

Income prospect trajectories after state-induced return from Germany to the Gambia: Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration as ‘slow deportation’

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Abstract

Considering the harsh humanitarian and financial costs of deportation, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) is considered a better alternative for returning migrants. This analysis assesses the differences in income prospect development after deportation and AVRR and the reintegration assistance they encompass. In a longitudinal comparative design, it follows the experiences of 20 migrants who returned from Germany to the Gambia between 2018 and 2020. It finds that both return types generate overly challenging economic trajectories that become difficult to distinguish over time. This is based on their different temporal tendencies. While AVRR often entails a disillusionment process about the inadequacy of post-return hopes, deportation can likewise lead to reorientation against the backdrop of inhumane deportation practice and following despair. Considering the overall low chances of establishing positive income prospects after any state-induced return, AVRR resembles a ‘slow deportation’.

Keywords: Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, deportation, The Gambia, Germany, economic trajectories

Introduction

Since the increase in intercontinental migration to Europe in the 2010s, ‘Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration’ (AVRR) programs have moved to the heart of European policy responses to reduce the number of ‘illegalized migrants’ (De Genova 2002) in the European Union (EU). AVRR is favored as a more humane and efficient alternative to deportation. Deportation involves the (anticipated) application of deceptive strategies and physical violence of state forces against vulnerable individuals, which often results in psychological distress or (self-)harmful behaviour before, during and after the deportation. Thus, AVRR can be implemented with lower legality and legitimacy costs for destination countries. Migrants’ higher agency

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through freedom in deciding on the return, having time to prepare and receiving assistance to realize one's aspirations back 'home' are prominent distinctions of AVRR from deportation in formal definitions and scholarly perspectives (e.g. Kuschminder 2017b).

However, this clear-cut distinction is contested. Koch subsumes the two return types under the one category of 'state-induced return'. She underlines the high relevance of the norm-building force of destination state interests and practices which the two are both a product of (Koch, 2014). Research questioning the distinction is mainly based on pre-return perspectives, focusing on the logics and effects of destination countries' return inducement strategies and infrastructures. Policy and AVRR program designers draw on the argument that it is also an issue of time that AVRR would unfold valuable effects for migrants while deportation would be comparatively damaging. Accordingly, it is time to follow the distinction between AVRR and deportation throughout that longer-term post-return stage (Paasche 2014). Indeed, the small body of post-return research has recently started to grow (Lietaert/ Kuschminder 2021), often querying that AVRR programs serve the purpose they claim to deliver. However, it has not yet been studied comparatively in how far AVRR and deportation affect migrants' post-return trajectories in comparison.

This study therefore compares the effects of deportation and AVRR over time in the post-return stage.² It examines how the experiences that returned migrants make with AVRR and deportation differ and how this distinguishes AVRR from deportation beyond the diversified realities of individuals' lives. Among a sample of 20 migrants who have returned from Germany to the Gambia in 2018 and 2019, I analyze how the migrants dealt with the conditions they faced and which role the respective type of return and reintegration assistance played. I understand their experiences as spatio-temporal trajectories, which I analyze along the time span of 2.5 to 3.5 post-return years. I concentrate on the return modes' effects on income prospects. While economic well-being is interwoven with multiple other social and psychological factors, the economic dimension stands at the heart of most AVRR programs and therefore depicts the core analytical dimension of this article.

State-induced return is a prevalent issue between Germany and the Gambia since 2017. Gambian emigration to Europe had been among the highest per-capita across the Mediterranean in the 2010s. Especially Gambian men travel along the 'backway', a Gambian term for migration through North Africa and the Mediterranean towards Europe. The majority of them leave in search of more fulfilling future prospects, living conditions and money to support themselves and their families. Additionally, they were driven out of the country directly or indirectly by an oppressing dictatorship (Hultin & Zanker, 2020). The vast majority of Gambian asylum claims in Germany, where the Gambian community more than quadrupled between 2014 and 2017, were not granted (Altrogge, 2019).

In the beginning of 2017, a political change happened in the Gambia, which served the German interior interest to reduce the amount of rejected asylum seekers. The decades-long dictator Yahya Jammeh was replaced by a democratically-oriented transition government. The new government encouraged return as proof to their constitutional legitimacy (Zanker/ Altrogge

² This paper is part of a cumulative dissertation project on the political effects of return migration at the example of The Gambia. The project started in 2017, with data collections between 2017 to 2021. It goes back to the observation of the increasing political pressure towards Gambian asylum seekers in Germany to return.

2019), including some openness towards forced return. Gambian migrants in Germany were increasingly pressured to return by German political and administration actors, leading to a slight rise in AVRR cases and the uptake of charter deportations (Zanker/ Altrogge 2022). Policy hopes started blossoming about what young people, including returning migrants, could achieve in the ‘new Gambia’. Through AVRR, they would not face the struggles for inclusion in Germany, future insecurity and deportation (risk), and instead profit from reintegration assistance to thrive better after return. A ‘Gambia task force’ was initiated involving German interior, foreign affairs and development policy actors as well as domestic education providers, among others, to concertedly increase AVRR attractiveness. Around a similar time, the European Union’s Trust Fund (EUTF), an international development response mechanism to the EU’s migration governance crisis, installed large projects for vocational skills and self-employment opportunities in the Gambia. This was supposed to discourage emigration, and at the same time added to the reintegration infrastructure. For all these reasons, the German-Gambian case offers an illustrative example of a return regime in the making.

In the following, I first discuss distinctions between deportation and AVRR and I explain the role of economic prospects for return migrants upon their return. Following, I give an overview about reintegration assistance in the Gambia and present my methodological and analytical approaches. In Section 3, I analyze the income prospect development within my sample, supported by a brief sample description. Discussing my findings in Section 4, I introduce the term *slow deportation*, by summarizing how the distinctive effects of AVRR returns diminish over time due to differing temporal tendencies, leaving its recipients in similarly challenged conditions of well-being as deported individuals. A temporal perspective on state-induced return thus reveals AVRR as ‘slow deportation’.

State-induced return, post-return conditions and income prospects

The distinctions between AVRR and deportation are set in legal definitions, law enforcement, and implementation procedures of destination states. They are manifested in statistics, policy documents, and societal discourses. Although contingencies remain – for example, the question up to which point in the asylum rejection process a person can decide for a return to be considered ‘voluntary’ – two parameters are generally acknowledged as most distinctive. First, the decision-making agency, which is higher in AVRR and lower in deportation: Migrants returning via AVRR contribute more actively to their returning with a decision, sense-making and preparation steps, while deported migrants usually did not decide for their returning, and consequently therefore often face more enforcement measures against their decision to stay. Second, the respective assistance granted: AVRR by definition includes assistance services, funded and organized by the destination state and its implementing partners, and stretching from pre- to post-return time spaces. For deporting states, offering this assistance to AVRR participants while denying it to deported individuals is considered key for the return incentivization to work. Thus, the need lowers to alternatively try to realize deportation. Hence, deportation by definition does not entail assistance as it is the case with AVRR.

Against this background, timing and temporalities differ for deportation and AVRR (Altrogge, forthcoming). This is due to respective schedules and time-spaces that policy and administration create around them. They initiate distinctive accesses to, imaginaries about, and attitudes towards the return itself and the potential support of reintegration assistance. AVRR builds on pre-return imagining of a close future and potential preparations which deported individuals do not develop – a factor which, according to Cassarino’s model on return migration, would decisively add to the chances of returning successfully (2004). Deportation, in contrast, rips migrants from their present lives and catapults them back in place and time (Khosravi 2018b).

The contested claims of AVRR’s advantages to deportation for post-return trajectories

The level at which these parameters address the distinctiveness of the return categories can be called into question. Instead of differentiation, Koch underlines the shared dominant norm-building around both types of return through destination state interests, subsuming the two under one joint category of ‘state-induced return’ (Koch 2014). Also, the voluntariness behind AVRR decisions can be questioned, as the alternatives of staying are too limited and the conditions too disadvantageous to consider the decision as free (cf. Cassarino, 2019). This leads some researchers to characterize AVRR as ‘soft deportation’ (Kalir 2017). Through ‘soft power’, deporting states enforce their interests to return deportable individuals by convincing migrants to participate in AVRR. “This [perspective] sensitizes us to the fact that such return has deportation-like properties, while acknowledging that it depends less on force and deterrence, and more on perceived legitimacy and — should the return be ‘assisted’ — on payments.” (Leerkes, Van Os and Boersema 2017: 8).

These critical approaches address both differentiating parameters – the return decision agency and the assistance offered. However, their argumentations mainly ground on the pre-return processes. While this is necessary and legitimate, return regimes’ activities and effects do not stop at this point but spatially and temporally stretch into origin contexts (Khosravi 2018a; Peutz 2006). Therefore, focusing on the post-return stage is necessary to further understand their differences and commonalities.

More broadly, scholarly attention on the post-return phase has grown in recent years (cf. Lietaert/ Kuschminder 2021). Research has found that the level of preparedness (willingness and readiness, cf. Cassarino 2004) allowing successful return is almost impossible to reach for illegalized, deportable migrants (Davids/ Van Houte 2014; Kuschminder 2017a). Not only do deported migrants face the structurally difficult conditions of the return locality that might have triggered migration in the first place (Kleist 2020; Schuster/ Majidi 2015), their deportation experiences add further psychological, social, and economic challenges. Economically, investments into migration are often considered null and void after deportation. Material resources obtained abroad cannot be brought back. Thus, deported migrants often experience protracted waithood, social liminality, economic and other dependencies (Khosravi 2018a).

Yet, a too narrow focus on post-deportation vulnerabilities rather evokes a ‘pornography of suffering’ (Schultz 2022: 83) than comprehensively analyzing post-deportation realities. The focus on vulnerability is also inherent in measuring reintegration, leaving little room to capture individuals’ social, economic, and political agencies. Through the way reintegration research is practiced, we co-create legitimacy of certain return and reintegration concepts, including their

normative biases, blind spots, and idealizations (Marino/ Lietaert 2022; Vathi, King and Kalir 2022). Therefore, we need to examine how the agency of migrants after involuntary return plays out and changes over time.

One expression of agency after involuntary return that is prominently identified in research is re-emigration (Kleist 2020; Schuster/ Majidi 2015), a particular fear of deporting states (Marino/ Lietaert 2022). Deported individuals are found to have particularly high propensities for re-emigration aspirations. However, with many not re-emigrating, their agency is much more diversified. Schultz (2022) describes how deportees in Mali overcome their 'failure' by following 'la chance' – an interplay of spiritual, cosmologic and practical opportunities – which can but does not have to include re-emigration options. Radziwinowiczówna (2021) finds that Mexicans deported from the US that do not have the possibility to migrate again eventually socially anchor through work, family life or community obligations if they have trouble to pursue their re-emigration desperateness. They can 'refunnel' their aspirations to the local setting.

Not only after deportation, also after AVRR do migrants often find themselves in challenging circumstances. While policy makers find that AVRR proves being empirically successful according to their parameters (see Kothe, Otte, Reischl, Uluköylü, Baraulina and Clevers 2023 for an evaluation of the German AVRR program StarthilfePlus), from a scholarly perspective, AVRR cannot make up for the disadvantages of the pre-return conditions (Davids/ Van Houte 2014; Lietaert/ Kuschminder 2021; Ruben, Van Houte and Davids, 2009). How does this differ when compared to deportation? Studies on deportation or AVRR either do not consider the respective other category, or do not differentiate within a mixed sample (see, for example, Davids/ Van Houte 2014; Khosravi 2018a; Kleist 2020; Lietaert, Derluyn and Broekaert 2014; Lietaert/ Kuschminder 2021; Ruben et al. 2009). Acknowledging that all state-induced return creates disadvantageous conditions for migrant trajectories, it is relevant to know how different forms of state return enforcements affect migrants differently to disentangle policy concepts and migrant realities.

Reintegration is commonly measured along parameters in three dimensions – economic self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial well-being (Samuel Hall 2017). Though, the way these are weighed and defined is subject to debate and biased by political interest (Marino/ Lietaert 2022). The economic dimension stands at the centre of reintegration concepts. Involuntary return usually entails economic hardship and disadvantageous access to the labour market (David 2015; Kuschminder 2017a; Monti/ Serrano 2022). Self-employment, which is also commonly proposed in AVRR-led reintegration concepts, is rather an expression of occupational precariousness. It is mostly a suboptimal, temporary 'last resort' solution usually generating insufficient revenues and less a project of entrepreneurial ambitions or managerial skills as these policy concepts suggest (Mezger Kveder/ Flahaux 2013).

The economic dimension stands at the heart of reintegration concepts. One reason for this is that it is central in migrants' self-assessments and activities after return, even while being related to other life domains. The "material situation, in particular income ... and housing ... [are] an extremely important and determining issue", Lietaert (2021: 244) finds for AVRR post-return. According to Lietaert, improvements in material stability are a generator for more general well-being over time. Accordingly, on the other hand, a decline in post-return well-being is often induced by a failure to generate sufficient income. In West Africa, livelihood security is

based on shared economic responsibilities within family networks, and money additionally carries high symbolic value. By contributing financially to an (extended) family income, migrants fulfil reciprocal obligations and gain access to social status according to established norms (Schultz 2022).

Reintegration assistance in the Gambia

‘Reintegration assistance’³ is a diversified sector. It varies regarding its content, duration and purpose of the provided assistance, involved actors, schedules of provision, target groups and information sources. Availabilities and setups are shaped by how a particular return regime is implemented in the transnational setting. Assistance can span from travel-organizational matters over financial instalments to business support and vocational training opportunities. It can contain these aspects in various combinations. The duration phases vary between short intervals up to several months and even years. If and which assistance a migrant receives, thus depends on various structural, but also individual factors. Some programs are comprehensive and meant to include every returning migrant, while others are selective, for example regarding access to certain trainings and loan schemes.

The differentiation between AVRR and deportation is only one factor, albeit central. According to its incentivizing character, AVRR integrates migrants into a transnational communication infrastructure before returning. The aim is to assess whether additional post-return assistance might be suitable for them. But the extent to which this is done depends on the will and ability of the migrant to utilize this option and on the will and ability of the return facilitating administration to include a certain individual. Also, the availability of supplementary programs is an important aspect here, for example due to limited implementation periods of ‘reintegration preparation’ programs (see below). All AVRR participants in Germany are included in the basic AVRR program REAG-GARP (Reintegration and Emigration Programme for Asylum-Seekers in Germany, and Government Assisted Repatriation Programme) which organizes the return. This is usually supplemented with financial support called ‘Starthilfe(Plus)’.

In the case of deportation, it is in the deporting states’ interest that deportation does not lead to reintegration assistance because it is a main pillar of AVRR’s incentivizing character. Therefore, for deported migrants, the first entry point to the assistance infrastructure is post-return. The most comprehensive program in the Gambia is an in-kind support funded by the EUTF and facilitated through the IOM, called ‘Post-Arrival Reintegration Assistance’ (PARA). It makes reintegration assistance available to deported migrants because of their high vulnerability, in comparison to other returned migrants for which assistance exists. These include not only those who returned from Europe, but high return numbers from North African transit countries. PARA offers assistance of the same characteristics as reintegration support for migrants returned from North Africa.

Further reintegration-oriented measures that returned migrants can apply for once back do not differentiate between deportation and AVRR (and return from North Africa). Similar to

³ ‘Reintegration assistance’ in this paper refers to formal assistance delivered by institutions within the return regime. Notably, migrants can also receive assistance through informal and civil society networks in addition to or instead of formal assistance.

PARA, they also attain more equality to access between different types of return. They address 'returnees' comprehensively, sometimes with set targets numbers for 'returnee' inclusion.

Methodology and analytical concepts

This analysis is based on 48 interviews conducted with 20 migrants who returned from Germany to the Gambia, including 12 AVRRE participants and 8 deported migrants. I interviewed each migrant at least twice⁴, mainly within three research stays in the Gambia in spring 2019 (three months), March 2020 (two weeks) and November 2021 (one month). Ethnographic observation in the living and working environments of study participants (housing, plots, shops), where interviews were often held, serve as complementary information. Additionally, I conducted around 15 expert interviews with assistance program representatives as well as participatory observation at five professional events of reintegration program designers and managers. Between my field visits, interlocutors had the opportunity to stay in touch with me via digital social media, if a smartphone was available.

In my research, I follow a compassionate stance that is sensitive to the unequal researcher-participant power dynamics. Given that I study the very circumstances that makes my interlocutors vulnerable, I attend to their well-being as best as I can without becoming part of the assistance infrastructure. This includes efforts into trust-building, offering friendship, and access to information on and contacts to reintegration infrastructures if desired. I further reflect on my research and methodology and its ethical implications in Altrogge (forthc.).

The sample was recruited to cover a maximum diversified spectrum of assistance experiences within a shared time and return regime context. Contacts to interviewees were facilitated through civil society networks of Germans and Gambians, and state and non-state assistance providers in both countries. However, I did not consult deported individuals before their return or through deportation facilities, as not to risk losing trustworthiness. In order to guarantee high anonymity in the return context, I did not use snowballing among returned migrants. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to cover the migration history and return experiences in a comprehensive manner. I started with more narrative and biographical elements in the first wave and more problem-centered elements in the second and third, after increased trust-building. The interviews were coded along a mix of inductive and deductive code sets. For this analysis, I concentrated on a code subset on the economic dimension, including interaction with assistance programs, and well-being codes. Due to inductive coding, links to other life domains could also be considered.

Following Lietaert (2021) and Hernández-Carretero (2017), I analyze migrants' income prospects. I understand income prospects as migrants' self-assessed performances and future outlooks in their 'projects of socioeconomic prosperity' (Hernández-Carretero 2017) under the circumstances they face. They are created through the balancing of abilities and hopes on a continuum of covering basic needs on the one hand and reaching economic success on the other. Changes in income prospects lay open if individuals are able to adapt their 'projects of

⁴The 2020 follow-up interview period was interrupted by a Covid-related evacuation; therefore, only 12 interviewees could be interviewed.

socioeconomic prosperity' as part of their whole migratory project to the given circumstances. Having good income prospects means to see a way of economically contributing to one's life-course development in a way that is perceived sufficient at least. This also includes the ability to fulfil financial responsibilities towards other family members if necessary.

Income-oriented activities of returned migrants stand in relation to their refunneling of living ambitions at their place of return. Refunneling describes the longitudinal process of "imagining for oneself a plan of action alternative to remigration [re-emigration]" (Radziwinowiczówna 2021: 79) which "makes involuntary immobility bearable and resynchronizes deported individuals with their community" (ibid.). Refunneling means localizing aspirations. This is only possible if individuals interpret their conditions as enabling contentment, prominently including the establishment of positive income prospects. I apply the concept of refunneling beyond deportation also to AVRR. While re-emigration desperation might not be high at the time of AVRR return as is the case in Radziwinowiczówna's deportation study, it can develop due to the conditions of AVRR as another form of state-induced return. I therefore understand refunneling as circumventing or overcoming occurring re-emigration desperation after state-induced return.

To analyze the empirical material, content analysis on each study participant's changing economic conditions over time were combined with analysis of emotional reflections. These included overall contentment and disappointment, increasing or decreasing return regret (AVRR), re-emigration considerations, and influential social and psychological factors. I then systematically ordered the participants according to their contentment development along certain criteria. My observations are found through comparison between different participants' trajectories as well as within each trajectory along time. Because of this, they are often not represented in single citations.

The longitudinal qualitative comparative approach enables me to consider meaning-making and individual relevancies at certain points in time. Doing so, I can make observations in the interplay between situational self-assessments and actions taken over an extended time period. In this, I identify temporal patterns with regard to the elements I compare – the longitudinal effects of different return types and the assistance received – in the broader contexts in which each individual finds himself. Its qualitative nature does not allow me to generalize on return trajectories more broadly, and individual return trajectories might produce counterexamples, especially in other regime contexts. Yet, I find shared temporal tendencies that individuals are more prone to face based on the compared factors – type of return and assistance received.

Income prospect trajectories among the returned migrants

In the following, I will first give a broad overview about some characteristics of the sample concerning migration trajectories and economic and education conditions, with more details to be found in the analysis. Then, I will describe the 'reintegration assistance' landscape and accesses of my sample. 3.3 presents the analysis.

Sample description

Gambian migrants exposed to state-induced return are a rather homogeneous group regarding socio-economic characteristics and migration motivations (Altrogge 2019), which are also reflected in my sample. Three quarters of the research participants stated economic challenges as major motivations for migrating. Among the remaining five participants, two had been persecuted by the former dictatorship, and three feared violent exposure to arbitrary law enactment. Many found themselves ‘just sitting’ before leaving, a commonly used phrase among underemployed and unemployed Gambians, to which migration to Europe is a reaction to especially among young men. The sample consists only of men.

Most interlocutors had left the Gambia between 2012 and 2014 and returned between 2018 and 2019. All had spent 3 to 6 years in Europe and applied for asylum in Germany, with all but two having received a negative decision, residing under the German asylum status of ‘Duldung’ (toleration), a “temporary suspension of deportation, which has resulted in individuals with indefinitely uncertain legal status” (Castañeda 2010: 246), creating protracted deportability (ibid.).

Around half of the interlocutors started their migration in their (early) 20’s, in six cases younger and in three cases older. Formal education included a variety of different levels, from school-dropouts to high school diploma holders. One finished formal vocational training and very few were awaiting vocational or tertiary education enrolment. All but three, who were still going to school or had just finished, were earning money before leaving. Their income varied in regularity and sufficiency, with working self-employed as taxi drivers, in construction or retail, often as day laborers or otherwise underemployed. A few also had working contracts in the gastronomy, health, and gardening sector. Some informants followed more than one income-generating activity, including traditional seasonal farming.

In Germany, many interlocutors had made a vocational internship, started an apprenticeship, or worked on a contract. Often, these setups were disrupted by changing asylum statuses and work permit withdrawals. Accordingly, most AVRR decisions were at least partly driven by being increasingly made unable to follow up on one’s ‘project of socioeconomic prosperity’ in Europe, underpinning the prevalence of deportability under the German toleration status.

For the analysis, I differentiate four groups of return conditions (Table 1). These groups share similar structural conditions regarding return type and amount of received assistance.

Table 1: Groups of return conditions

| | No assistance to basic assistance | Post-return to extended assistance |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Deportation # of migrants</i> | no post-return assistance: 4 | post-return assistance: 4 |
| <i>AVRR # of migrants</i> | basic assistance: REAG/GARP and Starthilfe(Plus) 4 | extended assistance: more than Starthilfe(Plus) 8 |

This distribution is not representative for state-induced return migration to the Gambia. It overrepresents AVRR return, which was significantly less numerous than deportation during time of research. It probably also overrepresents returning migrants receiving assistance. These purposeful overrepresentations enable me to observe the effects of the diversified set and intensities of reintegration support with qualitative techniques. They were yielded through the recruitment process.

Table 2 presents information on the attended programs and how many of my interlocutors received assistance.

Table 2: Assistance programs and number of participating migrants

| Program | Characterization (as received by sample) | # of sampled migrants |
|--|---|------------------------------|
| REAG/GARP with ‘Starthilfe(Plus)’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by the German state, facilitated through IOM Germany and Gambia - return organization and financial support between € 1,100 - and 2,000 - pre- and post-return (disbursed in two instalments) | - 12 AVRR |
| ‘Reintegration preparation’ programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by the German state - business start-up training and coaching - facilitated by German non-profit start-up service providers - training (six to eight weeks) and coaching on topics of small-scale business creation and implementation - pre-departure mainly, sometimes post-departure continued guidance | - 4 AVRR |
| ERRIN (European Return and Reintegration Network) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded through member states of the initiative, facilitated through a Gambian partner NGO - in-kind support of up to € 2,000, business implementation support - post-return | - 3 AVRR |
| Bavarian ‘Überbrückungshilfe’ (bridging support) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded and delivered by the German federal state of Bavaria - financial support, € 960 in eight monthly instalments - post-return | - 1 AVRR |
| IOM PARA (Post-Arrival Reintegration Assistance) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by the EU through the EUTF, facilitated through IOM Gambia - basic counselling and material in-kind support for small-scale business of up to around € 1,000 - post-return | - 4 deportations |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| GIZ / GTTI (Gambia Technical Training Institute) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by the German state through the German development agency GIZ, facilitated by the GTTI - vocational apprenticeship in solar installation (one year) - post-return | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 deportation |
| YEP (Youth Empowerment Project) / 'Tekki Fii' (Make it in the Gambia) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by the EU through the EUTF, facilitated through development agencies of European countries and local implementing partners - vocational skills trainings of different durations, cash-for-work employment, start-up entrepreneurship trainings (one week) - post-return | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 AVRR - 2 deportations |
| SBFIC (Saving Banks Foundation for International Cooperation) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funded by Germany, facilitated through a German NGO in the Gambia and its implementing partners - financial skills training (one week), business coaching, financial support through credits and grants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 deportations - 1 AVRR |

As the numbers indicate, some migrants attended numerous assistance programs, either in parallel or consecutively. Reasons for this will become visible in the analysis of the individual trajectories in the next section.

The likelihood for deported migrants to receive assistance at all is lower than with AVRR. There is a relative mistrust in reintegration institutions after state-induced return (Blitz, Sales and Marzano 2005; Weisner 2023). This proves higher among deported individuals in my sample, also because AVRR participants partially related their hopes for post-return success to assistance measures. Mistrust led some deported migrants to refrain from assistance altogether, which sometimes also happened during AVRR trajectories. Further reasons why both deported migrants and AVRR participants did not participate in (more) assistance was mainly a lack of information (especially among deported individuals) and eligibility or selectivity hurdles. These contain age brackets, insufficient quality of business planning capacities, or lacking formal agribusiness experience, disqualifying for agricultural development grants.

In the following, I analyze the experiences of my interlocutors and their respective income prospect trajectories along the four analytical groups. In order to show in-group commonalities and variations, I do comparisons between whole groups and within groups.

Income prospect trajectories

Almost every interlocutor concerned the question of how to obtain financial means at some point after return. Almost all pursued income-generating projects, linked to their occupational

and educational histories to different degrees.⁵ Economic concerns are found on a broad spectrum. They contain the bare fear of not having sufficient money for basic needs such as food, covering rent or children's tuition fees, and balancing private expenses and business costs. But economic concerns also go up to large investments such as buying a taxi or house construction. These different concern levels appeared after both types of return, and often within single trajectories, due to the fluctuating dynamics of well-being.

Deportation without reintegration assistance

The four migrants who were deported and did not receive reintegration assistance can be assumed to be the most disadvantaged group and might thus carry the highest potential of protracted vulnerability. After deportation, the mere willingness to develop any kind of motivation is thwarted, including income generation, because the individuals concerned do not want to be where they are in the first place.

I have stress because of they bring me back to Gambia. Every day I sit, I think about that. Every day. [...] Right now I don't think nothing. I am just thinking to find money, when I have small money, I try to go back to another country. (R04, June 2019, around 11 months after return)

Most deported migrants both without but partly also with reintegration assistance struggled emotionally with being back, voicing urges to re-emigrate, especially closely upon their return. This also applied to some migrants that do have migration assistance. Some developed efforts to operationalize re-emigration. Not trying to find a job or apply for reintegration assistance can be understood as another expression of this dismissive stance.

This group also contains one migrant who is kept from striving for work by his psychological instability (R15) and another one who re-emigrated relatively immediately (R01). R01 had initially migrated out of a fear of being lynched, and still did after return, hence he lived in the hiding until he had organized his re-emigration via private networks.

However, two individuals eventually refunneled their life aspirations in the Gambia, including income-generating strategies. One of them does so under economically protracted precarious conditions (R05), while the other one has found a slow but sufficiently steady way to generate income. This made him able to follow future prospects (R04). Both do not trust the IOM and do not want to have anything to do with them.

No, I didn't want to involve in all this sort of things. [...] Because when you go, maybe if you can get it, it's ok. When you didn't get it, make you little bit stressful, little bit sad. (R05, March 2020, around 18 months after return)

Both had access to financial means they had earned working in Europe that by far exceeded IOM's PARA support. Both invested into land and house construction, partly already while being abroad. Continuing this project was central for their refunneling of future ambitions.

⁵ Three migrants did not develop considerable or even latent ambitions to raise income after return. All faced mental health challenges, which hindered them in putting financial attention or efforts towards any other than regaining mental health. They include one AVRR participant with basic reintegration and two deported individuals, of which one received support from PARA.

While both were highly confused, angry, and emotionally struggling after their deportations, starting construction work and raising further financial means to work towards finishing the premises gave them strong local future orientations. Additionally, both migrants continue their income generation in the Gambia with taxi driving.

Beyond these similarities, their income prospects developed at different paces. R04 lived rent-free, could draw on his previously established networks as a taxi driver before migration and had bought a car for his family before his return which he could now make use of. R05 in contrast had financial responsibilities for his mother and sisters, including their apartment rent, and still had to invest into a driving license after return. For the beginning, he could only drive a shared taxi. At the end of data collection, R04 was making slow but steady progress in finishing construction work and was already making additional income by renting out two storage areas within the unfinished compound. Notably, R04 had in parallel also investigated options of re-emigration over a prolonged period of time. But after all, he was very satisfied with his conditions in the Gambia at the end of data collection, not aspiring to leave these upward dynamics any time soon. R05 was stuck in an early stage of construction as his monthly earning did not suffice to continue the process.

The discussed trajectories reveal that if deported individuals start to engage economically, there is a tendency for upward dynamics in their income prospect trajectories. The anger, confusion and denial, which deportation instantaneously triggers, also includes refusal to develop future ambitions at the country of return and potentially prefer re-emigration imaginations. Anyhow, the prevalence of these feelings can eventually be smoothed if individuals realize that life has to move on. This includes the need of developing income ambitions at the present location. If the situation allows someone to actually create income prospects and their hassling for income prospects has started to bear fruits, this might lead to a decrease in re-emigration ambitions. Even if economic progress might be slow, refunneling towards future visions in the Gambia can rise. When having access to private funds, relying on these is more attractive than supplementing them with formal reintegration assistance. The pace of the upward dynamic also depends on the migrant's relationship to material responsibilities within their social environment. Either they rather materially rely on their networks or, vice versa, the family rather relies on their contributions. This can impede the material success of one's project, but not necessarily one's refunneling.

Deportation with reintegration assistance

The four migrants that decided to apply for IOM's PARA and partly more reintegration assistance after their deportation are found along the same bandwidth of income prospects as those without assistance. They range from not developing any income-generating motivations at all to rather successful refunneling. In the latter, the received assistance was a key in this process. Thus, reintegration assistance after deportation can enable migrants to refunnel their income prospects but doesn't necessarily do so.

For one migrant, PARA has not triggered income-generating activities at all (R10). R10, who was deported while physically injured and under instable mental health conditions, used some of the PARA for medical treatment, and saves the rest for an imagined upcoming re-emigration. Different to R15, he is waiting for a good opportunity to leave the country again, feeling highly

socially detached, but not yet overall fit enough to realize his re-emigration. Thus, he keeps 'sitting' with visions of his future elsewhere.

For the other three deported migrants who received reintegration assistance, they actually had the ambition to support their income with it. Over time, all three received more assistance than just PARA, in two cases adding up to a chain enrolment in numerous programs. However, their efforts turned out quite differently.

For R14, the enrolment eventually successfully created income prospects. He had not accumulated assets in Germany to use after return. Instead, he tried to work as a self-employed plumber as prior to migration, but did not receive sufficient orders. He applied to various programs, which he was informed about by different actors. First, R14 had engaged in an unsuccessful attempt of starting his own satellite business based on a short-term training and his PARA support. Following this, R14 took part in the GTTI solar installation apprenticeship and afterwards became a regular staff member with a relatively high salary and social security. Staying with a diaspora family member' compound, he had not needed to pay for rent or meals in the meantime. R14 took up various unconnected reintegration assistance opportunities, as they came along. These served him as intermediary steps and networking opportunities.

In the case of R19, chain enrolment rather expresses the difficult task to use programs to refunnel future ambitions in the Gambia, and the high dependency some returned migrants might develop. Meanwhile, it created waves of hopes and motivation followed by disappointment, leading to a complete resignation regarding income prospects. After struggling for quite some time to accept the irreversibility of his return despite trying to do so, R19 eventually took up various reintegration assistance opportunities. They included IOM's PARA, a short-term business training, a loan and grant- scheme application, and finally a one-year solar-installation training program. He attributed a highly encouraging role to the first program he participated in about 9 months after his return.

Anything now I am doing, I will do it with confidence. [...] This business training I have, now I have to plan many things about the big business. And then that is how I- that is my goal today, to implement that strategy. (R19, July 2019, around 7 months after return)

However, despite his ambitions to develop his family's traditional farmland into a plantation and his efforts to meet all eligibility criteria for funding schemes, financial support after trainings never materialized. While hopping on newly popping-up reintegration program opportunities, his belief in their effects for his income prospects diminished. Living in a small village in rural Gambia with his family, he had used PARA to ease his family's high disappointment about his being back without earning money, but over time he feels increasing social exclusion from his family.

Between the extremes of securing a stable job and not profiting at all from program participation lies R02. He managed to use his PARA funds to open a convenience store, and even turn it into a small bar matching his pre-migratory vocational skills. However, the business never turned profitable, despite supplementary assistance through a loan scheme. This again, R02 is currently unable to repay according to plan. He depends on his landlady's generosity, occasional day labour, and financial support from a German friend. The business nonetheless eventually

gave R02's satisfaction in doing something, revealing that a refunneling through income prospects is possible even without actually generating sufficient profit to cover economic needs. Summarizing, migrants, also after deportation, might turn to reintegration assistance programs and try to reorient themselves according to the offered avenues. This can actually steer income prospect visions, with the programs' setup and rhetoric creating a projection area for imagined future prospects. This rhetoric including the ideal of staying in the Gambia, the deported might accordingly refunnel their income ambitions to the Gambia. Even when utilizing the assistance programs as adequate as possible, it however remains extremely difficult to create financial security through them. There is rather also the chance to create refunneling despite little or no income stability.

AVRR with basic reintegration assistance

Turning to AVRR, most interlocutors returned with a decisively higher motivation to establish themselves back in the Gambia than the deported. Indeed, for some, economic ambitions do not stand at the core of a return decision, but rather disillusionment and frustration about one's conditions in Germany or homesickness. However, also among them, the decision to return is accompanied by a general hope or belief that re-establishing also economically would be possible, or even promising. This is due to the fact, that returning was often a way to leave the condition of an unproductive 'just sitting' in Germany and actually do something again.

You know, I was sitting in Europe, I was thinking about it. Me, I have no opportunity here. Let me go back. Let me go and invest, if I have the money. Look at all this land. Nothing here. Maybe when you come back to Gambia, you will see a lot of development here. (R17, July 2019, around 5 months after return)

This difference to deportation is also reflected in the self-assessment of migrants with AVRR. They consider the degree of voluntarism as categorically different from deportation because of their given motivation and an agency to decide and make plans for living in the Gambia. Deported migrants are seen in contrast to that as facing traumatizing psychological stress because of their forceful, violent and sudden removal, but also for having lost their belongings abroad. Contrasting these self-perceptions, the spectrum of success in establishing positive income prospects over time following AVRR is as broad as after deportation. The following displays that. Among the four migrants with basic reintegration assistance, two experienced an overall upward dynamic in income prospects over time (R08 and R12), while one experienced a downward dynamic (R06). The fourth migrant did not develop any income prospects at all (R18)⁶.

R08 and R12 faced long phases of insecurity when they came back, during which they did not know whether their strategies to secure income prospects would turn out. Also, as some others, they both profited from not having financial responsibilities for other family members, living rent-free and receiving shared meals. When R12 returned, he precisely knew what he wanted to do, while R08 did not. R12 took up vocational training, which he had not started

⁶ Similar to deported R15, R18 is held back in developing income prospects due to a mental disorder. He had returned in order to withdraw from mental distress in Europe. He spent his financial assistance for traditional medicine and expenditures for the family.

before his migration and instead had obeyed his father's desires for remittances from Europe. For R08, who had fled the country fearing arbitrary persecution after a professional mistake at his job, the situation was different. He could not return to his previous occupation in the health sector. He roamed for jobs in his social networks while earning little money by shared taxi driving. R08 for a long time did not know whether this would bear fruits, leaving him in waithood and highly distressed. He would nonetheless not have invested his reintegration funds into a self-employment business, as the investment would be too low and risky.

Business here, you need at least some little bit of capital. [...] There are some that are doing good with that money. [...] But it's not everywhere that you can set up a business [...]. And you know how business has ups and downs. Like if this is your only capital, you started something and it did not go, you lose everything. (R08, June 2019, around 14 months after return)

Instead, he had invested his StarthilfePlus funds into his mother's health. It was this illness of her, that had triggered his return as well. Also did R08 turn down the offer of participating in the GIZ's GTTI apprenticeship program because the site was too far away from his network's support infrastructure. R08's insecurity was only overcome by waiting on a chance. He was finally offered a job at a clearing agency through a friend he had contacted over a year earlier. This gave him access to very satisfying income prospects, earning the highest monthly income among all research participants and vocational learning. He can do savings to eventually start a sales business and a family.

R08's decisions reveal some dilemmas that accompany basic reintegration assistance. One aspect is question of how to use the limited funds most wisely – risky or not. Also, he is confronted with the need of weighing the relevance of satisfying social network obligations, but also social network potentials regarding access to work. R12 faced these same insecurities, but he invested his Starthilfe funds into career development when the capital only sufficed for the first term's fees and living expenses. Not knowing where each following terms' funding would come from, this was a risky investment. His insecurity was exacerbated by his father's long-term anger about his return, denying him to re-join the family, let alone finance his education. R12 instead lived with a senior family friend who mediated between father and son, and also provided upcoming school fees when no other funding was found. Years later, when R12 nearly completed his education, his father surprisingly accepted him back to the family, and even started supporting his onward university education.

For R08 as well as R12, reintegration assistance could not carry their refunneling ambitions, but functioned as liminal support. Key for the positive trajectory development was the support of the social environment. Not having to financially care for other people and the fact that their visions actually turned realistic, also based on chance, were important aspects.

The general trust in positive income prospects through AVRR can however also be intriguing. R06 was convinced of his abilities to establish a business when returning:

"I know how it is. Because I travelled, I see Europe, I see Africa. So, I know how to manage, how to start a business" (R06, June 2019, around 7 months after return).

He had raised some private capital abroad and profited from rent-free living for himself, his wife and children. With savings from jobs in Germany and StarthilfePlus, he had bought a plot

of land to develop into a tourist lodge and living premises. But he never raised the necessary construction capital. Various small jobs in parallel, for example in his brother's market stall where he used to work in before migration, and at a small German NGO never generated more income than needed to cover his family's regular expenses. Meanwhile, his livelihood turned increasingly insecure because of compound overcrowding and ownership struggles. His wife separated from him at one point, taking the children with her, increasingly disappointed about their economic stagnation. R06's initially high contentment about being back completely diminished over time.

Summarizing, whether a social environment supports the material livelihood of a returned migrant or, contrarily, demands financial support by them makes a decisive difference. Reintegration assistance can be invested in quite different ways to fulfil a refunneling purpose, and business investment plans can actually be misleading. The ideal of creating a self-employing business with resources gained abroad can overstretch returned migrants' capacities. This will make business-directed capital useless. Lastly, livelihood circumstances keep changing, so that returned migrants have to adapt their income ambitions. This additionally challenges the chances for upward dynamics in income prospect development.

AVRR with extended reintegration assistance

In the following eight cases, migrants received supplementary reintegration assistance in different combinations and intensities. Four of them received both pre-return and post-return assistance. One received supplementary assistance only pre-return, and three post-return only. The spectrum of success in developing income prospects among them is as broad as among the other groups. Overall, three of these migrants did comparatively well (R13, R17, R21), while the other five have been facing deteriorating dynamics. Two of them are struggling to circumvent these deteriorating outlooks (R02, R11), while for three the downward dynamics have led to a perceived lack of income prospects in the Gambia altogether (R09, R16, R24).

All three migrants with the strongest upward dynamics received pre-return and post-return supplementary assistance (R13, R17, R21). Thus, higher pre- and post-return assistance at first sight seem to enhance chances for positive income prospect development. However, the fourth migrant who received supplementary assistance both pre- and post-return (R16) was not successful in starting his business. The two cars he had exported from Germany for a taxi business were dysfunctional. His relatives eventually withdrew his rent-free living when he could not contribute to household income anymore. He moved on to Senegal for a health treatment and from there, re-emigrated out of chance, receiving an invitation to Europe by a private person.

The second re-emigrated migrant was actually greatly pleased about being back but could not use his reintegration funds to further his promising welding career, which he had started in Senegal, also raising the funds for migrating there (R24). Neither suitable employment nor training opportunities could be identified in the Gambia by himself or his reintegration assistants. Also, onward migration to a specialized school in another West African country proved unrealizable once back. After investing some reintegration funds into his sister's shop and the rest on daily expenditures, he temporarily went to work in Dubai. Highly preferring to stay in the Gambia, R24 expects having to re-emigrate again, with increasing pressure to contribute to his compound's income.

R13, R16, R17 and R21 had more country-compatible future visions. Also, they owned a comparatively high capital gained through pre-return project-related fundraising with the support of start-up programs. All but R16 additionally had land available to live on and use for their business. R17 planned to construct a small-scale broiler farm, R13 developed a large plot of undomesticated land into a farm, and R21 was going to open a convenience shop in his family's village. The three returned to rural livelihoods and profited from rent-free living under partly very basic living conditions.

The migrants with general upward dynamics also went through phases of insecurity and face certain challenges continuously. Least so R17. He had returned with the highest capital and soon invested it according to plan. Although his farm created less profit than expected, he was highly content about his achievements and being back. When he had to go to Senegal for medical treatment for several months because of falling seriously ill, he had to sell his broiler stock because he had not made sufficient savings for social security. After returning, he re-launched the farm on a small scale, slowly increasing his livestock. R17's positive future outlook is nonetheless hazarded. A reason is his aunt, who is the owner of the land on which the farm is built and living with him next to it. She highly disapproves his small-scale income satisfaction and threatens to forbid its operation. R17 even moved into the broiler house in order not to have to stand her harsh criticisms throughout the day.

Also, R13's family disapproves of his contentment about being back and proceeding on a small-scale agricultural basis. His farm is even more challenged by the limited profit margins of small-scale agriculture in relation to the needed manpower. This problem keeps being relevant, even though R13 could motivate others to work with him for some time despite minimal wages. Also, secured additional investments through an SBFIC-facilitated grant did not help enough. While some members of his family try to make him sell his land, R13 holds on to it because it is the basis of his future life vision. Yet, he relies on supplementary short-term jobs and irregular material support from German friends and cannot further develop the land. R13 and R17 kept their high contentment about being back, despite realizing the economic limitations of their agricultural endeavors, their very basic living conditions, and the families' disapproval.

R03, R09 and R11 experienced slow deteriorations in their income prospects. R03 shared some conditions with R13 and R17 – land availability and agricultural ambitions – though in his case this did not lead to success. He started with too little capital to finish the construction of a tourist lodge with living premises he had started to build in his planned vegetable garden. Similar to R06, the necessary capital was overwhelmingly high, or the business plan overambitious. Participating in pre-return business training did not help him prevent his investment mistake. Working as contract- and self-employed gardener, his turnovers remained very inconsistent and low. Because of that, he was even forced to practice rent-reduced squatting in construction sites, later moving to a makeshift shack on his plot next to his slowly overgrowing building ruin.

Also, R11 with time realized that his income strategy would not enable him to cover his regular expenses, future livelihood investments and business costs at the same time. Other than R03, R11 could start a business with his reintegration assistance – a taxi bought with StarthilfePlus and ERRIN funding. He disapproved it of being an attractive career but trusted in his abilities to eventually re-enter his pre-migratory retail business through slow savings.

While in Germany, R11 had also bought a plot of land for housing to save rental expenditures which he continued to pay off. The monthly reimbursements meant limited business savings. When his taxi broke down after 2 years, he did not have enough savings to get it replaced. Without income source, he could not afford all living expenses including children school fees and rent. He lost the condition of the credit's instalments and the value of the invested money because meanwhile property prices had skyrocketed. R11 came to highly regret his return.

R09 failed in establishing an onward perspective while participating in profitable cash-for-work programs for an extended period. Contrasting R11 and R03, he never started self-employed business investments. Despite broad visions to invest some of his StarthilfePlus funds towards income generation, these prove unrealizable. A part of the capital was lost in a house fire, and the living expenses for his wife and two children increased. This again was influenced by his parents, who withdrew access to the family compound based on their disappointment in R09's return. He was unemployed and illiquid within less than six months and under high emotional distress. His prospects reversed when he was introduced into a cash-for-work program. The development initiative is conceptualized as an interim step towards longer-term career development. However, R09 did not find a suitable onward perspective. The savings he could make during contract periods based on high salaries for untrained construction labor, he spent on living expenses during unemployment periods. (Unpaid) vocational training were no option because of R09's financial obligations and his illiteracy. Empathetic program managers granted R09 numerous follow-up contracts, which intermittently eased his economic burden but created cycles of hope and desperateness. It also postponed his confrontation with a disadvantageous labor market to years after returning. While R03 and R11 struggled to cover their living expenses and at the same time create positive income prospects, R09's prospects were limited to the everyday.

Summarizing, the initial observation that more supplementary reintegration assistance would create higher chances for positive income prospects, proves rather misleading. Only three out of eight migrants (R13, R17, R21) could establish relatively satisfying income prospects, and these are by no means based on economic thriving. Their satisfaction with materially limited, basic living conditions and onward economic insecurities is possible as long as their housing is secured. Their situation is also easier with missing concrete economic responsibilities for other family members. In two cases, migrants could not find income-generating prospects despite their high urges to refunnel (R09 and R24). For three, income-generating activities that actually based on reintegration funds did not create positive income prospects despite individuals' high commitment (R03, R11, R16).

Also, supplementary reintegration assistance only seldom provides sufficient financial means for migrants to fulfil the multiple purposes necessary to cover after return. They cannot compensate for the challenging macro-economic and social environment. This includes restricted access to contract employment or suitable education opportunities in contexts where self-employment is not a viable option. Planning and running a profit-generating business requires financial and managerial skills and technical expertise which are not necessarily given. Supplementary reintegration funds or more business counselling can hardly counterbalance such shortcomings.

Discussion and Conclusion: AVRR as 'slow deportation'

The spectrum between rather satisfying and deteriorating income prospects is found among all four groups. After all, two deported migrants were among the most content regarding income prospects (R04, R14), and two further countered impending downward dynamics (R02, R05). At the same time, also numerous AVRR participants found themselves in situations of protracted challenging (R11, R03) to devastated (R06, R09) income prospects. Deportation is therefore not a categorically larger obstacle to positive income prospect development after return than AVRR. The only long-term obstacle to income prospect ambitions has been observed in cases of mental health challenges, which can occur with deportation as well as AVRR.

Corresponding with Lietaert (2021), individual, economic and social dynamics after return are too complex to categorically increase chances for positive income trajectories through AVRR. AVRR cannot create the preparedness necessary for high reintegration chances (cf. Casarino 2019). Kleist (2020) finds that after involuntary return, there is no unequivocal relationship between social trajectories and re-emigration. Correspondingly, there is no unequivocal relationship between mode of state-induced return, income prospect development and re-emigration. Beyond supporting these findings, my analysis suggests that specific temporal tendencies are part of the political constructions of AVRR and deportation that make them less distinguishable over time, which I will describe next.

AVRR and deportation are accompanied by differing temporal dynamics of expectations and agency. During and closely after return, the differences between the two are distinctively strong. The shock, anger and confusion after deportation evoke emotional distress and impulsive denial towards the new situation. Meanwhile with AVRR, migrants have a contentment-based orientation of refunneling income prospects at the place of return. They connect a relief about being back to the agency in their return decision-making. Accordingly, they arrive with more self-consciousness and expectations about their abilities to continue their journeys in that positive vein. In contrast, after the harsh disempowering experience of deportation, individuals have to re-orient themselves out of a non-existent future. That can counter-intuitively lead to upward dynamics in developing economic ambitions out of desperation. Yet after AVRR, future imaginaries are more easily thwarted due to the challenging economic environment that AVRR assistance cannot bypass. This is encompassed by downward dynamics in income prospect development.

Despite desperation, deported individuals can find ways out of the perceived stuckness. They face material needs of everyday expenses, have to prevent social exclusion and maybe even make savings towards their imagined re-emigration. The bare necessity of a reaction to this situation can eventually open avenues to regaining agency about one's future. That might include income prospects. The desperation to re-emigrate can become emotionally less prevalent, as refunneling might be more satisfying in the very present. Material success or the prospect of reaching it, even if low, can decrease re-emigration desperation. This proves even if income generation ambitions are co-motivated by it. If deported migrants can rely on resources attained abroad or find other means to become economically active after their return, their deportation rather means an interruption in the development of agency than its overall loss.

AVRR-based future hopes, on the other hand, bear higher risks of disillusionment over time. For some, the return allows a (sufficiently) satisfying trajectory, even if unexpectedly challenging. These challenges include decisively lower profit margins than anticipated or prolonged waitness before prospects start to turn positive. Yet, in many cases, individuals realize over time that they had underestimated these challenges and their gravity towards one's well-being. These prominently include the high stigma and social exclusion that also AVRR triggers in social networks. The AVRR reintegration assistance can hardly outweigh the effects of economic scarcities at the locality of return. Material dependencies of social networks on migrant revenues and lacking social security systems are relevant here. Also, small or inaccessible labor and educational markets often are a burden for returned migrants' success chances.

The perceived agency of an AVRR decision can then often not be upheld. Even when actually generating some income, it might not suffice to satisfy all obligations, hampering a re-funneling that aligns with one's social responsibilities. With time, various migrants thus do not reconfirm their AVRR decisions as having been wise. The agency of return decision-making, which characterizes the presumed voluntariness of AVRR, diminishes in a temporal perspective. AVRR can thus turn into a 'slow deportation'.

Regarding the role of assistance, the shared spectrum across all groups tells us two things: Firstly, a positive development of income prospects after state-induced return does not depend on reintegration assistance. It is only one among various mechanisms that affects trajectories, and unsystematically varies in importance. More prevalent seems the individuals' positions in their social network, and the economic responsibilities versus material support, which they entail. Individuals might attain livelihood security through them (housing, food, funding, job-networking), or in contrast, be confronted with pressure to contribute income. These two directions can change within trajectories, often unforeseen, and especially prevalent when a migrant has a core family to care for or rent to pay. Reintegration assistance can help extend time frames in which these enabling and disabling social circumstances unfold their full effect. But it hardly replaces them.

Secondly, reintegration assistance is not a categorical catalyst for more positive income prospects. Certainly, it carries the chance of making an often small, but nonetheless meaningful difference. But, notably, this can be the case both after AVRR and deportation. AVRR has the tendency to give access to more assistance starting pre-return, but by far not all AVRR participants are included in extended support. Thus, while receiving assistance might slightly increase chances for better income prospects, they overall remain rather unlikely. The multiple financial obligations of everyday living and securing a future are often too overwhelming. Yet, programs' idealizing conceptualizations and rhetoric about assistance leading to successful reintegration nurtures hopes and expectations among everyone. Many assistance recipients therefore need to constantly lower their expectations, realizing the boundaries of their agency. This problem stays, even when going along the avenues suggested by reintegration concepts. This ambiguity is particularly strong when individuals keep feeling dependent on programs while experiencing their ineffectiveness. The feeling is pushed, when they cannot find alternative enabling mechanisms. Such downgrading of ambitions cannot be equated with an adaptation to local circumstances as part of reintegration. All too often, it contains continued dependency on assistance,

lack in sufficient access to decent livelihood infrastructure. Also, it and often triggers psychological distress, social exclusion and increasing return regret.

As these findings show, return type and reintegration assistance encompassing AVRR and deportation do not create categorically better chances for positive income development over time. AVRR and deportation share a high propensity of a longer-term withdrawal of fulfilling ‘projects of socio-economic prosperity’, while both leave smaller windows for successful re-funneling. This contradicts the politically constructed dichotomy between deportation and AVRR. From this angle, AVRR resembles a ‘slow deportation’. This confirms the hypothesis of AVRR as ‘soft deportation’ in a longitudinal perspective and post-return context.

Kuschminder (2017a) argues that when it comes to the question of who should be held responsible for reintegrating returning migrants successfully, the returned migrants and the community they return to should be addressed, not giving much responsibility to the former destination country. As this covers those social actors that are present on the physical ground where reintegration is supposed to take place, this demand might seem obvious at first sight. However, AVRR and deportation – two return modes that are distinctively created in interest of the deporting state – have expectation management regarding successful reintegration as an ideal post-return process at their heart. Therefore, the suggestion to exclude them from responsibility for reintegration remains blind for the hegemonic bias of reintegration work. As Vathi et al. reveal, “migrants’ ... strategies of reintegration and re-migration are an expression, as well as a trigger, of multi-scale geopolitics” (2022: 1) that are “contingent upon different and, often, incongruous legal, political and socio-economic elements, as endorsed and employed by the different stakeholders involved” (ibid.). Deportation from the EU is a highly politicized issue for the Gambian government, because if they cooperate, this goes against their own population’s will, which therefore creates frustration and costs them legitimacy (Zanker/ Altrogge 2022). One central criticism is that the Gambian government should not allow deportations as long as there are no means and infrastructure to reintegrate deported individuals. If post-return reintegration assistance is made available for deported individuals as well, this would reduce the government’s leverage to reject deportations. Ironically, the lacking differentiation between AVRR and deportation in the post-return reintegration infrastructure might therefore even indirectly serve deporting states. Minding the intense geopolitical imbalances that create state-induced return and reintegration assistance to the favour of destination states, we cannot shift the responsibility for successful reintegration outcomes to the origin context.

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