
The role of counselling & reintegration support in shaping migrants' return decisions

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NEW REPORT: To Leave or Stay? Examining the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in the return decision-making of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands

By Ravenna Sohst, Camille Le Coz and Hanne Beirens

Available at: bit.ly/returns25



Context of the study

In the Netherlands and across the EU, only a small share of those ordered to leave actually depart.

Main challenges to enforcing returns:

- Authorities' limited capacities and lack of coordination;
- Absence of readmission agreements or cooperation with origin countries;
- Migrants' reluctance to return.

To improve compliance with return orders and encourage uptake of assisted return, the Dutch government has tested different **counselling** approaches and worked with a range of partners to offer **reintegration** assistance.



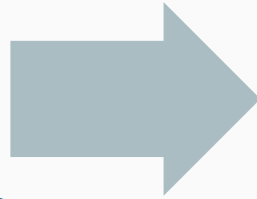
Still, gaps persist in understanding whether, how, and when **counselling and reintegration assistance interact with return decision-making**



Methodology: A mixed-methods approach

Quantitative analysis of administrative return data

- Case management data from the Dutch Departure and Repatriation Service (DTenV) between 2017 and 2023: 118,000 observed case outflows



Qualitative analysis of return decision-making

- 50 interviews conducted with returning migrants, DTenV policy advisors, EU stakeholders, NGO and IO representatives
- Visit of 2 Dutch reception centres
- Case studies of Nigeria and Iraq



Results I: What factors influence return decisions?



Conditions in the Country of Origin

- (Lack of) economic opportunity
- Security conditions
- Political (in)stability
- Social networks



Conditions in the Host Country

- Degree of local integration and social networks
- Access to work
- Housing
- Risk of immigration enforcement



Personal Circumstances

- Personal aspirations
- Family responsibilities
- Debt
- Gender roles
- Health conditions

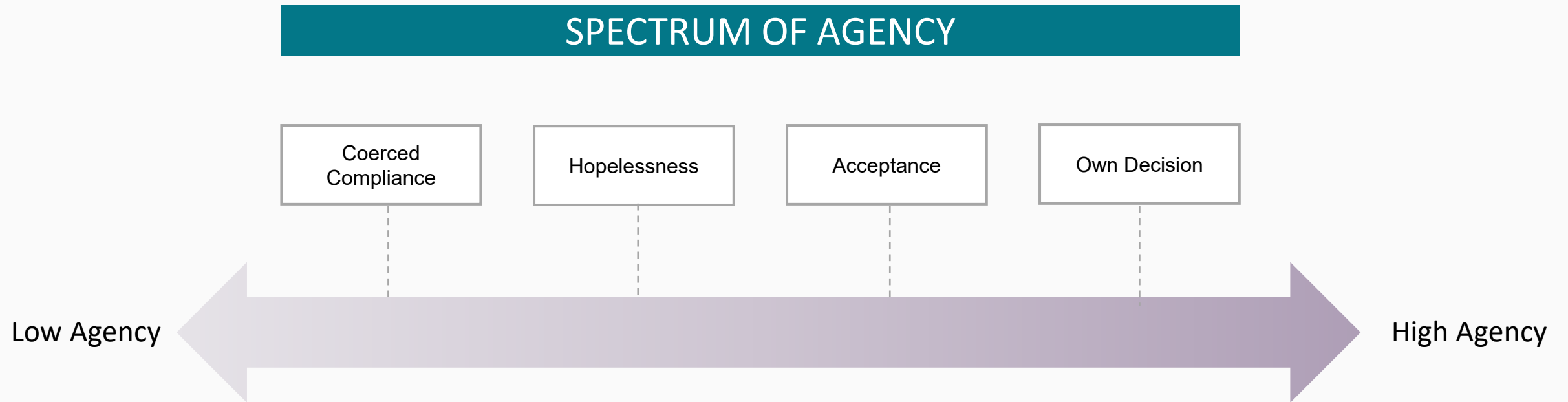


Policy Interventions

- Counselling
- Reintegration assistance
- Detention
- Re-entry bans



Results II: Migrants' decision-making processes



Results III: Counselling goals and methods

	Purpose	Provider	Method
Return counselling	Focus on persuasion to return and on compliance	State actors (e.g., return agencies)	Use of agency's return counselling methodology (WIGK) with flexibility (advisory role, 'stick & carrot' approach)
Case resolution counselling	Non-directional; explores all options (asylum, return, irregular stay, onward migration)	Mainly civil society; some small-scale state projects (e.g., Dutch National Immigration Facility, Belgian Shelter and Orientation project)	Comprehensive approach to build strong interpersonal relationships
Legal counselling	Understand legal decisions and explain future options	Legal professionals	Legal advice
Reintegration counselling	Supports planning and organising return; may include reintegration strategies	State or civil-society actors providing AVRR	Primarily logistical and often considered secondary



Results IV: Timing of counselling

Counselling is most impactful when timed to migrants' changing **agency and circumstances**.

1 After arrival or early on

- Migrants focus on obtaining a legal status, not return --> counselling about return often seen as premature or threatening
- But: early and consistent information helps plant seed of awareness for later decisions

2 After a leaving order or a rejected asylum claim

- Critical decision point, as hope for legal stay collapses
- Heightened uncertainty and state pressure
- Opportunities for both legal and return counselling

3 After a prolonged irregular stay

- Legally and socially complex
- Migrants often face homelessness, health issues or trauma
- Potential disconnect from origin country
- Opportunity for case resolution counselling



Results V: Impact of lengthy return procedures



- **Administrative return procedures vary widely across migrants.** E.g. in our dataset, migrants have undergone between 1 and 15 return procedures with DTenV.



- **Strong relationship between the number of records a migrant has with DTenV and a reduced likelihood of choosing assisted return.** Our model expects:

- 19% of migrants with 1 return procedure to depart via assisted return
- 9% of migrants with 3 return procedures to depart via assisted return
- 2% of migrants with 6 return procedures to depart via assisted return



Results align with prior research suggesting that a **prolonged stay in the host country may decrease migrants' willingness or ability to engage in assisted return.**



Results VI: The role of reintegration assistance

1 As experienced by returnees

Rarely the seen as a major incentive for return but can be a supportive factor for those already considering this option (reassurance, modest starting point).

2 Other policy objectives

Reintegration assistance can:

- Reduce vulnerability immediately upon return, when most needed
- Help people build a source of income, address trauma and stress;
- Facilitate dialogue with origin countries;

However, challenges can blunt its impact:

- Different reality on the ground;
- Critical needs sometimes overlooked.



Recommendations I: Counselling

Prioritise counselling at key decision-making moments

- Focus early sessions on information-sharing and legal advice
- Time counselling to coincide with key decision-making moments (e.g. final negative asylum decision, issuance of an order to leave)

Work more closely with reintegration partners in countries of origin

- Role of local reintegration partners (language, culture, local realities)
- Strengthen their capacity and involvement through funding structures
- Plan in-country visits and develop online communication

Improve country- and diaspora-specific knowledge among counsellors

- Build stronger and more personal relationships with migrants
- Develop expertise in working with certain migrants

Explore safe & voluntary ways to engage family and community

- Role of collective expectations and responsibilities
- Engagement must be voluntary and carefully managed
- Support returnee-led efforts to raise awareness and reduce stigma



Recommendations II: Strategy and partnerships

Clarify the strategic purpose of counselling and reintegration assistance

- Primary value may lie beyond only increasing uptake of assisted return
- Define their respective role and objectives in policy and programmatic documents
- Set realistic objectives and align investments

Invest in increasing legal system capacity and efficiency

- Detrimental effects on migrants' mental health and well-being
- Should not be done at the expense of due process

Enhance the diversity of approaches & actors involved in counselling

- Role of local reintegration partners (language, culture, local realities)
- Strengthen their capacity and involvement through funding structures
- Plan in-country visits and develop online communication

Strengthen monitoring and evaluation of counselling methods

- Track the strengths and weaknesses
- Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework
- Clarify and enhance coordination at the EU level
- Align with policy dialogue forums and practitioner groups



Thank you for joining us



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Read the report:
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