

Reach Out conference

Marth 24th & March 25th 2021 – Online

Context

The **Reach Out project** (November 2019 until April 2021), approved under the **ERRIN facility**, looks at ways of improving outreach to irregular migrants in urban settings and in that way to increase the knowledge about Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) among groups who are hard to reach – stranded migrants and migrants in transit.

The project consists out of two major pillars of which we presented you the key deliverables during the conference.

1. A **city component** that targets cities willing to develop a comprehensive approach to counselling people who find themselves outside any procedures or outside official reception facilities. Cities we brought together in a sustainable **community of practice** around issues of counselling and return for undocumented migrants and the importance of local stakeholders.
2. An **outreach component** in which OFII and FEDASIL have jointly deployed a multinational outreach team who approaches undocumented migrants to raise their awareness about existing legal options, including the possibility of voluntary return. A team that is currently operating in Brussels, Calais and Grande-Synthe (Dunkirk).

The conference was held online (Vimeo live streaming) and attended by an average of 100 people from >10 different countries. Among the participants we noticed both front-line workers in the field of migration and policy makers from various EU member states.

This End Report aims to bring together the most important elements of the Conference in a short report, and we hope that both the *casual passer-by* and the interested reader will be inspired by our project.

Brussels, April 2021

The Reach Out Team

Day 1: City component

March 24th 2021

1. Introduction and welcome *by Belgian Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration, Sammy Mahdi*

- To tackle false narratives, often deliberately diffused by smugglers, it is not only useful but also necessary to provide neutral and correct information to undocumented migrants (in transit) about their rights and options in the country where they are residing. Migrants need to be informed correctly so they can take well-informed future-oriented decisions. The team of outreachers has an essential job in winning what you could call 'the war on information'.
- It is essential to have contact and to work together with local governments and civil society. The Reach Out team of Fedasil will be extended to reach out to more migrants and to work in other regions of the country.
- European cooperation and exchange can only enrich the debate and practice.
- To consider migration causes and possibilities for reintegration in the countries of origin, it is necessary to work closely together with countries of origin.

2. Reach Out brings cities together. The set-up of a Community of Practice (CoP) of 6 European cities *by Koen Van Rompaey, Fedasil*

- Any policy on Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) should have an information strategy on disseminating information in streets, shelters, at distribution points, etc. to a hybrid group of undocumented migrants.
- Fedasil set up a sustainable network of Belgian cities and civil society named CONEX, with the objective of enhancing cooperation and exchanging information regarding voluntary return. CONEX stands for connecting through local networks. The aim is to search for the target group, find them, inform them on their legal options with a focus on AVR. National and local stakeholders are natural allies to tackle these issues.
- In the scope of the Reach Out project a Community of Practice (CoP) was set up, composed of 6 European cities that have actively installed a policy on reaching out to migrants in precarious situations and to exchange on their good and bad practices. Eurocities was happy to actively promote Reach Out through their network. Antwerp proposed to co-chair the CoP, Newcastle agreed to join as an observing partner.
- Study visits and mapping exercises of local stakeholders were conducted in the participating cities of the CoP
- The key findings of the study visits and mappings are summarized in five conclusions in a Blueprint.

3. 6 cities of the Community of Practice speak out (Newcastle, Antwerp, Milan, Amsterdam, Utrecht and Ghent)

3 questions were asked to every city.

	1. Why work around counselling of undocumented migrants?	2. Provide a good practice of counselling and return of undocumented migrants	3. What would be a good support - added value in counselling, especially on return?
Amsterdam	To inform migrants about their options and the pros and cons of every option.	Inform the migrant that illegal stay is no longer an option / tailor guidance / in a trauma sensitive + non-judicial way / reliable partners in country of return.	Vocational training.
Milan	Because undocumented migrants have no access to local administration and social services.	Provide shelter and legal assistance.	A multi-disciplinary approach.
Newcastle	Mainly to support front line organizations upon AVR.	Provide basic support.	To rely on a network in the country of origin / expectation management / support emotional stress.
Utrecht	To obtain a durable solution: legal stay or AVR	BARKA: target group driven outreach to homeless EU-citizens to verify if a reconnection to the home country is an option.	BARKA: work on the pull factors in the home country: work for example.
Antwerp	To provide perspective to rough sleepers / to understand the needs of migrants.	Target group driven outreach to homeless EU-citizens (Barka) / towards North African migrants (Rema).	Decision making asks time to build trust and needs tailor made information.
Ghent	The local authority is the most close authority to the migrant and to the civil society / to work on a sustainable solution for migrant and city.	Give shelter to migrants who signed in for AVR because of the added value of the social and professional network.	Offer shelter to every homeless migrant.

4. Presentation of a blueprint on how to build a network to reach undocumented migrants in an urban context regarding counselling and return by Bert Verstraelen, city of Antwerp

- During extensive mapping exercises and study visits the project found out that the six participating cities all together did daily efforts to reach out to the target group together with more than 50 local stakeholders. The cities and their stakeholders were able to provide counselling and assistance towards a realistic and legal perspective including AVR to around 2500 undocumented migrants. More than 500 of them returned voluntarily to their home country in 2020.
- The key findings of the study visits, mappings and exchanges are summarized in 5 main conclusions:
 1. Embed voluntary return in a broader counselling towards a perspective.
 2. Tap into an existing network of local stakeholders.
 3. Provide information on existing urban activities concerning counselling and return through a website.
 4. Create and maintain a multi-level dialogue.
 5. Allocate resources to embed voluntary return as an explicit responsibility.

Q&A

Q: Are there any other cities than Utrecht, where this holistic way of working (AVR embedded in a broader counselling towards a perspective) is used?

A: Bert Verstraelen: Next to the majority of cities in our CoP we know that for example Helsinki, Stockholm and Munich also use this approach. And probably I forget other cities.

Q: What about migrants who can't return or can't get a residence permit?

A: Koen Van Rompaey: This is a difficult but pertinent question that would be rather interesting to ask to the panellists of the panel debate that will take place later. First of all is the main objective to find for every individual case the best outcome possible, given the circumstances. We strongly believe that a good cooperation also with services responsible for granting residency permits could help to find solutions for a potential return or residence in the residing country. Unfortunately all these efforts aren't always a guaranty for success.

Q: Can a re-integration budget convince migrants to return home?

A: Koen Van Rompaey: No, often there are other motivations and arguments for a migrant to take the decision to return back home. For example restoration of the network back home is essential. Providing a re-integration budget could potentially reduce and/or even eliminate obstacles.

Q: What tips do you have for local authorities to start with this way of working?

A: Koen Van Rompaey: We would like to invite local authorities to read our Blueprint for cities (see 4) and in case they have got more questions we strongly recommend them to contact us. In the second phase of the Reach Out project we hope to develop an information session / webinar around this subject which could be offered to interesting local authorities or other city platforms/networks. For further details, please contact the Reach Out project (details later in this report).

1. Panel debate about multi-governance cooperation, challenges of intra-European cooperation between cities and the possibility of cooperation with cities in countries of origin or transit countries moderation by Jeroen Vandekerckhove, Fedasil

This panel discussion focused on three main questions:

1. The importance and challenges of multi-governance cooperation.
2. The importance and challenges of intra-European cooperation between municipalities.
3. Cooperation with cities in countries of origin and transit: realistic or a distant dream?

The participants were Mr **Michael Kegels**, *Director General of Fedasil*, Mrs **Sarah Spencer**, *Senior Fellow at COMPAS and its Director of Strategy and Director of the City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe (C-MISE)*, and Mr **Martijn Pluim**, *Director Migration Dialogues & Cooperation ICMPD*.

Mr Michael Kegels:

- Cities are in the front line confronted with the problems of our era, and need to find pragmatic solutions, close to the day-to-day reality of their residents.
- Fedasil is a multi-actor, a multi-level governance organisation, and takes up a unique role in the governmental landscape in Belgium. By creating coalitions Fedasil creates solutions for complex problems, in collaboration with stakeholders, including municipalities and the local actors that we reach through the municipalities.
- By investing / introducing these kind of solutions, Fedasil became a front-runner and was able to respond quickly when the Federal policy changed. ERRIN gave us the opportunity and the leverage to build this approach.
- Certain NGO's did not want to talk about return, and the current approach has opened many closed doors.
- Continuity of care: Fedasil remains responsible for counselling a migrant from his arrival to his departure and Fedasil has an obligation to provide solutions for the target group and society as a whole - even when this target group is hard to reach.
- Opportunities for the future collaboration with municipalities: creating a 'One stop shop' in the biggest cities, a concept where Reach Out and information provision is linked to reception.

Mrs Sarah Spencer:

- National government should give support to cities and municipalities on:
 1. Recognising and accepting the basic needs of irregular migrants, and create the political space to do so.
 2. Create dialogue: within which juridical borders do both national and local authorities work?
 3. Provide practical and financial support.
 4. Provide a 1-2-1 dialogue between official levels on individual cases / respect everybody's role.

Mr Martijn Pluim:

- Talking about a gov-to-gov approach on AVR in the Community of Practice, a balance between trust and a strong local policy towards migrants must be found. Local authorities are equal partners to establish a mutual understanding.
- Most of the returning migrants, don't re-integrate in the original context, but will stay in an urban environment. Given the fact that a lot of them deal with socio-psychological issues, this theme has to be a part in the discussion between cities in EU-member states.
- Q Mr. Pluim: Does C-MISE have contacts with third country-cities?
 - ✓ A: Mrs Sarah Spencer: No, most of the C-MISE cities are in a prospective phase and have now to find ways to work with their own national authorities.

Day 2: Out Reach Component

March 25th 2021

1. Introduction and welcome by Michael Kegels, Director General of Fedasil

- The issue of transit migrants is by nature a transnational issue, and with the aim to achieve a durable solution, a transnational approach is needed.
- In terms of knowledge management, we want to consolidate the outcomes of the mutual learning between Fedasil and OFII in a methodology, a practical guide for outreachers.

2. The Franco-Belgian multinational outreach team by Fedasil and OFII

- Set-up of a Franco-Belgian outreach team reaching out to undocumented migrants (transit migrants & stranded migrants) in Calais, Grande-Synthe (Dunkirk) and Brussels.
- Provision of government approved correct information (legal options including AVR). *"A well-informed migrant can take a well-informed decision."*
- 9 joint outreach sessions in both countries (mutual learning) – before pandemic when crossing the border was allowed.
- Getting to know the target group and transit migration as phenomenon.
- Focus on (1) correct information, (2) dialogue and (3) the importance of a network with the aim to establish a relationship of trust with the migrant.
- The Franco-Belgian team encountered some important challenges during outreach: measuring the impact, credibility vs trust as a state official, role stress as outreach workers, UK as *the promised land* and speaking about AVR with the target group.
- The team had more than 3500 counselling contacts with the target group over the year 2020.
- Development of a method (outreach model → see point 3) and integrating it in an 'Outreach Guide'.

Q&A

Q: What was the impact of COVID-19 on the Reach Out activities?

A: Bert Truyen: Because of COVID-19 restrictions we were obliged to pause for almost three months (mid-March till mid-June) our outside operational activities, a major part of the job as an outreach worker. We did some counsellings by telephone and reporting, but mainly we used this period for something else. We reorganised our weekly planning and we intensified the meeting moments between the French and Belgian outreach workers. We 'met' each other several times a week online for intervision, workshops and other operational meetings to analyse and work with the first findings we had in the field. The seed was planted for our outreach model, experiences were analysed and written down. The outlines of the model were developed in this particular period. After this first 'lockdown' we started again on the field with the first analysis of experiences in our heads. From on the end of June 2020 we were operating 'normal' again in the field, with respect to COVID-19 safety measures.

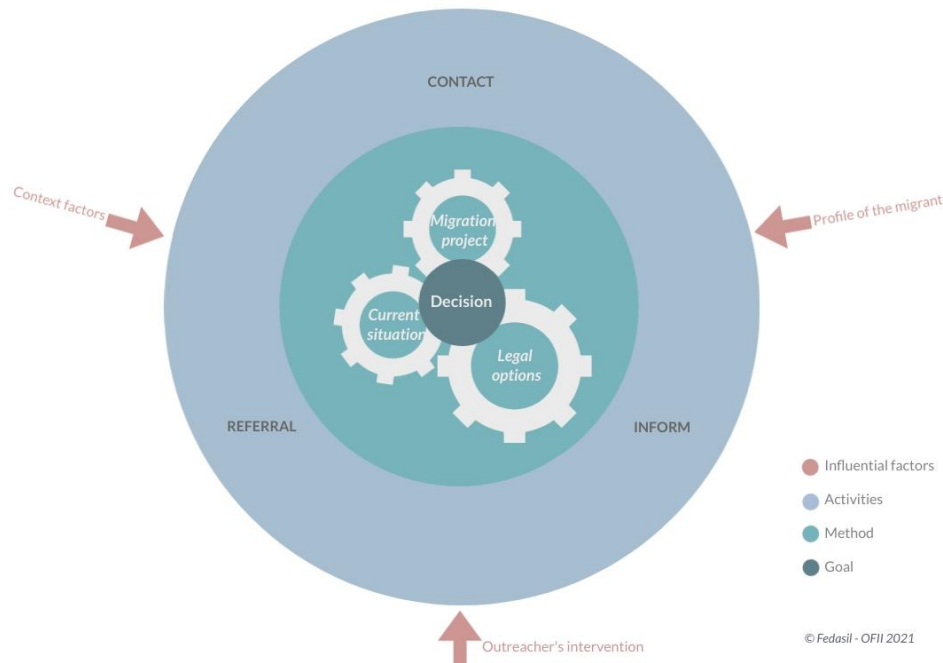
Q: What technology could be useful in the Reach Out activities?

A: Anaëlle Hars & Bert Truyen: A tablet to give real-time information to migrants could be very useful and is already used in France. A website with Q&A's and testimonials in native languages could be very useful as well. In the second phase of the Reach Out project we hope to be able to develop an innovative multi-media tool to facilitate outreach activities.

3. Presentation of the newly developed Outreach Model by Joris Kennis, Fedasil

- From experience to a model that can offer structure and guidance to field workers conducting outreach activities towards undocumented migrants outside official reception structures: the idea of '*micro counselling*' is introduced.
- Four important elements were defined in the making of the outreach model: influential factors, three main activities, the method, and finally the goal (towards a decision). You can find these elements in the model hereunder.
 - The influential factors include context factors, the profile of the migrant and the interventions of the outreach worker.
 - The main activities during outreach are contacting, informing and referring. Trying to establish a contact and keeping into contact, providing information and refer people in your network.
 - The method includes going into dialogue with the migrant about the migrant's migration project. It also means analysing what the current situation of the migrant is and contrasting it with the migration project, this therefore allows a possibility to present legal options. When using this method, it is essential to work within a network and to be able to, as an organisation with a multi-level approach, refer migrants to relevant services. The method is presented by the metaphor of rotating gears.
 - In the core of the process stands the decision. How to reach the decision making process? First, the outreach worker gives tailor-made information (which is reliable and trustworthy). Secondly they can mirror it to the current situation, and therefore advise the migrant. The outreach worker always lets the migrant keep the ownership of the decision. Finally, decision making means there is a minimum of trust and self-efficacy. The advice given by the outreach worker therefore always goes with guidance. The end result will anyway often depend on many other factors.

- Having contact on a regular base, staying available, providing correct information and having access to a referral structure, keeps migrants engaged in the decision-making.
- This model is described into detail in the Reach Out project paper: 'Reaching out to undocumented migrants: a guide'.



4. Panel debate about the importance of outreach in the “return chain”, the future of outreach & return counselling in Europe and transit migration as a phenomenon in Europe *moderation by Jeroen Vandekerckhove, Fedasil*

This panel discussion focused on three main topics:

1. The importance and challenges of outreach in the “return chain”
2. The future of outreach and return counselling in Europe
3. Transit migration: a European phenomenon

The participants were Mr **Mikko Hakkarainen**, *Policy Officer at the European Commission*, Mr **Ruben Laurijssens**, *Senior Programme Manager ERRIN*, Mr **Thomas Péguy**, *Deputy Director for Immigration, Return, Reintegration and International Affairs at l’Office Français de l’Immigration et de l’Intégration (OFII)* and Mr **Pieter Spinnewijn**, *Director of Operations Fedasil*.

Mr Mikko Hakkarainen:

- Underlines the willingness of the Commission to cooperate with all stakeholders (local NGO – local administration – regional administration – national administration – European administration).
- Reintegration must take into account the benefits of the migrant, the MS and the EU.
- Within the EU-framework on return counselling you see good examples of how the Commission sees the re-enforcement of both MS-policy makers and field organisations.

Mr Ruben Laurijssens:

- The challenges and the contexts in the different member states are not unique: the Reach Out project shows that listening to and learning from each other pays off. ERRIN applauds the development of joint-collaborations between EU-member states.
- Within the CADRE project, counselling (as a theme) has already its place in the Train the Trainer-manual and in the Training curriculum.
- ERRIN will keep on supporting the Reach Out way of working because its unique focus on transit migration.

Mr Thomas Péguay:

- Outreach can be seen as the last chance for administrations to have contact with migrants, before the migrant completely disappears underground.
- Reach out has taught us that transit migration is a European phenomenon: transit migration can be the consequence of a failure of the asylum application or because the procedure is so long that the migrant loses trust.
- Sometimes, transit migration is the consequence of the failure of integration: migrants obtain protection related not to the fact that they were in danger when leaving their country, but would be in danger if they returned home. This kind of protection does not allow them to work nor allow their families to join them. This is why some of them move (to England).
- Reach out provides a better understanding of the transnational dynamics of migrants: their plan is to reach the United Kingdom from Calais, but they rest in Brussels (because they benefit from better reception from NGOs than the conditions in France, according to them). And this transnational approach is also followed by the smugglers, who are often located in Belgium. They are therefore sometimes the same migrants found in the two countries, which reinforces the relevance of cooperation between FR and BE: acting in Brussels means acting in Calais, and vice versa.
- European solidarity: in France, applicants under the Dublin procedure represented more than 30% of the asylum applications (2019 and 2020). France transmitted 50 000 Dublin requests in 2019 and nearly 30 000 in 2020 for a transfer rate of about 18 % over the last two years. Like the relocation, which relieves the countries of first reception, it is right that European projects like outreach relieve the countries of destination of secondary movements.

Mr Pieter Spinnewijn:

- Aside return numbers, the Reach Out project shows its importance in a qualitative way: it bridges the gap between NGO's and national authorities, and it bridges the gap between the national and local level.
- Given the fact that there a lot of stranded and transit migrants, there is a current need of mapping, monitoring and collaboration, but we need to take our time to grow, because the challenges will grow as well. Therefore, upscaling the project is a good step.
- Risks: (1) effectiveness of the Dublin regulation. In Belgium less than 10% of the requests are executed. Migrants must be informed about Dublin before they leave the reception structure, and (2) Belgium is loved by transit migrants because of its reception facilities run by NGO's. To keep the balance straight in a EU context, it is necessary to have similar initiatives in every EU-member state.
- In recent months we have learned to gain insight into the needs of these migrants as well as the challenges for the authorities and we were able to tailor the operation accordingly. However, we also feel the need to deepen this approach. Transit migration transcends borders, so the idea of an EU observatory on transmigration seems an interesting one.

Findings

- Migrants are in need of access to **correct information**. Authorities have to fight against fake news.
- **Cities** fulfill the role of **front runners of innovation**. The Reach Out Community of Practice of six cities learned us that a practical exchange and dialogue between cities offers insights into how to tackle common problems.
- A practical **dialogue and an exchange** with cities in countries of origin and cities in other transit countries must be considered.
- Outreach and counselling aren't activities you conduct on your own completely isolated. The **collaboration** between different levels of governance and civil society can offer a solution to challenges faced. Building a **network of stakeholders on different levels** is essential.
- It is important to avoid considering **return counselling** as a stand-alone activity. It can only be successful when **embedded in a broader perspective** (within a set of options) and in the provision of a wider range of social services. Will the EU strategy on Voluntary Return recognize these findings? And help spreading this idea around all EU member states?
- The issue of transit migrants is by nature a transnational issue, and with the aim to achieve a durable solution, a **transnational approach** is needed.
- Reach Out has taught us that transit migration is a **European phenomenon**. Transit migration can be the consequence of a failure of the asylum application, a failure of integration or/and even the long duration of procedures in other EU member states. That's why some migrants decide to move to for example the UK.
- Reach Out helps to gain **insight into the needs of migrants in transit and the challenges** for national authorities when approaching them. We were able to tailor the operations



accordingly, however we feel the need to deepen the approach. Transit migration transcends borders, so the idea of an **EU observatory on transmigration** seems an interesting one.

The way forward

Reach Out would like to continue after April 2021.

An extension of the project is at the moment in a process of validation.

The proposed way forward:

1. **Disseminate key-deliverables:** (1) if the Outreach Model would be implemented in the CADRE-project the multinational team stays available, (2) info sessions and/or a webinar about the Blueprint will be organised, and (3) a focus group will be installed to open up Reach Out activities to interested EU member states in the ERRIN network.
2. **Consolidate, deepen and expand the project** by increasing the number of weekly counselling contacts conducted by the Franco-Belgian outreach team. Strengthen and **enlarge the network**. Establish a link between outreach workers in France/Belgium and ERRIN Service Providers in some well-chosen countries of origin. Include a SPOC of the UK Home Office to tackle false narratives about the UK.
3. External outreach, **creating a communications plan:** (1) storytelling + creative content, (2) creation of an innovative multi-media tool to facilitate outreach activities.

For further information

For any further information about:

- the link to the After movie of the conference
- the Conference (the entire recordings of the 2 days),
- the PowerPoint presentations, used during the Conference,
- the Reach Out Blue Print for cities,
- the Outreach Guide (including the Outreach Model),
- the Reach Out project in general,

please contact the Reach Out team via ReachOut@fedasil.be