Considered together, these forced and cooperative return data point to different return dynamics among Nigerian and Iraqi migrants, though more research is needed to better understand the factors behind these trends. For example, Iraqis appeared more willing to cooperate in their return, which may be due to conditions in Iraq and their understanding of and trust in the system. At the same time, counsellors and DTenV staff interviewed for the qualitative segment of this study noted strong diplomatic cooperation between Nigeria and the Netherlands on all types of returns, which may have contributed to the higher shares of Nigerian cases that ended in forced return.

Cooperative returns to the country of origin

Despite the amount of policy attention and resources devoted to assisted return, only a small portion of cases every year are resolved via IOM- or NGO-assisted return of migrants to their countries of origin. For instance, 16 per cent of DTenV return procedures that ended in 2023 did so because of cooperative returns from the Netherlands to migrants' countries of origin, and in around two-thirds of those cases, migrants returned with assistance from IOM or NGOs. This subsection takes a closer look at these cooperative returns.

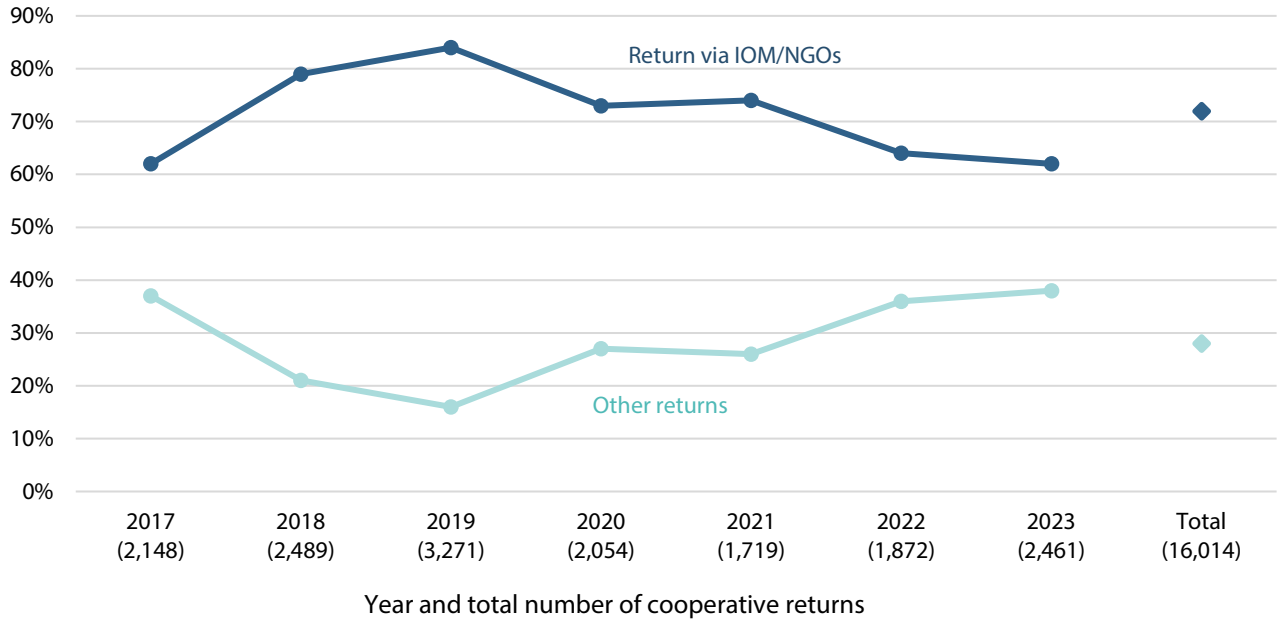
Across the entire 2017–23 period, 72 per cent of cases that ended in migrants returning cooperatively from the Netherlands to their countries of origin did so with the support of IOM or NGOs (see Figure 3).[98] The rest (28 per cent) ended in migrants leaving the Netherlands via their own means or with travel support from DTenV. The number of cooperative returns that occur via IOM/NGOs each year has fluctuated, with 2019 recording the highest number (2,732) in this period, while 2021 saw the lowest figure (1,273), likely influenced by the pandemic-era travel slowdown. These data suggest that, overall, most migrants who return cooperatively to their countries of origin are open to receiving assistance from IOM or NGOs. However, further research could dig deeper into these variations over time and shed light on differences between cooperative return with IOM versus NGO assistance.

Despite the amount of policy attention and resources devoted to assisted return, only a small portion of cases every year are resolved via IOM- or NGO-assisted return of migrants to their countries of origin.

98 A small number of individuals (43) benefitted from IOM/NGO-assisted return twice during this period.

FIGURE 3

Type of cooperative return among DTenV cases that ended in 2017–23



Notes: The category 'other returns' comprises three scenarios: returns in which DTenV provided travel tickets but migrants returned by themselves and without further assistance, returns that were completely self-organised and financed by migrants, and—due to erroneous data entry within the DTenV database—a small number of migrants who benefitted from IOM or NGO support but were incorrectly marked as 'other returns'. This information was shared by DTenV staff with the authors, and it is unfortunately not possible to provide a further disaggregation of this category based on the dataset used in this study. See Appendix Tables A–3 and A–4 for a breakdown of the data for Iraqi and Nigerian returnees.
Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

Yet again, these patterns vary significantly between nationality groups. Looking at the two country case studies, 50 per cent of cooperative returns to Nigeria in the 2017–23 period occurred with the assistance of IOM/NGOs, versus 96 per cent of cooperative returns to Iraq (see Appendix Tables A–3 and A–4). Over this period, a total of 223 IOM/NGO-assisted cooperative returns to Nigeria took place, ranging from only 13 in 2018 to 49 in both 2019 and 2022. In contrast, 736 IOM/NGO-assisted returns to Iraq took place in this period, ranging from 287 in 2017 to 55 in 2022.

These figures indicate considerable variation, both from year to year and between migrant groups. Nigerians were in most years much less likely than Iraqis to return with reintegration assistance. This finding is consistent with the results of the qualitative analysis, showing that Iraqi migrants were more open to receiving institutional support than Nigerians. However, further research is needed to delve into the role of individuals' profiles and motivations, as well as obstacles to the uptake of this support.

B. The impact of lengthy procedures and the number of counselling sessions on the uptake of assisted return

When migrants opt to return cooperatively and with assistance, what factors lead them to this decision? This subsection considers this question, focusing on the impact of lengthy procedures[99] as well as the number of counselling sessions.[100] Using a logistic regression model with odds ratios, the analysis compares the cases of migrants who returned to their countries of origin with IOM/NGO support versus those of migrants who either absconded or were deported—both typically considered undesired outcomes from a policy perspective. Return procedures that ended because the migrant obtained a temporary or permanent legal status, returned forcibly or cooperatively to another EU country, or ended for some other reason are excluded from the analysis. This leaves a total of 77,184 observations in the dataset. The regression uses the personal characteristics of the individuals involved in the cases (such as gender, age at case outflow, and citizenship) as covariates, and controls for year-specific effects to account for variation in return cooperation across countries and years (Model A). The research team also ran the same regression including the date of first contact with DTenV (Model B), thus accounting not just for the number of procedures (which may vary in length) but also for the overall time the person has been facing a potential return.

When migrants opt to return cooperatively and with assistance, what factors lead them to this decision?

How return processes play out varies strongly across nationalities and individuals, due to personal assessment of each case, different options for legal recourse, whether forced return to a particular country is possible, and whether an individual has identity documents or those need to be obtained. In the dataset used for the regression analysis, the most common nationalities were Moroccan (10 per cent), Algerian (9 per cent), Albanian (6 per cent), Nigerian (5 per cent), and Iraqi (5 per cent). Overall, 81 per cent of the cases involved men and 19 per cent women. The female share of Nigerian cases was slightly higher than this average, at 22 per cent. Migrants' first contact with DTenV occurred in the years between 2007 and 2023, the last year for which data are available. As a result, the maximum duration of time over which a return procedure had been open was 16 years; however, on average, procedures lasted 0.8 years, meaning most were opened and resolved within the same 12-month span.[101] The data also highlight the recurring nature of case management procedures, with migrants entering and exiting the DTenV caseload on average 1.4 times, ranging from 1 to 15 procedures. Nigerians were close to the average in terms of their total number of return procedures with DTenV (averaging 1.9 procedures), whereas Iraqis tended to have more return procedures (2.7). Finally, the data offer some insights into the number of counselling sessions migrants had with DTenV (but not other actors, such as IOM or NGOs). On average, persons in this dataset received 1.4 DTenV counselling sessions, but the top 5 per cent received more than 5 sessions.

99 In this context, a 'procedure' refers to the opening of a case file with DTenV. A procedure is closed once the migrant is confirmed to have left the Netherlands, for example through assisted return facilitated by IOM or NGOs. However, procedures may remain open for a time if the migrant leaves without formal notification, such as by crossing into Germany or Belgium, as these departures are not always known to the authorities.

100 A counselling 'session' refers to one meeting with a DTenV return counsellor.

101 In 80 cases, the start or end dates were erroneously entered in the DTenV database, resulting in negative numbers when calculating the duration of return procedures. These cases have been excluded from the analysis.

The analysis shows a strong, statistically significant relationship between the number of records a migrant has with DTenV (indicating repeated case management procedures) and a reduced likelihood of taking up assisted return (see Table 1). For example, 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. When testing for the duration since the first return procedure, the coefficient is also negative and significant, though somewhat smaller. These negative effects align with prior research suggesting that prolonged stay in a host country may decrease migrants' willingness or ability to engage in assisted return.[102] The findings also point to a possible behavioural effect—as migrants remain in the Netherlands longer and invest in building a life in the country, this may reduce their psychological openness to considering return to their origin country.

TABLE 1

Regression output showing the impact of DTenV counselling sessions, return procedure length, and number of procedures on migrants' likelihood to leave the Netherlands via an assisted return programme (in odds ratios), 2017–23

Variable	Model A	Model B
Female	1.537* (17.17)	2.048* (9.94)
Age at outflow	1.017* (20.31)	1.022* (7.89)
Year of outflow	1.090* (15.16)	1.077* (4.26)
Iraqi nationality	3.229* (12.80)	1.427 (1.35)
Nigerian nationality	0.575* (-5.03)	0.769 (-0.84)
Number of DTenV counselling sessions	0.811* (-24.59)	0.952* (-4.63)
Number of DTenV procedures	0.623* (-36.14)	
Days since first DTenV procedure		1.000* (-9.25)
N (cases)	77,088	8,999

* indicates a level of statistical significance at p<0.01.
Notes: The number of observations vary across models because data on the time since the first DTenV procedure is only available for a much smaller sub-sample (Model B). In addition, only two nationality coefficients (Iraqi and Nigerian) are presented in this table, but the model controlled for the largest ten nationalities in the DTenV dataset.
Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

In addition, the results show a small but statistically significant negative relationship between the number of DTenV counselling sessions and the likelihood of choosing assisted return in both Models A and B, indicating that migrants who receive more counselling are less accepting of assisted return to their country of origin. However, it is possible that the relationship is negative because migrants who are already more open to assisted return receive fewer counselling sessions while those who are less willing receive more sessions. For instance, of all types of case outflows, those that ended in a migrant's forced return had on average the highest number of DTenV counselling sessions. In addition, the volume of DTenV counselling is automatically higher for migrants in detention since DTenV counsellors must reach out at least once a month for a conversation (as discussed in Section 4.A.), and this pace means more counselling sessions are likely to happen before a case ends, whether through assisted return or otherwise. Finally, this finding does not account for IOM or NGO counselling sessions, which are not recorded by DTenV. This is an important limitation of this analysis, since IOM and NGOs can be very involved with some cases and can play an essential role in their outcomes.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these findings and their limitations: First, the effectiveness of counselling cannot be measured exclusively in how quickly it leads to a return, since the potential of counselling depends on migrants' openness to consider returning. The most complex cases also require the

102 Peitz, *Wege aus der Ausreisepflicht*.

most support and counselling, a pattern consistent with both prior research and insights from counsellors themselves.[103] Second, the findings provide further weight to previous research indicating that return counselling can be particularly effective for migrants already seeking to change their situation,[104] but that it may be less immediately effective with migrants who have resisted compliance with return orders for extended periods, possibly because they have stronger reasons not to go back.

The regression analysis further shows significant variation across nationalities. For instance, migrants from Albania and Moldova demonstrated a significantly higher likelihood of accepting assisted return, while those from Morocco and Algeria were notably less likely (not shown in Table 1). Migrants from Iraq also showed a higher likelihood of assisted return, whereas migrants from Nigeria were comparatively less likely to return via assisted programmes.

The findings provide further weight to previous research indicating that return counselling can be particularly effective for migrants already seeking to change their situation, but that it may be less immediately effective with migrants who have resisted compliance with return orders for extended periods.

These findings are likely connected to several factors, even if they are unaccounted for in this analysis. First, a migrant's future prospects for re-entry into a country may affect their uptake of assisted return. For instance, research on Albanian migrants shows that many try to avoid deportation since it typically comes with a five-year ban on entry into the European Union. And because it is common for Albanians to work temporarily in neighbouring countries, those with a return order may wish to keep this option open.[105] This also aligns with anecdotal evidence shared by practitioners, noting that the lack of prospects for future migration can complicate engagement with migrants on assisted return.[106] Individuals may be more willing to accept an undesirable outcome such as return if they believe they can later adjust or reverse that outcome. Thus, migrants from countries whose nationals are allowed to travel to the European Union visa free, such as Albania and Moldova, may find it easier to accept return, since they could decide to try again another time.[107] Similarly, geographic proximity to the Netherlands, the porosity of borders, and lower travel costs between countries are likely to shape decision-making, as such factors can render migration more feasible in the future. Taken together, these findings indicate that migrants from countries with more favourable and accessible migration options may be more likely to choose assisted return.

103 See, for instance, Zanzuchi and Steiner, *No One-Size-Fits-All*. These trends also emerged as a point of discussion in a series of closed-door roundtables organised by MPI Europe between 2024 and 2025 with counsellors and other practitioners, as part of the Reaching Undocumented Migrants project. For information on the project, see Return and Reintegration Facility, 'Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM)', accessed 1 March 2025.

104 Leerkes, van Os, and Boersema, 'What Drives "Soft Deportation"?'.

105 Talitha Dubow, Sze Eng Tan, and Katie Kuschminder, *EU Exit Regimes in Practice: Sustainable Return and Reintegration in Albania* (N.p.: Advancing Alternative Migration Governance, 2021).

106 Participant comments during workshops organised by MPI Europe for the project 'Study on the Gaps and Needs of EU Law in the Area of Return'.

107 In 2019, a request by the Dutch government to suspend visa-free travel for Albanians was reviewed by the European Commission but no changes were made. See Georgi Gotev, 'Commission: Suspending Visa-Free Travel for Albanians Should Not Be Decided Lightly', Euractiv, 4 June 2019; Alban Dafa and Wouter Zweers, 'Together or Alone? The Need for Increased Albanian-Dutch Cooperation to Fight Transnational Organised Crime' (policy brief, Clingendael, August 2020).

The possibility of being deported may also play a role in shaping migrants' uptake of assisted return. In fact, it is broadly assumed within DTenV and among EU policymakers that acceptance of assisted return increases when there is a credible threat of deportation. However, the regression analysis shows that, on average, assisted return uptake is higher among Iraqis compared to Nigerians, despite the fact that Nigerians face a credible threat of deportation while most Iraqis do not. This does not mean that, in some individual cases, the threat of deportation cannot increase a migrant's willingness to accept assisted return, as was the case for one of this study's Nigerian interviewees (see Section 6). However, it highlights the need for a more systematic understanding of the relationship between deportation pressure and return decision-making.

C. The relationship between a threat of deportation and the uptake of assisted return

Taking a short detour from the study's main focus on counselling and reintegration assistance, this subsection tests the relationship between the possibility of deportation and the uptake of assisted return. Understanding this dynamic better is critical, as it forms a key underpinning of DTenV policy and operational logic.

To explore this issue, the research team focused on the 20 largest nationality groups in the DTenV case management system between 2017 and 2023,[108] and sorted the countries of origin by their governments' level of cooperation on forced return into three categories: (1) there is broad cooperation on forced returns, and such returns are frequently possible; (2) cooperation on forced returns is challenging but possible in some circumstances or for certain groups; and (3) cooperation on forced returns is very difficult and hardly ever possible. This categorisation was based on a combination of information publicly available on the DTenV website[109] and on insights shared with the researchers by the agency's country experts. The assumption behind this categorisation is that migrants who face a threat of deportation will be more inclined to choose assisted return, as this may be considered more dignified and is accompanied by some financial and/or in-kind support, while migrants from less-cooperative countries will have lower uptake of assisted return because deportation is a less realistic threat. Finally, the threat of deportation could also have an impact on overall return numbers, as some migrants may opt for independent but unassisted return to avoid deportation.

When the research team added the indicator of bilateral cooperation to the logistic regression to create Model C, this produced results both statistically significant and mostly in line with the hypotheses. Compared to migrants from countries that did not cooperate on forced returns (category 3), those from the most cooperative countries (category 1) were more likely to choose assisted return. The model 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. This aligns with the hypothesis that the threat of deportation increases the uptake of assisted return. However, migrants from countries with

108 This is the top 20 nationalities for all entries in the DTenV case management system for all types of case outflows. From largest to smallest, these nationalities are: Morocco, Iraq, Armenia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Turkey, Nigeria, Suriname, Iran, Algeria, Sierra Leone, China, Guinea, Eritrea, Ghana, Egypt, Libya, Russia, Georgia, and Syria.

109 DTenV, 'Alle landen'.

selective cooperation on forced returns (category 2) were *less likely* than those from the least cooperative countries (category 3) to choose assisted return in this model. This nuances the original hypothesis and suggests that the threat of deportation must be credible for it to have an impact on the uptake of assisted returns.

Comparing return trends across countries (rather than at the individual level, as before) yielded a similar result. The total share of cases that ended in migrants returning to their countries of origin—either cooperatively or by force—was higher for origin countries that cooperate fully on forced returns. On average, 31 per cent of DTenV procedures in 2017–23 ended in some type of return among migrants from the most cooperative countries (category 1), compared to 22 per cent among migrants from countries with no cooperation on forced returns (category 3). However, analysis of variance shows that this difference is not statistically significant; there are several countries where cooperation is low but the ratio of returns to other case outcomes (absconding or issuance of a temporary/permanent permit) is still relatively high, and inversely, cooperative countries with low return rates. For instance, despite broad cooperation on forced returns, overall return rates are relatively low among Armenians (24 per cent of cases ended in return) and Nigerians (22 per cent). Conversely, migrants from China—a country that has essentially no cooperation with the Netherlands on forced return—have a relatively high return rate of 44 per cent, despite the lack of a credible threat of forced return. Such findings reflect the fact that return rates are not a function of forced returns alone (or the threat thereof via bilaterial cooperation); they also depend on migrants' chances of obtaining a legal status or absconding. Furthermore, even when their origin countries cooperate on returns, migrants with removal orders must still be located within the Netherlands and prepared for return—logistical steps that go beyond bilateral cooperation.

TABLE 2

Regression output showing the impact of the degree of bilateral cooperation related to forced return on migrants' likelihood to leave the Netherlands via an assisted return programme (in odds ratios), 2017–23

Variable	Model C
Female	1.391* (7.54)
Age at outflow	1.027* (19.06)
Year of outflow	1.040* (8.98)
Iraqi nationality	6.648* (14.03)
Nigerian nationality	0.496* (-5.60)
Number of DTenV counselling sessions	0.913* (-4.56)
Number of DTenV procedures	0.705* (-20.74)
Little bilateral cooperation with origin country	0.494* (-7.34)
Broad bilateral cooperation with origin country	1.305* (4.52)
N (cases)	43,669

* indicates a level of statistical significance at p<0.01.
Notes: The number of observations varies across the models in Tables 1 and 2. For the model in this table (Model C), data on the level of bilateral cooperation was only collected for the top 20 nationalities of migrants in the DTenV caseload in 2017–23; all other nationalities are thus excluded from this table. In addition, only two nationality coefficients (Iraq and Nigeria) are presented in this table, but the model controlled for the largest ten nationalities in the DTenV dataset.
Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

These findings highlight some of the ways in which the relationship between the possibility of forced return and the uptake of assisted return is more complex than is often assumed.[110] There is some indication that, at the individual level, the possibility of deportation increases one's likelihood to accept assisted return. However, migrants do not appear to react uniformly to the threat of deportation, as evidenced by differences across nationality groups such as Iraqis and Nigerians that do not correspond to their countries' level of cooperation with the Netherlands.

These findings highlight some of the ways in which the relationship between the possibility of forced return and the uptake of assisted return is more complex than is often assumed.

This variability likely arises from a combination of factors. First, it seems likely that those most desperate to avoid difficult situations in their countries of origin are less likely to choose assisted return, even when facing a threat of possible deportation.[111] Whether migrants would be returning to communities that stigmatise deportation (e.g., by assuming deported migrants are criminals) or that attribute failure to those who accept assisted return, and migrants' assessment of these community dynamics, may also play a role.[112] And as noted above, migrants' perceptions of their future migration options may contribute to differences in the uptake of assisted return.[113] Finally, the diaspora community in the Netherlands can also have an impact, with more affluent communities potentially able to financially support irregularly staying members while well-informed communities may share information about assisted return options.[114]

D. Takeaways from the analysis of DTenV case data

This analysis of DTenV administrative data contributes three key findings to the existing evidence base on factors that contribute to the uptake of assisted return. First, the analysis finds that a prolonged stay in the Netherlands reduces the likelihood of choosing assisted return. This is consistent with findings from a previous study conducted among migrants facing a leaving order in Germany.[115] This reluctance may be linked to psychological factors; the longer individuals remain in a country, the more they invest in building a life there, making return seem less viable (discussed in Section 5.B). This also aligns with qualitative findings

110 These results are of course limited by the way countries were grouped into three levels of cooperation, which cannot reflect all the specific details and differences in bilateral relations. The assessment of bilateral cooperation used for this categorisation was also based on the current state of cooperation, meaning this did not capture potential variations over the 2017–23 period. Nevertheless, these results remain meaningful from a policy and operational perspective, in that they provide a broad indication of trends within the majority of the recent DTenV caseload, given the analysis of the 20 most common nationalities in the agency's case management system.

111 For example, a DTenV counsellor interviewed for this study described a Nigerian man who was placed in administrative detention and faced immediate deportation, yet refused assisted return. The counsellor explained: 'To a Nigerian, you can't say "It'll be difficult to live homeless in the Netherlands." It's harder in Nigeria, even if you're legal… It's also cultural. In countries where families are expecting less, it's easier. But in Nigeria, the entire village has raised money for someone to go to Europe.' Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 9 January 2025.

112 Brouwer, *Family Matters*.

113 Participant comments during workshops organised by MPI Europe for the project 'Study on the Gaps and Needs of EU Law in the Area of Return'.

114 Apostolos Andrikopoulos, 'Argonauts of West Africa: Migration, Citizenship and Kinship Dynamics in a Changing Europe' (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2017); Liam Coakley, *Strengthening Information and Outreach for Assisted Voluntary Return In Ireland* (Dublin: IOM, 2015); IOM, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2010* (Geneva: IOM, 2010).

115 Peitz, *Wege aus der Ausreisepflicht*.

that will be discussed in the next section (Section 6.A), whereby individuals experiencing extended periods without legal status may encounter additional challenges (such as trauma, homelessness, and substance abuse) that make considering assisted return more difficult.

Second, the analysis does not find a positive relationship between the number of DTenV counselling sessions and the uptake of assisted return. However, this finding should be interpreted carefully—it does not necessarily indicate that counselling is ineffective, but may instead reflect differences in the profiles of migrants receiving more and less counselling. Some migrants may receive minimal counselling because they are already open to the idea of assisted return, while those who are more desperate to avoid challenging situations in their countries of origin (and thus less willing to return) might remain in the Netherlands longer and therefore receive more counselling sessions. In addition, this analysis does not take into account counselling sessions delivered by IOM and NGOs, which the study's qualitative findings (to be discussed in Section 6.A) indicate can be most likely to lead to a return decision, especially among migrants who have lived without a legal status for some time. These findings thus show that the effectiveness of counselling cannot be measured simply by comparing the number of counselling sessions with migrants' decisions regarding return.

These findings thus show that the effectiveness of counselling cannot be measured simply by comparing the number of counselling sessions with migrants' decisions regarding return.

Third, the data analysis finds no systematic relationship between a threat of deportation (as estimated by countries' level of cooperation with the Netherlands on forced returns) and the uptake of assisted return. While the possibility of being deported may prompt some individuals to choose assisted return, this effect does not apply to all migrants; in some cases, the nationals of countries with low levels of cooperation exhibited relatively high levels of acceptance of assisted return, while the nationals of some cooperative countries were relatively less likely to accept assisted return. This is an important departure from assumptions held within DTenV and other authorities across Europe, and brings nuance to the understanding of the role deportations can play in efforts to increase return rates via offers of return assistance.

Finally, the analysis raises several questions that merit additional research. For instance, the analysis draws attention to the variety of return pathways. While policy discussions and research often focus on return with assistance from IOM and NGOs, the data show that a smaller but non-negligeable group of migrants return cooperatively but without assistance. This includes migrants returning with tickets provided by DTenV and migrants organising and financing their own return. More research could helpfully shed light on the profiles of migrants engaged in this type of return (e.g., their sociodemographic and other characteristics, whether they have had access to counselling, and whether they are aware of the assistance available) and the impacts of these returns (e.g., in terms of the migrants' reintegration outcomes and vulnerabilities). Finally, the analysis draws attention to the need for more group-specific research. While the comparison of Iraqi and Nigerian cases illuminates some points of similarity and difference between these groups, additional research is needed to better understand the effects of counselling and reintegration on the return decision-making processes of other nationalities as well as specific profiles of migrants, including different demographic groups as well as individuals who have had different migratory trajectories.

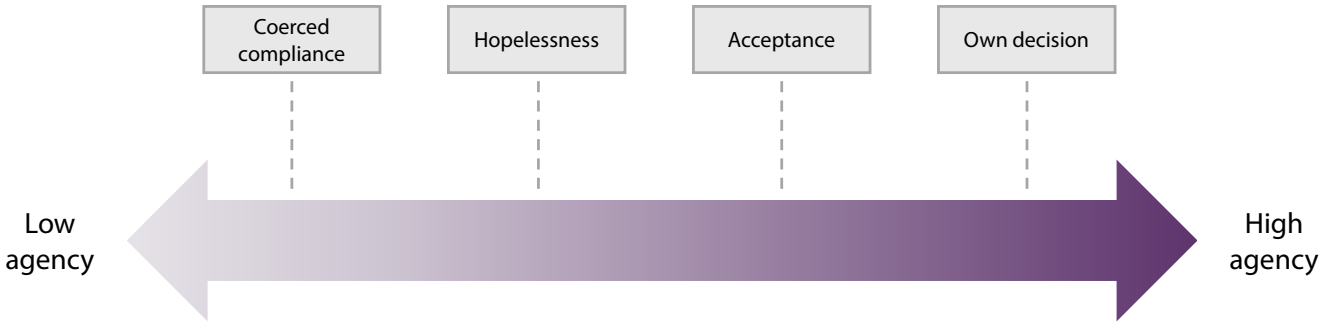
6 Results II: Exploring the Role of Counselling and Reintegration Assistance in Migrants' Decision-Making

The data presented above show that assisted return to migrants' countries of origin accounts for a relatively small share of how all DTenV cases end. This section focuses on decision-making within this subset of cases, and more precisely on the personal experiences of migrants who have returned to Nigeria and Iraq. It looks to understand what role counselling and reintegration assistance play in migrants' decision-making processes.

The 16 interviews with Iraqi and Nigerian returnees illuminated patterns of return decision-making shaped by personal circumstances, the duration of stay in the Netherlands, and other contextual factors. To analyse these experiences, the researchers developed a spectrum of agency, shown in Figure 4, based on a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts for key motivations and circumstances. In this context, 'agency' refers to the extent to which individuals are able to make return decisions independently of direct state interventions, such as counselling, detention, and the threat of deportation. The concept draws on the broader migration literature that understands return not simply as an act of compliance or resistance, but as a decision constrained and continually re-shaped by individual preferences, structural pressures, and the available choices (see Section 2).

FIGURE 4

Migrant return decision-making on a spectrum of low to high agency



Source: Authors' elaboration.

At the one end of the spectrum, 'high agency' means that migrants who take up assisted return decide to go back to their country of origin by their own volition (though in the context of this study, of course, migrants' decisions are constrained, given they face a leaving order). At the other end, 'low agency' decisions are those based on coerced compliance. In between these two points are decisions made based on varying degrees of acceptance and feelings of hopelessness, each influenced by different combinations of personal and structural factors. These levels of agency emerged in the interviews as follows:

- **Own decision**: Some migrants choose to return for personal reasons, independent of their legal status, the influence of counselling, or the availability of reintegration assistance. In these cases, factors such as health issues, family responsibilities, or a desire to reconnect with their home drive return decisions.

For instance, one Nigerian returnee explained that he opted for assisted return after a stroke left him seriously ill and unable to work in the Netherlands. 'I thought that I would die, so I wanted to come back', he shared.[116] He also recalled a strong wish to be surrounded by his family. Such decisions reflect a comparatively high level of agency, and a low level of state influence.

- **Acceptance**: In this group, migrants come to terms with their situation after receiving a negative decision on their asylum application (or another application for legal stay). They decide to leave the Netherlands, recognising it as a preferable option to irregular stay, forced removal, or where applicable, transfer to another EU country via the Dublin Regulation. For example, two Yezidi men living in reception centres chose to return to Iraq rather than face a transfer to Austria under the Dublin Regulation. For both, their lack of family and community ties in Austria were an important factor. One noted, 'The family reunification procedure in Austria is not good, it takes a long time… Very few Yezidis have applied for asylum in Austria, so I didn't want to go there.'[117] The other man shared, 'I heard that the Netherlands was sympathetic to the Yezidi faith and our persecution… There is a large community of Yezidis in the Netherlands and their feedback was good. I was also in contact with people from my village that now live in the Netherlands… The treatment in the Netherlands was good, not racist.'[118] In contrast, he reported negative experiences in Austria, saying he had been treated 'like an animal'. Eventually, the latter man heard of an incident in Iraq where Yezidis were incorrectly accused on burning down a mosque, which put the community at further risk of persecution and violence, including his wife and children who were still there.[119] The elevated risks his family faced, combined with the pending Dublin transfer, ultimately led him to return to Iraq. In these two cases, counselling and the offer of reintegration assistance played a minor role in return decision-making, helping to clarify the men's legal status and providing some reassurance of support after their arrival in Iraq.

- **Hopelessness**: For migrants in this group, the decision to return is driven by exhaustion and despair after a prolonged period of living without legal status, repeatedly applying for asylum or another legal status, and/or moving between European countries. These individuals often feel trapped in a cycle of uncertainty, which can take a severe toll on their mental health. Over time, this sense of hopelessness leads them to see return as the only viable option, even if it is not their preferred choice. For instance, one Iraqi migrant who had arrived in Europe as an unaccompanied minor spent four years living without legal status in the Netherlands and Luxembourg. After this prolonged precarity, he became so emotionally drained that he decided to return. 'During these years, it was really difficult… I was getting very tired of this life', he shared. 'I broke up with my girlfriend and I left my work due to troubles there… The reasons added up… This time I was feeling really desperate.'[120] Information he received from IOM about assisted return during multiple counselling sessions helped him navigate the process of acting on his decision, even though the counselling was not the primary motivation for his return.

116 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 21 October 2024.
117 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 7 October 2024.
118 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 7 October 2024.
119 The incident was reported in the media. See, for instance, Kurdistan24, 'Iraqi Sunni Endowment Confirms No Mosques Were Attacked in Sinjar', updated 30 April 2023.
120 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 26 November 2024.

- **Coerced compliance**: Some migrants decide to return only after experiencing significant pressure from the authorities, such as detention and threats of deportation. This decision is not necessarily a reflection of acceptance but rather a response to fear, limited alternatives, and coercion. For example, a Nigerian returnee described how he ultimately opted for assisted return after being detained and facing the likelihood of deportation, feeling he had no other choice: 'They [the DTenV] called me on the phone. They told me they are making sure to deport me back to Nigeria. I didn't have any options; they made their decision. The only way I could avoid it to happen is if I killed myself… I contacted IOM.'[121] In such cases, return counselling tends to be clear about the prospect of deportation and, once people agree to assisted return, the focus shifts to organising the next steps.

These categories are not fixed. There are some areas of overlap, and an individual's degree of agency often changes over time. For example, many of the interviewed migrants described moving towards hopelessness and coerced compliance over time.[122] In addition, not all migrants eventually accept return via assisted programmes and, therefore, fall outside of this spectrum. Insights shared across interviews suggest one's position on this spectrum influences the extent to which counselling and reintegration assistance can have an impact on decision-making, as well as which actors are best equipped to provide counselling, which methods are most effective in fostering a genuine conversation about return, and how migrants perceive reintegration assistance, as the next two subsections will explore in more detail.

A. The role of counselling in return decision-making

In seeking to understand what constitutes effective counselling—that is, counselling that supports an informed return decision-making process—it is useful to consider four key features: timing, location, lead actors, and methods used during sessions. This subsection looks at each of these in turn.

Timing of counselling

The counsellor and returnee interviews conducted for this study suggest that timing can have a major influence on whether and how counselling affects return decision-making—specifically, at which point in the migration trajectory (and associated level of uncertainty about legal status) the counselling occurs. Most of the interviewed returnees received counselling at multiple stages of their migration and return trajectory. For instance, the Dutch Refugee Council accompanies asylum seekers throughout their entire application process. In parallel, DTenV automatically reaches out to people if their application is rejected. Each of the below stages carries distinct implications for how migrants perceive their options and the role of counselling in guiding their decisions:

- **Counselling after arrival in the Netherlands**: The counsellors interviewed indicated that people are typically unwilling to discuss return in the early stages of the migration process (e.g., right after applying for asylum), as their primary focus is on obtaining legal status and settling in the Netherlands.[123] Generally showing a high level of agency at this stage, migrants are actively pursuing

121 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 30 October 2024.
122 Author interviews with Nigerian and Iraqi returnees, 5 November 2024, 30 October 2024, and 7 October 2024.
123 DTenV staff noted the importance of not over-investing in this phase, as it is unlikely that people will opt for assisted return at this stage. Author interviews with DTenV staff, 25–26 March 2024.

legal stay and building a life in the country rather than contemplating return, which is seen as premature or even threatening. In this phase, counselling interventions are unlikely to lead to decisions to return, as this contradicts migrants' goals and perceived options.

Despite this, counsellors in the Netherlands and other European countries emphasised the importance of introducing the concept of assisted return early and consistently throughout the legal proceedings, even if it is unlikely that migrants will opt for return early on.[124] Brief mentions at this stage can lay the groundwork for future discussions, they reasoned, making it easier to revisit the topic later—even years later—if migrants' circumstances or perspectives shift. For example, the Iraqi migrant who chose to return after spending four years living irregularly in the Netherlands and Luxembourg described having contact with IOM prior to his eventual return: 'I had applied previously with IOM to return two times, but then didn't follow up. I wasn't decided.'[125] Still, he knew about the option of assisted return and knew whom to contact for help when he eventually made that decision.

- **Counselling after a leaving order**: This can be a critical juncture for migrants' decision-making about return, as the order may prompt individuals to reckon with the fact that their initial plan of establishing legal residence in the host country is no longer viable.[126] At this stage, their outlook, sense of agency, and the state's enforcement measures shift abruptly. Uncertainty rises sharply for the migrant, who often has no clear plan for what to do in this scenario, while state-led pressures to depart increase. Moving along the spectrum of agency, many shift from an initial position of high agency and determination to stay towards hesitation and uncertainty. This transition can be shaped not only by legal outcomes but also by fatigue, lack of alternatives, and family reactions, for instance.

  Counselling at this stage typically involves extensive explanations of the legal situation and clarification of available options.[127] In the Netherlands, the Dutch Refugee Council provides individualised advice throughout the asylum procedure and a lawyer is made available to applicants who cannot afford one, for instance to discuss the possibility of appealing a negative decision. One Iraqi woman recalled, 'It was really upsetting for me to get a negative decision. I appealed but it also came back negative. I had a state-provided female lawyer that represented me. At that point, my lawyer discussed the status of my application with my son, but it was out of my hands. The people responsible at the camp [the reception centre] told me that I was out of any solutions: either you return, or you will be detained.'[128] The example clearly shows the confluence of increasing state pressure and coercion, combined with a personal reorientation as the woman's lawyer and her son discussed the situation. Counselling at this point can be pivotal, especially when it takes into account family and other pressures. In the example, the woman trusted her lawyer to speak with her son

124 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 25–26 March 2024; author interview with a representative of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, 24 October 2024; author interview with representatives of the Outreach Unit of the Danish Return Agency, 25 October 2024.

125 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 26 November 2024.

126 Similarly, in Denmark, the Danish Refugee Council relies on counselling to clarify both migrants' legal status and their future options following a leaving order. See Danish Refugee Council, 'The Methodology Employed by DRC'.

127 Author observations of counselling sessions, 26–27 March 2024. The research team observed two sessions in which return counsellors explained to two people the process, why they had exhausted the asylum procedure in the Netherlands, and what the next steps would be. The individuals were reluctant to believe this was the final outcome, and the counsellors helped to clarify the process.

128 Author interview with a female Iraqi returnee, 27 November 2024.

and reach the best decision for her. As a result, the return decision was accompanied by a sense of moderate control, in which she shared responsibility for her decision with her family.

- **Counselling after prolonged periods of living without legal status**: Counselling for individuals in this situation typically takes place outside of reception centres and is conducted by IOM and NGOs rather than DTenV. Prolonged periods in legal limbo or without legal status can exacerbate uncertainty and trauma.[129] This study's analysis of DTenV case management data (see Section 5) as well as previous research find that migrants are less likely to opt for assisted return the longer they are in a country, suggesting many feel disconnected from their country of origin and do not see a future for themselves there.[130] A multitude of personal circumstances can shape, and often limit, decision-making at this point, such as homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health challenges.[131] In addition, some of the migrants interviewed had experienced immigration enforcement actions, such as police controls or periods in detention, and they knew the realities of living without a legal status. NGOs working with migrants in long-term irregular situations stress the importance of first addressing basic needs (such as health or living conditions) before migrants are able to have a constructive discussion about return.[132] For instance, one Nigerian migrant described overstaying his student visa, after which he spent nearly two years without a permanent home. He explained, 'In the winter of 2023, I pitched my tent in Amsterdam, but someone came to take it away. It was cold, I went to the Red Cross for help. I was then referred to the Dutch Refugee Council.'[133] The NGO was able to arrange a place in a shelter for him. Then, after several meetings with his counsellor and logistical support from IOM, he decided to return to Lagos.

Across these stages, timing clearly matters since it can shape migrants' willingness to discuss assisted return, at least in the experiences of the returnees and counsellors interviewed for this study. Importantly, migrants' openness to engaging with this subject is not only influenced by their time in the Netherlands but also by their broader migration trajectory and earlier experiences. For example, one Iraqi returnee who had previously spent time in Italy explained that by the time he arrived in the Netherlands, he doubted whether obtaining legal status would be possible.[134] This case illustrates how expectations evolve over time: while initial hopes may be high upon leaving the country of origin, prolonged transit or time spent in other countries can lead to a more tempered, realistic assessment of one's chances to stay. As a result, the optimal timing for counselling may be different for those who arrive in the Netherlands after a relatively short journey compared to those who do so after years of uncertainty and movement across borders. For instance, some individuals whose past experiences have demonstrated that living in irregularity is a viable, if undesirable, path may be more inclined to prolong their stay, whereas those who remain attached to their original aspirations and reject irregular stay as an option may be open to engaging with return counselling soon after it becomes clear their initial plans may fall through.

129 Participant comments during the roundtable 'Unpacking the Role and Potential of Family Links in Undocumented Migrants' (Im)mobility Decisions', organised by MPI Europe, 10 December 2024.
130 See Peitz, *Wege aus der Ausreisepflicht*.
131 Participant comments during the roundtable 'Challenges and Lessons in Reaching out to Undocumented Migrants with Diverse Mental Health Issues and/or Substance Use Disorders', organised by MPI Europe, 3 October 2024.
132 Danish Refugee Council, 'The Methodology Employed by DRC'.
133 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 5 November 2024.
134 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 26 November 2024.

More research is needed to explore the utility of different counselling approaches at different stages of the process. This could support a more efficient use of resources—for instance, beginning with simple information-sharing while legal procedures are ongoing, focusing engagement efforts on critical moments such as when negative asylum decisions are issued, and broadening counselling strategies for those with long histories of irregular stay. Some of these practices already exist in the Netherlands, such as the case resolution counselling offered by NGOs in certain municipalities, but a more systematic and targeted application of these approaches could be beneficial. In addition, incorporating a clearer assessment of a migrant's migration trajectory and position on the agency spectrum into counselling could support more strategic prioritisation—focusing efforts, for example, on those most open to return, those with specific vulnerabilities, or those at risk of absconding.

More research is needed to explore the utility of different counselling approaches at different stages of the process.

Location of counselling

Another important factor to consider is the location and conditions under which counselling takes place. In the Netherlands, counselling occurs in a variety of settings, including reception centres, detention facilities, and outside of government facilities. These contextual differences can influence how migrants engage with counselling and perceive their options for return:

- **Counselling in reception centres**: This is conducted by DTenV and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. These agencies can refer migrants to IOM or NGOs for further support, and IOM can also offer counselling in reception centres independent of referrals. For migrants, counselling in reception centres is often emotionally charged. These spaces are associated with deep uncertainty and, for some, stressful interactions with Dutch immigration authorities. In interviews, returnees frequently reported confusion about the roles and identities of the officials they encountered, particularly those from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (which is responsible for assessing asylum applications) versus DTenV (whose focus is on return operations). For example, one Iraqi returnee recalled the exhaustion and anxiety of living in an arrival centre, which left a lasting negative impression on him: 'When I was in Ter Apel, there were a lot of incidents, stealing. I told my brother that I was not happy to live there… One day [later], the police came and took me by force back to Ter Apel, but I fled the place again.'[135] Such dynamics and insecurity make providing counselling in reception centres challenging, given trust and openness can be difficult to foster.[136]

  Yet, several returnees also reported they found DTenV staff at these centres helpful. For instance, the Iraqi woman who ultimately returned to Baghdad after a rejected asylum appeal described feeling grateful for the support she received in a reception centre: 'I had a good experience living there. They took care of us, followed up on my health conditions and provided medication. The staff were respectable, good people.'[137] Good relations can help foster trust which, in turn, can facilitate open discussions and increase migrants' perception of immigration and return processes as fair, since

135 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee and his father, 27 November 2024.
136 See, for instance, Kox, Boone, and Staring, 'The Pains of Being Unauthorized in the Netherlands'.
137 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 27 November 2024.

concerns and disagreements can be addressed. However, many other factors and potential obstacles to return may remain, such as family pressures and concerns about origin-country conditions. For instance, in the case of this Iraqi woman, it was eventually a phone discussion between her lawyer and her son that convinced her return was her only option. In this way, the counselling had a psychological impact (helping her understand her legal situation) and a practical impact (allowing her to express concerns, mainly regarding her medical needs). Upon return to Baghdad, IOM helped her obtain the medication she needed to regulate her blood pressure.

- **Counselling in administrative detention centres**: IOM has a small team of specialised counsellors who provide support to migrants in detention. In some cases, migrants request to speak with IOM, while in others, family members reach out to IOM on their behalf.[138] DTenV also has a dedicated team of counsellors, and the agency has a legal obligation to provide counselling to migrants in these centres at least once a month. In addition, detainees can request to speak with DTenV, and some counsellors meet with detainees more than once a month or follow up via phone calls. One DTenV counsellor described, 'There are speaking rooms in the detention centre where inmates can meet their lawyers, for example. But it's quite a walk to reach these rooms, I find it builds up psychological tension. So I usually go to them, ask if they have 10 minutes and sit down with them. Sometimes we walk in the patio or sit in the living room of the centre. I try to make it less formal.'[139] In other cases, DTenV counsellors voiced a preference for staying in the dedicated rooms, chiefly because of security concerns: 'I think they [detainees] are getting more violent, I don't know exactly why… We have a separation in the room to protect us, and there is a security button. Within minutes, security is there.'[140]

  While previous research has shown that being in detention is not the determining factor in most migrants' return decisions, it may still have an impact on some.[141] For example, one returnee interviewed for this study decided on assisted return when he was in detention, chiefly to avoid the humiliation of a forced removal and to obtain some (in-kind) support for his return. This shows that even shortly before their planned deportation, some migrants may come to view assisted return as an option. Still, counselling in detention settings can be highly challenging.[142] Tensions can be high during discussions of return, and some migrants may become violent towards their counsellors or towards themselves, engaging in self-harm. This underscores the distress migrants may find themselves in, trying anything in their power to avoid deportation. For example, one DTenV counsellor described a Nigerian man who was placed in administrative detention, faced immediate deportation, and still refused an assisted return offer. The counsellor recounted, 'I can't say I convinced him. A few days before his return he swallowed a lighter [to have his flight cancelled due to a medical emergency] … Even when the plane was in the air, he still wasn't ready.'[143] In this situation, the man was focused

138 Author interview with a representative of IOM Netherlands, 6 December 2024.
139 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 9 January 2025.
140 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 10 January 2025.
141 Mieke Kox, *Leaving Detention? A Study on the Influence of Immigration Detention on Migrants' Decision-Making Processes Regarding Return* (The Hague: IOM Netherlands, 2011).
142 Experiences from other EU countries reflect similar challenges. In Denmark, the Danish Return Agency and the Danish Refugee Council provide counselling in closed centres, but they have raised concerns about the conditions in some of these facilities (e.g., violence and drug abuse) that undermine the goal of supporting informed decision-making. Author interview with a representative of the Danish Return Agency, 13 December 2024; author interview with a representative of the Danish Refugee Council, 6 November 2024.
143 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 9 January 2025.

only on his losses; he did not consider recovering his freedom via return a gain, as it would mean having to leave the Netherlands.

- **Counselling outside government facilities:** According to the returnees and counsellors interviewed, counselling outside government facilities plays an important role in reaching migrants who may be hesitant to engage with authorities due to fear of enforcement, detention, or deportation.[144] IOM and NGOs maintain a strong presence across the Netherlands, offering counselling in a range of settings tailored to migrants' preferences. The returnees interviewed valued this flexibility. For instance, one Nigerian described feeling more at ease meeting NGO counsellors in informal settings such as cafés, where he felt safe discussing his options without fear of deportation.[145] In addition, IOM and NGOs have built extensive networks with other support organisations, diaspora groups, churches, and community leaders, which serve as entry points to engage with migrants considering return.[146]

  Insights from interviews indicate that meeting in an external setting can help migrants maintain a greater sense of agency, as it allows some to choose the location and feel more in control of the situation. This was particularly relevant for migrants who had been living without a legal status for a long time and those who had been previously detained. Additionally, meeting outside government facilities enables NGO and IOM counsellors to reach migrants who may otherwise struggle to access support. Those experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, or mental health challenges, for example, may find it difficult to schedule and attend appointments, especially at distant locations. This illustrates the relevance of taking into account the full range of personal circumstances when designing and implementing counselling initiatives, including their location.

In sum, where counselling takes place can influence migrants' openness and ability to engage with return options. Locations such as reception and detention centres can carry considerable emotional weight and constrain some migrants' willingness to engage in meaningful conversation about return and their future life. Meanwhile, counselling provided outside of government facilities, in spaces where migrants feel more comfortable and have a higher degree of agency, can foster trust and a more open dialogue.

Actors involved in return counselling

Although the actors involved in return counselling have distinct roles and operate in different locations, several interviewed returnees appeared unclear regarding who had provided them counselling, especially when it took place in government facilities.[147] Those with longer histories of irregular stay in the Netherlands generally had a better understanding of the process and the organisations involved, especially those who had received assistance from NGOs. Overall, these interviews indicated that the profile of the counsellor has an influence on migrants' perception of the information they provide and the return process more broadly:

- **DTenV**: The few returnees who recalled interacting with DTenV counsellors described these engagements as tense. Especially for Nigerians who faced the possibility of deportation, there

144 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 7 October 2024; author interview with a representative of IOM Netherlands, 6 December 2024.
145 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 7 October 2024.
146 Author interview with a representative of IOM Netherlands, 6 December 2024; author interview with a representative of the Danish Refugee Council, 23 September 2024.
147 Author interviews with Nigerian returnees, 6 and 28 November 2024.

was little trust in counsellors. One Nigerian returnee recalled, 'DTenV tells you every day that you are going back to your country. That is the role of DTenV, to give you a heart attack.'[148] In turn, counsellors sometimes showed little empathy towards migrants. For example, one DTenV counsellor, when describing interactions with a Nigerian man who was ordered to leave and was placed in administrative detention, said: 'I didn't have a connection with this man. Nobody did actually.'[149] While DTenV records on counselling sessions show frequent attempts at conversation, discussions only lasted a few minutes each as the man refused to interact with the counsellor. DTenV was preparing his deportation, yet 'in the meantime, he went to IOM and signed all the papers', the counsellor recounted,[150] surprised about this news after seeing little scope for cooperation with the person. Eventually, the man returned to Lagos with IOM assistance, which he said was due to believing his return was unavoidable and that IOM would at least provide him with some support.[151]

In line with this example, DTenV staff noted that the effectiveness of counselling largely depends on the quality of a counsellor's relationship with the person.[152] On this, trust levels varied significantly between the Nigerian and Iraqi returnees interviewed. Among Nigerians, many highlighted feelings of distrust towards Dutch authorities, instances of racism or discrimination, and a perceived lack of due process and disrespect for their rights. By contrast, Iraqis more frequently emphasised positive treatment, although this disparity could reflect differences in the sample of returnees interviewed in the two countries[153] and broader factors related to cultural differences and legal proceedings (notably, whether or not the respondents had applied for asylum and recognised the legitimacy of the process).

- **IOM**: The interviewed returnees generally reported trustworthy and helpful experiences with IOM counsellors, particularly when receiving help in obtaining identity documents and organising travel. Given the organisation's presence in reception centres, they also found it easy to get in touch with IOM staff.[154] However, in some cases, returnees associated IOM assistance with DTenV, as it was presented as an alternative to deportation or Dublin transfers, and because the counselling took place in reception centres (government facilities).[155] This association has potentially mixed implications for how returnees perceive IOM's role. On the one hand, some may see IOM support as a practical and relatively more dignified solution within their constrained set of options, as was the case for the woman who returned to Iraq with the help of IOM. On the other hand, for migrants still exploring ways to remain in the Netherlands, this proximity to authorities could lead to mistrust, making them less likely to engage with IOM counsellors.

- **NGOs**: Migrants who received counselling from NGOs during their return often described a more personal and trusting relationship, compared to interactions with government actors. These migrants typically engaged in repeated conversations with the same counsellor, allowing for tailored support and a deeper connection. For instance, one Nigerian returnee who had stayed in the Netherlands

148 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 30 October 2024.
149 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 13 January 2025.
150 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 13 January 2025.
151 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 30 October 2024.
152 Author interview with DTenV staff, 9 January 2025.
153 Compared to the interviewed Iraqi returnees, those from Nigeria had stayed for longer periods in the Netherlands on average, and fewer returned directly from reception centres.
154 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 27 November 2024.
155 Author interview with Iraqi returnees, 26–27 November 2024.

without a legal status for more than 20 years reached out to the Goedwerk Foundation. Through several conversations, the Goedwerk counsellors learned that the man felt deeply ashamed of his teeth, which were in a poor state given the lack of treatment he had received while living without legal status, and they were able to find a dentist who would serve him free of charge. The man eventually returned to Lagos.[156]

NGOs also frequently connect returnees with local reintegration service providers in Nigeria and Iraq prior to their return.[157] These links can facilitate discussions about local realities and build migrants' confidence in support available to them if they return. For instance, the Patriotic Citizens Initiative, the reintegration service partner for most Dutch NGOs providing assisted return to Nigeria, frequently joins calls to support counselling sessions and has follow-up conversations with migrants to discuss the option of return.[158] The involvement of such reintegration partners in counselling sessions is not limited to NGOs. Several European countries, such as Sweden, have sought to increase the involvement of their reintegration partners in return and predeparture counselling.[159] Similarly, other EU Member States have recognised the importance of involving nongovernmental and local actors in the return process. In Belgium, for instance, Fedasil has developed partnerships with civil-society organisations and municipalities in an effort to connect with irregular migrants. While these partnerships may encourage returns, it is not their only aim.[160]

Overall, the presence of IOM and NGOs in reception centres was generally regarded as valuable by interviewed counsellors and migrants. For NGOs, this was largely the case when returnees viewed them as independent from the government, facilitating more open conversations about return. Such trusting relationships can help reduce uncertainty for migrants who are struggling to understand their situation and legal options but are wary of discussing these topics with DTenV. Yet previous research has pointed to increasing cooperation in the Netherlands between NGOs and enforcement-focused state actors such as DTenV, and such connections—real or perceived—can decrease migrants' trust in these organisations.[161] This points to the importance of adequate and clearly communicated safeguards as tools to build trust and uphold the impartiality of nonstate actors involved in counselling and assisted return operations.

Counselling goals and methods

Counselling goals and methods vary widely, from return-focused counselling to broader case resolution approaches, more specialised legal advice, and reintegration planning (see Box 4). These methods reflect both host-country authorities' desire to achieve compliance with return orders and the different needs of migrants at different stages of the return process. However, this range of strategies also raises critical

156 Author interview with a representative of the Goedwerk Foundation, 25 July 2024.
157 Such linkages can also be coordinated by government agencies (e.g., the Swedish Migration Agency and scouts from the German development cooperation agency, GIZ). See Lucía Salgado, *Leveraging Predeparture Counselling to Support Returning Migrants' Sustainable Reintegration* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2022).
158 Author interview with a representative of the Patriotic Citizens Initiative, 23 September 2024.
159 In Sweden, reintegration service partners such as the European Technology and Training Centre and Weldo have delivered information sessions to people with a return order. Author interview with representatives of the Swedish Migration Agency, 4 November 2024.
160 Return and Reintegration Facility, 'Reaching Undocumented Migrants (RUM)'.
161 Kox and Staring, '"If You Don't Have Documents"'.

questions about which are most effective when it comes to supporting informed decision-making, when working with different target groups, and at different points in the process.

- **Legal counselling**: As shown in previous research and indicated in interviews,[162] most people struggle to navigate the complex legal and administrative procedures involved in asylum and return processes, often compounded by language barriers and the technical nature of official communications. This creates a strong need for thorough explanations and legal advice at every stage. For instance, one DTenV counsellor in a reception centre explained that discussing migrants' legal status is a key part of the first conversation he holds with people who have received a negative decision in their case.[163] While migrants are typically assigned a state-appointed lawyer, additional legal counselling is available via the Dutch Refugee Council, which supports people throughout their asylum procedure.[164]

- **Return counselling**: DTenV counsellors' use of the agency's return counselling methodology, Wigk, has been mixed, as noted in Section 4.A. While many interviewed staff members said it provides a useful framework, particularly for less-experienced staff, more-seasoned counsellors often adapt their approaches based on personal experience.[165] This flexibility was seen as essential, allowing counsellors to tailor conversation strategies to individual cases within the constraints of the time available. As one counsellor put it, 'When it comes to conducting good conversations, it's about analysing good motives. But it is also about recognising good push and pull factors. That's how you try to have the conversation. This takes time, but time is limited.'[166] Some counsellors expressed more scepticism about Wigk's usefulness, with one saying, 'I'm a bit allergic to the Wigk. I already used these methods before the courses [on the Wigk methodology]. It's normal to treat the person as a human. But it doesn't work for everybody, sometimes it doesn't work at all.'[167]

  DTenV counsellors also recounted using other techniques. One described his approach: 'I am a relatively young guy compared to my colleagues. I can connect with criminals. My tactic is usually to get the person to laugh to break the ice before I start talking business. But other colleagues, like older females, can take an advisory role, motherly. That would never work for me.'[168] Other counsellors underlined their reliance on a 'stick and carrot' approach, at least when there is a chance a migrant may be deported, using the threat of forced return to encourage a conversation about assisted return as an alternative[169]—a strategy reported to work with some migrants but not others, even when they are in detention and awaiting deportation. For instance, one DTenV staff member recounted the case of a person he provided counsel to: 'He wasn't open to IOM. He didn't want to return yet, he still had goals. Until the end, he was still hoping that everything would turn around for him.'[170] In some cases, it may be the possibility of being transferred to another European country, rather than deportation to

162 Stefan Le Courant, *Vivre sous la menace. Les sans-papiers et l'Etat* (Paris: Seuil, 2022); author interview with representatives of the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers in a reception centre, 27 March 2024.
163 Author interview with DTenV staff, 26 March 2024.
164 VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 'Juridische begeleiding', accessed 16 December 2024. IOM does not offer legal advice and instead refers migrants to VluchtelingenWerk for this purpose. Author interview with representatives of IOM, 6 December 2024.
165 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 27 March 2024, 9 January 2025, and 13 January 2025.
166 Author interview with DTenV staff, 27 March 2024.
167 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 13 January 2025.
168 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 9 January 2025.
169 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 26–27 March 2024. See Section 5.C for further discussion of the impact of the threat of deportation on uptake of assisted return.
170 Author interview with a DTenV counsellor, 9 January 2025.

one's origin country, that serves as the 'stick' in this approach. For instance, several interviewed Iraqis described the prospect of a Dublin transfer to countries such as Greece and Austria as less desirable than assisted return to Iraq, because they had been poorly treated in these countries or because they had specifically hoped to settle in the Netherlands.[171]

This variation in the application and perceived value of Wigk among counsellors, and counsellors' use of other techniques, point to a disconnect between the approaches counsellors have found useful through practical experience and the formalised tools promoted by the agency. The lack of consistency also makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of DTenV counselling, as there is no uniform approach in practice. At the same time, it is unclear whether stricter adherence to the Wigk methodology would result in higher rates of return. In any case, the counsellors were familiar with the concepts central to the Wigk methodology, having received training on them. In this sense, the methodology appears to provide a certain common foundation for counsellors.

Beyond these methodological considerations, DTenV counsellors identified a common challenge: navigating the complex legal processes of the migrants they speak with, including the long wait times between appeals.[172] This creates uncertainty for both migrants and counsellors, complicating discussions about assisted return since most migrants only open up to such discussions once there is no more chance they will obtain a legal status in the Netherlands. As a result, DTenV counsellors emphasised the need to provide legal clarity as swiftly as possible, while streamlining procedures in other areas (e.g., asylum systems). Doing so can prevent migrants from becoming trapped in prolonged legal limbo, which delays decisions regarding return or integration and reduces the effectiveness of counselling.

- **Case resolution counselling**: NGO staff typically take a comprehensive approach in this type of counselling, which focuses on building strong interpersonal relationships and has proven particularly effective for engaging migrants with a longer history of irregularity in the Netherlands. For instance, one Nigerian returnee recalls his contact with a counsellor from the Dutch Refugee Council: 'I met him in the office and told him I didn't have a phone, so he gave me a new phone. He also made sure that Amsterdam Undocumented gave me accommodation.'[173] Such experiences are illustrative of how case resolution counselling addresses a broad spectrum of challenges and considers the entirety of a migrant's circumstances, rather than focusing solely on return.
- **Predeparture preparation, including reintegration counselling**: Many of the returnees interviewed needed assistance in acquiring travel documents, such as identity papers or diplomatic laissez-passers, before they could return to their origin country.[174] As such, predeparture counselling sessions were considered useful, if primarily logistical. However, speaking with individuals after their return, many discounted this assistance as secondary, in part because reintegration plans developed during these sessions rarely succeeded in practice (see Section 6.B for more on reintegration assistance).

171 Author interviews with Iraqi returnees, 26–27 November 2024.
172 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 26–27 March 2024.
173 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 5 November 2024.
174 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 21 October 2024.

Effective counselling necessitates adapting methods to the varied conditions and needs of migrants. However, return decisions are not solely made by individuals in many cases; family dynamics frequently have a substantial influence, affecting migrants' willingness to engage in return discussions and shaping their outlook on the future (see Box 7).

BOX 7
Return as a collective decision: The role of family and community

In many cases, return decisions are shaped not only by the individual migrant's preferences or circumstances, but also by the expectations of and obligations to their family, community, and close social relationships. These considerations featured prominently in many of the study's interviews, particularly with Iraqi returnees, and align with broader research and practitioner observations. For instance, preliminary results from a study among irregular migrants in Belgium and France suggest that family members are the only stakeholders with significant influence over migrants' decisions regarding return. Similarly, research about Algerian returnees from Switzerland found that family-related motivations are the primary driver of return decisions.

Among interviewed migrants, many had consulted with family members in Iraq or Nigeria while contemplating return. In some cases, families actively encouraged the migrants to stay in the Netherlands, while in others, they advocated for return—something that was particularly evident in the wishes of female family members. Families' involvement in return decisions is often a continuation of their role in broader migration trajectory. For instance, one Iraqi migrant said his family organised key parts of his journey from Iraq, including his travel to an asylum application centre and temporary accommodation with a family friend. His father explained, 'He [my son] has an aunt that lives in the Netherlands. There was a family leaving from Greece, so we handed them my son to go with them. Once they had reached Germany, I gave them the address of the aunt and they dropped him off there.'

Family can also be a source of stress or concern in return decision-making. Some people considering return anticipate pressure from their families or feel shame for failing to meet their expectations. Thus, some interviewees avoided discussing their return plans with their families, only revealing their decision after arriving, and one faced outright rejection upon return. At the same time, close personal ties to people in the Netherlands can be a consideration. Having children in the country can create a strong incentive not to return. On the flip side, two returnees mentioned the end of romantic relationships as playing a primary role in their decisions to leave the Netherlands.

Practices for counselling and outreach to migrants' families

Despite these findings, most counselling efforts adopt an individual-centric approach, frequently overlooking the importance of family engagement. Where such engagement does occur, it is often for groups with specific vulnerabilities, such as unaccompanied minors or individuals with mental health or substance use disorders. However, some organisations have adopted other strategies to engage families and communities:

- **Enhancing family tracing and mediation**: IOM and NGOs can offer support with locating family members (known as family tracing) in cases where migrants have lost touch with their families or were separated. In rare cases, they may also offer family mediation. However, both activities require significant time and resources, which are often not available. Family members' influence on return decision-making and reintegration varies, but strengthening family connections through these activities can offer some support to individuals facing a departure order and struggling with the decision to return.

BOX 7 (cont.)
Return as a collective decision: The role of family and community

- **Shaping narratives in countries of origin**: Families do not exist in isolation; their views on migration and return are shaped by broader community attitudes. Consequently, one approach to involving families constructively in migrants' return is by shaping broader narratives and raising awareness in countries of origin about topics such as the living conditions of irregular migrants in Europe. For instance, IOM's Migrants as Messengers initiative, which ran from 2017 to 2019, relied on testimonies from returnees to raise awareness of migration challenges and to counter prejudice against returning migrants. However, most studies suggest such information campaigns fail to influence the views of their target audiences.
- **Providing community-based reintegration**: Another approach is to provide support to returnees and the broader communities to which they return via community-based reintegration projects, with the goal of promoting social cohesion and preventing feelings of envy. This may involve creating microenterprises jointly operated by returnees and nonreturnees, or both groups' involvement in development initiatives such as environmental conservation projects. However, it is often difficult to align highly personalised counselling and broad, community-based reintegration projects, making this strategy better suited for supporting common rather than returnee-specific needs.
- **Engaging with diasporas**: This approach generally aims to raise awareness and understanding of assisted return. For instance, IOM, the Dutch Refugee Council, and the Goedwerk Foundation have strong connections with diaspora groups in the Netherlands and engage with them on various topics, not just return. While there is some evidence that diasporas disseminate information regarding return options, it is unclear the extent to which this affects migrants' decision-making. Such strategies also require organisations to be open to working with these communities in ways that align with their own priorities.

These strategies may prove useful in some contexts, though they remain underdeveloped and sensitive, for understandable reasons. For instance, one interviewed Nigerian returnee said he did not disclose his strained family relationship during counselling, considering it a private issue. He explained, 'My parents paid my tuition fees in the Netherlands. There was a lot of pressure from them to succeed [and stay in the Netherlands]. But I didn't want to speak much about it with [my counsellor].' Upon his return, this dynamic led him to spend reintegration funds on temporary accommodation, as staying with his family was not an option. For migrants navigating complex family dynamics—and open to discussing them—family mediation services could be offered as an additional support service to help address such challenges.

Sources: Participant comments during the roundtable, 'Unpacking the Role and Potential of Family Links in Undocumented Migrants' (Im)mobility Decisions', organised by MPI Europe, 10 December 2024; author interview with staff of the Outreach Unit of the Danish Return Agency, 30 October 2024; author interview with representatives of the IOM, 6 December 2024; author interview with representatives of the Goedwerk Foundation, 25 July 2024; author interviews with Iraqi returnees, 26–27 November 2024; author interviews with Nigerian returnees, 21 and 24 October 2024; Sonja Zemmin, *Harragas in der Schweiz—Gibt es einen Weg zurück? Perspektiven zur freiwilligen Rückkehr und Reintegration in Algerien, Marokko und Tunesien* (Geneva: IOM, 2022); Jelmer Brouwer, *Family Matters: A Study into the Factors Hampering Voluntary Return of Migrants Residing at Family Locations* (Geneva: IOM, 2018); Migrants as Messengers, 'Authentic Storytelling by Migrants for Migrants in West Africa', accessed 16 December 2024; Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko, *Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance* (Geneva: IOM, 2018); European Commission, 'AMIF, Engagement of Diaspora Communities on Awareness Raising', updated January 2019; Kathleen Newland, *Destination-Country Policies to Foster Diaspora Engagement in Development* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022 Revised).

Overarching challenges: Coordination, trust, and field building

As strategies and infrastructure for counselling have evolved, several overarching challenges have emerged. A primary one is coordination between different actors. As the experiences shared in interviews illustrate, migrants often interact with multiple counsellors throughout their time in the Netherlands, starting with those from DTenV, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, and legal representatives, followed by IOM and potentially NGO counsellors. Each has distinct goals and approaches, which was widely described as valuable for the process as it allowed for greater tailoring of engagement with migrants.[175] DTenV staff also observed that migrants who received counselling from different organisations were often better prepared for return and reintegration.[176]

In some cases, this plethora of actors can lead to inconsistencies or even contradictions in the advice and information provided.

However, in some cases, this plethora of actors can lead to inconsistencies or even contradictions in the advice and information provided.[177] For instance, NGO counsellors and social workers often prioritise building trust and may be more hesitant to actively promote return, whereas state-appointed lawyers and DTenV counsellors typically adopt an approach focused on quicker outcomes. This divergence can create confusion and undermine migrants' understanding of the legal and administrative process.[178] Similar tensions have been reported in other contexts, such as Belgium's case resolution pilot projects, where differing priorities between social workers and lawyers led to minor conflicts.[179] These examples highlight the importance of different counselling actors sharing consistent, accurate information, even if they do not agree on the end goals.

Another key issue lies in the need to establish trust. Many returnees said that deciding to return was a pivotal moment in their life, one that took time and was made under significant constraints and risks.[180] For counselling to be effective, migrants need to feel they can openly and honestly discuss their situation with people who have comprehensive and up-to-date knowledge of their legal options and the procedures involved. Yet, trust is often fragile, especially when migrants have had past experiences that inspire little confidence in government institutions, such as detention or legal procedures they considered unfair. Certain strategies have shown promise in fostering trust. For instance, involving NGOs can yield some success for migrants who view NGOs as trusted sources of information and support, whereas DTenV's focus on return can raise mistrust. In addition, continuity in counselling relationships appears to be an important factor. Having a single counsellor follow a migrant's case over time facilitates relationship-building and can ensure questions and concerns are addressed consistently. For instance, counsellors from IOM and the Dutch

175 Author interviews with DTenV staff, 9 and 13 January 2025.
176 Author interview with DTenV staff, 9 January 2025.
177 DTenV staff noted some challenges to coordination with partners that have different operational procedures. Author interviews with DTenV staff, 26–27 March 2024.
178 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 27 November 2024.
179 Participant comments during the roundtable 'From Pilots to Projects of Scale: Pursuing Case Resolution for People on the Move through Case Management-Based Approaches Instead of Using Detention', organised by the Jesuit Refugee Service, Brussels, 26 April 2024.
180 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 5 November 2024; author interview with an Iraqi returnee and his father, 27 November 2024.

Refugee Council use WhatsApp to maintain communication with their clients in between meetings.[181] NGO counsellors are also frequently open to addressing issues not directly connected to return, such as helping migrants find shelter or access care for health problems.[182]

Finally, given the diversity of counselling approaches and the considerable discretion counsellors have in guiding conversations, there is a clear need for systematic and ongoing learning within the field. Counselling is inherently a practice-driven skill, evolving in response to the unique circumstances and needs of individual migrants and benefitting from regular reflection and adaptation. The Danish Refugee Council conducts regular reviews, data analysis, and peer-learning meetings.[183] Such activities can help assess the strengths and weaknesses of different counselling methodologies and identify areas for improvement.[184]

B. The role of reintegration assistance in return decisions

European policymakers and practitioners often view offering reintegration assistance as a tool to encourage the uptake of assisted return. This assumption has contributed to decisions to make reintegration support widely available for migrants returning from European countries, as well as to the development of degressive benefit models in several countries, which offer higher financial rewards for quicker return decisions (see Box 8). However, the academic literature has long indicated that reintegration assistance has a limited role in motivating return decisions, as discussed in Section 2. This section asks the questions: What role, if any, does reintegration assistance play in return decisions? And how does this compare to and interact with other factors such as family connections, safety concerns, and economic opportunities?

Reintegration assistance as experienced by returnees

While some returnees interviewed for this study described how counselling can shape return decision-making, they generally did not see reintegration assistance as a significant incentive to opt for assisted return. Most described the financial support provided as insufficient to meaningfully influence their decisions. For instance, one Iraqi returnee noted, 'If you compare the amount I lost by coming to the Netherlands in terms of effort, time, and resources with the financial support I got in return, it's really very little. I could only barely obtain some housing with the reintegration assistance. It was just the basics and a little bit of capital.'[185]

Instead, other factors played a far more decisive role, such as a pervasive sense of hopelessness (particularly among interviewed Nigerian returnees) and the desire to reunite with family members (more common among interviewed Iraqi returnees). For example, three of the Nigerians who benefitted from reintegration assistance via Frontex's EU Reintegration Programme said that they returned because they saw it as a way to

181 Author interview with a representative of IOM Netherlands, 6 December 2024; author interview with a representative of the Danish Refugee Council, 6 November 2024.
182 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 5 November 2024.
183 Author interview with representatives of the Danish Refugee Council, 6 November 2024.
184 MPI Europe and a team of European practitioners are developing a monitoring and evaluation framework on outreach and counselling for irregular migrants, to guide future initiatives and learning within the field.
185 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 21 November 2024.

get out of a cycle of detention in the Netherlands.[186] Meanwhile, an Iraqi returnee who had been counselled by the Dutch Refugee Council said that he only went back because his mother became very ill: 'I had stayed in the Ter Apel reception centre only three months. Then my mother became very ill in Sinjar. I contacted an NGO and IOM, and they helped me come back.'[187]

The interviewed counsellors agreed that reintegration assistance is rarely the primary driver of return. However, they noted it can act as a deciding factor for those already considering this option, as it offers reassurance and a modest starting point to help them re-establish themselves. As one DTenV staff member noted, 'It helps with saving face.'[188] For example, one Iraqi returnee who had worked as a painter in the Netherlands used his reintegration assistance to buy painting materials and continue his occupation upon return to Baghdad.[189] His decision to return was mainly motivated by the end of his relationship with his Dutch girlfriend, but the availability of reintegration support helped reassure him that he would have a source of income in Iraq, and it has allowed him to pay back some of his debt and support his family. In Nigeria, a returnee who had been supported by the Goedwerk Foundation emphasised that without this assistance, fulfilling his most basic needs upon return would have been extremely difficult.[190]

The interviewed counsellors agreed that reintegration assistance is rarely the primary driver of return. However, they noted it can act as a deciding factor for those already considering this option.

Reintegration assistance may also have a greater impact on some nationality groups than others. For example, some practitioners have found it to be more of a deciding factor among migrants from countries in the European Union's neighbourhood, such as those in the Balkans and North Africa. The costs of traveling between these countries and Europe are lower compared to those faced by migrants who have travelled further distances, and who may thus be less likely to see reintegration assistance as meaningful compensation for what they have spent to reach Europe.[191]

Other policy objectives associated with reintegration assistance

Even though reintegration assistance does not appear to significantly increase the uptake of assisted return, it does serve other important policy objectives. Politically, it can facilitate dialogue with origin countries that are more open to the return of their nationals if it comes with some form of support.[192] Moreover, reintegration assistance has the potential to help people build a source of income, overcome stigma, and

186 Author interviews with Nigerian returnees, 6 and 28 November 2024. This finding aligns with research in France that highlights the fact that some migrants without legal status choose to return to avoid the prospect of being detained again. See Le Courant, *Vivre sous la menace*.
187 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 19 November 2024.
188 Author interview with DTenV staff, 13 January 2025.
189 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 21 November 2024.
190 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 24 October 2024.
191 Author interview with a representative of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, 23 October 2024.
192 DTenV staff noted that Iraqi officials were sometimes reluctant to cooperate when returnees are particularly vulnerable. One recalled, 'Iraq says: we find it difficult to give returnees a place. Now Iraq wants to build centres so they don't end up on the street'. Author interviews with DTenV staff, 26–27 March 2024. See also IOM, 'Readmission' (Global Compact Thematic Paper, IOM, 2017); Le Coz, 'Migrations: une nouvelle boussole pour le retour'.

address trauma and stress they experienced during their migration journey.[193] It also provides this support immediately upon return, when it is often most needed.

How returnees use the reintegration support they receive can vary widely. In this study's sample, most returnees received a small amount of money upon return, and the remaining support in-kind. Two-thirds utilised the reintegration assistance for livelihoods or social needs, while the other third either were not able to successfully implement the idea they had for using their reintegration support or they had to revise their plans. As Table 3 shows, reintegration assistance was sometimes spent on one-off purchases and essential needs, and sometimes used for investments with potentially longer-lasting benefits. For instance, one Iraqi returnee living in a camp for internally displaced persons used the assistance to buy essential housing equipment for his family's tent.[194] An Iraqi woman was able to purchase medication.[195] And in Nigeria, two returnees used the reintegration support to start a small business.[196]

TABLE 3

Examples of experiences with reintegration assistance among Iraqi and Nigerian returnees from the Netherlands

Category	Interviewee and role of reintegration support
Basic / social needs	An Iraqi woman purchased medication and household appliances.
	An Iraqi man purchased housing equipment for his family (e.g., a fan).
	An Iraqi man accessed school lessons for his son to catch up and reintegrate into the education system.
	An Iraqi man purchased household items.
	A Nigerian used the support to meet his basic needs.
Livelihoods	An Iraqi man purchased equipment to open a phone accessories shop.
	An Iraqi man purchased materials to continue his occupation as a house painter and repay his debt.
	A Nigerian man purchased equipment to start a small business.
	A Nigerian man purchased goods to start a small business.
Challenges and adaptation	An Iraqi man wanted to open a shop for mobile phones, but his money was stolen.
	An Iraqi man had yet to receive his reintegration assistance.
	A Nigerian man sold equipment he received to get cash for temporary accommodation.
	A Nigerian man's business plan did not work out.
	A Nigerian man's business plan did not work out because he spent his reintegration funds on medical needs.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on eight interviews with Iraqi returnees and six interviews with Nigerian returnees, October 2024–January 2025.

193 IOM, 'Types of Reintegration Assistance and Sustainable Reintegration Outcomes' (working paper, Sustainable Reintegration Knowledge Bites Series, IOM, Geneva, 2022); Anna Knoll, Pauline Veron, and Niklas Mayer, 'A Sustainable Development Approach to Return and Reintegration: Dilemmas, Choices and Possibilities' (discussion paper 291, European Centre for Development Policy Management, Brussels, January 2021).

194 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 21 November 2024.

195 Author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 27 November 2024.

196 Author interviews with Nigerian returnees, 6 and 28 November 2024. Research also suggests that reintegration assistance is particularly valuable when financial support is supplemented by tailored guidance and practical information to facilitate a more sustainable return procedure. See Ruerd Ruben, Marieke van Houte, and Tine Davids, 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre- and Post-Return Assistance', *International Migration Review* 43, no. 4 (24 July 2018): 908–37.

Despite the provision of reintegration assistance, challenges experienced after return can blunt its impact. Among the interviewed Iraqi and Nigerian returnees, a key issue for several individuals was that their initial plans did not work out. For example, two of the Nigerians found it necessary to use the funds in ways other than they had originally intended, and one sold the equipment he had received for income-generating activities to afford temporary accommodation after being rejected by his family.[197]

Two main factors contribute to this disconnect. First, the reality on the ground often differs from what returnees and their counsellors envision during predeparture planning. Second, critical needs are sometimes overlooked during these discussions or emerge only after return. For instance, one Iraqi returnee used his assistance to repay debts accumulated during his migration journey. Indeed, debt is a widespread challenge for individuals who borrow money to fund their migration journey but are then unable to work enough in Europe to repay it before returning.[198] Unforeseen needs can also include basic household goods and treatment for new health issues. Consequently, reintegration assistance—which is limited in scope—cannot address the full extent of difficulties migrants may encounter after return.

Such issues can create a gap between expectations and reality. Several returnees expressed dissatisfaction with their reintegration assistance, particularly because they felt counsellors had promised more financial support than they ultimately received.[199] These gaps highlight the need for more careful reintegration planning that responds to the local context and returnees' personal circumstances, as well as clear communication about the purpose and modalities of reintegration assistance. At the same time, these insights also signal a lack of accessible support for returnees from local governments in the two case-study countries.

BOX 8
The degressive benefits model: An incentive to increase assisted returns?

Several European countries, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland, have introduced variations of a degressive benefits model to encourage the uptake of assisted return. These policies provide higher financial assistance to migrants who opt for assisted return soon after receiving a leaving order, with the amount gradually decreasing over time. The aim is to incentivise early decisions to return while still offering some support for those who return later.

There has been, however, no systematic evaluation of these policies in the countries where they have been implemented. Early experiences, based on interviews and initial feedback, are mixed. In Switzerland, where the policy has been in place for several years, there are concerns that it disproportionately rewards those already inclined to return quickly, while failing to offer sufficient motivation to those facing more complex situations and who may take longer to decide to return. In France, which introduced the approach in 2023, officials report more promising results. According to the French Office for Immigration and Integration, the mechanism has significantly increased the uptake of assisted return among migrants from countries whose nationals require a visa to enter France. However, it has reportedly had no effect among migrants from visa-free countries, given the baseline amount of assistance is significantly lower for this group (300 euros, as compared to 1,200 euros for migrants from countries requiring a visa, offered within the first month of receiving a leaving order). More comprehensive evaluations are therefore needed, especially in light of the findings from this study and previous research on the multifaceted nature of return decision-making.

Sources: Author interview with a representative of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, 22 October 2024; author interview with a representative of the French Office for Immigration and Integration, 25 October 2024.

197 Author interview with a Nigerian returnee, 5 November 2024.
198 IOM, *Returning to Debt: Examining the Effects of Indebtedness on Reintegration Outcomes* (Geneva: IOM, 2022); author interview with an Iraqi returnee, 21 November 2024.
199 Author interview with Nigerian returnees, 6 and 28 November 2024.

C. *Takeaways from insights shared by returnees and counsellors*

Interviews with returnees and counsellors, as well as the observation of counselling sessions, have shown that counselling can play a role in migrants' return decision-making. Yet, its role is not uniform and varies across migrant profiles. Different personal circumstances appear to require different counselling approaches to have an impact. Taking the degree of migrant agency into account, the interviews suggest that counselling is most crucial for those who fall within the middle range (in the 'acceptance' and 'hopelessness' categories) rather than at either end of the spectrum ('own decision' and 'coerced compliance'), since those mid-range groups are more actively re-evaluating their options for the future. This includes a diverse set of migrants, such as those who have recently received a negative asylum decision and those who have been living irregularly in the Netherlands for years. Tailoring counselling to their specific circumstances increases the likelihood of meaningful engagement. For example, legal counselling, potentially combined with return counselling, is especially relevant immediately following a negative decision or appeal as migrants seek to understand their options. This period is often a critical juncture at which migrants, sometimes together with family members, decide whether they should remain in the country without status, move elsewhere, or consider return. Investing in counselling at this stage can therefore be particularly impactful.

For migrants who have resisted enforcement efforts and remained in the Netherlands irregularly for an extended period, return counselling is especially challenging—particularly if the migrants do not actively seek it out or deeply distrust it. In these cases, outreach beyond government facilities, such as through NGOs, may be more effective in engaging with migrants. Counselling for this population is often most impactful when it extends beyond return discussions and addresses wider concerns such as homelessness, mental health, or addiction that can make it difficult to plan for the future. Additionally, normative arguments for returning are unlikely to be effective, given these migrants have resisted compliance for a long time. Instead, a more productive approach appears to be drawing a broader time horizon—discussing life goals, such as securing stable housing or starting a family—and exploring the conditions under which these goals might be achieved.

For migrants who have resisted enforcement efforts and remained in the Netherlands irregularly for an extended period, return counselling is especially challenging.

Counselling for migrants at either end of the agency spectrum appears to have a more limited impact on return decision-making. Those who decide to return do so based either on their own preferences and considerations (high agency), or they strongly resist return but are coerced into compliance (low agency). For migrants with a high degree of agency, counselling primarily serves as a practical support mechanism, helping with travel arrangements and administrative procedures. While some in this category may feel reassured by the assistance offered by IOM or NGOs, their decision to return is not primarily shaped by counselling. For migrants with a low degree of agency, including those in administrative detention, even intensive counselling is unlikely to change their position. Nevertheless, it remains essential, given the severe mental strain these migrants experience and the associated risks, such as self-harm or aggressive behaviour.

Additionally, some individuals who long reject assisted return do reconsider it at a later stage, making it important to consistently offer assisted return as an option.[200]

Turning to reintegration assistance, this study's findings suggest it is best viewed as an important but often misunderstood element of the return process. Despite common logic voiced in European policy circles, offers of reintegration assistance are rarely a deciding factor capable of incentivising return in and of themselves, but this support does serve multiple functions that extend beyond individual decision-making. However, the effectiveness of reintegration assistance is often constrained by discrepancies between pre-return planning and realities on the ground in the countries to which migrants return. This underscores the need for reintegration planning that takes into account such realities as well as returnees' personal circumstances.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to better understand the influence of two instruments—counselling and reintegration assistance—on the decision-making processes of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands. Over the years, only a small proportion of migrants who are ordered to leave this and other EU countries ultimately depart, and even fewer do so via assisted return programmes, despite the significant resources invested in these initiatives. In 2023, for instance, only 16 per cent of DTenV return procedures ended in a cooperative return from the Netherlands to migrants' countries of origin (two-third of which returned with assistance from IOM or NGOs), whereas 24 per cent of cases ended because the individuals received some form of temporary or permanent legal permit in the Netherlands, and in a further 32 per cent of cases, the government lost contact with the migrants involved. This raises important questions about the effectiveness of government policies and tools to incentivise the uptake of assisted return, and why their role has remained limited. Are counselling and reintegration assistance fundamentally ill-suited to influencing return decision-making, given the complex realities migrants face? Or are these tools potentially effective but currently underutilised or poorly implemented? And finally, what constitutes a realistic objective for policymakers when it comes to the uptake of assisted return, especially in light of the wide range of structural and personal factors that shape migrants' decisions?

Only a small proportion of migrants who are ordered to leave this and other EU countries ultimately depart, and even fewer do so via assisted return programmes, despite the significant resources invested in these initiatives.

The analysis of almost 118,000 records from DTenV's case management system has shed light on both the workings of this system and the complexities surrounding return management. Between 2017 and 2023, the most common reason a return procedure came to an end (42 per cent of cases) was that the person had absconded, while 20 per cent of cases ended in a grant of some form of legal status, 19 per cent in

200 However, such options are being reconsidered with the proposal for a new EU Return Regulation significantly expanding the use of forced return. See European Commission, 'Commission Proposes a New Common European System for Returns' (press release, 10 March 2025).

cooperative return, and 13 per cent in forced return. These figures have fluctuated over the years, with a notable 15-percentage-point decrease in the proportion of cases that ended in migrants absconding between 2017 and 2023, accompanied by a 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of individuals receiving some form of temporary or permanent status. These trends have yet to be explored in detail in the academic literature.

The logistic regression analysis undertaken to explore which factors contribute to the uptake of assisted return shed additional light on recent trends. It found that the likelihood of opting for assisted return diminishes the longer an individual has remained in the Netherlands and the more return procedures they have undergone. This negative relationship is consistent with previous research, which suggests that an extended stay in the host country may reduce migrants' willingness to participate in assisted return programmes, while simultaneously increasing obstacles to enforcement of return orders.[201] This finding is also aligned with insights from interviews with DTenV counsellors, who reported significant challenges in dealing with prolonged procedures and appeals or new application procedures (e.g., for asylum or other legal statuses) as these hampered swift decision-making. Furthermore, the analysis found a small but statistically significant negative relationship between the number of counselling sessions a migrant took part in and their likelihood of choosing assisted return; however, rather than being a sign of counselling's ineffectiveness, this negative relationship may reflect the fact that migrants more open to assisted return may make this decision more quickly, while those who are less inclined to return might take longer to decide and, in the meantime, receive more counselling sessions.

The data analysis also revealed that the relationship between the possibility of forced return and the uptake of assisted return is more nuanced than many policymakers and practitioners might assume. While there are some indications that the threat of deportation may indeed increase migrants' willingness to accept assisted returns overall, the analysis suggests that even among those facing a credible risk of forced removal, the proportion choosing assisted return can vary considerably. Other factors also play a significant role in this decision-making process; this may include migrants' perceptions of living conditions and economic prospects in their origin country, debt, the stigma of deportation, the views of family and community members, and options for future migration.

Interviews with migrants, Dutch and other European policymakers, counsellors, and other practitioners provided additional information on the specific role of counselling and reintegration assistance. Overall, these insights indicate that counselling alone rarely leads migrants to opt for assisted return. This finding aligns with other research showing that only a small proportion of migrants who receive a return decision ultimately decide to return, even when counselling and assisted return and reintegration programmes are available.[202] Still, the interview findings suggest that counselling can play a crucial role in helping migrants understand their legal status and available options. Many interviewed migrants relied on these sessions to navigate complex legal and bureaucratic procedures, highlighting their importance in enabling informed decision-making. This was particularly evident among those who had lived without legal status in the Netherlands for extended periods, often experiencing cycles of irregularity and additional challenges such as homelessness, as well as among vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors. For these groups,

201 Peitz, *Wege aus der Ausreisepflicht*.

202 Schmitt, Bitterwolf, and Baraulina, *Geförderte Rückkehr aus Deutschland*; European Migration Network, 'Policies and Practices on Return Counselling'.

alternatives to return, such as obtaining a temporary or permanent permit to stay, also became increasingly relevant over time.[203]

The interviews also showed that counselling efforts are often constrained by migrants' lack of trust in the authorities, given their focus on increasing return numbers—a finding similar to those in prior studies.[204] This was particularly true for migrants with a history of detention. Many viewed their experiences with the Dutch legal system as unfair, compounded by feelings of discrimination and exclusion. As a result, DTenV counsellors were often met with scepticism, and sessions with them generally had little influence on decision-making. By contrast, migrants often had more open attitudes towards counselling provided by NGOs and information from reintegration partners in their countries of origin, findings also aligned with the literature.[205]

A significant added value of NGOs' involvement in this space is their ability to offer a broader scope of counselling. Unlike the return counselling offered by DTenV, which centres on persuading migrants to leave the Netherlands, these organisations often adopt a case resolution approach, aiming to identify solutions in collaboration with the migrant and considering a wide range of options, from seeking some form of legal status to irregular stay to return. In addition, counsellors are typically open to supporting migrants via a range of other services, such as help securing housing or addressing health issues. Previous research[206] and the counsellors interviewed emphasised that this openness to discussing a migrant's full range of future possibilities and addressing issues beyond legal status is critical for building trust and fostering meaningful conversations.

While counselling was found to play an important role in shaping migrants' understanding of their future options, returnee interviews painted a more mixed picture of reintegration assistance, another policy intervention aiming to incentivise assisted returns. The study's findings indicate that migrants perceive reintegration support as having relatively limited benefits, insufficient on its own to persuade them to return. As shown previously,[207] the interviews revealed that most returnees do not view the financial and logistical support provided as adequate to compensate for the challenging economic and socio-political conditions in their countries of origin. Many interviewees said these structural challenges made it hard to envision a sustainable future upon return, limiting the value of the assistance in their decision-making process. This is especially true because many migrants have made significant investments in their journey, frequently incurring debts

Most returnees do not view the financial and logistical support provided as adequate to compensate for the challenging economic and socio-political conditions in their countries of origin.

203 This is also the case in Germany, for example. See Laura Francesca Peitz, 'Return or Regularization? A Temporal Analysis of Rejected Asylum Seekers in Germany' (working paper, European University Institute and Migration Policy Centre, 2025).
204 Cleton and Schweitzer, "'Our Aim Is to Assist Migrants'".
205 Zanzuchi and Steiner, *No One-Size-Fits-All*.
206 Zanzuchi and Steiner, *No One-Size-Fits-All*.
207 Schmitt, Bitterwolf, and Baraulina, *Geförderte Rückkehr aus Deutschland*; Sarah Lichtenstein, Robin Gregory, and Julie Irwin, 'What's Bad Is Easy: Taboo Values, Affect, and Cognition', *Judgment and Decision Making* 2, no. 3 (2007): 169–88; Martin Hanselmann and Carmen Tanner, 'Taboos and Conflicts in Decision Making: Sacred Values, Decision Difficulty, and Emotions', *Judgment and Decision Making* 3, no. 1 (2008): 51–63.

and carrying with them high expectations from family and community members, which can make the prospect of returning even harder to accept.[208] Furthermore, while interviewed Iraqi and Nigerian returnees did describe the reintegration support as helpful in addressing certain immediate challenges (such as obtaining household goods or addressing medical needs), such experiences reflect the use of reintegration assistance to meet basic needs rather than to support longer-term reintegration. This study does not focus on measuring the effectiveness of reintegration assistance, but these findings still raise questions about the discrepancy between its stated goals and apparent shortcomings in supporting sustainable reintegration.

Overall, the findings from both the data and interview analysis cast doubt on the potential of counselling and reintegration assistance to significantly increase the uptake of assisted return. This is due in large part to the vast number of factors that influence migration and return decisions. At the same time, the findings suggest that the role of counselling and reintegration support instruments are sometimes misunderstood by policymakers and not systematically developed, implemented, or evaluated with a view to improving their effectiveness. For example, while DTenV has developed the Wigk counselling methodology, its application remains inconsistent in practice, and many counsellors rely on approaches shaped by experience. Without mechanisms for regular review and shared learning, it is unclear whether wider and more consistent use of Wigk or another methodology would lead to better outcomes. Interviews with DTenV counsellors did indicate that training provided on the Wigk approach contributes to a common basis and culture within the agency that encourages staff to view migrants' motivations and decisions within a broader context than just compliance, which can help foster more meaningful conversations. Efforts to continue to improve the Wigk methodology could seek to leverage counsellors' feedback and experience, or DTenV could provide practical guidelines to help counsellors integrate elements of the methodology into their personal strategies.

Even if counselling and reintegration assistance do not directly raise return numbers, both policy tools play other important roles in the broader return process.

Moreover, even if counselling and reintegration assistance do not directly raise return numbers, both policy tools play other important roles in the broader return process, including by helping migrants better understand their legal situation, supporting informed decision-making, and mitigating vulnerability upon return. These are by themselves important and desirable outcomes from the viewpoint of destination countries such as the Netherlands, both from an ethical and a pragmatic perspective as they can help increase the legitimacy of returns and gain or maintain support from migrants' origin countries.

208 IOM, *Returning to Debt*; Mixed Migration Centre, *Return and Reintegration in the Context of Senegal: Strengthening the Evidence Base* (Geneva: Mixed Migration Centre, 2024); Brouwer, *Family Matters*.

Recommendations

The findings discussed above point to a number of limitations and challenges within return and reintegration policies and programmes. As a starting point for recommended improvements, it will be important to better align policy and programmatic expectations for counselling and reintegration assistance with their demonstrated impacts. This should include:

- **Clarifying the strategic purpose of counselling and reintegration assistance, recognising that their primary value may lie beyond increasing uptake of assisted return.** This study makes clear that counselling is only one of many factors influencing migrants' decisions about whether to accept assisted return, and that its influence may be limited if other factors (such as family or community support and origin-country conditions) do not align. Yet, it also shows that both counselling and reintegration assistance serve important functions beyond increasing assisted return. Their specific contributions, such as reducing vulnerability upon return, supporting informed decision-making, and improving procedural fairness, should be acknowledged and assessed on their own merits. To this end, policy and programmatic documents should seek to clearly define the respective roles and objectives of counselling and reintegration assistance, to ensure a shared understanding of what these tools are intended to achieve and how their effectiveness should be measured. This should also include setting realistic objectives and aligning investments in nongovernmental networks and partners, counsellor training, and reintegration assistance accordingly.

In addition to this overarching takeaway, both counselling and reintegration assistance could be further improved to enhance their role in return decision-making as well as to further their other benefits (e.g., reducing vulnerabilities). To this end, policymakers, officials, and their nongovernmental partners should consider the following practical recommendations:

- **Create a conducive environment for counselling that recognises the gravity of return decisions.** The decision to return to one's country of origin is one of the most difficult and consequential choices many migrants make. For counselling to be meaningful, it must take place in an atmosphere that acknowledges this emotional weight and allows for open, trust-based dialogue. Yet, many returnees interviewed for this study described counselling, particularly in reception and detention centres, as stressful, impersonal, or even hostile, due both to the institutional setting and to difficult interactions with other migrants or staff. To foster more constructive conversations, counsellors should actively work to reduce this tension. Even small steps, such as holding sessions outside formal offices, sharing a cup of tea, or offering consistency in which counsellors work with which migrants, can help create a more humane environment. For migrants living outside of these centres, flexibility on the part of IOM and NGOs when setting meeting locations, which are often tailored to the preferences of individual migrants, has proven to be a valuable and well-appreciated practice.
- **Prioritise counselling at key decision-making moments to enhance its potential impact.** If a key goal for a counselling intervention is to increase the uptake of assisted return, counselling sessions could be strategically timed to coincide with moments when migrants may be more open to considering return—such as immediately after a final negative asylum decision or the issuance of an

order to leave. Early counselling sessions could focus on information-sharing and exploring a migrant's legal options, while more direct conversations about return may be more appropriate once the individual's options have narrowed and uncertainty sets in. Aligning counselling efforts with these key junctures can increase their relevance and responsiveness to migrants' decision-making needs.

- **Invest in increasing legal system capacity and efficiency to speed up processing of asylum requests and other procedures that may precede a leaving order.** Given that lengthy legal procedures are linked to both lower uptake of assisted return as well as prolonged periods of uncertainty that can have severely detrimental effects on migrants' mental health and well-being, there is a general interest in reducing the time individuals wait for decisions on their cases. At the same time, greater efficiency should not come at the expense of due process in these procedures, as this is the foundation for any leaving order's legitimacy.

- **Expand efforts to work more closely with reintegration partners in migrants' countries of origin during counselling and reintegration planning.** This research has shown the significant role local reintegration partners sometimes play in migrants' decisions to return. For those considering return, being able to speak in their native language, connect to a counsellor of the same culture, think through the local realities that await them in their country of origin, and craft reintegration plans accordingly can have a profound impact. However, the engagement of local reintegration partners needs to be carefully managed and adequately supported. For instance, local partners currently are not remunerated for participating in counselling sessions and other predeparture activities, only for services they provide once a person has returned. Many reintegration partners are small NGOs with highly engaged personnel but little financial flexibility, which can make this additional, unpaid engagement difficult. To strengthen their capacity and involvement in counselling and predeparture planning, funding structures could expressly cover these organisations' involvement in predeparture activities. Additionally, stronger connections with reintegration service partners could be developed through in-country visits or online communication, raising counsellors' awareness of local conditions and improving their ability to support migrants effectively. Some such initiatives have already been implemented, including study visits for service partners in destination countries (e.g., in Sweden and France) and virtual engagements between counsellors and key contacts in origin countries (e.g., Germany).[209] However, these efforts are often fragmented or project-specific, lacking a cohesive and long-term approach.

- **Improve country- and diaspora-specific knowledge among counsellors.** This study highlights the value of counsellors who understand migrants' backgrounds and the context in their countries of origin. This knowledge helps the counsellors build stronger, more personal relationships with migrants and tailor counselling strategies to specific needs. This suggests the potential utility of having counsellors develop expertise in working with certain groups of migrants. Denmark, for example, has reportedly seen some success by designating specialised return counsellors to work with Iranian irregular migrants who have lived in the country for a long time.[210] This kind of targeted approach seeks to foster counsellors' understanding of the conditions in specific countries and awareness of

209 Migration Partnership Facility, *Empowering Reintegration: Strengthening Capacities for Return and Reintegration Counselling through CSOs* (Brussels: Migration Partnership Facility, 2024).

210 Author interview with the staff of the Outreach Unit of the Danish Return Agency, 30 October 2024.

cultural factors influencing decision-making for a particular group, rather than providing generalised cultural sensitivity training. Overall, this illustrates the value of providing additional training to counsellors on specific countries of origin, or organising teams with dedicated focal points for certain countries, regions, or migrant profiles.

- **Explore safe and voluntary ways to engage family or community members in return conversations.** Where appropriate, counselling programmes could offer optional engagement with migrants' families or close social networks, recognising that return decisions are often shaped by collective expectations and responsibilities. In some cases, migrants' relatives have invested in their migration journey and may urge them to remain abroad, which can complicate the return process. Facilitated discussions, led by local reintegration partners, could help families better understand a migrant's experiences and reasons for returning, reduce stigma, and flag reintegration challenges early on, such as the need for separate housing. However, family involvement is not always safe or desirable. Families may also be complicit in exploitation or coercion, especially in cases involving women. Any engagement must therefore be strictly voluntary and carefully managed. More broadly, returnee-led efforts to raise awareness and reduce stigma in countries of origin, supported by international partners, could offer a safe avenue for community outreach.

- **Maintain and enhance the diversity of actors and approaches involved in counselling in order to reach and provide tailored support to different groups of migrants.** This study underscores the value of a multi-partner approach to counselling, given different actors are well-positioned to play different roles. Offering counselling via several different actors can help ensure that migrants with different needs and profiles have opportunities to reach out and explore their options. For example, DTenV counselling, with its focus on return, is well suited to meeting the needs of individuals who are already likely to return and need additional advice on operational next steps. In contrast, IOM and NGOs' longer-term engagement with returnees and, in some cases, broader focus (e.g., through case resolution counselling) can build deeper, more trusting relationships between migrants and counsellors that support constructive conversations with individuals who are undecided and need guidance as they consider return and other possible options. It is important to provide counselling opportunities that accommodate these diverse profiles. Achieving this requires a strong network between official and nongovernmental actors, dedicated outreach, and a diversified counselling approach. Better coordination and a clear distribution of responsibilities would also help different actors avoid providing inconsistent information. Importantly, the autonomy of NGOs should be carefully maintained as it is crucial to their continued ability to serve individuals who are hard for authorities to reach.

- **Strengthen 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 counselling approaches, both within DTenV and the other actors providing counselling in the Netherlands. Work is already underway to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for counselling,[211] including a set of monitoring indicators that Member States and Frontex could utilise. This would be especially

211 MPI Europe has designed a monitoring and evaluation framework for frontline workers that lists relevant indicators before, during, and after return counselling sessions and outreach efforts. This has been undertaken as part of the the EU-funded Reaching Undocumented Migrants project and is available to members of the Return and Reintegration Facility.

beneficial, particularly as Frontex and EU-supported initiatives are 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 such efforts. Finally, aligning this work with ongoing research in the field is crucial and could be done by supporting policy dialogue forums[212] and practitioner groups where experts can exchange best practices and collaborate with researchers.[213]

Finally, strengthening European countries' relationships with origin countries could help facilitate assisted returns while also serving complementary goals. Options for doing so include:

- **Supporting investments in origin countries, especially in systems that can assist returning migrants.** Development efforts in origin countries are crucial to improving the conditions that prompt migrants to leave and that may weigh heavily on their decisions about whether to return. Efforts to improve those conditions in ways that ease return and reintegration should include enhancing governance structures, promoting economic development, improving security and stability, and strengthening climate adaptation—areas that align with overseas development assistance contributions from the European Union and its Member States. Closing the development gap and, in doing so, changing the calculus in return decisions can only be achieved through long-term programmes as well as collaboration in areas such as trade and foreign investment. Alongside these broad development efforts, more targeted investments could focus on enhancing the capacity of origin countries to deliver services tailored to returnees' specific profiles and needs. This involves integrating return and reintegration considerations into national migration and development strategies. It also necessitates the establishment of suitable national and local governance structures, such as an interministerial coordination task force or working group, to coordinate on these issues. Ensuring that services are accessible to and appropriate for returning migrants should also involve training for staff in national employment agencies, social services, and municipalities. Finally, cooperation with reintegration service partners, such as IOM and Frontex's local partners, should be strengthened to ensure that assistance is well-coordinated and tailored to individual profiles. Many efforts of this kind are already underway, with programmes funded by the European Union or its Member States.[214] In the context of growing pressure on development budgets,[215] maintaining these types of engagement is, however, likely to become increasingly challenging.
- **Investing in regular pathways that could offer mobility options after return.** Many people who return to their countries of origin wish to migrate again and, in the absence of legal routes to do so, some may consider irregular journeys. Reintegration planning should thus be more proactive in helping returning migrants explore regular migration pathways that may be available to them. This could encompass both regional and international migration opportunities. Some examples of this type of initiative already exist, such as Germany's Centres for Migration and Development, which serve

212 Policy dialogue conferences such as the one organised by DTenV on 27 March 2025 can contribute to this goal.
213 This objective is on the agenda of the EU-funded Return and Reintegration Facility, which is managed by ICMPD.
214 See, for instance, Expertise France, 'ProGreS Migration Tunisie', accessed 15 March 2025; ICMPD, 'MRCs: Migrant Resource Centres', accessed 15 March 2025.
215 Vince Chadwick, 'Belgium Just Cut Its Foreign Aid by 25%. Does Anybody Care?', Devex, 10 February 2025.

as hubs to advise returnees on reintegration but also discuss legal migration.[216] These initiatives are still in their early stages, and more work is needed if they are to achieve meaningful results. However, the political context at the EU level and within some Member States may make this approach less viable in the near term, particularly with ongoing discussions regarding entry bans.[217]

The field of return policy is evolving quickly, with significant investments and innovations in counselling and reintegration measures in recent years. The effects of these efforts are context dependant, varying across migrants from different countries of origin and in different personal circumstances. The policies and programmes in this space are equally diverse, relying on partnerships between actors with varied agendas and approaches. Through its close look at the Dutch case, this study highlights potential areas for improvement not only at the national but also the EU level. A first-order focus should be on counselling efforts that build trust with migrants and assist them as they make decisions about return. The study also highlights the need to be realistic about the role reintegration assistance can play, recognising that its primary benefits lie in providing support upon return rather than incentivising return in the first place. While this may necessitate a shift in conventional wisdom, such steps hold the potential to improve the efficacy of legal procedures and return operations, facilitate informed decision-making, and help those who opt to return do so with dignity.

While this may necessitate a shift in conventional wisdom, such steps hold the potential to improve the efficacy of legal procedures and return operations, facilitate informed decision-making, and help those who opt to return do so with dignity.

216 German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'Centres for Migration and Development', accessed 10 March 2025.

217 See, for instance, the proposal for a new EU regulation on return: European Commission, 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing a Common System for the Return of Third-Country Nationals Staying Illegally in the Union, and Repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC' (COM [2025] 101 final, 2025/0059 [COD], Strasbourg, 11 March 2025).

Appendix. Additional Data by Nationality

TABLE A–1

Outflow of Iraqi cases from the DTenV caseload, 2017–23

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Absconded	39%	45%	44%	45%	49%	37%	32%	**42%**
Forced return	5%	3%	6%	6%	4%	5%	6%	**5%**
Cooperative return	28%	21%	12%	18%	15%	18%	20%	**20%**
Temporary or permanent permit issued	21%	25%	31%	24%	25%	34%	35%	**26%**
Other	6%	5%	7%	7%	7%	7%	6%	**6%**
Total cases	1,576	1,211	1,164	609	522	390	422	**5,894**

Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

TABLE A–2

Outflow of Nigerian cases from the DTenV caseload, 2017–23

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Absconded	40%	41%	57%	39%	49%	43%	30%	**44%**
Forced return	15%	9%	12%	9%	6%	8%	8%	**9%**
Cooperative return	13%	7%	12%	8%	7%	13%	27%	**12%**
Temporary or permanent permit issued	23%	31%	16%	41%	35%	32%	24%	**29%**
Other	9%	12%	3%	2%	3%	4%	11%	**5%**
Total cases	418	487	1,436	1,284	1,194	958	1,019	**6,796**

Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

TABLE A–3

Cooperative returns to Iraq, 2017–23

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Return via IOM/NGOs	97%	98%	93%	99%	98%	98%	88%	**96%**
Other returns	3%	2%	8%	1%	2%	2%	13%	**4%**
Total cases	295	137	80	68	64	56	64	**764**

Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

TABLE A–4

Cooperative returns to Nigeria, 2017–23

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Return via IOM/NGOs	85%	81%	100%	97%	100%	49%	19%	**50%**
Other returns	15%	19%	0%	3%	0%	51%	81%	**50%**
Total cases	26	16	49	29	24	99	201	**444**

Source: Author analysis of administrative case management data provided by DTenV.

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Acknowledgments

This report results from a study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe), with the support of a grant from the Research and Data Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

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The authors are grateful to Casper van Nassau at WODC and Claudia van der Horst at the Repatriation and Departure Service (DTenV) for their assistance throughout this project. They are also grateful to the DTenV staff who facilitated the researchers' access to previously unpublished administrative data and who answered questions in The Hague and in two reception centres. In addition, the authors thank Pieter Maas and Laura Carpier at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Netherlands and their colleagues at IOM Iraq and IOM Nigeria for facilitating interviews with returnees. The authors are also grateful to Marlies Oosterwijk and her colleagues from the Dutch Refugee Council; Lonne Hintzbergen from the Goedwerk Foundation; Richard Hooton and Roland Nwoha from IRARA; Osita Osemene from the Patriotic Citizens Initiative; and Hajjaj Mustafa from the European Technology and Training Centre for facilitating interviews with returnees. In addition, the authors sincerely appreciate the invaluable insights shared by the members of this project's steering committee—Mieke Kox, Anja van Heelsum, Claudia van der Horst, Marieke van Houte, and Casper van Nassau.

Finally, the authors thank their MPI Europe and MPI colleagues for their support, including María Belén Zanzuchi for her smart insights on the issue of counselling; Lauren Shaw for her excellent edits; Lukas Boeckxstaens for his support during data collection in the Netherlands; Abigail Goldfarb for her excellent research assistance; and Arianna Barcherini, Bertrand Steiner, and Théa Kouvatas for all their support throughout the research process.

Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
Layout: Katie O'Hara
Cover Photo: iStock.com/pundapanda

Suggested citation: Sohst, Ravenna, Camille Le Coz, and Hanne Beirens. 2025. *To Leave or Stay? Examining the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in the return decision-making of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands*. Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe.

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