

REPORT

EXPERT CONFERENCE ON RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

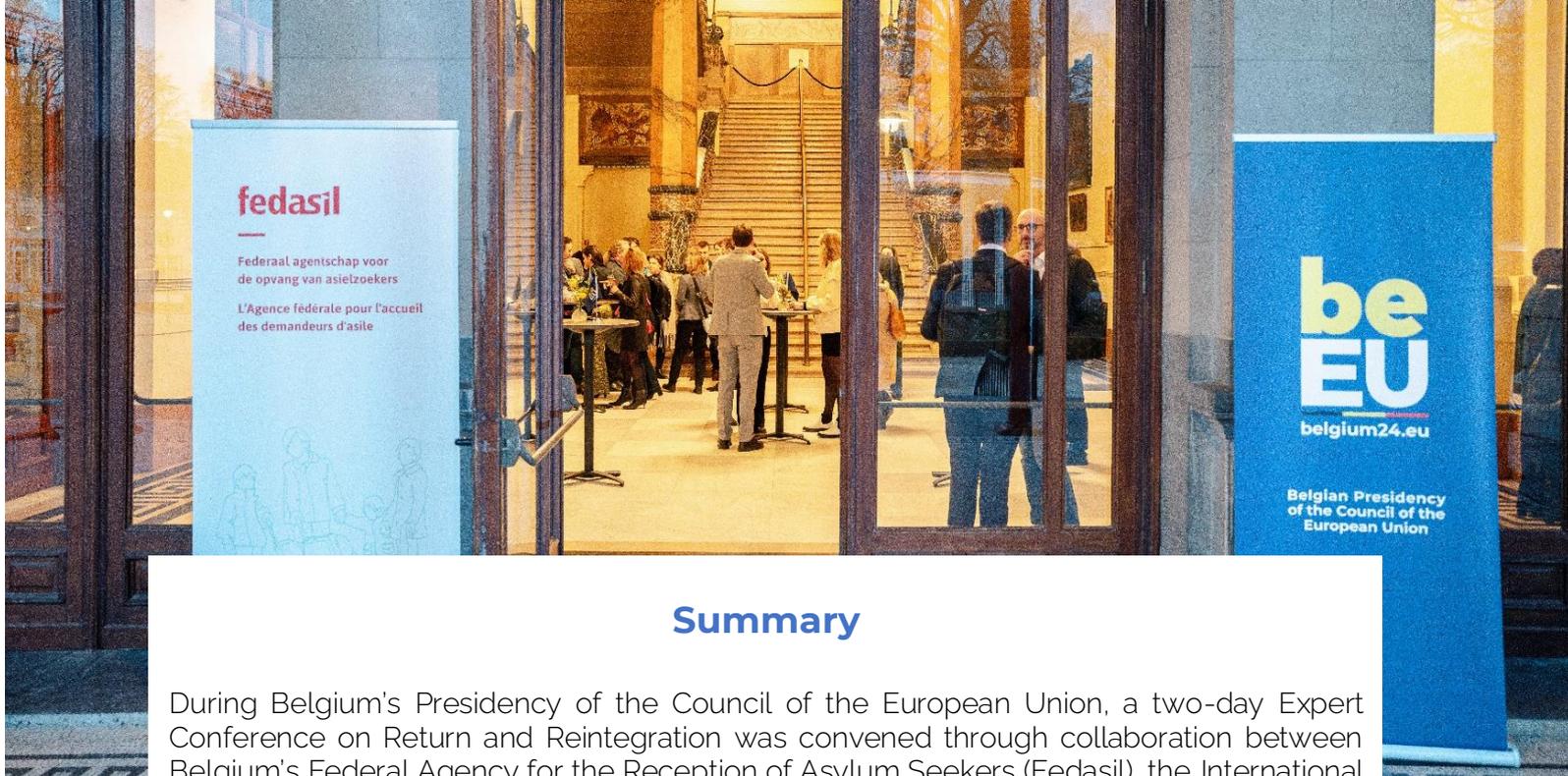
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The Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration, jointly organised by Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), played a crucial role during Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU. This conference provided an invaluable platform for exchanging fresh perspectives and shaping the agendas of Member States, the EU, and their partners.

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Summary

During Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, a two-day Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration was convened through collaboration between Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). This conference provided a platform for experts and policymakers to explore the complexities of return and reintegration policies and practices, related to the ongoing dynamic of EU-level programming becoming reference over national programming. It aimed to reflect on the changing landscape of return and reintegration in the EU, looking at both the EU internal and external dimensions. It also aimed to look ahead, encourage innovative perspectives, and provide valuable insights to shape the agendas of Member States, the EU, and their global partners.

The first day of the conference delved into the latest developments within the framework of an evolving EU harmonised strategy towards return and reintegration. This focus was particularly significant in light of the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration and the adoption of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, signalling momentum and urgency to advance the return and reintegration agenda. Participants engaged in discussions covering various aspects of return and reintegration. They primarily stressed the need to overcome fragmentation in the return landscape and to implement balanced and coherent approaches that reconcile harmonised EU frameworks with customised national return and reintegration programmes. The significance of quality reintegration support, effective return counselling adapted to different settings and profiles, and better monitoring and evaluation to promote evidence-based policymaking was also underscored. In line with these discussions, conference participants emphasised the need to expand, diversify and augment efforts, with particular focus on the following key objectives:

Enhancing Collaboration: Sessions emphasised the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches involving national and local authorities, EU Agencies, and civil society organisations (CSOs) both in countries of origin, transit and destination, to design and implement successful return and reintegration initiatives.

Balancing Growing Harmonisation with National Programmes Tailored to Specific Contexts and Needs: Participants emphasised the necessity of ensuring complementarity between national programs and Frontex Joint Reintegration Services (JRS). They advocated for harmonisation in return and reintegration strategies across Member States, while retaining the flexibility to tailor programs to specific contexts and vulnerable groups.

Supporting Returnees Across the Economic, Psychosocial and Social Dimensions: Experts promoted a holistic approach to return and reintegration, integrating economic, psychosocial and social dimensions to establish comprehensive support systems. Addressing pre-departure and post-return mental health issues among returnees emerged as a critical aspect of successful reintegration. These insights highlighted the necessity for providing adequate psychosocial support.

Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation: Experts advocated for enhancing evaluation methods to assess both outcomes and processes of return and reintegration programmes. Advocating for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks, designed to accommodate diverse perspectives and meet the needs of different stakeholders, including returnees, countries of origin, and EU Member States.

Utilising Data Effectively: Discussions stressed the importance of promoting data-driven policy by enhancing the comparability of data and digital case management systems and ensuring the interoperability of different systems and collaboration between different actors. Continuous efforts to effectively collect, interpret, and utilise data will be crucial to inform policy decisions and maximise the impact of existing policies and programmes.

Empowering Return Counsellors: Participants emphasised the central role of return counsellors in providing comprehensive and accurate information throughout all stages of the return process and in facilitating sustainable reintegration. Consequently, participants advocated for their continuous involvement across all stages of the return and reintegration processes to ensure effective return counselling.

Ensuring Predictable Long-term Funding: Acknowledging the importance of sustained commitment, participants highlighted the need for predictable EU funding for voluntary return and reintegration initiatives to bolster the sustainability of programs. This is especially critical as Member States deepen their involvement in initiatives funded by the EU, specifically emphasising their engagement in the JRS.

Governance Structure and Budgets Review: With voluntary return and reintegration policies gaining prominence within the EU, discussions underscored the need to assess if the current EU governance structures and budgets are still adequate. This assessment should include the role and mandate of Frontex to ensure that return perspectives are well-represented and discussed in the Frontex Management Board. Additionally, it is essential to reflect on policy perspectives and strategic positioning to ensure Frontex's activities align with evolving needs and priorities in the field.



On the second day of the conference, the emphasis shifted towards bolstering the sustainability of reintegration programming. The goal of sustainable reintegration is to ensure enduring benefits for returnees and communities in countries of origin. Conversations delved into multiple facets of return and reintegration initiatives, including establishing connections between development cooperation and migration management, integrating remigration into return and reintegration strategies, and implementing inclusive project cycle management. Participants highlighted the importance of expanding initiatives to enhance the sustainability of reintegration programming, with particular emphasis on the following key objectives:

Inclusive Project Cycle: Discussions highlighted the importance of involving all stakeholders in EU Member States and countries of origin throughout the project cycle, from (pre-)design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Through co-creation, the goal is to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of reintegration efforts, benefiting both returnees and the communities involved.

Promoting Engagement from Countries of Origin: Sessions emphasised the need to empower countries of origin to co-lead in designing and implementing return and reintegration programmes, ensuring alignment with national development strategies.

Alignment of Funding: Participants stressed that to benefit returning citizens and local communities, international funding should align with the national development policies of countries of origin. Reintegration involves short-term and long-term perspectives, with various organisations, funding sources, and roles involved. Developing and funding packages for basic needs through the EU return landscape is crucial, but long-term reintegration efforts extend beyond return administrations. Building bridges between the different phases of the reintegration processes, whilst ensuring these are adaptable to local contexts, is essential,

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Enhanced Coordination: Participants advocated for improved coordination among development agencies and migration management agencies to streamline programming and optimising impact for returnees and communities. Particular attention is drawn to prioritising vulnerability and strengthening the capacity and accessibility of existing services.

Integration of Remigration: Discussions centred on considering integrating remigration as a potential outcome of voluntary return and reintegration efforts. Therefore, a shift is required from viewing it solely as a failure, to acknowledging it as one of the possible outcomes for both returnees and the communities involved, especially within the context of legal migration pathways.



Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing pressure on the European Union (EU) to enhance its effectiveness in managing return and reintegration processes.

The increase in arrivals and asylum applications in 2015-2016 brought attention to the importance of effective return policies, leading to the development of action plans by the European Commission and the expansion of the mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) which has consequently increased its operational support to Member States in all phases of return, including voluntary return and reintegration. Despite significant efforts and investments by Member States and the EU, low return rates remained a concern.

In 2020, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed legislative changes to strengthen the links between asylum and return procedures and conduct swifter returns. Subsequently, in 2021, the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration was adopted, emphasising the promotion of voluntary return initiatives. In addition, the EU is working to enhance cooperation between national and EU levels and improve the monitoring and evaluation of return and reintegration programmes. The objective is to improve the effectiveness of return and reintegration policies and to develop a more coherent approach to return and reintegration across the EU, or even a common EU return system, as formulated in the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration.

Therefore, the operational landscape of return and reintegration in the EU is rapidly changing, and a common understanding of the critical ingredients of successful return and reintegration is also emerging in the field.

At the EU level, several initiatives have been effectively implemented, including the Frontex Joint Reintegration Services (JRS), the examination of best practices within the European Migration Network Return Expert Group (EMN-REG), and the enhanced cooperation among EU Member States through the High-Level Network on Return (HLNR) led by the Return Coordinator. Additionally, Member States are enacting legislative reforms and implementing new operational strategies at the national level to enhance returns.

New dynamics are emerging where EU-funded and operated solutions are increasingly at the forefront, even serving as the benchmark in programming. This shift emphasises the critical need to strengthen digitalisation, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms. Furthermore, it requires a distinct approach to coordination — one that is responsive to these evolving trends and enables effective collaboration.

The upcoming Commission should address persistent challenges to establish more effective policies and practices, in particular overcoming fragmentation in the EU return and reintegration landscape.



Conferences like the Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration provide valuable opportunities for collaboration and idea exchange among civil society organisations (CSOs), Member States, countries of origin, and EU Institutions. Let us draw inspiration from these insights and work together to enhance return and reintegration efforts within the EU.

Day 1: Moving Towards a Harmonized Approach in Return and Reintegration

Welcome & Opening Remarks

The opening speeches emphasised the need to enhance the EU's return policy by strengthening the common return system. Key points included:

- The need for greater harmonisation, transparency, trust-building, digitalisation and high-quality return counselling throughout all stages of the migration process.
- Cooperation with CSOs and national and local authorities in Member States and countries of origin.
- The importance of assessing achievements in return and reintegration, particularly in light of the recently agreed New Pact on Migration and Asylum and the importance of effective returns for its implementation ensuring that returns are not only effective but also sustainable in the long term.

Overall, the panellists highlighted the core values of humane return policies, efficiency, and sustainability in return and reintegration endeavours.

Nicole de Moor, *State Secretary for Asylum and Migration at the Belgian Federal Government*, emphasised Belgium's dedication to enhancing the EU's return policy, particularly strengthening the common return system. She stressed the significance of fostering a humane, sustainable, and effective return policy, highlighting the values of coherence, shared logic, and trust-building among Member States. Belgium's commitment to prioritising the common return system aligns with the objectives of its presidency. It demonstrates notable progress in initiatives such as the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) and support for return counselling. Acknowledging these successes, she highlighted that the conference's main aim was to create a compassionate and effective return policy, with a strong focus on voluntary return. Building on past good practices,

Ms. de Moor advocated for predictable and high-quality return and reintegration support, with active collaboration in developing sustainable policies alongside the Commission and Frontex. She considered the coherence of collective efforts at national and international levels are crucial for successful policy implementation and maintaining trust among stakeholders. Furthermore, she emphasised the necessity of ensuring that all EU Member States are on board. With Belgium holding the Council presidency, discussions on return policy gain increased attention on the policy agenda. The insights gathered during the conference are expected to influence future interactions with the Commission and the European Parliament.



"Fostering a humane, sustainable, and effective return policy, highlighting the values of coherence, shared logic, and trust-building among Member States is significant."

Fanny François, *Director-General at Fedasil*, underscored that while it may appear unconventional for a reception agency to host a conference on return and reintegration, it was a purposeful legislative decision in Belgium to assign Fedasil the coordination of voluntary return and reintegration programme. Fedasil's direct interaction with asylum seekers empowers them to make well-informed decisions and prepare for life post-asylum process. Transparency and trust-building are core tenets of Fedasil's approach to return counselling, tailored to address the distinct needs of migrants. Moreover, the agency stresses the importance of partnerships with CSOs and local authorities, recognising them as indispensable allies in all their initiatives.

Through extensive collaboration with various stakeholders, Fedasil has been instrumental in shaping EU initiatives, establishing its position as a critical influencer in the field of return and reintegration by advocating for multi-stakeholder and multi-governance approaches.

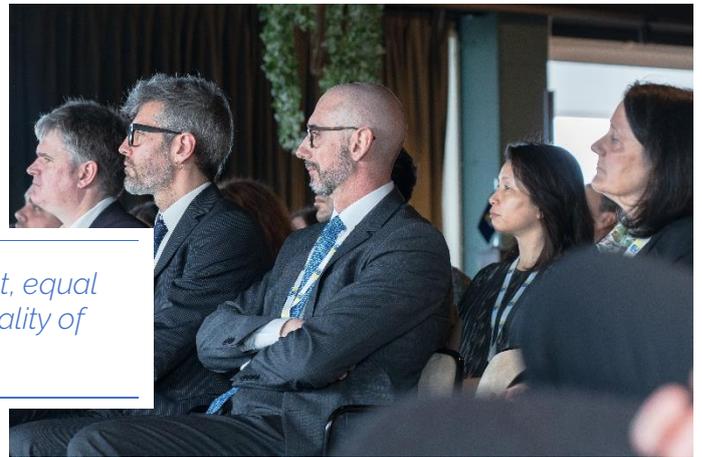


"Transparency and trust-building are core tenets of Fedasil's approach to return counselling, tailored to address the distinct needs of migrants."

Michael Shotter, *Director Migration and Asylum, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs at the European Commission*, underscored the conference as an opportune moment to reflect on achievements in the field of return and reintegration. Mr. Shotter highlighted the pivotal moment marked by the third anniversary of the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration and the adoption of the Pact. Which shows the commitment to forge sustainable solutions for migration management, prioritising border control and solidarity among Member States. Central to fully realising the new migration rules are effective and sustainable return. While Frontex has played a crucial role in bolstering return effectiveness and providing reintegration support, challenges persist in implementation due to fragmentation in approaches within and between Member States and between national and EU-level. In this sense, he remarked that collaborative efforts with Frontex, in the EMN-REG and the HLNR as well as fully embracing digitalisation are pivotal to ensure a common EU system on return and the success of the Pact. The Pact implementation mandates a collective shift in efforts, emphasising the necessity of collaboration and progress for ensuring effective return and reintegration across the EU.



"Collaborative efforts with Frontex, in the EMN-REG and the HLNR as well as fully embracing digitalisation are pivotal to ensure a common EU system on return and the success of the Pact."



"While numerical targets are set, equal emphasis should be on the quality of actions."

Alessandro Di Tolla, *Director of the European Centre for Returns Division at Frontex* focused on Frontex's evolving role, noting how the new EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration has transformed its operations. From primarily enforcing return policies, Frontex now pioneers areas like counselling and reintegration support. Despite progress, he considered there is room for growth, especially in balancing quantity and quality. Internally, Frontex is restructuring to better prepare for future challenges. Assistance to Member States has expanded significantly, notably in facilitating voluntary returns and reintegration.

Successes underscore the effectiveness of collaborative efforts and the importance of a unified approach. While numerical targets are set, equal emphasis should be on the quality of actions. Mr. Di Tolla stressed ongoing commitment to listening, learning, and collaborating, through Frontex's active participation in events like the conference. Harmonisation among stakeholders is essential for success, ensuring a cohesive approach. Frontex remains dedicated to proactive engagement and collaboration, focusing on enhancing the overall quality of their contributions at the EU level.



Session 1: A balancing act: Defining risks and opportunities of an increasingly harmonised system of return and reintegration.

During the opening session, led by **Hanne Beirens**, *Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, attendees discussed the changing landscape of return and reintegration in the EU and the risks and opportunities of an increasingly harmonised approach.

- Panellists shared valuable perspectives on opportunities and challenges, emphasising the need for a nuanced strategy that balances growing harmonisation of return and reintegration with the needs and priorities of individual Member States.
- Collaboration, adaptability, and tailored support for vulnerable groups were highlighted as key themes. Trust among stakeholders was underscored as crucial for the long-term success of reintegration efforts.
- Discussions also centred on Frontex's initiatives, including the JRS, and underscored the importance of integrating JRS with national programs designed to address specific priorities and needs.
- There was an emphasis on the necessity to enhance quality monitoring in return and reintegration processes.
- Overall, the session emphasised the importance of collaborative efforts and the provision of adequate support to ensure high-quality return and reintegration programming across the EU.

Panellists

Dries Lensen, *Team leader, Joint Reintegration Services Team at the Post-Return Unit at Frontex* underscored the significance of Frontex's initiatives, particularly the JRS, in the realm of return and reintegration. He outlined three main impacts of Frontex's JRS. Firstly, he noted that the JRS had provided a common framework and reduced discrepancies among EU Member States, which increases clarity on reintegration policies across the EU and might in turn reduce secondary movement. Secondly, Mr. Lensen highlighted the concept of operational ownership by national authorities, which empowers Member States to take charge of reintegration assistance efforts and maintain control over the process. Thirdly, he stressed that JRS operates within a broader EU framework, ensuring closer linkages with other EU bodies and EU activities, both in Member States and third countries. Lastly, he underlined the need for coherence by aligning return practices as well as the importance of consolidating the JRS before considering further expansion, including engagement with countries of origin and alignment with national requirements.





Thomas Peguy, *Deputy director of Immigration, Return, Reintegration and International Affairs, at the Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration (OFII)*, highlighted the effectiveness of EU initiatives such as JRS and RIAT in enhancing communication and operational efficiency. However, he also underscored the importance of diversification and the development of national programmes that complement JRS. He noted the increasing complexity of returnees' profiles, with a notable rise in those facing mental health problems, calling for tailored voluntary return programmes - including psycho-social interventions - to address their specific needs. Drawing from examples in France, he emphasised the need to embed reintegration within a broader migration framework, which includes circular migration models. Additionally, Mr. Peguy emphasised the crucial need for predictability in EU funding to enable the design and implementation of successful return and reintegration programmes. This predictability ensures stability and continuity in supporting migrant return and reintegration efforts.

"Reintegration should be embedded within a broader migration framework, which includes circular migration models."

Koen Van Rompaey, *Head of Service Voluntary Return at Fedasil*, underscored the advantages of establishing a shared foundation and highlighted the added value of existing EU-level initiatives such as JRS and RIAT. He emphasised the necessity to complement EU-level initiatives with flexible national programmes to address diverse national requirements, utilising domestic funds for targeted objectives. He stressed the importance of EU programmes aligning with national efforts and emphasised the critical role of creating a robust quality monitoring framework to uphold trust, coherence and quality, particularly with JRS expansion.

"It is a necessity to complement EU-level initiatives with flexible national programmes to address diverse national requirements, utilising domestic funds for targeted objectives."

Christina Jespersen, *Senior Project Manager at the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF)*, outlined the role of the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) within the EU return architecture. It was emphasised that the RRF addresses tasks not yet undertaken by Frontex, such as developing complementary reintegration services tailored to specific contexts and groups, including vulnerable returnees. These services are required to be coherent, non-conflicting, and operationally aligned with Frontex's basic services.



*Ingredients for synergies:
a mix of standardised approaches
and tailored national programmes*

Session 2: Pitfalls of a tick-the-box exercise: What steps are needed to secure the quality of reintegration support and foster sustainable reintegration?

Camille Le Coz, *Associate Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, led the second session, highlighting the importance of robust reintegration support and sustainable integration.

- Experts identified hurdles in current strategies and stressed the need for clearly defined roles, robust methodologies, and adequate research funding.
- Despite growing recognition of its multidimensional nature, defining and measuring sustainable reintegration across EU Member States remains a challenge.
- The session explored complexities in crafting a comprehensive monitoring framework, including the need to develop key performance indicators (KPIs), and reach an agreement on benchmarks for success, the need for sufficient funding for monitoring efforts, the need to measure and manage risks in existing programmes, and to include local actors in monitoring exercises, ideally at the (pre-)design stage.
- Audience questions focused on challenges in monitoring and evaluation, partner selection criteria, the impact of asylum procedures on returns, and the advantages of diversifying partnerships.

Panellists

Lucia Salgado, *Associate Policy Analyst at MPI Europe (MPI-E)*, delved into the changing understanding of the goals and benchmarks for success of reintegration programmes among key stakeholders in the field. She highlighted the varying goals of reintegration programmes, from encouraging returns to prioritising immediate assistance and encouraging collaboration with third countries on migration issues, although there is a growing acknowledgement that reintegration programmes should foster sustainable reintegration. Despite this growing consensus, the definition of sustainable reintegration is still and unclear. While sustainable reintegration has traditionally been linked to economic integration, there is a rising acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of reintegration, including as well psychosocial well-being and access to services. Therefore, establishing a unified definition and approach to sustainable reintegration remains an ongoing endeavour.

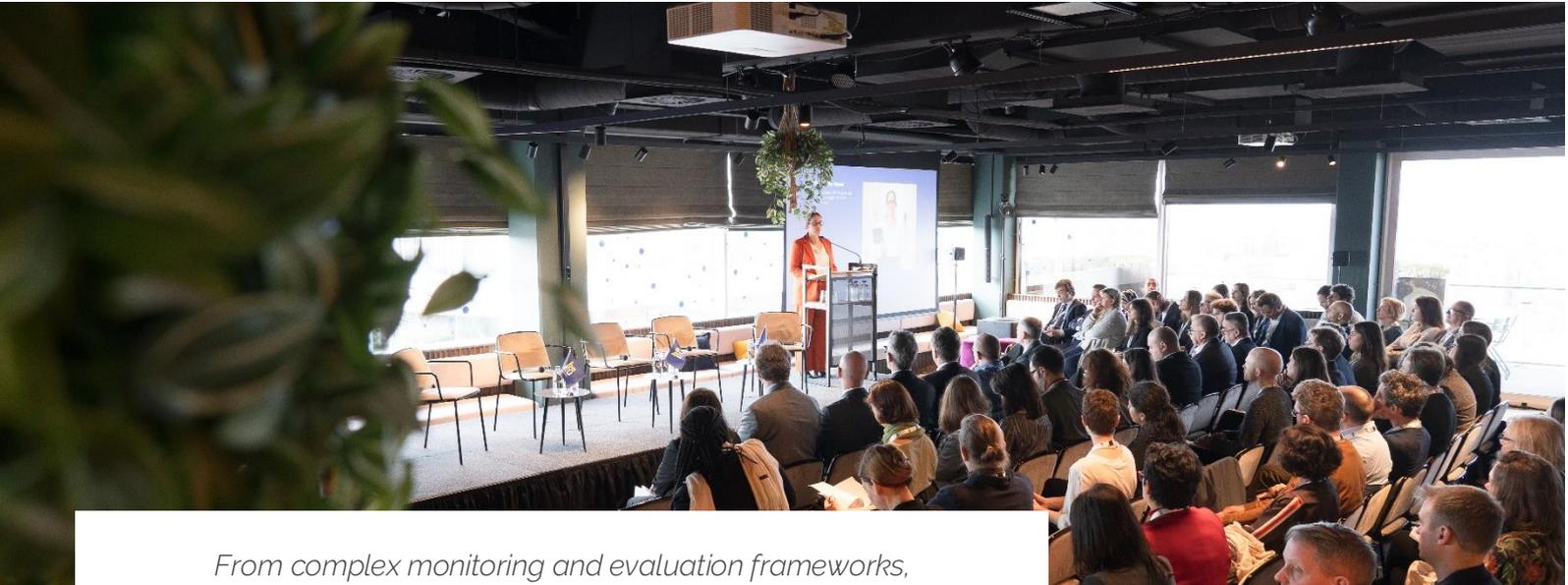
Jo Matyn, *Reintegration Program Coordinator at Fedasil*, outlined Belgium's approach to quality monitoring, which emphasises the quality of the process over mere outcomes. This approach ultimately leads to better outcomes. Over the years, various quantitative and qualitative mechanisms and tools have been developed to enhance monitoring. These include database analysis, regular meetings and interviews with partners, evaluation visits, and the establishment of a steering committee. This approach underscores the importance of trust, collaboration, and continuous improvement in facilitating successful reintegration. Moreover, it emphasises the critical connection between pre-departure preparations and post-arrival initiatives, highlighting how thorough preparedness significantly influences success.

"The critical connection between pre-departure preparations and post-arrival initiatives, highlights how thorough preparedness significantly influences success."

Dries Lensen, *Team Leader of the Joint Reintegration Services Team within Frontex's Post-Return Unit*, referred to the goal of creating a system that is sustainable and predictable, and discussed the complexities of crafting a robust quality monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for the JRS. He highlighted the development of KPIs to consider the perspectives of all stakeholders, including returnees, countries of origin, and Member States. He also raised questions on how to assess and mitigate risks in existing programmes, how to measure vulnerabilities, or how to correctly interpret the data to inform decisions. Emphasis was placed on the need to establish minimum standards and thresholds for the indicators used, along with potential progress in the performance of programmes and tools. Mr. Lensen also highlighted the complexity of monitoring with numerous stakeholders and actors operating in diverse geographical contexts, each with varying expectations from EU Member States (e.g., regarding sustainability). Therefore, establishing robust, systematic, and operational monitoring for a comprehensive program like the Frontex JRS is a complex task.

"The goal is creating a system that is sustainable and predictable."

Nassim Majidi, *PhD, Founder, and Director of Samuel Hall*, discussed previous research efforts by International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Samuel Hall to measure sustainable reintegration through the Reintegration Sustainability Survey, which contains economic, social, and psychosocial indicators. Despite progress, challenges still need to be addressed, including miscommunication and mismanagement between pre-departure and post-arrival stakeholders, as well as between return and reintegration and development actors. This underscores the necessity of comprehensive approaches involving all sectors of society, promoting local ownership and consequently improving processes and outcomes. Ms. Majidi highlighted the significance of collaborative design efforts, where local actors are included, and the adoption of transparent, participatory monitoring practices to address existing gaps effectively.



From complex monitoring and evaluation frameworks, to unlocking insights and solutions

Session 3: Moving the needle: How to leverage return counselling to improve the uptake of return?

Led by **Alexander Smits**, *Policy Advisor at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs*, Session 3 focused on the crucial role of return counselling in facilitating successful migrant return and community reintegration:

- Despite challenges stemming from differences in national systems, experts discussed advancements in training and establishing clear expectations for counselling whilst also noting the importance of further strengthening the implementation of return counselling.
- The panellist emphasised the rich diversity within counselling practices, highlighting the involvement of various stakeholders, serving different target groups, and employing a range of methodologies. They underscored the importance of recognising and giving equal consideration to these diverse practices, as they all play integral roles and contribute uniquely to the field. At the same time, the panellist also noted that there remains room to better match counselling practices to specific groups and the need for a more coherent implementation.
- The session highlighted the invaluable contribution of CSOs in counselling, emphasising their role in providing accurate information, fostering trust with returnees, and facilitating communication across counselling stages.
- Audience inquiries revolved around improving coordination among partners in countries of origin, promoting collaboration between return and development partners, and harnessing new technologies to strengthen return and reintegration processes.

Panellists

Jasper Swanenberg, *Operational Officer at the Post-Return Unit of Frontex*, highlighted the progress made in developing and implementing the new Frontex return and reintegration counselling training and the organisation of the training curriculum. The training piloted for national authorities last year builds on the EU Return Counselling Framework launched by the European Commission in 2019 and the return counselling curriculum developed by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN). Despite differences in national systems, hindering complete standardisation and harmonisation, he recognised the importance of achieving a shared understanding of return counselling. Mr. Swanenberg also acknowledged efforts to improve and harmonise practices. With this aim in mind, Frontex provides communication tools to Member States and has established partnerships with different actors such as Caritas International and other reintegration partners to deliver comprehensive training, ultimately working towards a more harmonised approach within the EU.

"Despite differences in national systems, hindering complete standardisation and harmonisation, it is important to achieve a shared understanding of return counselling."



Anne Dussart, *Head of Department Asylum and Migration – Social Programs at Caritas International*, emphasised CSOs' crucial role in return counselling. She highlighted their role in providing reliable information and in bridging pre-departure and post-return counselling. She stated that CSOs play a vital role in establishing trust with returnees, particularly in cases where they mistrust government actors. Ms. Dussart noted the decreasing engagement of CSOs since the early 2000s, necessitating their revitalisation and emphasised that the collaboration between CSOs and government authorities is vital for offering comprehensive support to returnees during the return and reintegration process. Efforts are underway to raise awareness among CSOs in EU countries with limited experience in reintegration programs, with the goal of enhancing collaboration and information exchange. In line with this, Caritas International is initiating a two-year, EU-funded project to empower NGOs in EU countries that are rather new to reintegration programmes, and explore their potential role in pre-departure counselling.

“The collaboration between CSOs and government authorities is vital for offering comprehensive support to returnees during the return and reintegration process.”



Ellen Verheijden, *Head of Department for Alternatives to Detention (ATD) at the Immigration Office of Belgian FPS Home Affairs*, discussed the implementation of an individual case management approach since 2021. This approach involves proactive action after a return decision, exploring legal stay options and voluntary return possibilities through a two-track system. Coaches liaise, and meet up with potential returnees, transparently communicating with them to address challenges, including mental health barriers, faced upon return. The ATD department collaborates closely with executive departments within the Immigration Office to swiftly address any ambiguities or problems that might arise during counselling trajectories.



*Orchestrating diverse roles,
crafting a unified composition*

Session 4: Ensuring value of investments: What steps are needed to use the growing evidence base effectively?

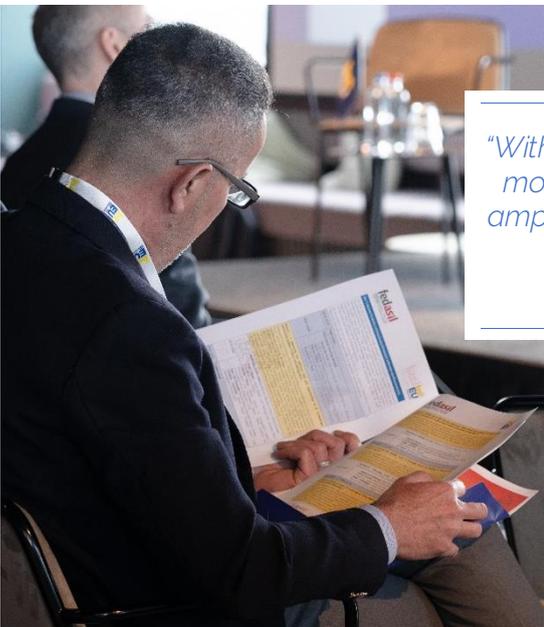
In Session 4, led by **Camille Le Coz**, *Associate Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, experts discussed how data can drive innovation and inform policymaking in return and reintegration efforts.

- Panelists emphasised the need for systematic approaches to address data collection and analysis challenges, advocating for collaboration with global and local partners. They highlighted the importance of defining and gathering relevant data while ensuring unbiased interpretation. The aim is to collect easily comparable data and amplify the voices of refugees and migrants to provide insights for policies and programmes. Long-term approaches were emphasised to understand return dynamics and the challenges returnees face.
- RIAT was discussed as a valuable resource for standardising return processes and providing real-time data access for decision-making.
- The session also highlighted the difference in data-collection on reintegration processes and return processes, where more efforts need to be made on data-collection within the EU on return interventions, including through stepping up digitalisation.
- During the Q&A session, the discussion touched upon various themes, such as the significance of data in promoting voluntary returns, the notable gap in data concerning individuals who opt not to return, the value of qualitative data, the prospective advancements of digital technologies in facilitating data sharing, and the ongoing debate regarding the equilibrium between standardisation and customisation in data collection.

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Panellists

Roberto Forin, *Europe Regional Manager at the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)*, shed light on the data collection efforts carried out by MMC and stressed the importance of gathering comparable data. He highlighted the significant gap in research on return. Filling in this gap, he presented MMC's extensive survey data on people on the move collected globally and shared insights from Senegal, showcasing a longitudinal approach to understanding return dynamics and the challenges returnees face over time. Among the findings was the experience of returnees feeling shame towards their community upon returning home. With these studies, the MMC aims to amplify the voices of refugees and migrants, and therefore, inform policies and programmes.

A photograph of a man in a dark suit and glasses, seen from the side, looking down at a document he is holding. The document has some text and a logo. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a meeting or conference setting with other people and chairs.

"With extensive survey data on people on the move collected globally, the MMC aims to amplify the voices of refugees and migrants, and therefore, inform policies and programmes.."

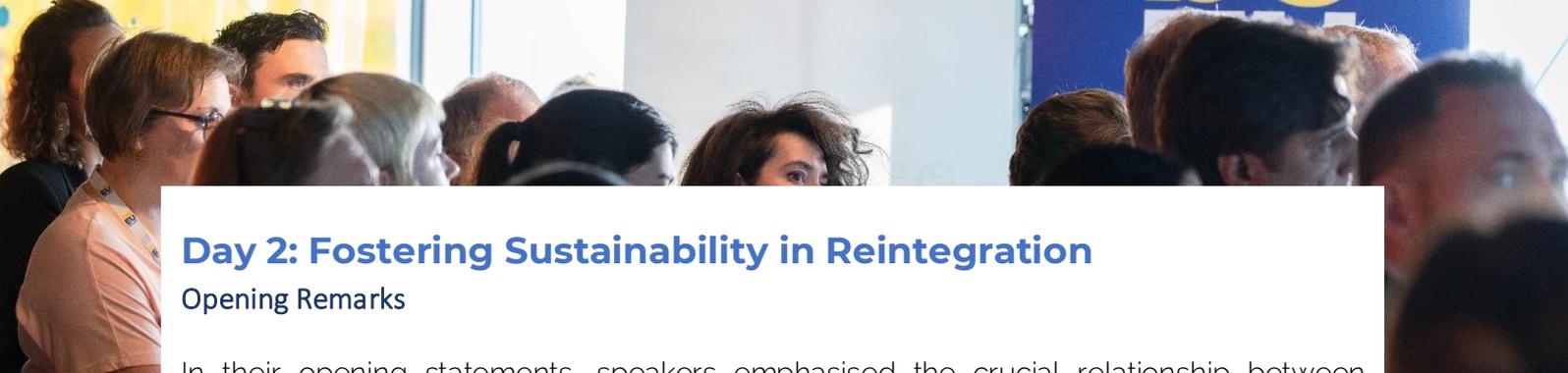
Peter Neelen, Senior Program Manager at the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF), discussed RIAT as a case management and counselling tool. He emphasised RIAT's potential to standardise return processes across Member States by providing transparent, comparable, and relevant data on the assistance received by returnees throughout every stage of the return process. The tool namely delivers real-time data access to facilitate accountability and decision-making. While RIAT already effectively gathers and disseminates information concerning reintegration, including needs, entitlements, and background details, efforts are ongoing to consolidate this data into statistical reports. These reports could serve as a "window" for Member States to gain insight into post-arrival realities. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all data may be equally reliable for analysis compared to case management purposes. Recognising that available data will always be utilised, a strategy has been initiated to enhance the quality of data input, thereby improving the reliability of data consolidation. He also acknowledged some inherent limitations of RIAT, such as the fact that the tool only contains data from beneficiaries of reintegration programmes returning from Europe, hindering comparing outcomes with returnees who do not receive assistance from EU Member States.

"While RIAT already effectively gathers and disseminates information concerning reintegration, efforts are ongoing to consolidate this data into statistical reports. These reports could serve as a "window" for Member States to gain insight into post-arrival realities."

Damien Jusselme, Head of Data Science and Analytics at the Global Migration Data Analysis Center (GMDAC), addressed data collection and analysis challenges and advocated for systematic approaches to maximise the impact from data collection efforts. He underscored the importance of interoperability and accessibility in managing data, In terms of interoperability. Mr. Jusselme stressed the need for more standardised approaches and tools to facilitate effective data comparison and analysis across various settings. In terms of accessibility, Mr. Jusselme emphasised the importance of customising data presentation for diverse audiences and understanding the data needs of decision-makers. Collaboration with global and local partners was also considered essential for comprehensive data collection, ensuring accessibility for diverse stakeholders.

"There is a need for more standardised approaches and tools to facilitate effective data comparison and analysis across various settings."





Day 2: Fostering Sustainability in Reintegration

Opening Remarks

In their opening statements, speakers emphasised the crucial relationship between migration and development, calling for collective action from diverse stakeholders to ensure the sustainable reintegration of migrants. Key points highlighted included:

Return and reintegration are integral parts of a broader migration cycle, underscoring the necessity for all stakeholders to align with long-term perspectives.

Efforts to tackle challenges like overlapping programmes and differing priorities among stakeholders are necessary, supporting goals of trust-building and long-term sustainability. Past successes in creating comprehensive return and reintegration plans were acknowledged, focusing on qualitative pre-departure counselling, tailored support, and strengthening returnees' social networks for successful reintegration.

Commitment to effective migration policies was reiterated, citing recent initiatives like the European Pact on Migration and Asylum and significant financial support for voluntary return programmes.

Collaboration with various stakeholders was considered necessary for efficient return operations and maintaining humane and rights-based procedures.

Overall, the remarks highlighted the importance of sustainable reintegration efforts, equitable partnerships, and coordinated action to address challenges returnees and communities face in their countries of origin.

Caroline Gennez, *Minister for Development Cooperation and Major Cities in the Belgian Federal Government*, emphasised the inseparable link between migration and development, advocating for their convergence in policy discussions. She underscored the significance of fostering equal partnerships and mutual respect between origin and destination countries, firmly rejecting the notion of using international development budgets to coerce cooperation in readmission agreements. Ms. Gennez highlighted voluntary return and sustainable reintegration as key political priorities, aligning them with the Global Compact on Migration. She stressed the necessity of providing long-term support beyond short-term post-arrival support, to ensure enduring benefits for returnees and their communities. Drawing on the principles of development cooperation, she emphasised the importance of building trust-based relationships and focusing on long-term sustainability. Additionally, Ms. Gennez called for coordinated efforts to address challenges such as overlapping programmes and actions and differing priorities among stakeholders. Commending the conference to facilitate inclusive dialogue, she hopes the discussions would inform future cooperation strategies, ultimately benefiting both countries of origin and returning migrants.

"There is a need for coordinated efforts to address challenges such as overlapping programmes and actions and differing priorities among stakeholders"

Hugo Verbist, *Ambassador, Belgian Special Envoy for Migration and a representative of the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Development Cooperation*, stressed the intricate link between migration and development. He called for a holistic approach to reintegration, highlighting the Belgian Federal Government's strong commitment to sustainable reintegration efforts. He underscored ongoing initiatives to address the challenges posed by return and reintegration. Central within these initiatives is the need for enhanced coordination among stakeholders to empower local ownership and ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration programmes.

He stressed the necessity of a strategic discussion on return and development to guide these efforts more effectively, Belgium will foster such a discussion during an IMEX meeting on the 23rd of April, and during a joint meeting of EMWP and CODEV delegates in the Council of the European Union on the 17th of May. In conclusion, Mr. Verbist underlined the importance of better connecting the return process with development initiatives and national strategies in the countries of origin. He also advocated exploring complementarity among stakeholders and expressed the aim to structurally embed the link between the internal and external dimension of the return process.



"It is important to better connect the return process with development initiatives and national strategies in the countries of origin."

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Nils Baetens, *Head of Department Future Orientation at Fedasil*, underlined the past efforts in developing comprehensive return and reintegration programmes. He showcased instances of migrants successfully establishing businesses upon their return, attributing this achievement to the concentrated efforts in preparing and offering personalised assistance to returning migrants. Mr. Baetens underscored the indispensable role of return counsellors throughout the entire return process. He advocated for pioneering strategies, including one-stop arrival centres. He also suggested exploring new avenues to strengthen legal channels for labour migration post-return, particularly considering the labour shortages in EU Member States.



"Return counsellors have an indispensable role throughout the entire return process."

"Collaboration with stakeholders, especially international organisations, is unmistakable for efficient return operations."



Mercedes García-Pérez, Head of Division for Migration and Human security, Deputy Director for Global Issues, at the European External Action Service (EEAS), emphasised the EU's commitment to effective migration policies, referring to developments in this field. She primarily underscored the recent adoption of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, noting significant financial investment in voluntary return and reintegration programmes. She also highlighted the crucial role of EU delegations in coordinating stakeholders and services. Ms. García-Pérez stressed that collaboration with these stakeholders, especially international organisations, is unmistakable for efficient return operations. She reiterated the commitment to upholding humane and rights-respecting return procedures and advocated for enhanced links between development initiatives and sustainable integration to address problems migrants face when returning.



*Building bridges between migration and development,
paving the way for sustainable reintegration*

Session 5: From political will to capacities: How to grow local ownership for reintegration?

In Session 5 of the Conference, moderated by **Ravenna Sohst**, *Policy Analyst for Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, the discussion centred on empowering countries of origin to co-lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of return and reintegration programs. Key points highlighted included:

- Strategies for translating political commitment into tangible results, showcasing recent initiatives within countries of origin aimed at customising public services and bolstering support mechanisms for reintegration.
- The critical role of local ownership and advocacy for whole-of-government and multi-stakeholder approaches.
- Identification of specific challenges such as shame, guilt, and psycho-social needs experienced by returnees during reintegration, which were recognised as distinct obstacles requiring capacity building at the local level and active engagement of diverse stakeholders.
- Advocacy for embracing long-term, sustainable, and systemic approaches to reintegration, along with promoting coordination among stakeholders and strengthening referral networks at the local level.
- Highlighting country-specific approaches to reintegration, such as the establishment of specialised desks for returnees and shelters for vulnerable groups in El Salvador and Egypt's National Referral Mechanism.
- Collaborative partnerships and innovative solutions to overcome challenges, recognising the essential roles played by both national and local actors in spearheading integration initiatives within local communities.

Panellists

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Corantine Groccia, *Reintegration Officer at Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Program for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA), at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)*, underlined the crucial role of local ownership in reintegration efforts, being a central theme in recent discussions on migration management and reintegration. She provided an example of a cross-regional workshop where government officials from North and Sub-Saharan African countries deliberated on concrete operational challenges and solutions in return management and reintegration assistance. Insights from this workshop showed the usefulness of whole-of-government and multi-stakeholder approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ms. Groccia highlighted the importance of utilising national operational frameworks and institutional policies to ensure coherent reintegration strategies. Additionally, she discussed challenges such as feelings of shame, guilt, and psycho-social needs faced by refugees during reintegration. The findings stress the importance of enhancing the capacity of local services and carefully integrating them into return case management processes.

"Utilising national operational frameworks and institutional policies is important to ensure coherent reintegration strategies."



Raffaella Greco Tonegutti, *Lead expert Migration and Development at Enabel*, emphasised the importance of embracing long-term, sustainable, and systemic approaches to reintegration, echoing the sentiments expressed by the minister earlier. She highlighted the distinction between actions and principles in pre- and post-return assistance alongside immediate reintegration, contrasting individual-centric strategies with broader, systemic approaches advanced by development actors. Besides, she advocated for strengthening existing services and referral networks at local levels and promoting coordination among diverse stakeholders and ecosystems.



Ms. Greco Tonegutti stressed the significance of local development planning attuned to reintegration needs. Furthermore, she urged for concrete measures to facilitate socioeconomic reintegration. Emphasising the systemic nature of sustainable reintegration methods, she underscored the necessity for alignment and coordination among stakeholders. Additionally, she stressed the pivotal roles of both national and local actors, particularly in spearheading reintegration initiatives within local communities.

“Both national and local actors have a pivotal role, particularly in spearheading reintegration initiatives within local communities.”

Javier Helamán Reyes Menjívar, *Ambassador of El Salvador to Belgium*, outlined the country's reintegration approach, focusing on specialised desks for returnees and shelters for vulnerable groups. The approach involves counselling migrants globally in their consulates, particularly in the U.S. and Europe, about return and reception procedures. Upon return, returnees are welcomed at the airport, and introduced to reintegration initiatives. Integration services follow, with referrals to territorial desks and specialised support for women. Evaluation and follow-up stages ensure ongoing assistance, while reception centres provide immediate support. Organisations like the Salvadoran Institution for Women's Development offer additional support. Challenges include improving socioeconomic integration, digitalisation, and data accessibility for policymakers. Despite these, he underscored that El Salvador remains committed to fostering successful reintegration and community involvement.



“Evaluation and follow-up stages ensure ongoing assistance, while reception centres provide immediate support.”

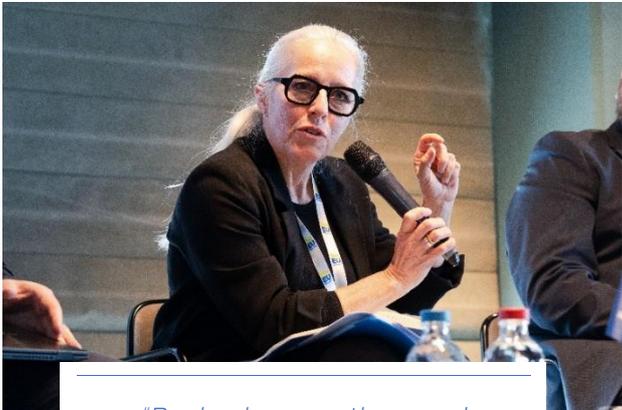
Ahmed Saada, Associate Minister of Social Solidarity at the Ministry of Social Solidarity Egypt, highlighted Egypt's unique context in hosting migrants and its approach to migration management. He emphasised the implementation of a National Referral Mechanism as part of a more extensive national Common Case Management System involving various stakeholders. Additionally, he underscored Egypt's decision to implement a bottom-up approach for mapping services at the local level, with a specific focus on the roles of social and case workers. Building a knowledge management system is prioritised for accountability and decision-making. Mainstreaming funding aligns with Egypt's national interests, ensuring that support for returnees is community centric. Community workers are crucial as the first line of support, considering factors like shame and community pressure. Technology, including a mobile app and helpline for returnees, are proposed for enhanced assistance. Strengthening partnerships with international entities aims to avoid duplication of actions and optimise efforts. The following steps involve announcing the referral mechanism and utilising national resources for reintegration activities, particularly in social care.



"Strengthening partnerships with international entities aims to avoid duplication of actions and optimise efforts."

Christina Jespersen, Senior Project Manager at the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF), discussed the Operational Framework for collaboration between development and reintegration partners. The Technical Working Group created this framework in 2019 to tackle challenges such as miscommunication among pre-departure and post-arrival stakeholders and reintegration and development sectors, as well as misalignment in timelines, objectives, criteria, and funding sources. The aim was to harness synergies to support both returnees and communities. The framework offers practical advice for overcoming these obstacles.

Despite progress, these challenges persist, requiring ongoing dialogue and efforts to ensure effective collaboration. The last Technical Working Group meeting in January 2024 acknowledged the continued existence of these challenges and emphasised the need for sustained efforts and national initiatives. Reviewing practices and identifying practical solutions remain ongoing priorities. Additionally, efforts are underway to digitalise mappings of services and platforms to facilitate early identification and referral processes for returnees. Challenges such as interoperability and updating systems need to be addressed for effective implementation.



"Reviewing practices and identifying practical solutions remain ongoing priorities."

Session 6: Looking beyond the drop-off point: To what degree can legal migration opportunities be mobilised in the sustainable reintegration toolbox?

Session 6 delved into the concept of remigration within the framework of legal remigration after return and sustainable reintegration. It challenged the traditional notion of remigration after return as a failure, instead considering it an opportunity within broader migration strategies. Key points highlighted included:

- Integrating legal remigration after return into policy frameworks, recognising its significance for individuals and communities.
- Recognition of the evolving perspective towards legal remigration after return, noting its increasing acceptance within migration discourse, particularly when occurring in the context of orderly and legal migration.
- Efforts to support legal migration, including initiatives such as skill mapping, upskilling programs, and partnerships with the private sector to facilitate entrepreneurial activities.
- A shift in attitude towards legal remigration after return, reframing it not as a failure but as one of the potential outcomes of migration, reflecting changing societal attitudes towards migration trajectories.
- Discussion of initiatives aimed at promoting legal migration pathways and maximising migration’s potential while minimising risks, with references to global migration compacts and EU initiatives focused on skills forecasting, skills matching, talent partnerships, and visa facilitation.
- During the Q&A session, attendees raised inquiries about the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the impact of new border procedures on legal migration, educational opportunities for returnees’ children, private sector involvement in migration initiatives, and efforts to track migrants and facilitate legal migration pathways.

Jonathan Chaloff, *Senior policy analyst at the International Migration Division, OECD*, began the session by discussing how the conversation around remigration has changed over the years. He emphasised the importance of addressing this topic today, as attitudes have shifted significantly in the past five to six years. Previously, remigration was seen as a failure of efforts to support return and reintegration, often viewed as taboo and overlooked in analyses. The focus was primarily on reintegration programmes to keep people in their home countries. However, there is a shift towards openly discussing remigration, providing an opportunity to delve deeper into this previously avoided subject.



Unveiling the Taboo: Exploring the Formerly Unspeakable

Panellists

Golda Myra Roma, *Senior Project Manager at the Migrant Resource Centre Pakistan (MRC)*, discussed whether remigration supports sustainable reintegration. Within this context, she emphasised the growing interest of national governments in labour migration promotion and highlighted statistics indicating significant interest in remigration, particularly following the economic impacts of COVID-19. The MRC has undertaken campaigns for reskilling and upskilling returnees, collaborating with the private sector for entrepreneurial activities and offering specific initiatives for women. Ms. Roma recommended fostering strategic partnerships between companies in countries of origin and destination countries to facilitate remigration. Additionally, she highlighted the need to develop communication strategies that link remigration, return and reintegration efforts for more comprehensive support. The fact that these MRCs combine legal remigration and reintegration through referral, all supported by local authorities, makes them a hub where the concept of "remigration as a potential outcome of reintegration" can be explored and piloted.

"There is a need to develop communication strategies that link remigration, return and reintegration efforts for more comprehensive support."

Mustafa Haider, *Director of the Welfare Department at the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation*, discussed their work in helping Pakistani citizens reintegrate into society after returning home, as well as creating new opportunities for them to work abroad again. He highlighted the significant Pakistani diaspora worldwide, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the USA. The organisation's efforts include gathering data, providing training to enhance skills, distributing tools, promoting vocational training, supporting entrepreneurship, and facilitating re-employment through skill mapping and the development of so-called 'skill passports'. Emphasis was placed on the importance of accurate data and collaborating with foreign employers to establish legal pathways for migration. Future steps include simplifying the visa application processes for workers, as current complex processes could drive some migrants to resort to irregular migration for employment a

"The importance of accurate data and collaborating with foreign employers to establish legal pathways for migration cannot be overlooked."



*Remigration Opportunities:
A decisive factor in voluntary return trajectories?*

Alexandra Hilbig, *Project Manager at the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ)*, elaborated on Germany's comprehensive approach to migration, emphasising referrals to the Global Compact on Migration as a baseline for German policy and maximising migration's potential while minimising risks of migration. The approach also recognises migrants as both beneficiaries and agents of the return and reintegration process. In this context, Ms. Hilbig outlined the role of the Centres for International Migration and Development and their 360° approach. In providing services to returnees, as they integrate psychosocial support alongside economic assistance, and in promoting legal migration through talent partnerships. The Centres view return as a new chapter in the life of the migrant.

"Migrants are recognised as both beneficiaries and agents of the return and reintegration process."



Anna Perego, *Legal and Policy Officer Legal Migration at the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs at the European Commission*, provided insights into EU policies on legal migration and reintegration, accentuating the synergies between legal migration and return and reintegration efforts. The issue of labour shortages highlights the importance of legal migration in tackling demographic challenges and fostering job creation across different sectors. She shared examples from projects aimed at improving seasonal and circular migration pathways. These (EU) initiatives encompass skills forecasting, talent partnerships (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt), visa facilitation, and linking labour migration and education support initiatives in partner countries to address labour shortages and facilitate legal migration pathways.

"The issue of labour shortages highlights the importance of legal migration in tackling demographic challenges and fostering job creation across different sectors."



Session 7: Safeguarding reintegration: Exploring different funding models to safeguard sustainable reintegration programmes.

Session 7, moderated by **Hanne Beirens**, *Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, focused on exploring different funding models to safeguard reintegration efforts. Key points highlighted included:

- The significance of the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) as a major funding source for return and reintegration programmes.
- Challenges associated with existing funding streams, such as issues with cohesion, timeframes, and exit strategies. Difficulties also arise in aligning international funding with national policies due to competing domestic priorities in countries of origin.
- The necessity for innovative approaches, greater coherence in programs, and coordination among stakeholders to ensure the effective utilisation of funding.
- The role of networks like the European Migration Network Return Experts Group (EMN-REG) in facilitating knowledge and best practice sharing on return and reintegration efforts.
- The importance of linking reintegration initiatives to national structures in countries of origin and aligning them with broader development goals.

Overall, the session underscored the significance of collaboration and coordination to maximise the impact of funding for return and reintegration efforts.

Panellists

Guido Castellano, *Program Manager for EU Policies and Fund Coordination at the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs at the European Commission*, provided an overview of the history of the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), tracing back to 2005 when the Commission initiated financial support for return and reintegration programmes. Return is a significant component of AMIF, embedded within Objective 3 of the fund. Allocation of funds under Objective 3 for the period 2021-2027 prioritises actions on voluntary return and reintegration. Castellano outlined two funding streams under AMIF and emphasised that Member States receive higher co-financing rates from the Commission, with 90% funded by the Commission and 10% by Member States. Mr. Castellano highlighted the role of initiatives such as the European

Migration Network Return Experts Group (EMN-REG), which is also funded by AMIF, in facilitating effective return and reintegration efforts. He stressed the importance of adopting innovative approaches, such as counselling and fostering greater coherence in programmes to ensure the effective utilisation of funding. Additionally, Castellano underscored the collaborative approach in funding the RRF, serving as a primary incubator for innovation. He further highlighted the emphasis on additional needs in return within the new Pact, prioritising return efforts.

"The collaborative approach in funding the RRF, serving as a primary incubator for innovation is crucial."

Aurélie Sgro, Policy Officer and Program Manager at Unit G6 Migration and Forced Displacement, Directorate-General for International Partnerships at the European Commission, emphasised that return and reintegration have been a priority of DG International Partnerships (INIPA), with significant funds allocated to various regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and for programmes under DG NEAR. Ms. Sgro noted that while progress has been made, more efforts are needed to redefine approaches to return and reintegration. This includes linking initiatives to national structures in countries of origin to tackle parallel structures and aligning individual reintegration packages with broader development goals. She called for greater use of national envelopes to localise funding and improve linkages with development sectors.



"While progress has been made, more efforts are needed to redefine approaches to return and reintegration. This includes linking initiatives to national structures in countries of origin to tackle parallel structures and aligning individual reintegration packages with broader development goals.."

Hugo Rickberg, Senior Specialist at the Office of International Affairs at the Swedish Migration Agency, focused on the changing policy context in Sweden, noting that the focus of Swedish migration policy has shifted towards voluntary return and repatriation. While the AMIF remains the main source of national perspective for funding, Mr. Rickberg highlighted room for improvement in its utilisation. At present, only ten projects are in progress, suggesting improved assistance in developing and implementing project proposals effectively.

He highlighted the innovative nature of projects funded through the ERRIN and the RRF programmes, illustrating their potential for synergy. Nonetheless, he observed that assistance from the RRF is unavailable for national projects funded by AMIF. Furthermore, he referenced an ongoing initiative for development cooperation, aimed at aligning activities with long-term perspectives and approaches in the development sector.



Unleashing the power of collaboration and coordination to amplify the impact of funding for return and reintegration.

Session 8: The future of the EU return and reintegration field: Where are we heading and what will success look like?

The conference's closing session, moderated by **Hanne Beirens**, *Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI-E)*, provided an opportunity for reflection and projection on the future of return and reintegration efforts in the EU. Key points emphasised included:

- Recognition of progress in consolidating and professionalising programmes, with a call to prioritise return and reintegration through the implementation of the Pact.
- Challenges and proposals for comprehensive work plans and roadmaps, stressing the importance of leveraging data, fostering innovation, and enhancing digitalisation efforts while maintaining stability.
- The need to strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and strategic planning in return and reintegration initiatives, with recognition of the increased cases managed by JRS.
- Highlighting the social-based nature of return and reintegration efforts and the central role counsellors play in all phases of the return and reintegration process.
- The necessity for fully dedicated management and budget allocation to ensure funding predictability and effective programming.



Overall, the session demonstrated a commitment to enhancing collaboration, coherence, and innovation, and ensuring stability and sustainability in return and reintegration initiatives across the EU.

Panellists

Silvena Pesta, *Head of Unit of the Return and Readmission unit at the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs at the European Commission*, underlined the strides made in the field of return and reintegration and emphasised the need for further consolidation of programmes and overcoming fragmentation through a coherent implementation at national and EU level. She furthermore noted the importance of the collaborative approach through the EMN, the RRF and Frontex for further development and strengthened cooperation. She highlighted the ambition to implement the Pact, making return and reintegration a central focus. She urged against fragmentation within and between Member States and EU levels, advocating for expanding best practices, using digital tools to address fragmentation and harmonising return processes.

"Strides have been made in the field of return and reintegration, however there is still the need for further consolidation of programmes and overcoming fragmentation through a coherent implementation at national and EU level."

Alessandro Di Tolla, *Director of the European Centre for Returns Division at Frontex*, stressed the robust collaboration between Frontex and Member States (MS) across all initiatives. He reflected on Frontex's positive progress towards consolidation and emphasised the crucial alignment of return decisions with border procedures to reinforce the connection between border management and reintegration efforts. Mr. Di Tolla highlighted the challenges and gaps in the field, underlining the necessity to develop a comprehensive work plan and roadmap for implementing the Pact. He also emphasised the importance of predictability in joint planning to effectively address the actual needs of MS, with JRS playing a central role in the overall dimension of return and reintegration.

Regarding budget allocation, he advocated for growth tailored to the specific needs of MS. Reflecting on Frontex's governance structure and mandate to ensure equitable representation, especially in addressing the underrepresentation of return agencies, he considered a reinforced structure dedicated for return and reintegration desired to foster collaboration among all stakeholders engaged in this field.

"Predictability in joint planning is important to effectively address the actual needs of MS, with JRS playing a central role in the overall dimension of return and reintegration."



Mr. Di Tolla further emphasised the objective of legislative changes aimed at enhancing collaboration with MS and fortifying national programmes. He underscored the significance of coherence in programmes offered to countries of origin, aligning with their national interests and tailoring cooperation accordingly. Additionally, he underscored the importance of sustainable reintegration, emphasising the continued relevance of basic packages as essential tools for return counsellors. He stressed the need for EU financial structures to reflect the critical role of reintegration and encouraged the integration of reintegration efforts across various operational levels. At this operational level, Di Tolla highlighted the role of ICMPD in supporting the JRS and associated Frontex activities through ongoing operational cooperation.

"A reinforced structure dedicated for return and reintegration desired to foster collaboration among all stakeholders engaged in this field should be considered."

In his reflections, **Peter Neelen**, *Senior Program Manager at the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF)*, emphasised the significant progress in piloting EU policies on return and reintegration. He stressed the crucial role of leveraging data utilisation and fostering innovation, while maintaining stability in response to the evolving landscape.

Mr. Neelen underlined the importance of fostering cooperation with countries of origin and bridging the gap between those countries with basic and comprehensive reintegration programmes. He also highlighted that, after years of piloting, including previous involvement from the ERRIN, significant progress has been achieved in the past two years. Bringing stability into this emerging EU programming is crucial. However, according to Mr. Neelen, this is not just a matter of budget and governance; it also involves how all actors,

including Member States and Frontex, utilise and collaborate with the various components that are already in place. He acknowledged the significant rise in cases managed by JRS to 10,000, which highlights the need for actions to enhance data collection, analysis, monitoring, etc. This progress facilitated broader discussions on critical issues such as data management, monitoring, and evaluation, reflecting the dynamic changes in the field.



"Bringing stability into this emerging EU programming is crucial."

Additionally, Mr. Neelen referred to the OFII pilot initiatives, which explore the linkage of reintegration with circular migration and green initiatives. He concluded by emphasising that there is a consensus emerging that firstly, Member States will always require these packages as easy-to-use tools for counsellors, while secondly, "real" reintegration, characterised by sustainability, long-term impact, and local ownership, must occur through existing actors in countries of origin.

Therefore, the focus should be on building bridges rather than creating new initiatives. ICMPD was highlighted as an organisation capable of facilitating this bridge-building process. Through its operational support in countries of return for local reintegration strategies and its connection with the EU operational return world via the RRF, ICMPD can play a pivotal role in this endeavour.

Pieter Spinnewijn, *Director of Operational Services at Fedasil*, discussed the organisation's initial scepticism towards EU voluntary return programmes, which was eventually overcome by the EU's advancements in this area. He highlighted the benefits of services such as RIAT, Frontex Application for Return (FAR), and JRS. Mr. Spinnewijn emphasised the ongoing need for strategic planning and execution, advocating for thorough quality monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Additionally, he underscored the importance of innovative approaches in developing strategies for return and reintegration, promoting collaboration with broader networks and NGOs to align with the societal goals of voluntary return policies and programmes. Furthermore, Mr. Spinnewijn stressed the significance of dedicated management and budget allocation for voluntary return, ensuring stability in funding and program implementation.

"There is a continuous necessity for strategic planning and execution, thorough quality monitoring and evaluation frameworks."





Conclusions

During Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration, held in collaboration with Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and opportunities surrounding migrant return and reintegration.

Spanning two days, the conference served as a platform for experts and policymakers to analyse the evolving landscape of return and reintegration policies within the EU. It aimed to scrutinise both the internal and external dimensions of EU-level programming, fostering innovative perspectives to shape agendas at national, EU, and international levels.

On the first day, discussions focused on recent developments within the framework of an evolving EU harmonised strategy towards return and reintegration. Participants emphasised the need to overcome fragmentation in the return landscape and to implement balanced approaches that reconcile harmonised EU frameworks with customised national programs. Key objectives included enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, supporting returnees across various dimensions, and ensuring predictable long-term funding.

The focus shifted on the second day towards bolstering the sustainability of reintegration programming. Discussions revolved around establishing connections between development cooperation and migration management, promoting engagement from countries of origin, and integrating remigration into strategies. Participants stressed the importance of aligning funding with national development policies and enhancing coordination between different agencies.

The conference highlighted the increasing pace of EU support uptake in voluntary return and reintegration processes. There was a collective acknowledgement of the expanding role and impact of EU operational programming, emphasising its transformative effect and the emergence of new challenges.

Participants underscored the importance of collaboration, innovation, and evidence-based policymaking to address the complex challenges in this domain effectively. Participants acknowledged the increasing role and impact of EU operational programming and understand how this brings change while creating new challenges. There was a call to gear up on monitoring, data analysis, counselling and aligning reintegration with development.

The phase of piloting is over. The landscape is settling, and most actors seem to be aligned on each other's roles and responsibilities for now. There was a call for consolidating and deepening the recent evolutions, while leaving the question open whether the landscape "as is" is in the long run apt to take the EU Return Policy to the next level.

The insights collected from the conference aim to inform and guide future efforts in supporting returning migrants and their communities, ensuring sustainable and dignified reintegration processes.

Topics for further discussion include rationalising the EU landscape with a migrant-centred approach, finding synergies between interventions in third countries, and exploring the options for further digitalisation.

While this report provides a glimpse into the Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration discussions during Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is essential to acknowledge that it cannot fully capture the atmosphere, inspiration, innovative ideas, and connections made during the event.

None of these experiences would have been possible without the participation of all attendees – those who joined in Antwerp and those who connected online. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to each participant for their engagement, which truly enriched and made the conference impactful.



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Annex 1: Overview of speakers



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Caroline Gennez
Minister for Development Cooperation
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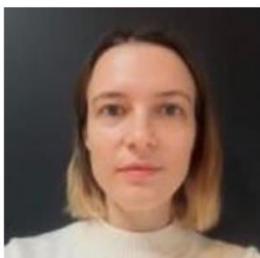
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Hugo Verbist
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Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs,
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Pieter Spinnewijn
Director Operational Services,
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Jasper Swanenberg
Operational Officer,
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AGENDA

EXPERT CONFERENCE ON RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

Lindner Hotel, Antwerp, Belgium / Online

19-20 March 2024

The Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration will be jointly hosted by Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) at the occasion of Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU. The conference aims to inject fresh thinking and inform the agenda of Member States, the EU and their partners.



You can access the **background note**, the **overview of speakers and moderators**, and the **list of participants** via this QR code.

DAY 1: MOVING TOWARDS A HARMONIZED APPROACH IN RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

The first day of the conference invites panelists and participants to reflect on current developments within the context of an increasingly harmonized approach to return and reintegration in the EU. The sessions touch upon several areas in which EU cooperation and support have grown in the past years, including in reintegration, outreach, counselling, quality monitoring and knowledge management. The discussions aim to go beyond mere stock-taking exercises and invite participants to take an open, collaborative and forward-looking perspective.

All the sessions will consist of a setting the scene by the panelists, followed by a panel discussion and ending with the possibility for questions from the audience.

09:00-09:30 Registration

09:30-10:00 Welcome & Opening remarks

- **Nicole de Moor**, *State Secretary for Asylum and Migration*, Belgian Federal Government.
- **Fanny François**, *Director-General*, Fedasil
- **Michael Shotter**, *Director Migration and Asylum*, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission.
- **Alessandro Di Tolla**, *Director of the European Centre for Returns Division*, Frontex.

SESSION 1: A balancing act: Defining risks and opportunities of an increasingly harmonized system of return and reintegration.

Participants and panelists will discuss opportunities and challenges in moving towards a more harmonized system for returns and reintegration. Questions to be discussed include risk mitigation in future programming, opportunities for complementarities between national and European initiatives, and questions around targeting the needs of specific groups of returnees or national priorities. Where can the EU expand its investments in reintegration programmes? Some of the EU's return ambitions are served well with an European accelerator programme which allows promising reintegration practices and innovations tested in one setting. How to ensure that the outcomes of successful pilot projects are valorised in an efficient way?

10:00-11:30

Moderator: Hanne Beirens, *Director*, Migration Policy Institute Europe.

- **Dries Lensen**, *Team leader, Joint Reintegration Services Team, Post-Return Unit*, Frontex.
- **Thomas Peguy**, *Deputy director of Immigration, Return, Reintegration and International Affairs*, Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration (OFII).
- **Koen Van Rompaey**, *Head of Service Voluntary Return*, Fedasil.
- **Christina Jespersen**, *Senior Project Manager*, Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF).

11:30-12:00

Coffee break

SESSION 2: Pitfalls of a tick-the-box exercise: What steps are needed to secure the quality of reintegration support and foster sustainable reintegration?

The session will tackle ongoing questions around ensuring quality of reintegration support, including the various approaches in quality monitoring of reintegration programmes. The different opportunities and pitfalls of existing tools will be discussed,

along with strategies on how these could be mitigated, for instance through defining clear roles and responsibilities, building a solid methodology and ensuring sufficient funding for longitudinal research.

12:00-13:00	<p>Moderator: Camille Le Coz, Associate Director, Migration Policy Institute Europe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nassim Majidi, <i>PhD, Founder and Director</i>, Samuel Hall. - Lucia Salgado, <i>Associate Policy Analyst</i>, MPI Europe. - Dries Lensen, <i>Team leader, Joint Reintegration Services Team, Post-Return Unit</i>, Frontex. - Jo Matyn, <i>Reintegration Program Coordinator</i>, Fedasil
13:00-14:30	Lunch
<p>SESSION 3: Moving the needle: How to leverage return counselling to improve the uptake of return?</p> <p>The central question of this session is how return counselling could be further leveraged to improve return uptake and reintegration outcomes. Elements to be discussed include how to improve the effectiveness of return counselling, how to adapt counselling strategies to different target groups and settings and how to strengthen cooperation with partners in countries of origin and destination.</p>	
14:30-15:30	<p>Moderator: Alexander Smits, <i>Policy Advisor</i>, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jasper Swanenberg, <i>Operational Officer, Post-Return Unit</i>, Frontex. - Anne Dussart, <i>Head of Department Asylum and Migration – Social Programs</i>, Caritas International. - Ellen Verheijden, <i>Head of department, Alternatives to Detention</i>, Immigration office, Belgian FPS Home Affairs.
15:30-16:00	Coffee break
<p>SESSION 4: Ensuring value of investments: What steps are needed to use the growing evidence base effectively?</p> <p>The last session of the day will dive into data crunching. Data are stressed as a crucial motor for innovation and evidence based policy design. The monitoring and evaluation of initiatives has been far from systematic or long-term, forgoing valuable opportunities to expand and refine the reintegration toolbox. How to define and collect the relevant data? What are the possibilities of knowledge gained from (combining) representable data sets? Could it lead us to the heart of why certain practices work for some returnees or in some reintegration contexts? Treating and interpreting data is a cautionary tale; what if data are incomplete or biased? How to take into account the risk of false conclusions through selective reading?</p>	
16:00-17:00	<p>Moderator: Camille Le Coz, Associate Director, Migration Policy Institute Europe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peter Neelen, <i>Senior Program Manager</i>, Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF). - Roberto Forin, <i>Europe Regional Manager</i>, Mixed Migration Centre. - Damien Jusselme, <i>Head, Data Science and Analytics</i>, Global Migration Data Analysis Center (GMDAC).
17:00-17:30	<p>Wrap up Day 1</p> <p>Jeroen Vandekerckhove, <i>Head of International Relations</i>, Fedasil.</p>

NETWORK EVENT: RECEPTION & DINNER

19:00-23:00	<p>All in person participants are cordially invited to the networking dinner.</p> <p>The event will take place in the Marble Hall, Flanders Meeting & Convention Center Antwerp - A Room with a ZOO.</p> <p>Entrance: Koningin Astridplein 26, 2018 Antwerp (Main Entrance ZOO)</p> <p>May we kindly ask that you wear your badge for identification purposes.</p> <p>If you have communicated dietary preferences, please identify yourself to the manager of the venue.</p>
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DAY 2: FOSTERING SUSTAINABILITY IN REINTEGRATION

During the second day, participants are invited to take a long-term view and discuss how reintegration programming can be made more sustainable to create lasting effects for returnees and communities in countries of origin. The debate will focus on partnership opportunities with countries of origin, development actors and civil society, legal re-migration, and funding possibilities.

All the sessions will consist of a setting the scene by the panelists, followed by a panel discussion and ending with the possibility for questions from the audience.

09:00-09:30	Registration
09:30-10:00	<p>Welcome & Opening remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Caroline Gennez, <i>Minister for Development Cooperation and Major Cities</i>, Belgian Federal Government.- Hugo Verbist, <i>Special Envoy for Migration</i>, Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.- Nils Baetens, <i>Head of Department Future Orientation</i>, Fedasil.- Mercedes Garcia-Perez, <i>Head of Division for Migration and Human security</i>, Deputy Director for Global Issues, European External Action Service.

SESSION 5: From political will to capacities: How to grow local ownership for reintegration?

The first session of the day focusses on the goal of achieving local ownership in countries of origin. How to move from political will to capacity on the ground. The session will reflect on the latest programming, including capacity-building and peer support activities. The debate will also focus on ongoing efforts in origin countries to adapt public services and support the reintegration process.

10:00-11:30	<p>Moderator: Ravenna Sohst, <i>Policy Analyst</i>, Migration Policy Institute Europe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Corantine Groccia, <i>Reintegration Officer</i>, Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA), IOM.- Raffaella Greco Tonegutti, <i>Lead expert Migration and Development</i>, Enabel.- Javier Helamán Reyes Menjívar, <i>Ambassador of El Salvador to the Kingdom of Belgium</i>, El Salvador.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ahmed Saada, <i>Associate Minister of Social Solidarity</i>, Ministry of Social Solidarity Egypt. - Christina Jespersen, <i>Senior Project Manager</i>, Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF).
11:30-12:00	Coffee break
<p>Session 6: Looking beyond the drop-off point: To what degree can legal migration opportunities be mobilised in the sustainable reintegration toolbox?</p> <p>During this session, panelists and participants are invited to reflect on the meaning of 'sustainable reintegration'. Could sustainable reintegration include legal migration as an extended pathway for reintegration, and if so, under which conditions? The discussion will open questions around regional mobility and partnership with labour mobility actors and explore how reintegration programmes could be better linked with circular migration schemes or labour pathways.</p>	
12:00-13:00	<p>Moderator: Jonathan Chaloff, <i>Senior policy analyst</i>, International Migration Division, OECD.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Golda Myra Roma, <i>Senior Project Manager</i>, Migrant Resource Center Pakistan, ICMPD. - Mustafa Haider, <i>Director</i>, Welfare Department, Overseas Pakistanis Foundation. - Alexandra Hilbig, <i>Project Manager</i>, Sector Programme Migration and Development, Sector and Global Programme, German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ). - Anna Perego, <i>Legal and Policy Officer, Legal Migration</i>, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission.
13:00-14:00	Lunch
<p>Session 7: Safeguarding reintegration: Exploring different funding models to safeguard sustainable reintegration programmes.</p> <p>While destination country governments and international donors are the main source of funding, their streams are often disconnected, with short timeframes and no clear exit strategy. On the other side, countries of origin are faced with a range of competing domestic priorities and are subsequently challenged to align international funding with national policies. Topic of discussion are the main advantages and limitations of current funding models and the possible exploration of alternative options that could help improve cooperation between donors and countries of origin and diversify funding sources.</p>	
14:00-15:00	<p>Moderator; Hanne Beirens, <i>Director</i>, Migration Policy Institute Europe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guido Castellano, <i>Programme Manager – EU Policies</i>, Fund Coordination, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission. - Aurélie Sgro, <i>Policy Officer and Programme Manager</i>, Unit G6 Migration and Forced Displacement, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, European Commission. - Hugo Rickberg, <i>Senior Specialist</i>, Office of International Affairs, Swedish Migration Agency.
15:00-15:30	Coffee break

Session 8: The future of the EU return and reintegration field: Where are we heading and what will success look like?

The concluding session will draw from the vast amounts of input produced in the preceding two days, and looks into the future. The panellists are invited to discuss and share with the audience how they envision the future of the European return and reintegration landscape.

15:30-16:30	<p>Moderator: Hanne Beirens, <i>Director</i>, Migration Policy Institute Europe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Silvena Pesta, <i>Head of Unit of irregular migration and return policy unit</i>, Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission.- Alessandro Di Tolla, <i>Director of the European Centre for Returns Division</i>, Frontex.- Ralph Genetzke, <i>Director, Head of Mission</i>, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).- Pieter Spinnewijn, <i>Director Operational Services</i>, Fedasil.
16:30-17:00	<p>Concluding remarks</p> <p>Jeroen Vandekerckhove, <i>Head of International Relations</i>, Fedasil.</p>