Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

As announced in the previous edition of our newsletter, in the current edition we would like to present you in more detail the main topics and issues of the International Workshop for Return Counsellors.

The fourth International Workshop took place in December 2013, and as in the previous years it was very well attended. Besides staff members of IOM and the implementing partners in the countries of origin, representatives of the return counseling organizations, the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (BM.I) and other interested parties took part in the Workshop.

In the current edition of the newsletter we would like to give all participants of the International Workshop the opportunity to read up once more on the most important points. Furthermore, we would like to give all interested persons who did not have a chance to attend an overview on the addressed issues.

We wish you a pleasant read!

With best regards,
Department for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
IOM Country Office for Austria

Opening speech on the first day of the International Workshop by Thomas Mühlhans (BM.I).
Main topics and issues of the International Workshop for Return Counsellors

The fourth International Workshop for Return Counsellors was held on 3 and 4 December 2013 at the premises of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (BM.I) in Vienna. The workshop served as a platform for the exchange of information about the reintegration projects of IOM and allowed the return counselors and IOM staff from countries of origin to talk directly about current challenges in ongoing projects.

More than 50 people attended the workshop on both days. Return counsellors, representatives of the BM.I and other stakeholders met with IOM staff from Islamabad, Kabul, Lagos, Moscow and Vienna, as well as with representatives of the NGO “Vesta”.

In addition to formal presentations on specific projects, topic- and country-specific working groups were held each afternoon to enable focused discussions to take place in small groups:

The topic-specific working groups focused on important aspects of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Voluntary return and reintegration of particularly vulnerable persons (unaccompanied minors and victims of trafficking), women and families, persons with medical needs, and sustainable reintegration.

Within the country-specific working groups, the return counsellors and representatives of IOM and/or implementing partners in the countries of origin exchanged their views about the challenges in the countries in which IOM is implementing reintegration projects.

Each working group consisted of one or two representatives of the IOM Country Office for Austria, one or two guests from other IOM offices or “Vesta”, and participants of the workshop.

The following pages provide a summary of the most important points which were discussed in the working groups. Of course, this summary can only reflect a part of the lively discussions that were held.
Challenges in the counselling of especially vulnerable returnees

What needs to be considered when counseling especially vulnerable persons, such as unaccompanied minors or victims of trafficking about the option of assisted voluntary return? This and other questions were discussed by a working group at the International Workshop for Return Counsellors.

The participants of the discussion emphasized that the first step in return counselling for especially vulnerable persons is to determine whether they really want to return home. Moreover, the family and financial situations of each individual potential returnee need to be clarified.

Regarding the voluntary return of unaccompanied minors, several issues need to be taken into account: First, a best interest determination needs to be undertaken to assess whether the return is indeed the best option for the minor. In addition, the minor’s family must be located and a family assessment must be carried out to find out whether the family is willing and able to care for the child. Furthermore, in order for IOM to provide return assistance, the guardians in Austria and the country of return must give written consent to the minor’s return. These pre-return steps necessitate a certain amount of time.

The dependency of unaccompanied minors on their legal guardians can also bring obstacles for return counselling: in some cases it is hard to clarify whether the child really wants to return. The return counsellors’ ability to influence the decision process is limited, even if they notice a discrepancy between the child’s and the legal guardian’s wish.

In cases of human trafficking, a risk assessment should be carried out prior to the return to prevent re-trafficking. The identification of trafficked persons is a significant challenge to providing case-sensitive return counseling: Persons who have been exploited often do not easily open up about this experience and do not want to be stigmatized as a “victim”. As return counsellors usually only meet the potential returnee three to four times, it is unlikely that they will build up sufficient trust with a client so that he/she feels that he/she can speak up about his/her trafficking experience. This is also related to the fact that consequences that could arise from pressing charges against the trafficker are never clear beforehand and could potentially have negative outcomes for the trafficked persons and their families.

Other vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities or clients who are marginalized in their country of origin due to their sexual orientation, should also be given particular attention during return counselling.

Recommendations of the working groups:

- The return counsellors should be provided with a list of indicators of trafficking in human beings. All return counsellors should have some basic knowledge of the topic.
- Return counsellors should have access to a network of relevant experts who can be contacted and/or involved in an alleged case of human trafficking.
- Peer-Counselling: When in doubt, discussions with colleagues (internally) and/or experts (externally) can be useful.
There are several specific challenges of providing return counselling to women and families. These were discussed in a working group at the International Workshop for Return Counsellors. The main focus of the discussion was laid on the Russian Federation/ Chechen Republic.

First, return counsellors reported about their experience that Chechen women were often under pressure from their family and/or community. This could affect both their return decision and the situation after return.

In such cases the counsellors always try to explain to the women their legal situation in Austria (with the help of specialized lawyers) and their rights according to Austrian legislation such as child custody and assistance for single women. In some cases women decided to stay in Austria after receiving additional information.

For some clients the question about the custody for their children after a separation is crucial when deciding about voluntary return. In the Chechen Republic, two legislations are relevant in this question: the legislation of the Russian Federation and Islamic law. According to Russian family law, a child under 10 normally stays with his/her mother, whereas children older than 10 are asked about their opinion, which should be taken into account by the court. According to Islamic law, babies under three years of age can stay with their mothers, and children from the age of 7 are asked about their opinion. However, according to the representative of the Chechen NGO “Vesta”, it has happened that children were taken away from their mothers by the father’s family after the mothers’ return.

Another challenge is posed if not everyone in the family supports the decision to return voluntarily. In some cases only one spouse wants to return home while the other wants to stay. The different levels of integration as well as the development of a social network in Austria can lead to conflicts, which can result in separation. This poses quite a challenge for return counselling. Therefore, individual and separate counselling sessions with both spouses are essential. However, the cultural sensitivity and social competence of the counsellor plays an important role in this context, because in some cultures it is perceived as impolite to hold separate counselling sessions.

When dealing with the voluntary return of families with children who were born in Austria, emergency travel documents need to be organized for the children prior to the return in order for them to be able to enter the Russian Federation.

This process can be especially difficult for children who were born in an EU country other than Austria (for example Poland). In such cases, the birth certificates need to be translated first; the different spelling of names can be a problem.

When families with many children return voluntarily, it has to be taken into account that the financial burden is considerably higher than for single returnees; furthermore, the operational return process is more difficult to organize. It could therefore be very helpful to adapt the reintegration assistance to the size of the family.

Recommendations of the working groups:

• Cultural sensitivity as well as the involvement of all concerned family members in the decision-making process.
• Special attention and support (legal counseling, psychological counseling) to women before return.
• Adaption of the reintegration assistance to the size of the family.
• Additional assistance for single parents.
The sometimes grave health issues of persons who decide to return voluntarily pose specific challenges for both return counseling institutions and IOM. These concern the logistic organization of the return process and the reintegration of the returnees in the country of origin.

During the International Workshop for Return Counsellors, the specific challenges of the voluntary return of people with medical needs were discussed in small groups. The return counsellors explained that the most common health issues among (potential) voluntary returnees are tuberculosis (Russian Federation and Georgia), hepatitis B and C (Afghanistan and Pakistan), cancer (Russian Federation) and posttraumatic stress disorder (Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Russian Federation). Alcohol and drug addiction are also problematic, especially with returnees from India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Belarus. Furthermore, returnees often have to deal with psychological problems, which in some cases are connected with the difficult socioeconomic situation of the (potential) returnee in Austria.

When organizing the departure, the clarification of the required special logistical support for returnees with special medical needs is essential. If a person with health issues returns, the exchange of information between the return counsellor and the IOM Vienna Operations Department is crucial for the organization of a smooth return. In such cases, the staff of the Operations Department assists by informing the airlines about which kind of support is needed for the returnee, and by supporting the returnees, for example by helping to organize a wheelchair if required.

Another important question is how to appropriately manage the expectations of returnees. It can be difficult for the return counsellors to advise such clients, because counsellors often do not have detailed information about the health care system, the availability of medical services and medication in the country of return. In countries in which the IOM Country Office for Austria implements reintegration projects (currently Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and the Russian Federation/ Chechen Republic), the respective project coordinator can send a medical request to the IOM office in the country of origin or to the implementing partner organization.

The translation of medical prescriptions, which returnees often require for their medical follow-up after their return, poses a further challenge. The prescriptions often contain very specific vocabulary; translations should therefore be done by professional translators with the necessary expertise. However, there are currently no resources to cover for such professional translation services.

When returnees with health problems can benefit from a reintegration project, it is necessary to determine how these particular returnees can be supported in a reasonable and sustainable way, especially when they are unable to start an income generating activity because of their health condition.

Recommendations of the working groups:

- If a person with health issues returns, exchange of information between the return counsellor and the IOM Vienna Operations Department is crucial for the organization of a smooth return.
- Financial resources should be made available for the translation of medical prescriptions.
**Sustainable Reintegration**

A sustainable reintegration in the country of return is the aim of all projects in the field of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, and it is often seen as an indicator of their success. However, there are several concepts and definitions of sustainability that raise a variety of questions, such as how should sustainability be measured? Which factors are decisive for a sustainable return and reintegration? Which aspects of reintegration should be monitored? What is the role of return counselling organizations?

These and other questions were discussed in the framework of small groups at the International Workshop.

The self-sufficiency of returnees was mentioned as a major component of a sustainable return; this aspect is also interconnected with the community and the state. Another important factor that influences sustainability is the motivation to return and the expectations associated with it.

Besides economic success and the ability to live self-sufficiently, other factors can also define the perception of the individual success of a returnee, such as good education, widened possibilities (to react to a given situation, to stay in the country of origin by choice, etc.), or inheritance, such as a business. Apart from measuring economic factors, it is generally difficult to measure the sustainability of return and reintegration independently from the individual’s perception.

The definition of sustainability can differ, depending on the perspective taken. Some stakeholders consider reintegration to be sustainable when a returnee leaves Austria and permanently stays in the country of return. From the perspective of the countries of return, sustainability can be defined as something more than just the successful reintegration of individual returnees: The successful reintegration of individuals can have a positive impact on local communities, as well as on the society as a whole. When taking a wider approach to the sustainability of reintegration projects, the impact on local communities is central. An example for this wider approach is a Swiss joint project for returnees from Switzerland to Tunisia. The project supports returnees, who employ a minimum of five persons in their company, with at least one of them not being a family member. Thus the local community also profits from the reintegration assistance.

Conversely, local conditions can also constrain the individual success of the returnee (e.g. difficult economic situation, high bureaucratic requirements when founding a company etc.).

One of the most important factors for sustainability is the management of returnees’ expectations. Return counselling plays a central role with the provision of adequate and accurate information before return about the economic situation and the employment opportunities in the country of return. It can be helpful if returnees prepare their reintegration measures, especially business plans, in advance (before departure), as it would allow them to prepare more thoroughly for the time after their return.

**Recommendations of the working group:**

- From the point of view of the return counsellors, the reintegration assistance should also be offered to persons who have not returned voluntarily.
- Incentives for innovative businesses, especially those benefiting communities, should be introduced.
- The distribution of adequate and reliable information about the country of origin is central.
- The market situation should be analysed so that the returnees can make informed decisions about their businesses.
- The planning of reintegration measures, such as business plans, before the return can be helpful.
Several discussions in small working groups about country-specific issues also took place within the International Workshop. The working group on the Chechen Republic mainly addressed whether returnees face problems with authorities upon their return, whether there is a sufficient local infrastructure for people with a physical impairment and what is meant by “maternity capital”.

Here is a summary of the essential points discussed:

The representatives of IOM Moscow and the Chechen NGO “Vesta” stated that they were not aware of concrete cases where returnees had faced problems with the authorities upon their return. However, questionings at the airport could happen and could last a while. Persons who had participated in military operations would probably be questioned by the local police.

IOM is required to provide the Russian authorities selected data about project participants before their return (participant’s name, date of birth and address in the Chechen Republic). Every project participant must declare in writing that he/she agrees with this data transfer. If a returnee has doubts about his/her personal data being transferred to the Russian authorities, he/she should reconsider his/her participation in the reintegration project. The assistance for voluntary return without participation in the reintegration project is still possible in such cases.

Many returnees to the Chechen Republic have serious medical conditions or physical impairments. According to the Chechen NGO “Vesta”, mostly the families take care of persons with special needs. In general, the support and acceptance of society towards persons with disabilities is high in the Chechen Republic. On the official side, it is not easy to receive a disability status, and it is necessary to re-apply for this status on an annual basis. The existing infrastructure does not take into account the needs of people with disabilities.

The so called “maternity capital” is a form of state support for families with children. It is available for families with a second child (if the allowance is not obtained for the second child, it can also be obtained for the third or fourth child; however, the allowance can only be obtained once). The child must be a Russian citizen; the place of birth is irrelevant. The application has to be submitted to the pension fund when the child turns 3 years. The applicable law is in force until the end of 2014; the sum has been increased from RUB 350,000 to RUB 406,000. The allowance is not provided in cash, but can be used to finance housing as well as for educational purposes. Mostly the support is used for to finance housing. Usually the money is spent very fast so it does not get lost; therefore it is rarely saved for educational purposes. The maternity allowance is very popular in the Russian Federation and the possibility of receiving “maternity capital” is well known there.

Portrait of a returnee to the Chechen Republic: Islam V., 28 years old

Islam V. returned with his wife and children to the Russian Federation / Chechen Republic after a short period of stay in Austria. Relying on his background in law and accountancy he planned to get involved in running a shop in his native city Grozny.

Back home, he was supported by “Vesta” in all administrative steps and in setting up a business plan. Islam made up his mind to become a sales representative of a company. However, for this endeavour he needed a car and proposed to acquire it with the reintegration grant, covering parts of the costs with his own funds. The business enabled him to improve his income situation, pay for his rent (he received additional support by IOM to pay the rent for the first months) and purchase medicine for one of his children.

IOM and the local partner organisation “Vesta” monitored the progress of Islam’s reintegration process and gave support and counselling where needed. Looking back with satisfaction on the course of the reintegration project, Islam aims at opening his own shop and is motivated to also get to know other project beneficiaries, “(...) especially those engaged in trade business, [as this ]will let me find new relations to develop my business career.”
One working group at the International Workshop was devoted to the discussion of the present challenges within the implementation of reintegration measures in Nigeria.

John Onoja from IOM Lagos reported about his experiences related to the implementation of the project: One of the main challenges regarding the reintegration in Nigeria is the very high costs for rent. In most parts of the country the rent has to be paid two years in advance. This affects both the private and the business market for real estates. Nevertheless, John Onoja pointed out that most returnees were able to establish themselves.

Regarding the challenges of the project implementation Mr. Onoja pointed out that the processing of the payments for reintegration assistance was often a problem. In order to ensure a maximum of transparency, the start-up money is not paid to the project participants in cash, but is instead paid directly to the service providers/suppliers. This sometimes appears to be a problem because many entrepreneurs do not have an official business bank account (the majority of transactions in Nigeria are made in cash).

Furthermore, Mr. Onoja explained that in some cases it can be difficult to get a registration certificate without paying a bribe. In general corruption is widespread in Nigeria and there is a common mistrust towards state institutions. Because of this, it can also take a long time to establish a trustful relationship between IOM staff and the returnees. Return counsellors mentioned similar difficulties in the discussion: As Nigerian clients have a strong mistrust towards Austrian migration and asylum counselling institutions, it is also difficult to establish a relationship of trust within the return counselling sessions.

John Onoja stressed that in general it is essential for returnees to receive comprehensive counselling before their return to Nigeria so that they know all about the reintegration project and the different steps of the reintegration process. As project participants sometimes doubt that they will really receive reintegration assistance after their return, it can be helpful to establish contact between registered project participants and persons who have already returned to Nigeria. This can build up trust and reassure the returnees that they will actually be supported after their return.

**Portrait of a returnee to Nigeria: Joy E., 30 years old**

Ms. E. returned to Lagos, Nigeria, in November 2012 with her three children. She had lived in Austria for ten years, her three daughters were born there. The decision for her to return to Nigeria was not an easy one. In the end she decided to voluntarily return, as she felt that there were not enough perspectives for her in Austria. She had always dreamed of working as a designer and could not realize this wish in Austria.

After her return, Ms. E. used the reintegration assistance of IOM to purchase a sewing machine, fabrics and sewing notions and to cover the shop rent. Ms. E. combines “western” fashion styles with African fabrics. She draws her inspiration from the internet by looking up fashion websites such as Zalando or Zara. Ms. E. designs the clothes and a tailor sews them on her order. Per week the team produces 20 garments. Ms. E. is satisfied with the sales and is able to generate an income for her and her family from her designs.

As a single mother, Ms. E. is a vulnerable project participant and therefore received additional assistance in the form of temporary accommodation and payment of school fees for her children. Her flat, the shop and her children’s school are all located in the same area, which makes it possible for her to combine her family and professional obligations.
Voluntary return and reintegration: Pakistan

In the country-specific working group on the reintegration in Pakistan, the participants discussed challenges within the counseling of potential returnees, for example how to deal with the mistrust of returnees regarding the reintegration project, or the security situation in Pakistan and returnees’ fears.

Return counsellors stated that some returnees are afraid of the Pakistani airport police, and that they fear to be taken into custody after their arrival. Asma Kashif from IOM Islamabad explained that irregular migration was a problem for Pakistan and that the authorities therefore wanted to gather information. If returnees cooperated and answered basic questions, there were usually no problems. In this context, the presence of IOM at the airport could make it easier for returnees; therefore, the organization of reception assistance by IOM was highly recommended by Asma Kashif. Flights should be booked at least one week in advance, so IOM Pakistan has sufficient time to arrange for reception assistance.

Asma Kashif also emphasized that the provision of country of origin information was very important for returnees. The security situation in Pakistan depended on the region of return. In some regions in Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the monitoring of returnees could only be done by telephone, because IOM staff could not go there because of security reasons. It could happen that in some areas returnees might be perceived as westernized and not religious enough. However, there were no reports about specific problems when people returned to their families.

Some returnees were concerned about possible retaliation due to loans they had taken out from family and friends to finance their journey. According to Asma Kashif these fears were present, but not to the extent that returnees avoided meeting their families or cash out the reintegration assistance in order to pay back their debts.

According to Asma Kashif the feedback from project participants within the monitoring was mainly positive. She emphasized that reintegration was a dynamic process: If project participants had a problem with their businesses, they talked to the local IOM staff, and together they prepared new ideas and solutions. This is the case for approximately 10% of beneficiaries. Only 2% of beneficiaries do not contact IOM or are not reachable.

If project participants were unsure or had mistrust towards the project, it would be advisable that they contact the IOM office in Pakistan in advance. This could help to build up trust. For Asma Kashif, one of the biggest challenges was the proper and correct handling of expectations: The returnees want to receive assistance immediately, thus they need to be well informed in advance that reintegration is a long process and that it takes time to gather the necessary information, get approvals and settle cash payments.

Portrait of a returnee to Pakistan: Irshad C., 28 years old

Mr. C. returned to his home village Monla in Pakistan in December 2012, after his asylum application in Austria was rejected. During the return counseling in Austria, Mr. C. was considering to open a car rental business. However, after talking with the IOM colleague in Lahore after his return, he decided to use the reintegration assistance to purchase three buffalos. He took into account that there is a great demand for fresh milk both in his village and in the nearby city of Rahwali.

IOM Vienna carried out a monitoring trip to Pakistan in November 2013 and visited Mr. C. He explained that he is keeping his three buffalos (two adults and one calf) at his uncle’s farm, but that he is looking for a barn nearer to his house and to the city so that he can be more independent.

He has one employee who does the milking, and he sells the milk to a shop on a regular basis. Since the generated income is quite low, he is thinking about starting a supplementary business as a photographer for weddings and others events.
The most important questions about reintegration in Afghanistan were discussed in small groups at the International Workshop for Return Counselors. The main topics included the situation of minor returnees and the current security situation.

Regarding the current situation of minor returnees, Shah Zaman from IOM Kabul reported that at the moment there were no legal provisions for minors in Afghanistan, and that the Afghan parliament was now working on this issue. IOM Kabul focuses on family tracing and the assessment of the family situations. This is very often done by telephone, as IOM wishes to protect both its employees and the project beneficiaries. However, there are very few cases of minors returning to Afghanistan. There are no public programs or state support for minors. Therefore, the responsibility for caring for the minor lies entirely with the family.

The security situation in Kabul was also a topic of discussion. Shah Zaman explained that there are two types of security: personal security (concerning family conflicts, individuals, etc.) and general security (concerning certain areas where the Taliban are active). In terms of general security, there are certain regions that are deemed to be less safe than others.

For female returnees, it is necessary to differentiate between women returning with the support and approval of their families (i.e. the family has accepted her leaving Afghanistan and welcomes her back) and women who left without the family’s approval in the first place and will not be accepted and supported by their families. For the first category, even though they receive the family’s support, they may still encounter problems in the local community, as they will probably not be easily accepted after having been away in a foreign country. For the second category, where the family did not approve of the woman going abroad, women are in a very dangerous situation. They would have to ask for the government’s support and be placed in a shelter. They would not be allowed to live alone, as their lives would be in danger. Given this situation, their return should not be advised, according to Shah Zaman.

People with psychological problems or other medical conditions, that cannot be treated in Afghanistan, such as cancer, can also expect to face serious challenges in Afghanistan and should not be advised to return.

Regarding business start-ups Shah Zaman explained that there are differences between setting up a business in rural and urban areas. In urban regions, such as Kabul, the following documents are necessary to establish a business: license and rental agreement from the municipality, three quotations for the purchase of goods, and, if relevant, a partnership agreement, signed by three witnesses. For rural areas, no license is necessary and beneficiaries only need to bring a rental agreement from the local district office and three quotations (bids) for the purchase of the goods.

Since many project beneficiaries can neither read nor write, participants of the working groups also discussed whether it is possible to establish a balanced and fair working condition between illiterate and literate business partners. Shah Zaman stated that most business partnerships exist between relatives or friends, thus there is a huge trust involved in the joint work. IOM Kabul has previously never heard about problems between literate and illiterate partners.
Portraits of two returnees to Afghanistan: Maher A., 26 years old & Mubin K., 25 years old

Mr. A. and Mr. K. left Afghanistan with high hopes of working and making a living abroad. They shared the same dreams, the same aspirations and both had similar and complementary work experience. When they decided to return voluntarily to Afghanistan in November 2012, they shared not only the same flight, but the willingness to make the best of this opportunity.

That is why they joined forces and started a partnership in the construction industry (shuttering services). In the beginning, Mr. K. rented a suitable premise for the shop in Kabul. With the reintegration assistance of IOM Mr. A. and Mr. K. purchased equipment for the shop. On their own, it would not have been possible for them to cover the costs of starting a business. However, by combining their funds, they managed to purchase the necessary equipment.

Since Afghanistan is experiencing a construction boom at the moment, the business idea proved to be very profitable. During a monitoring visit in October 2013, their business was evaluated as one of the most successful ones among project participants. Both Mr. A. and Mr. K. are happy with their decision to return to Afghanistan: Mr. A. says that, “The best thing is that I have rejoined my family and we live a happy life together”, while Mr. K. says, “I am fully satisfied about life in my country.”

Portrait of a returnee to the Republic of Moldova: Ion C., 19 years old

Ion C. comes from a very large Moldovan family with irregular income. Five of his six siblings are still minors and his parents are only able to do sporadic paid work on local farms. Ion emigrated to Austria, hoping to be allowed to work and to support his family. Confronted with a different reality, he decided to return voluntarily to his home village in southern Moldova.

Ion took the opportunities presented by the reintegration project very seriously. He invested a great deal of effort into carrying out a market analysis of his business idea and decided to start a rabbit farm. With the assistance of IOM, Ion built a shelter for his rabbits, purchased cages to house them and bought 20 rabbits. He also attended a business training organized by IOM so that he can run his rabbit farm based on a solid foundation of knowledge.

Furthermore, the project paid his tuition at a technical school in Cahul so that he can complete his education. Ion’s family helps care for the rabbits while he is at school.

Ion says that the reintegration assistance he received has not only helped him, but also his family.

His parents had repeatedly gone abroad in search of work in the past, but now they want to stay home to invest in the rabbit farm. The family now plans to find an additional house or apartment, so that they have more living space.