



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Carr, H. (2014) Returning 'home': experiences of reintegration for asylum seekers and refugees. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44 (Suppl1). i140-i156. ISSN 0045-3102.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu046>

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Returning ‘Home’: Experiences of Reintegration for Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Abstract

Social workers have a role in providing support to asylum seekers and refugees who are considering returning to their country of origin. To enable good support, a greater understanding is required of the experiences of those who return voluntarily, their difficulties of adjustment and reintegration back into their country of origin. This systematic review explores themes within eight qualitative studies of the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees who voluntarily return. It specifically focuses on the conditions that make reintegration back home most successful. There are three key findings: people need to be prepared for return, economically and psychologically; independent monitoring could protect returnees; and there are contradicting drivers between internal migration policies and return policies of EU host countries. Asylum seekers are ordinarily unable to work in the host country, which means they are unable to save or develop skills for return; these employment restrictions create dependency and corrode the resilience required for sustainable return. The findings of this review can be drawn upon as a model of discussion points between social workers and people considering return. It serves to highlight that return is not necessarily the end of the migration process for individuals.

Keywords: social work, asylum seekers, refugees, voluntary return, return migration, reintegration

Introduction

Social work in the UK is in a dilemma. On the one hand, there is a nationally proclaimed need for ever more assertive and improved professionalism, breaking out of bureaucratic ways of working to deliver better results. The Secretary of State for Education, Gove (2013), has called for the profession ‘to innovate, try new ways of

working' and to question 'the validity of what is currently considered adequate practice'. On the other hand, much of today's social work is mired in austerity, risk managing the allocation of seemingly ever decreasing resources or capabilities while working with the vulnerable and marginalised of society. **Forced migrants are among the most marginalised, with many assessed as not eligible for the social care that is so needed.** Both The College of Social Work and BASW are ensuring that migration is brought to the fore of social work training (Guru, 2013) and return is a significant issue within this work. On a practice level, this systematic review provides insights into the needs of forced migrants considering return and how practitioners can best support them. On a strategic level, it gives examples of innovative and creative practice and highlights the need for social work as profession to act as a collective force for social justice.

The return of asylum seekers and refugees to their country of origin is contentious; the 'voluntariness' of return is questionable for those without settled status and equal rights within the host country. Asylum seekers and refugees commonly experience poverty, harassment and poor health in the UK (Freedom from Torture, 2013; Reacroft, 2008; Refugee Council, 2013), which clearly pushes people to return to their country of origin. There are also factors pulling people to return, such as changes in the country of origin's security, family bereavement or illness. Ethically, migrants need the opportunity to consider their best options regarding return; this requires clear and accurate advice. Advice on voluntary return should be impartial, non-directive and within a confidential setting (Refugee Action, 2012). This paper is written to support that advice process with knowledge gained from the experiences of returnees.

Migration and return are political and emotive issues; practitioners need to cut through the media portrayal of migrants and from personal narratives, both tragic and triumphant, develop their level of empathy and the relevance of responses. The following is a key consideration for practice:

'How can it be assumed that refugees are returning 'home' when the very reason they left was that they did not feel 'at home' anymore?'
(Ghanem, 2003, p21)

Conceptually there are three types of return: voluntary, coerced/mandatory and forced. For this review, 'voluntary return' refers to return to a country of origin, travelling independently or through an assisted voluntary return (AVR) programme with an element of freewill and informed choice in the decision-making to return. Measuring this degree of informed choice is problematic; ideally, voluntary return requires security of immigration status from which a person can consider their settlement options (ECRE, 2005). Unfortunately, the studies within this review do not identify the individuals' 'push and pull' factors of return; the samples include assisted returns where voluntary return represents choosing to return, with or without financial or other incentives, rather than staying and risking inevitable forced return by the host government, arguably coerced returns. The division between voluntary and coerced return is often unclear in official statistics and research. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1996) states that return is deemed 'voluntary' if return is: 'within legal, physical and material safety and dignity'; 'lasting and sustainable'; and 'takes place without forces pushing refugees to leave or barriers preventing return'. In the UK, an asylum seeker may be detained and forcibly removed at almost any time; it is within this context that asylum seekers currently apply for 'voluntary' return (Clery et al., 2005).

Definitions

Within this paper, a refugee is a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951). An 'asylum seeker' is 'someone who has applied for refugee status, whereas a refugee has had their asylum application accepted; there are obvious implications here as to the degree of choice for settlement planning. The term 'forced migrant' is used to refer to both asylum seekers and refugees to reflect the coerced, often violent, conditions that push people to leave their country of origin.

In the UK, it is perceived as cost-effective to promote voluntary return (National Audit Office, 2005). In 2012, out of 8,764 removals and voluntary departures of asylum applicants (including dependants), 3845 returned voluntarily, rather than

enforced. Of this 3845, 2524 returned through AVR programmes (Refugee Council, 2013). Voluntary return allows returnees more control over timing and preparation for return. Returnees hold their own travel documents on entry to their country of origin, a significant safety issue when going through passport controls. Those who have access to travel documents and money may return independently. Voluntary return is considered a more sustainable option compared to enforced return, with returnees having greater agency in the process. There can be the comforting illusion for the host nation that returnees will slot back into their family lives and communities where they ‘naturally’ belong. The reality is that often people return to face poverty and continuing persecution, some are detained, tortured by the authorities and/or go missing (ECRE, 2005).

Refugee Action is the non-governmental organisation (NGO) contracted by the UK government to assist with voluntary return; this contractual relationship mirrors the tensions between social work and the government when trying to serve ‘two masters’ (Webber, 2012, p4). **Through receiving government funding, NGOs jeopardise their independence to fully represent their service users’ views on government policy and legislation.** Webber (*ibid*) argues that NGOs legitimise unacceptable policies, describing their involvement ‘as the nosegay hiding the stench of reality’. **As the government encourages return to unstable regions, the facilitation of such return causes conflict when return is deemed too dangerous.**

This systematic review focuses on reintegration experience; successful reintegration or ‘embeddedness’ (Houte & Koning, 2008) is measured by the sustainability of return, through: ‘returnees’ subjective testimony; returnees remaining or expressing a desire to remain in their country of origin; and objective measures of returnees’ income and housing’ (Thiel & Gillan, 2010, p10). For the UK Border Agency (UKBA), successful reintegration may be merely returnees staying in their country of origin and not re-migrating to the UK. There is concern that the UKBA places more emphasis on encouraging return rather than looking at the longer-term consequences for returnees. For example, the Home Office has encouraged return to Afghanistan and Iraq at a time when the refugee community organisations (RCOs) themselves say that it is not yet safe for return (Blitz et al., 2005).

This review starts from the Kosovan experience of 1999, a significant time in the development of formulated voluntary return packages; there was a large-scale return programme across Europe, involving collaboration between the EU countries (ECRE, 2000; Danish Refugee Council, 2008). The UK government, matching other EU governments, allowed 'look and see' visits for heads of families and community leaders to ascertain possibilities for return, and offered a grant if a person returned within the year's stay they had been given in the UK. This grant increased in value towards the end of this year as a 'pull' factor to return. Meanwhile, the threat of diminishing rights, enforced removal if asylum was later refused and growing animosity from the media and local communities worked as 'push' factors for return (Amore, 2005). Now, return packages vary depending on the return country and include financial incentives, training opportunities and business grants.

Method

This systematic review focuses on returnees' subjective testimony as to how successful reintegration has been experienced. It explores the financial, social and psychological aspects of reintegration into family and community life. The inclusion criteria was: qualitative research between 1999-2011; voluntary return from developed EU host countries to developing, refugee-producing countries, either independently or on an AVR programme; published in English. The review objectives were to investigate the experiences of returnees under eight predetermined domains (global themes) under which the emerging themes were organised: social and cultural integration; economic reintegration; physical and psychological health factors since return; persecution/discrimination within country of origin; ongoing impact of living in the host country; reflection on support for reintegration from the host country; reflection on the decision to return; and future plans for the individual.

The following databases were searched (March 2011) as key resources in the social care field: Applied Social Sciences Index of the Social Sciences (ASSIA); Care Knowledge; International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS); PsychINFO; Sage Journals; Social Policy and Practice; and Social Care Online. The search terms were (voluntary return*) OR (assisted return*) producing 364 articles. Beyond a database search, agencies were contacted for unpublished and grey literature: ICAR,

Refugee Council, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and universities with centres focusing on migration (Sussex University, University of East London, University of Kent, Oxford University). Through direct contact with Refugee Action, four reports were identified: Refugee Action (2010); Bryan & Cocke (2010); Houte & Koning (2008); and Thiel & Gillan (2010).

A total of 374 articles were then screened for relevance to the review, firstly through title and abstract and then the remainder (14) through full text screening. Articles were excluded if focusing on enforced return, return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or return from neighbouring countries. Voluntariness of return needed to be evident in the authors' discussions. The final eight primary studies were appraised using the primary research appraisal tool of Paterson et al (2001) to determine validity. For each study, it was important to note: sample characteristics; the author's impartiality to return; the source of funding; the degree to which returnees were given a voice in the research process; and the generalisability of the findings beyond the specific research population.

Data extraction was standardised across the eight studies (as adapted from Coren & Fisher, 2006 and Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Notably, the response rate for each study suggested the level of trust from the asylum seekers, refugees and refugee community. Each text was coded for key words and reoccurring themes. Attride-Stirling's (2001) method of thematic networking was used to contribute to the narrative analysis, exploring coded text out of the context of the article in order to reflect on patterns and structures of relationships. For each predetermined global theme, a conceptual map was drawn from the raw data of each article.

There are gaps in the research base. Overall, there are few studies looking specifically at the return experiences of those who return voluntarily from EU countries. There are articles written from the view point of funders and NGOs but little qualitative data from returnees themselves. Returnees may want to maintain a low profile in their community and avoid the publicity of research. Furthermore, studies tend to focus on

return to countries for which there are return programmes and established contacts within those regions, as with Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Limitations in the Research

This was a small-scale, time-bounded project with one author. Ideally, a systematic review is completed by a team of researchers who can quality control the methodology at each stage of the process (SCIE guidelines, Coren & Fisher, 2006); this would be the next stage for a wider project. Subjectivity did enter the review process with the pre-determination of the global themes; this greatly assisted with the organisation of the data at the initial stages, yet with greater time and resources, a focus group would be most appropriate for identifying these themes.

The eight studies were varied; Huttunen (2010) was a single case study of a Bosnian couple's return, who consequently felt stranded and unsupported, whilst Muggeridge & Dona's sample had the legal option to re-return to the host country (2006), enabling greater agency and choice. Further research needs to search for greater subtlety in the literature, to consider the individual characteristics of the returnee, their position in the migration cycle and the level of assistance received.

Noteworthy studies fall outside the inclusion boundaries. Lie's study (2004), excluded as data was gathered prior to 1999 and did not differentiate between voluntary and forced return, focuses on the hardships of return to Bosnia. It explores how post-traumatic stress disorder can worsen on return to the place where the damage originally occurred. This longitudinal study had a high attrition rate of interviewees and highlights the cost and time implications of tracing and travelling widely to returnees' homes. Furthermore, von Lersner et al (2008) also emphasised the negative impact of return to the place where the original trauma occurred, looking at the psychological strain of the return process. This article was not included as the participants were predisposed to psychiatric disorders.

Emerging Themes from the Studies

Reintegration into Family Life and Local Community

Houte & Koning (2008) highlight the importance of maintaining contact with family and friends throughout the asylum period to enable social embeddedness on return; this keeps people updated on news, changes and maintains social familiarity, protecting returnees from the shock of return. Interviewees often note difficulties trying to fit back into a family and community when people have moved on and changed (*ibid*; ECRE, 2005: Bosnia). Riiskjaer notes returnees feeling like ‘strangers’, ‘outsiders’, ‘foreigners’ and ‘dealing with completely different people to the ones we had left behind’ (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008, Iraq Interview 27:7, p5).

One theme that is repeatedly expressed across the studies is the perception that returnees are wealthy (ECRE, 2005; Muggeridge & Dona, 2006; Refugee Action, 2010; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008). Hence, returnees are at increased risk from authority officials and local criminals trying to extort money, with extreme examples of bribery, kidnapping and disappearances. Returnees to Afghanistan note the shame of returning ‘empty handed’ (ECRE, 2005). The impact of returning without wealth to Sierra Leone has serious consequences, with all thirteen of the sample from Refugee Action’s study (2010) saying they were rejected by their families and communities within one week of returning due to being ‘empty-handed’ without money or qualifications. These returnees to Sierra Leone were made homeless and experienced humiliation and mockery:

‘it was very difficult after I arrived because nobody wanted to know what it was like in the Netherlands. ‘What are you doing back?’ people still ask me. I haven’t been accepted. I wake up with headaches and a screaming in my head – it’s not good’ (Refugee Action, 2010, ‘Ibrahim’, p13).

Prior to return, there is a reluctance to tell friends and family when asylum claims have been refused. Returnees try to resettle before contacting families due to shame (Refugee Action, 2010, ‘Mahmoud’, p13). In Sierra Leone, a ‘hierarchy of shame’ is indicated; it is viewed as less shameful to return voluntarily than be forcibly removed or deported and handed to the police (Refugee Action, 2010, ‘Rulle’, p14).

Reintegration into Employment and Financial Situation

All eight studies in this review discussed the overriding role of employment and financial resources in reintegration; there is the repeated message that people need to be allowed to work whilst in their host country, to save and gain skills for return. One returnee to Afghanistan says he would have returned earlier if he had been able to work and save for return:

'he prefers this situation (of difficulties) to being condemned to passivity and being separated from his family in Europe' (ECRE, 2005, p122).

Financial independence protects returnees from political instability. The wealthy and well-educated generally find reintegration easier. Houte & Koning (2008) found 31-47 year olds reintegrate more successfully than other age groups as they have had some pre-migration education and work experience, familiarity with their environment and are then better placed to re-enter the market place upon return (p38).

High unemployment and irregular employment are a common theme in the studies, with returnees often having to try alternative types of work to get an income (Black et al, 2004, p32) and getting little support within ailing local economies (Huttunen, 2010). Many returnees were below the poverty line, such as in Bosnia, with unemployment especially high in villages. In Kosovo, out of 34 interviews in Black et al's study, five households said they had no money coming in at all and thirteen were living on one wage (2004, p31). Returnees to Bosnia and Russia need registration papers to be able to work and access social support and there is difficulty in obtaining this registration (ECRE, 2005). Few interviewees were able to access financial support from abroad.

People are in a better position to start businesses if they have the social networks already in place or if they are part of cooperative business ventures (Refugee Action, 2010). Of course, general insecurity in a country can prevent business initiatives developing. Riiskjaer & Nielsson (2008) note 'several' interviewees found it too dangerous to go out to work each day; there was a need to leave one man at least at

home to protect the family (Iraq). In some cultures, there are strong gender expectations of men succeeding (Houte & Koning, 2008, p35) and single women not being allowed to own a business (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008).

Health Factors since Return

‘Returnee shock’ (Refugee Action, 2010, p15) implies the reality of return is very different from how many imagined. Refugee Action (2010) notes that most returnees felt vulnerable and anxious as they entered their country. There is a need for psychological preparation for return, rather than abruptly re-entering as an active citizen after being a passive ‘non-citizen’ in Europe (Refugee Action, 2010, p15). Refugee Action’s study argues that there is a need for ‘the provision of a safe place in which returnees are given the time and psychological security to manage ‘returnee shock’ (2010, p24).

One Bosnian returnee says:

‘it has been more upsetting to return to Bosnia than it was to leave it, because we had hope at the beginning, but none of our hopes have been realised’ (ECRE, p83).

Keeping contact with local information can bridge the gap between imagination and reality and prepare people for return (Muggeridge & Dona, 2006). Some returnees remain emotionally stuck at the time of war or crisis and family and friends encourage them to ‘move on’ and accept the new way of life. In Sierra Leone, the daily trauma in surviving is noted and people therefore do not have the capacity to deal with the war trauma. It is suggested that the high level of disputes, beatings, domestic and child abuse are symptoms of war trauma (Refugee Action, 2010).

In Sierra Leone, there are no psychiatric hospitals and only one psychiatrist in the country, according to Refugee Action (2010, p17), and many returnees experienced some form of psychological disorder. There are cultural differences in response to mental illness, ‘a lot of sickness is stress-related, but nobody recognises mental health problems, which are explained as witchcraft problems’ (Refugee Action, 2010, p18).

Continuing Persecution or Discrimination on Return

In Riiskjaer & Nielsson's study (2008), returnees from Denmark to Iraq told their children to keep secret that they were from Denmark in the fear that they would be termed Danish, thus being at risk of extortion; the danger of travelling on a Danish passport through ports of entry was also raised. Sri Lankan returnees are arrested and charged for leaving the country illegally, some assaulted, tortured and even murdered by police on return (ECRE, 2005, p27). ECRE record the case of a returnee from Greece to Sudan who was detained by the security service on arrival and went missing (2005, p118).

Government officials can discriminate against returnees trying to access employment, housing and social support, such as with Chechens; registration is denied and criminal cases can be falsified against the returnees (ECRE, 2005, p46). Bosnian returnees also reported 'unexpectedly high' discrimination on return, being unable to access their homes and then being unable to register in their new location (ECRE, 2005, p82). Continued corruption and nepotism in employment is discussed in many of the studies.

Returnees are particularly vulnerable when they are seen to be different (Houte & Koning, 2008, p41). In Sierra Leone, returnees felt safer in the capital city where they had greater anonymity. People are also safer where they are part of the ethnic majority. People may need to hide their religious identity (Huttunen, 2010). In Kosovo, some interviewees carry guns for protection and in Afghanistan, returnees become internally displaced to escape possible kidnapping or after paying ransoms (ECRE, 2005). Return is often to a climate of unrest and uncertainty, with easy access to weapons and first-hand experience of violence.

The Impact of Living in the Host Country

Returnees found it easier to reintegrate if they had always considered their stay in the host country as temporary; this provides psychological protection and social networks for when they return (Houte & Koning, 2008, p59). Becoming accustomed to the

ways of the host country causes difficulties in reintegration; interviewees expressed they were used to living in a democracy with freedom of speech and no longer fitted in their country of origin (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008).

Restrictive migration policies within the host country forcibly create dependency, causing a damaging loss of self-esteem (Houte & Koning, 2008, p62). Supporting oneself in the host country, rather than depending on state payments, provides greater resilience on return (Houte & Kouting, 2008, p41). Returnees needed the opportunity to accrue qualifications, skills and wealth in readiness for return. Through migration, many returnees maintained transnational networks for support, although this was rarely for financial support (Houte & Koning, 2008, p33).

Reflection on Assistance and Level of Support from Host Country for Reintegration

Some returnees had received pre-departure advice and information, but this lacked information on security (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008). Many of the interviewees from the studies had received financial assistance for reintegration such as through The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP); this support helped set up business opportunities for Sri Lankan returnees (ECRE, 2005). The limitations of VARRP are noted as not providing large enough grants for significant or sustainable support and aid is unevenly distributed, not reaching poorer areas in Bosnia (ECRE, 2005, p87). There were several reasons for not applying for VARRP: too proud to accept charity; suspicion of IOM collecting information for the government; intending to re-migrate on return to a third country; and not believing support would materialise, such as in remote regions (Bryan & Cocke, 2010, p9). IOM provided three months temporary accommodation to returnees to Sierra Leone, yet many went on to face serious housing problems (Refugee Action, 2010).

A repeated theme across studies is the request for ongoing contact with NGOs. In Bosnia, 'there was a sense of having been abandoned by Austria' (ECRE, 2005, p82) and similar is noted in Kosovo. Interviewees said it was important to feel that the international community keeps interested in supporting Kosovo's development (ECRE, 2005, p62).

Reflection on Decision to Return

‘Push and pull’ factors influencing the decision to return included: adverse economic conditions in the host country (Black et al., 2004, p20); feeling obliged when their status ended (*ibid*); strict family reunion policies (Riiskjaer, 2008); rebuilding assistance (Bryan & Cocke, 2010, p15); and needing better community relations, having struggled from the impact of not speaking the main language of the host country (Huttunen, 2010). However, security in the country of origin is of paramount importance in the decision-making process to return.

One family believed they could return to the host country if it was unsustainable to remain in their country of origin; they had not understood their rights under immigration policy (Huttunen, 2010). Yet again the right to work in the host country is raised: one returnee to Afghanistan says he would have returned earlier if he had been able to work and save for return (ECRE, 2005, p122). For nine interviewees who returned from Austria to Kosovo, powerlessness and lack of opportunities within Kosovo were noted:

‘It is quite obvious that the repatriation was no sustainable success so far’
(ECRE, 2005, p94).

Within these studies, the male head of household usually makes the decision to return. For Riiskjaer (2008), there was only one case in which the wife instigated the family’s return to Iraq.

Future Plans for the Individual

Return is not necessarily the final step in the migration journey, with many reports of people finding life in their country of origin unsustainable and making plans to re-migrate (Bryan & Cocke, 2010). In Black et al’s study, half the Bosnian sample (15) and 21 out of the 34 Kosovan sample said they wanted to return abroad, mainly for economic reasons (2004, p29). Out of Houte & Koning’s sample, 76% wanted to re-migrate also due to their poor economic situation, wanting to join family abroad, with

11% making actual plans to leave (2008, p34). Alternatively, Bryan & Cocke (2010) found most of their sample of returnees to Sri Lanka positive about their futures after returning. Four out of the five returnees from Austria to Bosnia interviewed as part of the ECRE project (2005) viewed Bosnia as home and had no obvious desire to return to Austria.

Muggeridge & Dona found interviewees who did not want to grow old in the UK, whereas the other studies highlight the great concerns people have around ageing without resources in place. ECRE's study (2005) cites two elderly sisters who returned from Austria to Bosnia subsequently living in poverty with inadequate accommodation and support: they said that if war was to occur again, they would not want to leave Bosnia:

'never again endure the horror of returning – that's their credo'
(ECRE, 2005, p122).

Issues for Children, Women, Older People and Vulnerable Adults

No research was found on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) voluntarily returning to their country of origin. However, Gladwell and Elwyn (2012) have undertaken research with former UASC aged 18-24 who have been forcibly returned from the UK, mainly to Afghanistan. It is clear that children and adult asylum seekers are treated very differently within the asylum system yet returnee care leavers do not get additional support (Gladwell & Elwyn, 2012). The majority of Gladwell & Elwyn's sample of 24 former UASC 'reacted vehemently against the idea of returning voluntarily to their own country'. Gladwell & Elwyn's (2012) case studies show continuing fears of return: fear of the Taliban impacting on the ability to work and a need to hide; the need for a supportive family to help resettle and rebuild lives; family shame if return is 'empty-handed'; and general heightened vulnerability to abuse.

Parents expressed concerns on behalf of their children: the threat of kidnapping and human trafficking (ECRE, 2005, p89); poor education and opportunities; living in poverty; local drug abuse problems (ECRE, 2005: Kosovo); and having to return to an

unknown country if they have grown up in the host country. There were suggestions that in Russia, children have been interrogated in schools by law-enforcement bodies about their parents when they are from Northern Caucasus and/or with no registration (ECRE, 2005, p51).

Throughout the studies, women were typically viewed by the returnees as needing the protection of men or their family. Specifically, in Iraq and Sri Lanka, it is socially unacceptable for women to live alone in a house (ECRE, 2005, p76) and to own a business (Iraq). It is extremely difficult for single women to find work and provide for themselves and their families. Women are at risk of trafficking and crime; one single woman was noted as returning to Iraq and is now missing in transit (ECRE, 2005, p116). Culturally, women may find it difficult to adjust on return, with different role expectations and less freedom in the public sphere of life.

Older people are at financial risk due to poor infrastructures of social benefits and healthcare. The older generation may become dependant on their adult children, but these traditional caring networks are failing as children move to EU countries where they are unable to work and send money back. The lack of family support reduces the sustainability of return for older people (Huttunen, 2010). Older people may have greater concerns with accessing medication and healthcare. Despite the concerns of return, many older people throughout the studies returned because they wanted to reclaim their property and wanted to be part of a social network (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008).

Implications of the Review

This review highlights themes to consider for advising and advocating on voluntary return. Forced migrants require current, reliable information on their legal rights and the security and economic situation in the area of possible return. Return is often to post-conflict areas with greater risk of violence and crime; returnees may need to consider contingency plans. This review suggests that having good local knowledge prior to return assists people to readjust and reintegrate more successfully, with more realistic expectations. Advice needs to be trusted so should be delivered from a non-directive and impartial stance. There need to be strong interagency links between

social workers, RCOs both in the host country and country of origin, and the refugee agencies that hold expertise within this field. Vulnerable adults and children should have their needs fully assessed prior to return for sustainability and quality of life. Ethically, reintegration support must be aimed at long-term sustainable return. This review has indicated that restrictive immigration policies within the EU do not support sustainable return for individuals; people lose self-esteem, confidence and cannot increase funds and skills for return (Black et al, 2004); this needs addressing at a policy level.

Safety in the country of origin is the key area of concern for returnees who often request independent monitoring on return (ECRE, 2005). There are lost voices noted in the research: people missing after return, often after coming into conflict with the authorities in their country of origin (ECRE, 2005, p118) or with local criminals (p117) or just not getting to their final destination (p116). Return to volatile regions can also result in internal displacement. Return is not necessarily the end of the migration journey.

Social work should influence the development of return programmes at a policy level. ECRE (2005, p135) notes an inspirational and innovative model of good practice for voluntary return. A Swedish return programme, Goteborg-Initiative, sends Somali-origin teachers from Sweden back to Somalia to teach in local schools where they have a shortage of teachers. The scheme is voluntary, the teachers are funded on a one-year contract paid by Sweden and given return tickets. Whilst providing direct aid, the programme also allows the teachers to consider return whilst actually in Somalia. Return to Sweden is not seen as any failure of the programme and so far, 65% have stayed in Somalia.

Within migration, social work is in a challenging and challengeable position; whilst service users need to be at the heart of practice, practitioners are required to follow current legislation. This includes ascertaining eligibility with some extremely vulnerable adults left unable to access services. In response to this context, new radical social work needs to 'dance cleverly' (Singh & Cowden, p93); discriminatory practice needs to be challenged on an individual and a structural level with renewed commitment to social work values. The Social Work Action Network (SWAN, 2011)

provides an example of collective action challenging budget cuts for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the West Midlands as racist.

Social work training should provide an excellent grounding for working with forced migrants, utilising the core values of: developing communication; commitment to empowerment and equality; working within professional ethical guidance; and an appreciation of social network theory and relationship-based practice. It is essential to be able to quickly build a rapport where there may be mistrust, secrets and silence (Kohli, 2006). To enhance these skills, there needs to be knowledge of migrants' stories, hopes and fears. Practitioners need to confidently ask questions about individual's circumstances. During assessments, there needs to be an exploration of life beyond the host country.

CONCLUSION

Return remains a multi-faceted and complex issue yet this review has highlighted recurrent themes within experiences of reintegration after voluntary return: migrants need to be prepared for return, economically and psychologically; independent monitoring could protect returnees; and there are contradicting drivers between internal migration policies and return policies of EU host countries. Returnees need to be able to save and develop skills for return.

Throughout this review, there continues the question of 'voluntariness'; destitution, the threat and experience of detention at any stage of the asylum process, and the probability of mandatory removal are examples of the compounding factors pushing for return. Restrictive public policy drives the process of 'othering' and the forced passivity of asylum seekers (Robinson, 2013, p3). Asylum policy and legislation often contradict the values and ethics of social work, yet practitioners still need to encourage self-determination and empowerment for service users (Trevithick, 2012) and the 'principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (The International Federation of Social Workers, 2000). Practitioners need to strive to maintain their focus on the best interests of individuals to have successful lives, beyond the limitations of eligibility criteria and border controls. This challenge is at a time when social workers are often bound by bureaucracy (Robinson, 2013).

This review explored harrowing accounts of particularly vulnerable adults struggling to thrive back in their country of origin; older people without financial resources and family support in Bosnia (Huttunen, 2010) and adults with mental health problems, still suffering trauma, in Sierra Leone. These cases highlight the importance of having supportive networks upon return; people who maintained transnational links seemed to fair better for return (Muggeridge & Dona, 2006). These links kept people informed on the reality of the conditions back in their country of origin and kept expectations upon return realistic.

The key message from this review for practitioners is to consider the eight themes within this review and explore these areas with service users who are questioning whether to return:

- family life and local community networks;
- employment opportunities and the financial implications of return;
- health and particular vulnerabilities;
- risk of continuing persecution and discrimination;
- the impact of leaving the host country and the changes in culture and expectations that the person has developed;
- the level of assistance required from the host country for return to be viable;
- reflection on the decision-making process itself;
- how return fits into the person's future plans.

Attlee (1920, as cited in Parker & Doel, 2013, p212) aptly stated: 'Social workers must be social pioneers, social investigators and social agitators'. This still holds true. Through working with lawyers, the larger NGOs, BASW and The College of Social Work, the common issues raised from individual casework should be addressed collectively at a structural level. However, for social work professionals working with forced migrants, external expertise is dwindling as the impact of cuts in legal aid take effect and established NGOs within the migration field suffer redirected and reduced funding (Carey, 2008). This has created an imperative opportunity for both practitioners individually, and social work as a profession, to improve the support they give to forced migrants.

REFERENCES

Research Studies for this Review

- Black, R., Koser, K., Munk, K., Atfield, G., D'Onofrio, L. & Tiemoko, R. (2004) *Understanding Voluntary Return*. (Home Office Online Report, 50/04), London: Home Office.
- Bryan, R. & Cocke, B. (2010) *Research Report 30 – The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2004 and 2004 Extension: Monitoring Report*, London: Home Office.
- European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (2005) *Increasing Refugee Participation in the Field of Voluntary Return*. Available from: <http://www.ecre.org.uk> [last accessed 18 January 2011].
- Houte, M. & Koning, M. (2008) *Towards a Better Embeddedness? Monitoring Assistance to Involuntary Returning Migrants from Western Countries*, The Netherlands: Bureau Maatwerk bij Terugkeer (Mediation Agency for Return), Cordaid – report emailed direct from Refugee Action.
- Huttunen, L. (2010) 'Sedentary Policies and Transnational Relations: A 'Non-sustainable case of Return to Bosnia', Oxford University Press: *Journal of Refugee Studies*.
- Muggeridge, H. & Dona, Giorgia (2006) 'Back Home? Refugees' Experiences of their First Visit back to their Country of Origin', *Oxford University Press: Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19, p. 4.
- Refugee Action (2010) *Field Trip Report: Refugee Action Field Trip to Sierra Leone 24 March-3 April 2009*, London: Refugee Action – emailed direct from Refugee Action.
- Riiskjaer, M. & Nielsson, T. (2008) *Circular Repatriation: The Unsuccessful Return and Reintegration of Iraqis with Refugee Status in Denmark*, UNHCR: New Issues in Refugee Research, Research Paper No. 165.

Further References

- Amore, K. (2005) *Refugee and Return: A Comparative Study of Kosovar Albanians in Italy and the UK*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001) 'Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Research*. 1, p. 385.
- Blitz, B., Sales, R. & Marzano, L. (2005) 'Non-voluntary Return? The Politics of Return to Afghanistan', *Political Studies*, 53, pp. 182-200.

- Carey, M. (2008) 'Everything Must Go? The Privatization of State Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work*, 38, pp. 918-935.
- Clery, E., Daniel, N. & Tah, C. (2005) *The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2003: An Evaluation*, (Home Office Findings 264), London: Home Office.
- Coren, E. & Fisher, M. (2006) *The Conduct of Systematic Research Reviews for SCIE Knowledge Reviews*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.
- Danish Refugee Council (2008) *Recommendations for the Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers: Lessons Learned from Returns to Kosovo*. Available from: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/B670B9ED3ED40306492575940023BDC6-Full_Report.pdf [last accessed 26 September 2013]
- European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *Kosovo/Kosova: Return, Reconstruction, Respect (Conference Report)*, 28 January 2000. Available from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a6684.html> [last accessed 26 September 2013].
- European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2005) 'Increasing Refugee Participation in the Field of Voluntary Return'. Available from: <http://www.ecre.org> [last accessed 18 January 2011].
- Freedom from Torture (2013) 'The Poverty Barrier: The Right to Rehabilitation for Survivors of Torture in the UK'. Available from: www.freedomfromtorture.org [last accessed 19 September 2013].
- Gladwell, C. & Elwyn, H. (2012) *Broken Futures: Young Afghan Asylum Seekers in the UK and in their Country of Origin*, Geneva: UNHCR Policy and Development Service.
- Ghanem, T. (2003) *When Forced Migrants Return 'Home': The Psychological Difficulties Returnees Encounter in the Reintegration Process*, Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre.
- Gough, D. & Elbourne, D. (2002) 'Systematic Research Synthesis to Inform Policy, Practice and Democratic Debate', *Social Policy and Society*, 1, pp. 1-12.
- Gove, M. (12 November 2013) 'Supporting Social Workers to Provide Help and Protection to Children'. Available from: <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/getting-it-right-for-children-in-need-speech-to-the-nspcc> [last accessed 2 February 2014].
- Guru, S. (2013) 'Curriculum Guide: Migration and Refugees'. Available from: http://www.tcsw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/Media_centre/CG_Migrationrefugees.pdf [last accessed 26 September 2013].
- Hintjens, H. (2012) 'Nowhere to Run: Iraqi Asylum Seekers in the UK', *Race & Class*, 54 (2), pp. 88-99.

- Home Office (2007) *Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom 2006*, Norwich: The Stationery Office.
- International Federation of Social Work (2000) 'Statement of Principles'. Available from <http://www.ifsw.org> [last accessed 1 February 2011]
- Kohli, R. (2006) 'The Sounds of Silence: Listening to What Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children Say and Do Not Say', *British Journal of Social Work* (2006) 36, pp. 707-721.
- Koska, V. (2008) 'Return and Reintegration of Minority Refugees: The Complexity of the Serbian Returnees Experiences in the Town of Glina', *Politička Misao*, Vol. XLV, (2008), 5, pp. 191-217.
- Lie, B. (2004) 'The Psychological and Social Situation of Repatriated and Exiled Refugees: A Longitudinal, Comparative Study', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 32, p179.
- Lutze, K. (2005) *Proposals and Models to an Integrated Approach of Reintegration of Refugees of Ethnic Minorities, who are Returning from EU Member States: Final Report*, AGEF Berlin – Association of Experts in the Fields of Migration and Development Cooperation. Available from: <http://www.agef.net> [last accessed 18 January 2011].
- National Audit Office (2005) *Returning Failed Asylum Applicants*, London: The Stationery Office.
- Parker, J. & Doel, M. (2013) *Professional Social Work*, London: Sage/Learning Matters.
- Paterson, B., Thorne, S., Canam, C. & Jillings, C. (2001) *Meta-Study of Qualitative Health Research: A Practical Guide to Meta-Analysis and Meta-Synthesis*, London: Sage Publications.
- Popay et al (April 2006), *Guidance on the Conduct of Narrative Synthesis*, Lancaster University.
- Reacroft, J. (2008) *Like Any Other Child? Children and Families in the Asylum Process*, London: Barnado's. Available from: http://www.barnardos.org.uk/like_any_other_child_asylum_report08_full.pdf [last accessed 26 Sept 2013].
- Refugee Action, *Choices Voluntary Return Conference Report 2005*, London. Available from: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk> [last accessed 15 February 2011].
- Refugee Action (2012) Choices Assisted Voluntary Return Service. http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/ourwork/assisted_voluntaryreturn.aspx [last accessed 25 June 2012].
- Refugee Council <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

- Robinson, K. (2013) 'Voices from the Front Line: Social Work with Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia and the UK', *British Journal of Social Work*, 2013, pp. 1-19.
- Ross-Sheriff, Fariyal (2006) 'Afghan Women in Exile and Repatriation: Passive Victims or Social Actors?' *Affilia*, 21, 206. Available from: <http://aff.sagepub.com> [last accessed 30 October 2011].
- Ruben, R., van Houte, M. & Davids, T. (2009) 'What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre- and Post-Return Assistance', *International Migration Review*, 43, 4, pp. 908-937.
- Social Care Institute of Excellence. Available from: <http://www.scie.org.uk> [last accessed 18 January 2011].
- Social Work Action Network (2011) 'SWAN Leads Campaign against Racist Cuts'. Available from: <http://socialworkfuture.org/articles> [last accessed 2 February 2014].
- Temple, B. and Moran, R. (2006) *Doing Research with Refugees*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Thiel, D. & Gillan, K. (2010) *Research Report 29 – Factors Affecting Participation in Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes and Successful Reintegration: A Review of the Evidence*, London: Home Office.
- Trevithick, P. (2012) *Social Work Skills and Knowledge: A Practice Handbook*, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education.
- UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, 189.
- UNHCR (2004) *Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities*, Geneva: UNHCR.
- UNHCR (1996) *Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection*, Geneva: UNHCR.
- Von Lersner, U., Elbert, T. & Neuner, F. (2008) 'Mental Health of Refugees following State-Sponsored Repatriation from Germany', *BMC Psychiatry*. Available from: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-244X/8/88>.
- Webber, F. (2012) 'UK: The Real Immigration Debate', *Race & Class*, 53 (3), pp. 91-98.