

Returnee Voices in Policy

*A practical toolkit for more inclusive,
responsive and legitimate return and
reintegration policymaking*

PURPOSE

This toolkit helps policymakers move from the principle of “*including returnees*” to meaningful participation and influence in return and reintegration policymaking. It provides practical tools to assess who is included, what they are able to influence, and how lived experience can shape policy decisions. It treats participation as a governance issue, not simply a consultation or communications exercise.

It helps policymakers:

1. Assess whether returnees and relevant local and receiving-country actors are meaningfully included in policy design, implementation, monitoring and review;
2. Distinguish consultation from influence;
3. Design participation that reflects diverse returnee experiences and is safe, ethical and non-tokenistic;
4. Create clear feedback and accountability pathways so that lived experience can influence policy priorities, programme design and how success is defined and assessed.

WHY RETURNEE PARTICIPATION MATTERS

Returnees are not only recipients of return policy or sources of testimony. Their lived experience is policy knowledge about how return and reintegration systems work, where they fail and what needs to change. Meaningful inclusion means enabling that knowledge to influence not only programme delivery, but also how needs, success and sustainable reintegration are defined and measured.

1. WHAT FAIR FINDINGS MEAN FOR POLICYMAKERS

FAiR finding	Policy implication
A return can be lawful and operationally completed while still being regarded as illegitimate. Actors also judge how return is carried out, its foreseeable consequences, how responsibilities are shared and whether receiving actors have meaningful ownership.	Do not treat legal finality, completed returns or cooperation rates as sufficient evidence of legitimacy. Include affected and receiving actors in assessing whether policy is fair, proportionate and workable in practice.
Return policies and public narratives often speak about returnees without giving their knowledge meaningful influence. Returnees may appear as beneficiaries, cases, numbers or sources of testimony while key policy choices remain institutionally defined.	Treat lived experience as policy knowledge. Build participation into design, implementation, monitoring and review rather than relying only on consultation or communication activities.
Being heard is not the same as having influence. Returnees can be consulted, quoted or invited to meetings without changing programme objectives, eligibility rules, budgets, indicators or implementation.	Ask not only whether returnees participated, but what they were able to change. Make the scope of influence explicit before participation begins.
Returnees are not a homogeneous group. Experiences and perspectives vary by age, gender, health, family situation, migration history, degree of choice in return, preparedness, location and experience of assistance.	Do not treat visible or articulate participants as representative of all returnees. Participation mechanisms should deliberately include diverse profiles and provide confidential routes for less visible voices.
Policy knowledge also sits at the local and receiving-country level. Municipalities, frontline services, civil society and receiving-country institutions often see gaps and consequences that are less visible to national or international policymakers.	Include local and receiving-country actors early enough to shape priorities and implementation, rather than involving them only after key decisions have been made

Successful reintegration is not defined in the same way by everyone. Institutions may emphasise programme completion, service delivery or reduced remigration, while returnees, families and communities may emphasise dignity, belonging, recognition, predictability and the ability to build a viable future.

Make explicit whose definition of success is being used. Involve affected actors in defining objectives, indicators and the time period over which outcomes are assessed.

Reintegration unfolds over time. What appears successful at programme closure may later become precarious, while difficult beginnings may improve.

Distinguish short-term programme outputs from longer-term lived outcomes. Monitor beyond formal assistance periods and involve affected actors in deciding when and how reintegration outcomes should be assessed.

Many returnees maintain family, economic, emotional or professional ties across borders. Continued mobility may be part of a viable future rather than evidence of failed reintegration.

Include returnees' own understandings of mobility, transnational ties and future plans when defining sustainable reintegration.

Policy test: Who defines success in return and reintegration? Before defining a return or reintegration programme as successful, ask:

1. **According to whom?** Whose expectations are being used — government, programme implementer, municipality, returnee, family, community or another actor?
2. **Against which criteria?** Return completed? Assistance delivered? Employment? Housing? Wellbeing? Dignity? Social acceptance? Ability to plan a viable future?
3. **At what point in time?** Arrival? End of assistance? Six months later? Two years later?
4. **Who had influence over those criteria?** Were returnees and receiving actors merely consulted, or could their knowledge actually change objectives, indicators and policy decisions?

Policy principle: Inclusive return policymaking requires creating meaningful routes through which lived experience can influence policy priorities, programme design, resource allocation, monitoring and accountability — including the criteria through which success is defined and assessed.

2. INCLUSION AND LEGITIMACY DIAGNOSIS: HOW INCLUSIVE AND RESPONSIVE IS YOUR POLICY?

Use this diagnostic during policy design, programme review, funding decisions or evaluation. Mark each item Yes / Partly / No and record what needs to change. The questions assess not only whether returnees are included, but whether return policy reflects lived reintegration realities, distributes responsibilities fairly and creates meaningful influence over how success is defined and assessed.

Area	Diagnostic question
Participation	Were returnees involved before key policy or programme choices were fixed, rather than only consulted after design?
Diversity	Were different profiles included, reflecting differences in age, gender, health, family situation, skills, debt, migration history, return experience, degree of choice and preparedness?
Influence	Can returnees' input actually change policy or programme decisions, rather than only inform consultation reports?
Local ownership	Were municipalities, local service providers, civil society and other relevant community actors involved early enough to shape policy design, priorities and implementation arrangements — rather than only being asked to deliver decisions made at national or international level?
Receiving country ownership	Did relevant national authorities and institutions in the country of return have meaningful influence over how return and reintegration arrangements were designed and implemented?
Defining success	Were returnees, local actors and receiving institutions involved in deciding what successful or sustainable reintegration means, which outcomes should be measured, and over what period?

What Does Your Diagnosis Show? Interpreting The Diagnosis

The diagnostic is not intended to produce a single score. A policy may be strong in one area — for example, returnee participation — while remaining weak in another, such as local ownership, responsibility-sharing or longer-term monitoring. Use the levels below to identify where practice currently sits and where the most important gaps remain.

Level	What it looks like
Emerging	Returnees and receiving actors are recognised, but involvement is ad hoc. Policy priorities and definitions of success are largely set institutionally, and performance is measured mainly through procedures, return numbers or assistance delivered.
Developing	Returnees and local actors are consulted and differentiated needs are increasingly recognised, but participation has limited influence over programme design, resource allocation or indicators. Feedback does not systematically lead to change.
Meaningful	Returnees, local actors and relevant receiving institutions influence design, implementation and monitoring. Different experiences are represented, the scope of influence is clear, and feedback leads to visible changes in policy or practice.
Institutionalised	Participation and co-production are regular, funded, diverse and safeguarded. Returnees and receiving actors influence priorities, programme objectives, resource allocation and definitions of success. Feedback and participation are linked to formal accountability and policy-revision processes.

Look for the weakest link: a participatory policy can still produce poor outcomes if local systems are under-resourced; a well-funded programme can still lack legitimacy if affected actors have little influence over its design or definition of success.

3. RETURNEE PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE LADDER

The ladder helps policymakers distinguish visibility, voice, participation and influence. FAiR research shows that being represented or heard does not necessarily mean having influence over policy decisions or over how needs, priorities and successful reintegration are defined. The ladder can be used at national and municipal levels and across policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. **Higher levels are not necessary for every decision, but policymakers should be explicit about the level of participation being offered and should not present consultation as co-design or influence.** Apply the ladder to a specific decision or process rather than labelling an entire policy or institution. The key question is not only “Were returnees involved?” but “What were they able to change?”

Level	Level of involvement	What it means in practice	What change does it create?
1	Mentioned	Returnees appear in policy language, statistics, reports or evidence, but have no direct role in decisions.	Nothing directly.
2	Heard / consulted	Returnees share experiences, views or preferences through interviews, surveys, consultations or meetings. Institutions decide how that input is interpreted and used.	The evidence base and policymakers’ understanding may change, but there is no commitment that policy or practice will change.
3	Validate	Returnees review findings, assumptions, proposed tools, information materials or policy interpretations before finalisation.	Errors, assumptions, interpretations and proposed materials can be corrected.
4	Advise	Returnees participate regularly in national or municipal advisory groups, forums or structured consultations, with a defined route for recommendations to reach decision-makers.	Recommendations and implementation choices can be influenced, although final decisions remain institutional.

5	Co-design	Returnees work alongside policymakers and practitioners to design services, referral pathways, eligibility approaches, information materials or support models.	Programme or policy design can change before implementation.
6	Monitor and adapt	Returnees participate in monitoring, evaluation, complaints analysis and programme review, with findings connected to formal processes for response and adaptation.	Services, procedures, eligibility rules, implementation arrangements and resource priorities can change.
7	Shape priorities and definitions of success	Returnees and returnee-led organisations have sustained, resourced influence over policy priorities, programme objectives, indicators, resource allocation and the criteria and time horizons used to judge successful reintegration.	The framework itself can change: what is prioritised, funded, measured and counted as success.

Influence test

- 1. Ask:** What decision was genuinely open to influence? (a) *Who participated, and who was missing?* (b) *What did returnees recommend?* (c) *What changed as a result?* (d) *What did not change, and why?* (e) *Were participants told what happened next?*
- 2. Warning sign:** If policymakers cannot identify a decision, process or resource that participants could realistically influence, the exercise is primarily consultation or evidence-gathering rather than co-production.
- 3. Minimum standard at every level:** Participation should be voluntary, accessible, diverse and safe; compensated where substantive time or expertise is requested; and followed by a clear explanation of what was heard, what changed and what could not change. Participation, criticism or complaints should never affect eligibility for assistance or access to services.
- 4. Representation matters:** Do not rely only on returnee leaders, publicly visible participants or programme “success stories”. Seek different experiences and profiles, including variation in age, gender, health, family situation, migration trajectory, degree of choice in return, preparedness, location and experience of assistance. Where public participation could create stigma, legal, family or livelihood risks, provide confidential or anonymous routes for influence.

4. USE RETURNEE VOICES ETHICALLY IN POLICY PROCESSES

A returnee voice should have a policy purpose: identifying a gap, testing an assumption, co-designing a solution, monitoring implementation or holding an institution accountable. Visibility is not a goal in itself.

Format	Use when...	Safeguarding requirement
Anonymised quote	A lived experience illustrates a pattern without requiring public identification.	Remove details that reveal identity, location, family, route or legal situation.
Composite case	Several people describe a similar pattern and identification risk is high.	State clearly that the case combines experiences; do not invent facts.
Audio	Voice and tone add value in a closed workshop or training.	Use specific consent; consider whether voice itself can identify the person.
Video	The person actively wants public visibility and understands the audience and future circulation.	Use specific, informed and revocable consent where feasible; agree on duration and channels of use.
Advisory forum	Direct, repeated input is needed for design or review.	Ensure diverse membership, safe participation, compensation and feedback.
Participatory monitoring	Returnees help assess whether a programme works in practice.	Protect participants from retaliation or service-related consequences; separate complaints from eligibility decisions.

Ethical checklist

- ☐ Use specific informed consent for each purpose and channel.
- ☐ Avoid deterrence messaging that turns returnees into warnings to others.
- ☐ Do not reduce people to trauma, vulnerability or curated "success stories", and ensure returnees have a right to non-participation as well.
- ☐ Compensate time and expertise fairly where participation is substantive.
- ☐ Give participants a chance to review how their contribution is framed when feasible.
- ☐ Protect anonymity where participation could create stigma, legal, family or livelihood risks.
- ☐ Include quieter and less visible profiles, not only articulate or publicly comfortable participants.
- ☐ Close the feedback loop: explain how input was used and what happens next.

5. FINAL POLICY ACTION BOX

The shift: Move from speaking about returnees to designing, implementing, financing and monitoring return and reintegration systems with them.

- Involve returnees before key policy choices are fixed.
- Include diverse returnee experiences.
- Be explicit about what participants can influence.
- Involve local and receiving-country actors early enough to shape decisions.
- Create safe, accessible and confidential routes for participation and feedback.
- Compensate substantive participation and expertise appropriately.
- Document what participants recommended, what changed, and what did not change.
- Involve affected actors in defining what counts as success and when it needs to be assessed.
- Regularly test participation is changing policy, practice or resource allocation – rather than simply generating consultation.

FAiR evidence base used across this toolkit package

- [Erasmus University, Samuel hall, and Università degli Studi di Milano \(2024\), Migration Discourses and Enforced Return Policies: Perspectives from the Global South and Diaspora Communities, FAiR working paper.](#)
- [Samuel Hall, Koç University, and Erasmus University Rotterdam \(2024\), Discourse and Policies: Silencing Returnees and the Need for More Inclusive Return Policies, FAiR working paper..](#)
- Samuel Hall and ICMPD (2024), [Returnee voices matters: Towards more including return policies](#), FAiR policy brief.
- Samuel Hall (2026, unpublished) Beyond Listening: Aligning Return Policy with Reintegration Realities, FAiR policy brief.
- Samuel Hall and Koç University (2026, unpublished), From Imaginaries to Realities: Returnees' Preparedness for Reintegration, FAiR working paper.
- Samuel Hall (2026, unpublished), What Makes a Return Legitimate? Perspectives from Actors Negotiating, Organising and Receiving Returns, FAiR policy brief.
- Majidi, N, Samman, J and Pfister, L (2026, unpublished) Who Gets to Define Sustainable Reintegration? Competing Expectations and Legitimacy in Return Governance.
- FAiR synthesis policy brief on return and reintegration realities.