To be an effective platform for exchanging information, ensuring visibility and coordination of activities between various partners;
2. To be a reference source for updated information in the field of voluntary return and reintegration;
3. To strengthen awareness and compliance with the standards set forth by the EU Return Directive (2008/115) by EU Member States and other actors involved in voluntary return.

Among the tools envisaged by the VREN, an e-community is to be used and nurtured by all its members, represented by governmental officials, NGOs, International Organisations (IOs), and other stakeholders in the field of voluntary return.

VREN is built up through the contributions of its users, and to be a support in the daily work of the users, with IOM and other experts to ease this flow.

Please have a look at the website and become member by clicking on www.vren-community.org.

Editorial note

Welcome to the first issue of the VREN newsletter. This newsletter will provide you with an insight into the functionality and purposes of the VREN – an initiative that provides information on various aspects of Voluntary Return in Europe and in countries of origin whilst nurturing the work of practitioners in the field of Voluntary Return in their daily work.

The VREN is by no means intended to be an exhaustive information instrument, but rather animate the curiosity of its users. It is conceived for practitioners to find useful hints for their work; at the same time, users are called to contribute to enrich the e-community through sharing their viewpoints on issues at stake, posing questions to experts, or sharing concerns to be possibly tackled through the contribution of other participants.
1. Events

**VREN – 1st Advisory Group Meeting**

On the 29th and 30th March 2012, the first meeting of the Advisory Group, consisting of... took place in Brussels. The aim of this meeting, the first out of three envisaged throughout the duration of the project, was to pave the way for future successful implementation of the VREN, in particular through the e-community, but also National Stakeholders’ Network in the different countries participating in the project.

All means of communication envisaged by VREN are meant to ease building a constructive dialogue and effective exchange among different stakeholders involved in the field of voluntary return. Representatives of the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia and the United Kingdom, as well as the European Migration Network (EMN), the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and the European Commission were present.

As a result of the first Advisory Group Meeting, a number of issues related to return were flagged up as discussion points:

1. Common terminology/glossary for Voluntary Return related terms according to the EC Return Directive
2. How to make Voluntary Return cost effective
3. Awareness raising on the Voluntary Return option amongst potential returnees and in the countries of origin as preventive tool against irregular migration
4. Counselling – outreach activities in the EU Member States
5. Sustainability of the VREN through an Institutionalisation of the initiative
6. Vulnerabilities of the migrants and on the link between reintegration schemes and co-development

Taking advantage of the presence of the above-mentioned participating countries, and representatives of the European Commission, the project was also publicly launched; this provided an opportunity to countries not involved to learn about the project’s objectives, its set up and planned activities. From the additional countries attending - Belgium, Poland and the Netherlands - Poland announced the willingness to be part of the initiative. Inputs on how to make the e-community a useful tool were also collected.

**European Reintegration Support Organization (ERSO)**

On the very same dates in Brussels the General Board Meeting of the ERSO project took place. The aims of the meeting were:

1. Approval and signing of the Network’s Membership Agreement, Mission Statement and Strategic Program 2012-2015;
2. Explanation on maintenance of the platform and homepage;
3. Planning the year 2012;
4. Elaborating a strategy concerning new members/membership of the network;
5. Elaborating a common strategy of the network towards EU policy;
6. How to define interesting packages/linkages between the departments for Development and Migration in the partner organizations;
7. Expanding the ERSO Network to new members.
2. News at International level

Below are two examples of (Assisted) Voluntary return concepts and schemes applied outside the European Union.

1. The Canadian Government has launched on 29 June a pilot programme for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration for failed asylum seekers from the Greater Toronto Area. Following the experiences of 19 EU countries as well as Australia, the Canadian Government decided to launch this pilot.

With the reform entered into force on 16 February 2012 as part of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act, the aim is to provide faster decisions, prevent abuses of the system and favour the rapid departure of failed asylum seekers. The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) together with IOM will implement the project, expected to last till 31 March 2015 and target some 6,955 people, returning to any possible country in the world. The aim is to increase the number of those failed asylum seekers who comply voluntarily to leave the country, this way avoiding also a permanent re-entry ban.

For more information please see http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/avrr-arvr

2. Another interesting case in point is represented by the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme for Sri Lankan migrants in West Africa. As a matter of fact, this programme is an example of introducing AVRR schemes as a coordinated response to address return migration in transit countries, while responding to immediate needs of stranded migrants.

The project, is being implemented by IOM (with the support of the Canadian Government), started in January 2012 and will run until 31 March 2013 and beyond if the demand is there and funds are consequently made available. The Sri Lankan community was selected as one of the most in need.

The project provides for the following:

1. assisting migrants in making an informed decision
2. providing individual return assistance, which includes financial support for the return flight, travel documentation and necessary travel arrangements until final destination in Sri Lanka, fitness-to-travel health checks, transit assistance, and emergency food, accommodation and other support prior to departure
3. providing arrival assistance in Sri Lanka
4. providing reintegration assistance to establish small businesses or engage in education/training

So far IOM has provided assistance to over 150 Sri Lankan migrants who chose to return to Sri Lanka.

IOM Missions involved in West Africa from where the project can be activated are: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja), Dakar, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka.
3. News at European level

While the 2011 Call for Proposals of the Return Fund Community Actions closed on 26 April 2012, the following projects are being implemented under the Community Actions 2010:

1. “European Re-integration Instrument - ERI”; beneficiaries are: the Repatriation and Departure Service, The Netherlands; the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), Germany; Federal Agency for the reception of Asylum seekers, Fedasil, Belgium; FOD Binnenlandse Zaken/DVZ, Belgium; Office français de l’immigration et de l’intégration (OFII), France; Swedish Migration Board, Sweden
2. “Euro Latin-American System for professional training, return, sustainable insertion from Europe to Latin-America (PTRSI)”; beneficiaries are: Organization of Ibero-American states for education, science and culture, Spain; Associacao Lufosonia Cultura e Cidadania (ALCC), Portugal; Federación de Entidades Latinoamericanas de Cataluña (Fedelatina), Spain; Istituto Cooperazione Economica Internazionale (ICEI), Italy, Ecuadorian Movement in UK, United Kingdom
3. “Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland towards a joint approach in the field of job placement promotion for Iraqi returnees (MAGNET);
4. “Pilot initiative to test feasible and sustainable join reintegration measures from the EU (REINTEGR-ACTION);
5. “Phase II of Return Network in Latin-America for Comprehensive, Effective and Sustainable Return Programme including RE-integration (RN Latam II); beneficiaries are: Fundación Accem, Spain; America España Solidaridad y Cooperación (AESCO); Italian Council for Refugees (CIR), Italy; France terre d’asile, France; Maatwerk bij Terugkeer, The Netherlands.

Briefs from Brussels:

1. The EU signed a readmission agreement with Turkey in June, thus paving the way for visa liberalization and improved mobility between Turkey and the EU while satisfying MS concerns about irregular migration, cross-border crime, and pressures on EU borders, especially with Greece.

2. A Council “Road Map” draft was advanced under the auspices of the Danish Presidency to propose ways to strengthen cooperation with third countries of transit and origin on migration management, prevent illegal migration via the Greek-Turkish border, enhance border management at the external borders, and to strengthen migration management, including cooperation on return practices. Special attention was given to Turkey as a transit country for irregular flows towards the EU.

3. The European Commission launched in June the EU strategy for the eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) which is designed to strengthen partnerships in the fight against THB and to guide Member States in the transposition of the Directive on human trafficking.

4. News at National Level

Below please find some information on two different, but equally interesting events, that took place in recent months and that address different aspects of Voluntary Return, all the same relevant.

1. In the framework of the Portuguese Assisted Voluntary Return Project, from 14 to 22 May, IOM Lisbon together with a journalist and a cameraman were in Brazil filming a video on reintegration assistance. This took place in the main States of return and location of the reintegration network members – i.e. São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Goiás. Returnees and representatives of partner NGOs were interviewed. The main goal of the video was to tell the story of those who returned, their journey, and especially their
reintegration back home, the challenges they faced, the assistance they received by IOM and other partners in Brazil.

In addition, from 22 to 25 May the yearly seminar on reintegration involving all partners in Belo Horizonte was organized. This seminar was attended by IOM Lisbon, IOM Buenos Aires, a representative of the Portuguese Border and Alien Service (SEF) and two Professors from the PUC Minas University. This seminar is a yearly event organised within the IOM Lisbon project. The goal of this seminar is to take stock of what has been done and learn from it, in particular with reference to the reintegration component, through the involvement of the Academia as well. IOM is also planning (starting in June 2012) on developing together with the University a study on positive factors and obstacles to a sustainable return and reintegration.

In the next number of this newsletter the results of these events will also be shared and can possibly serve as food for thoughts.

2. On 23 May, in Vilnius, IOM organised a seminar for journalists and public relations specialists addressing the topic “Migration and Communication. Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes”.

The seminar was organized in the framework of the project Returning Home III that is funded within the 2010 National Annual Programme of the Return Fund.

The seminar covered two different themes: effective communication in the field of general migration and in the context of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme. 16 Lithuanian journalists and public relations specialists attended the seminar. Speakers introduced IOM activities both in Lithuania and globally in the framework of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme.

The seminar also elaborated on the main factors influencing public opinion, and emphasized the importance of press and public communication actors in shaping and influencing public opinion about migration and migrants.

According to a survey, conducted in Lithuania in 2010, the public perception of immigration flows is largely shaped by public media. As a consequence, inaccurate information about migrants and migration processes as a whole by public media contributes to building stereotypes, negative attitudes and general negative opinion about migration.

The seminar drew the following conclusions:
- Journalists and public relations specialists are key actors in forming unbiased public opinion about migration processes;
- Inaccurate information about migration which is disseminated by journalists through various communication channels forms a false opinion about migrants and migration trends in Lithuania.

As a general underlining principle, when reporting about Assisted Voluntary Return, it is important to draw a clear distinction between forced deportation and voluntary return.
5. A closer look at

Countries of origin information – Information sources on migrants’ countries of origin is a key element in a number of important decisions and events related to the migrants’ projects and paths. While on the one end, this set of information is relevant to better understand the background the migrants bring with them in the destination countries, it is particularly important when a decision on the need for international protection of a person is to be taken. To this respect, a number of initiatives are on-going through UNHCR, Refworld, and ECOI. At EU level, the European Commission has supported the idea of creating a common Country of Origin web-based portal. This portal, which will be gradually transferred to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in the course of 2012, envisages the possibility for real time exchange of information through a “Forum”, which includes both open discussions and a more specific “questions section”.

The web-based tool was also used to support the gathering and sharing of information that can be used by migrants when considering returning back to their home countries. This field is indeed another one where information on countries of origin is key, as it is unanimously recognised that by taking an informed decision, return migrants are more likely to engage into sustainable reintegration and reinsertion paths.

When evaluating the decision on whether or not to return back home, migrants usually need updated information on health care, housing, education, employment, business opportunities, and transportation. To this purpose, IOM had been running two consecutive phases of the IRRiCO project - Enhanced and Integrated Approach regarding Information on Return and Reintegration in Countries of Origin - (for more information: http://irrico.belgium.iom.int/).

It is interesting to note that for both the asylum determination and the voluntary return fields, the web-based gateway has been seen as the best instrument to exchange information in a timely and reliable fashion. This underlining principle is also at the basis of the VREN initiative. It would be extremely interesting to see how all of these efforts can be better put together and create useful synergies.

6. Looking ahead

What is next? In September the new issue of the Newsletter will follow up on some topics that have been briefly depicted in this number, such as: reintegration prospects in Brazil, the views of returned migrants, the feedback collected vis-à-vis the VREN through the organisation of several voluntary return networks’ meetings all around Europe. We also invite all of the readers to inform the project management team about events taking place in the near future - through the VREN “send a message”.

Interesting things to do and to know:

- Training courses
  Title: Fostering the Social and Professional Reintegration of Return Labour Migrants. a training course co-organised by the International Training Centre of the International Labour Organisation (ITC-ILO) and the European University Institute (CRIS Project). 26th – 30th November 2012, Turin, Italy

- To know
  ACP States have become important countries of origin and destination in the migration scenario. At a meeting in Brussels on 31 May 2011, which gathered the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of 27 EU Member States and 79 ACP countries, it was agreed that dialogue on migration should be enhanced, and that both the European Union and the ACP countries should pay special attention to issues such as visa policy, migrants’ bank transfers and returning migrants. A dedicated working group was also established specifically for this purpose, which will report

7. Interesting reading

Among others:
- *Return Migration to Mali: Examining Definitions and Statistical Sources*, by Davide Calenda - EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

- [www.re-migrants.eu](http://www.re-migrants.eu); the website of the Re-Turn project offers a variety of information. Re-Turn stands for Regions benefiting from returning migrants, particularly in Central Europe. It aims at identifying measures to capitalize on returning migrants and thus enhance human capital and remigrants’ entrepreneurial abilities in participating regions. The project is based on a partnership of 12 partners from seven countries (DE, AT, IT, PL, CZ, SI, HU) representing regional and sub-regional public and not-for-profit bodies (3 public authorities, 1 association of public authorities, 3 qualification and training organizations), research organizations (2 universities and 2 research institutes) and 1 international organization lobbying for migration issues. The project consortium is strengthened by associated public authorities. The project is supported by the Central Europe Programme co-financed by the ERDF.