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Back but Not Home: Reintegration Realities and Returnee Resilience in Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper examines the reintegration of returnees in Pakistan based on field research carried out in December 2024, in partnership with two local organizations. The paper looks at the socio-economic and psychological aspects of reintegration, evaluates the current reintegration programs and lists areas to develop a better cooperation with international partners such as StartHope@home. According to the interviews, returnees often face three main challenges: economic sustainability, social stigma, and mental health problems. The Pakistani labor market absorbs 1.5 million new entrants annually (World Bank, 2013; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022); therefore, most returnees find economic support through self-employment in sectors such as agriculture, dairy farming, and small trading. On the social front, returnees are subjected to societal scrutiny, emotional loneliness, and feelings of failure. One of these organizations focuses on business development and family involvement, while the other one provides psychosocial counseling and raises awareness through storytelling. Both organizations emphasize the importance of holistic approaches in reintegration, including long-term accompaniment, mental health, and community integration. It is estimated that 25 percent of the returnees re-migrate, with 7 percent returning to Europe. The study concludes with recommendations for skills training, family-oriented business models, and psychosocial support. Strengthening cooperation with local agents and improving data on reintegration outcomes are key to achieving sustainable returns. These findings also present an opportunity to policymakers and practitioners who intend to investigate how to strengthen reintegration measures in Pakistan and beyond.

Keywords: return migration, reintegration, social stigma, informal economy, psychosocial support

Introduction

The last decade has been characterized by a sharp increase in the phenomenon of forced displacement on a global scale. According to the High Commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in 2024, that figure exceeded 120 million people who have been displaced as a result of persecution, war, and violations of their rights (UNHCR, 2024). Out of that number, 43.4 million have been registered as refugees and a large percentage of them seek asylum in European states. Germany has been a key destination, as it has admitted about 124,000 asylum requests in the first half of 2024 alone, which makes 24 percent of the EU total (EUAA, 2024). Nevertheless, only about a quarter of the applications of this sort lead to a recognizable status of protection (BAMF, 2024), which means that more than a million such cases are still hanging in the air, or, eventually, will have to make the decision to depart to their original homelands.

Governments and other international actors are increasingly embracing the idea of voluntary return as an efficient and humane solution to forced return. Nevertheless, reintegration after returning is often accompanied by serious economic problems, social stigma and psychological distress, all accentuated by the lack of reintegration planning (Mahar, 2020). Most of these challenges are experienced in countries that have unstable labor markets and limited mental health support. Such countries include Pakistan whereby the returning people who have come back to the country; mostly those who have been in Europe are found to be facing problems in terms of reintegrating in a sustainable social and economic

aspects, as another recent field research study from the north regions of Pakistan confirm that 76% of the respondents faced such difficulties among others **(**Ali, Akhtar, Ali, 2023).

Within this complicated scenario, programs like StartHope@Home have come up to help in the process of preparation for returning and reintegrating. A German-based program prepares returnees for a sustainable economic reintegration through entrepreneurship coaching and the development of business plans. Skills-building programs not only help with knowledge transfer and planning the refugee's future, but also vocational training can have a positive effect on the participant's empowerment and self-esteem (Cohen, 2004). Although such programs provide excellent instruments as a measure to reintegrate economically, few studies have been conducted on the degree to which the models meet the reality in countries of return, thus there is a lack of sufficient existing evidence to understand processes of sustainable return and reintegration (Kuschminder, 2017). It is important to note that even when most reintegration programs focus on economic reintegration, sustainable reintegration cannot be achieved only by focusing on economic success (Schewel, 2020).

In order to investigate this aspect, the field research was carried out in Islamabad, Pakistan, in December 2024 in collaboration with two local partner organizations who prefer to remain anonymous. The current research paper will observe the common points of view between both organizations, the current support system, the main difficulties of the returnees, and the possibilities of international cooperation, all this with the help of expert interviews and program analysis. This paper offers a critical consideration of the realities of reintegration in Pakistan with reference to the interconnection of the economic, social, and psychological factors of reintegration. The article also provides practical implications of policy formulation and program design.

Methodology

The paper is based on a qualitative and exploratory research design grounded in fieldwork conducted in Islamabad, Pakistan, in December 2024. The research had two primary goals: first, to understand the realities of returning migrants and second, to assess the role of local actors in supporting sustainable reintegration processes. Data was gathered using expert interviews of key members of two local organizations that prefer to remain anonymous. Therefore, this paper refers to them as Organization A and B. Organization A is a social enterprise specialized in vocational training and entrepreneurship, while Organization B focuses on awareness and counselling, working with migrants who leave and return to Pakistan.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, which allowed for guided questioning and open discussion directions to be taken. This methodological choice allowed conducting a deeper analysis of the institutional practices, the perceived obstacles to re-entry and re connect, and possible areas of collaboration between sectors. Conversations were conducted in person, recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations have been carefully followed during the research. The informed consent of the participants on the objectives of the study, the voluntary character of participation and the right to withdraw were explained. Before the actual recording was done, the participants were appropriately made aware of what exactly the study was all about, as well as the fact that their anonymity was going to be guaranteed. We can see that no personally identifiable information was gathered and disclosed.

Although the information that has been acquired gives valuable depth, the study was geographically and institutionally restricted. Since time and logistics could not allow a researcher to visit other parts of the country, other settings, such as the regions and rural re-integration settings, which might have different dynamics, were not considered in the fieldwork part of the research. Moreover, direct interviews with the returnees were not provided in the study; rather, it was based on the professional opinion of the people who work

with them on a daily basis and could explore their opinion. These shortcomings justify the need for more detailed studies in the future.

Results

The expert interviews conducted with representatives of Organization A and B illustrated the challenges to sustainable reintegration faced by the returning population in Pakistan. Findings of this research are categorized into four areas: economic constraints, social stigmatization, psychological pressure and structural gaps in the programs.

The economic limitation is severe to the point that the returnees often face this challenge. The labor market of Pakistan, which absorbs an estimated 1.5 million new entrants on an annual basis (World Bank, 2013; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022), offers a limited number of formal employment opportunities. As a result, a sizeable number of the returning migrants resort to self-employment in informal sectors, such as dairy farming, small-scale retail, or transport. However, when business entrepreneurs start their business ventures, they encounter new challenges, such as limited access to financial resources and unpredictable market fluctuations. Participants observed that business training obtained abroad, especially within European settings, is not very practical for the Pakistani informal economy market. There are other problems related to social integration. It is a fact that most of the returnees are not welcomed quite well by their communities or at their homes, especially in circumstances that are somehow painted as a failure or in cases of deportation (Schewel, K. 2020). As evidence shows, forced return impacts negatively on the well-being of the returnees, since it takes away their sense of control (Webber, 2011).

The people interviewed explained how all these negative images translated to feelings of isolation, poor relations, and even in some cases, they considered hiding their migration history. Community stigma has an adverse impact on the psychosocial well-being of returnees, both in terms of their sense of self-worth and their capacity to reconnect with their social and economic networks. Even when many returnees have no option to stay abroad, their perception of their migration journey and expectation on return affect their self-perception and therefore, are important subjective factors to consider in the reintegration process (De Haas & Fokkema, 2011).

One very important but underrated aspect of reintegration is related to mental health, as Blitz, Sales, and Marzano (2005) validate in the interviews they had with asylum seekers; most of them are already under an intense amount of pressure when they are still in the receiving country, this is exacerbated by the distrust they have for organizations and institutions abroad and in their home country. Both organizations mentioned the fact that anxiety symptoms, shame and symptoms of depression are very prevalent among the returnees but noted the lack of mental health care specific to this group of people. According to the representatives of organization B, the delivery of psychosocial support is not being adopted at the level which would be desired because of the combination of stigma, lack of awareness and economic distress of the individuals.

One can see that both organizations are interested in delivering reintegration support, although one should note that they do not have the same operating model. Organization A has vocational training and entrepreneurship as the two major areas of focus, its programs are customized to be in line with the informal markets, and where family members, especially women, are included in the running of co-managed businesses. Moreover, they are committed to maintaining continuous engagement with the participants, in some cases, they employ former participants to support as peer coaches for new returnees, and they do follow-ups up to three years. In contrast, the focus of Organization B is to provide counselling services related to the topic of migration, implementation of awareness campaigns and promotion of financial literacy. Pilot experiments have recently been performed to determine the feasibility of reception and orientation of returnees at the airports. Although both organizations are

contributing to the sustainable reintegration of returnees, they admitted that there is a huge gap in coordination efforts with other organizations, long-term monitoring and mental health support.

Another observation revealed in the interviews is the size of secondary migration. It is estimated that about 25 percent of the returnees consider their potential remigration and nearly 7 percent of them are trying to come back to Europe. These percentages are more positive, but still in line with another study conducted 20 years ago by Black et al. (2004) with returnees from the UK returning to Bosnia and Kosovo, where 50 percent of Bosnian returnees declared that they would like to return abroad, while this number was more than 60 percent for Kosovo. This tendency highlights the fragility of reintegration processes and the need for holistic and longer-term solutions.

The following tables show a summary of the insights taken from the interviews with Organization A and B:

Table 1. Summary of insights from Organization A

Category	Insight
Business Adaptation	Unregulated markets, different prices and informality in conducting business challenge the returnee's business models.
Business Area	90% of returnees choose dairy farming for immediate income; a small percentage choose grocery businesses.
Financial Disadvantages	High upfront payment requirements for supplies affect new businesses negatively; new businesses are forced to pay upfront, while established businesses can access credit forms.
Mental Health	Emotional distress and isolation are caused by social stigma and familial or community shame.
Family Involvement	Involving family members, especially women, in business ownership eases pressure and boosts success.
Educational Barriers	Low education levels do not give the returnees the opportunity to obtain formal employment, thus leading to self-employment.
Remigration Trends	An estimated 25% of returnees intend to migrate again; 5–7% to Europe and some to the Middle East.
Lack of Mental Health Support	Limited programs with specific mental health focus.
Vocational Training	Skills in veterinary care and soft skills can improve sustainability in chosen businesses.
Program Limitations	The reintegration programs focus on the economic side without a significant holistic and long-term support.

Relevant quotes from the interview with Organization A:

"Many returnees dropped out of school early, so getting a formal job is nearly impossible, forcing them into self-employment."

"Economic recovery directly reduces the shame factor—when returnees succeed financially, community criticism fades."

"About 90% of returnees choose dairy farming because it offers immediate income, but most lack knowledge of livestock diseases."

"Involving family, especially women, in business ownership can ease the burden on returnees and improve business outcomes."

Table 2. Summary of insights from Organization B

Category	Insight
Visa Challenges	Long processing time of visas (up to 10 months) can lead to irregular migration.
Deportation Issues	Large deportation figures leave a great number of the deported beyond the reach of assistance programs.
Social Stigma	Returnees are met with shame and suspicion by the communities.
Community Influence	The stories of successful past migrants influence further migration of other people, usually on an irregular basis.
Remigration Trends	Many returnees attempt migration again due to limited opportunities.
Skill Development	Not only to focus on the economic aspect, but also on soft skills

Relevant quotes from the interview with Organization B:

"Many deported migrants don't go through our programs because they're unreachable or unaware of the support available."

"Communities play a huge role in migration decisions—family and friends encourage irregular migration because of past success stories."

Discussion

The results of the fieldwork conducted in Islamabad show the complexity of the reintegration process and reveal a significant gap between the available support systems in Pakistan and the realities faced by returnees. Although relevant aspects—such as vocational training and counseling—are addressed by existing programs, these initiatives are limited in reach, duration, and conceptual integration.

The continued focus on economic reintegration, though, is appropriate due to the limited economic opportunities and immediate needs of the returnees, threatens to downplay the psychosocial and cultural aspects of reintegration (Tizazu, Derluyn & Lietaert, 2021). Even though both organizations have different institutional models, they come to the same basic conclusion: sustainable reintegration is impossible to achieve only by means of entrepreneurship or training. The ability to achieve social acceptance, a new sense of belonging, and emotional well-being is equally important. However, these aspects are underfunded and not adequately included in program design.

A relevant challenge refers to the conflict between business plans created in Europe regarding reintegration and the informal economic systems that thrive in local settings in Pakistan. Business development coaching models used in StartHope@Home, for example, assume certain regulation of the commercial market, of the labor market, access to financial services, and freedom of entrepreneurs that many of the returnees do not face when they arrive. Some of the popular challenges that the returnees experience in their adoption of informal practices include, among others, fluctuating prices and costs, family-based labor requirements, and tacit rules of competition. These problems may limit their preparation and will increase the risk of business failure.

Social stigma takes this even deeper, making the process of reintegrating even more difficult. Contrary to economic hardship, stigma acts in a hidden, yet extremely powerful manner. The identity of the returnee on the social front is commonly restructured in a negative way, being linked to failure, deportation, or as a wasted opportunity. This stigma has the possibility to not only affect the individual mental health of the person, but it can also limit community-based reintegration, social capital, and psychological safety.

Another insight from the interviews is the lack of system-level monitoring and evaluation. Where there is no longitudinal data on the outcome of the returnees, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of various interventions and determine which have a sustainable impact and which are ineffective in preventing remigration. The two organizations acknowledged that they have limited ability to follow up participants beyond the first year, and they frequently must depend on unreliable feedback instead of structured follow-up.

Lastly, the secondary migration rate, which is quite high, with about one quarter of the returned migrants trying to migrate once again, indicates the fragility of the reintegration processes. The interaction of economic vulnerability, emotional distress and social exclusion may serve as a driving force towards pursuing migration another time. This challenges the prevailing idea that return is one of the last sections of the migration circle and rather establishes reintegration as a vulnerable and continuously open-ended process.

Such insights mark the need for reintegration programs that go beyond being context-sensitive and holistic, but also as part of a longer-term community engagement approach. Programs should be transformed to have a multi-level support system that covers psychosocial care, social reintegration, and a family-based model of entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

This paper underlines the urgent need to redefine reintegration as not merely an economic process, but, instead, as an intensely social and psychological one. Returnees face a mixed experience when getting back to Pakistan, including labor market challenges, social stigma in their own neighborhood, and serious psychological difficulties. The challenges are connected, and their solutions need to be more holistic and go beyond the scope of business training programs. Although projects like the ones carried out by the two organizations have been proven to display promising practices, they are still held back by narrow scope, poor coordination of effort and a lack of systematic and long-term monitoring.

Moreover, the difference between return preparation measures, which are anchored on European laws and practices, and the practices of the informal economy in Pakistan indicates the need to complement the European practices with locally based reintegration strategies. Olivier-Mensah (2017) reaches a similar conclusion, explaining that current models of return and reintegration are created from a nation-need perspective, instead of being designed from a returnee/refugee center-need. However, economic sustainability alone is not enough to provide social acceptance and emotional resilience. Instead, the topic of reintegration should be viewed as a multi-dimensional and community center activity, guided by a culturally adaptive strategy and supported by psychological well-being professionals.

Unless these systemic shortcomings can be tackled, there is also the risk that they will promote remigration and perpetuate displacement cycles. There is, therefore, not only a policy need but also a moral duty to improve international and local collaboration, combine psychosocial support, and finance circular reintegration routes that capture the complexity of life upon return. International Organization for Migration (IOM 2023) also highlights the need for collaboration and coordination between international actors

Recommendations

To ensure the proper efficacy and sustainability of reintegration programs for the returning individuals in Pakistan, there are some important measures that should not be ignored. On a first instance, vocational training should be aligned with the realities of the informal economy in Pakistan. It is of critical importance that the entrepreneurship and skills development programs are locally rooted, and focus on business models that make sense for the context, for example, dairy farming or informal retail in certain areas of Pakistan. Training should also be highly responsive to the ambiguity of regulatory systems and practical issues that define these sectors, rather than being based on models of formalized economic systems.

Besides technical skills, soft skills and psychosocial dimensions should be included in reintegration programs. The training must include, for example: communication, negotiation, and financial literacy skills, along with organizational assistance in the emotional aspect. It is crucial that mental health workshops, stress management training, and trauma-focused methodologies be essential components in the reintegration process, rather than being perceived as supplementary measures.

Another critical aspect is family and community engagement. It is suggested that initiatives seriously consider businesses that can be run by families and distribute economic responsibilities among family or household members. This method can reduce personal pressure on returnees as well as stimulate community engagement. Public awareness initiatives can be a positive measure to tackle current negative stereotypes and support more positive perceptions of returnees.

Stronger forms of collaboration with local organizations ought to be identified and nurtured (Loescher & Milner, 2003). Ilesanmi (2023) evaluates the reintegration experience of internally displaced populations in Nigeria and the study affirms that Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programs (AVRR) by themself are ineffective to achieve sustainable reintegration. These programs tend to be short-term, uncoordinated and not locally geared. To promote the process of providing context-sensitive reintegration support, formalization of collaboration with associated stakeholders, such as the two organizations, should be proposed. These collaborations can also include mutual capacity or skills-building activities, which help the local specialists share their experience with international actors, so that they can adapt their tools and programs accordingly.

Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems should support reintegration efforts (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). A long-term tracking system of returnees is urgently needed to assess not only the economic outcome but also the mental health and social integration of the returnees. This data is crucial in the real-time modification of programs and the identification of early signs of reintegration failure. As shown by Lietaert, Bakewell, and Derluyn (2016) in a longitudinal study of returnees from Belgium to Armenia, the preparation before leaving Belgium could help in their orientation to plan before arriving back home, and this has a positive effect on their general well-being. However, this preparation for return should be accompanied by longer-term support in the country of origin.

It is necessary to review the inclusion criteria and the reach of the return and reintegration support programs. Many of the returnees, particularly the ones that have been deported, often without plans to return, savings, or social preparation, face great challenges in their reintegration journey and are left without support (Majidi, Lietaert, & Derluyn, 2020). The expansion of the eligibility of reintegration programs to additional profiles and the development of alternative routes, according to the type of return to the country of origin, would promote the fairness, coverage and general impact of reintegration measures.

All these recommendations make it clear that there is a need to switch to a more holistic and locally based approach to the process of reintegration and make it go beyond the classical economically self-sufficient aspect, and expand to the aspects of emotional well-being, social cohesion, and long-term support.

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