

From Returnee Voices to Better Practice and Policy Influence

*A toolkit for practitioners and civil
society working on return and
reintegration*

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

FAiR research in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye shows a persistent gap between how return is organised and how reintegration is lived. Return may be managed through procedures, timelines, categories and assistance packages, while life after return is shaped by uncertainty, housing and employment constraints, stigma, family expectations, health and psychosocial needs, weak or fragmented local services, and changing aspirations.

For practitioners, this creates a double task. The first is practical: help people navigate the immediate consequences of return and connect them to realistic support. The second is systemic: identify recurring barriers, challenge harmful narratives, and use practice evidence to improve programmes and policy.

The latest FAiR work adds an important distinction. Being heard is not the same as having influence over how needs, outcomes and success are defined. Returnees may be consulted or quoted while institutions still determine programme priorities, service standards and what successful reintegration should mean. This toolkit therefore moves from voice to meaningful participation and, where possible, shared definition of needs and success.

Use this toolkit to:

- Support safer and more realistic preparedness before and after return;
- Identify where individual needs intersect with structural and local-system barriers;
- Strengthen referrals, handovers and coordination across actors;
- Use returnee voices ethically and without instrumentalisation;
- Create space for returnees to influence how needs, outcomes and success are defined.

Core idea: Returnees are not only recipients of return policy, of aid or sources of testimony. Their lived experience is evidence about how return and reintegration systems work, where they fail, what counts as a viable life after return, and what needs to change.

Practice pathway: Good practice links immediate support to the wider system and creates a route for returnee knowledge to shape practice and policy change.

1. WHY RETURNEE VOICES MATTER IN PRACTICE?

Returnee voices matter because they reveal what institutional categories and programme outputs often miss. They can show where information is inaccurate, procedures are inaccessible, assistance does not fit local realities, stigma affects service uptake, and institutional definitions of success diverge from lived experience.

- They reveal where procedures, eligibility rules, referrals and services **fail in real life**.
- They show how **economic, social, psychosocial and family dimensions interact** rather than occurring in isolation.
- They make visible the gap between **what people expected before return and what they encounter afterwards**.
- They help **distinguish administrative return categories** from actual preparedness, agency, vulnerability, resources and capacity.
- They expose the difference between **assistance delivered and a viable life rebuilt over time**.
- They reveal how families and communities also judge return **through expectations of success, obligation, morality, gender and contribution**.
- They can **strengthen advocacy and programme design** - but only when people retain meaningful control over how their experiences are used and what conclusions are drawn from them.

Practice test: Ask not only “*Did we hear returnees?*” but also “*Did their knowledge change the way we define the problem, design the response, define outcomes or decide what happens next?*”

2. TELLING STORIES

Legitimacy in practice: four questions before and after return

FAiR research with actors negotiating, organising and receiving returns shows that a return may be lawful and operationally completed while still being regarded as unacceptable or illegitimate. Practitioners may not control return decisions, but they often see their consequences first. Their evidence can therefore help make legitimacy visible in practice.

Question	What to look for	What practitioners can do
Was return carried out with dignity and proportionate attention to individual circumstances?	Family unity, health and protection needs, correct identity, notice and time to prepare, property/assets, information received.	Document foreseeable harms; raise safeguarding concerns; avoid treating legal finality as proof that needs have been addressed.
Were responsibilities agreed rather than transferred by default?	Who is responsible for medical follow-up, documents, reception, housing, immediate costs, family contacts, referrals and serious needs?	Clarify handovers before or at arrival; record gaps; escalate unresolved responsibilities to programme managers and authorities.
What happens after arrival?	Realistic access to livelihoods, healthcare, psychosocial support, education, housing and functioning referral systems.	Treat arrival as a transition point, not case closure; connect immediate reception to longer-term support.
Do receiving actors and returnees have meaningful ownership?	Can local institutions, practitioners and returnees influence how support is designed, adapted and reviewed?	Create joint review spaces; feed implementation evidence upward; include returnees and local actors early enough to shape decisions, not only validate them.

Why this matters: Legitimacy is not separate from effectiveness. Where return arrangements are poorly coordinated, disproportionate or lacking ownership, cooperation and reintegration support can become fragile even when procedures were formally completed.

Ethical storytelling, participation and safeguarding

The first duty is not to make stories visible; it is to avoid harm and protect agency. Consent for an interview, counselling session, focus group or workshop does not automatically cover publication, social media, donor events, advocacy campaigns or media use.

Four principles

01 Use specific informed consent and protect identity: Explain the purpose, audience, characterisation, possible circulation, risks and withdrawal options where feasible. Remember to change details that can reveal a person through name, image, voice, route, workplace, school, location or family relationships.

02 Let returnees shape the meaning: Ask what they want others to understand, what should characterise their story, what should remain private, and whether they agree with the conclusion drawn from their experience.

03 Move from participation to influence: Where possible, involve returnees in defining programme objectives, service standards, priorities and what successful reintegration should mean - not only in providing testimony.

04 Link returnees to systems: Identify the repeated pattern, structural barrier, responsible actor and the change required. Avoid presenting a structural problem as an individual failure.

Return Reality and Preparedness Conversation Guide

Use this as a conversation guide.

Expectations

- What did the person expect life after return to look like?
- What has been different?

Clarify misinformation; update the support plan; avoid blaming the person for expectations shaped by family, public narratives or incomplete information.

Agency and timing

- How much choice, notice and time did the person have?
- What could they realistically prepare?

Treat low agency and short notice as preparedness risks regardless of formal return category.

Information and documents

- Do they know how to access services?
- Are identity, registration, applications or missing documents barriers?

Provide orientation, document support, translated/simple information and hands-on accompaniment.

Family, property and immediate obligations

- Are family members separated?
- Are property, savings, wages, debts or belongings unresolved abroad?

Flag cross-border and handover issues early; Connect to legal, consular or specialised support where available.

Housing and basic needs

- Is housing stable and safe?
- Are basic costs manageable?

Refer early; Coordinate with municipal and social-protection actors; Do not wait for livelihood support to solve acute needs.

Livelihoods, skills and debt

- What skills and goals do they have?
- Are qualifications recognised?
- What debts or family financial expectations exist?

Use realistic, market-linked livelihood planning; Avoid generic training; Connect to employers, recognition pathways, mentoring and financial counselling where available.

Health and psychosocial wellbeing

Are health needs, stress, shame, anxiety or trauma affecting daily functioning or service access?

Ensure confidential referral and continuity of care; Normalise psychosocial support as part of reintegration.

Family, community and stigma

- How is return understood by family/community?
- Does the person feel safe being identified as a returnee?

Use privacy safeguards; Offer peer support, mediation or community-level work where appropriate.

Transnational ties

Are children, partners, work, property or obligations spread across countries?

Do not assume return equals severing cross-border ties; Plan around lawful mobility and family realities where possible.

Future aspirations

Does the person imagine staying, moving again, studying, working abroad or maintaining circular mobility?

Treat future mobility as relevant to planning, not automatically as reintegration failure.

3. FROM STORIES TO ACTION: SUPPORTING REINTEGRATION

Strengthening Local Reintegration System

Storytelling should inform advocacy and accountability. Stories say something of the system within which return and reintegration are experiences. It informs action: FAiR findings consistently show that individual preparedness cannot compensate for absent or inaccessible local systems. Practitioners should therefore map the environment into which people return, not only the profile of the person returning.

System area	Check	Practice response
Reception and handover	Is there a named receiving actor and a clear transfer of information for urgent needs?	Use a handover note or case conference; clarify responsibilities and avoid gaps between pre-return and post-return actors.
Referral pathways	Are health, psychosocial, housing, education, legal, protection and livelihood services mapped and reachable?	Maintain a live referral map; verify eligibility, accessibility, cost and language rather than relying on outdated directories.
Municipal capacity	Do local authorities know the available pathways and have staff/resources to guide returnees?	Build municipal contact points, in-person support and simple escalation routes.
Mainstream services	Can returnees use ordinary public services without unnecessary parallel systems or exposure?	Prioritise connection to sustainable mainstream services while retaining specialised support where needed.
Community and peer resources	Are trusted returnee, family, diaspora or community networks available?	Use voluntary peer and community support without substituting unpaid informal care for public responsibility.
Local economic conditions	Do proposed livelihood interventions reflect actual markets, qualification recognition and employer demand?	Use local market evidence; engage employers and chambers; avoid business grants as a default solution.

Accountability

Can people complain safely, and is there a mechanism to adapt services when patterns recur?

Create accessible feedback channels, assign responsibility for follow-up and report back on changes.

Continuity principle: Support should connect pre-return preparation, arrival, immediate reception and longer-term local services. A handover is only complete when the receiving actor knows what is expected and the returnee knows where to go next.

Peer Support: Connect Newly Returned And Experienced Returnees

Peer support can reduce isolation, improve service navigation and generate knowledge that practitioners alone do not hold. It should complement, not replace, institutional responsibility.

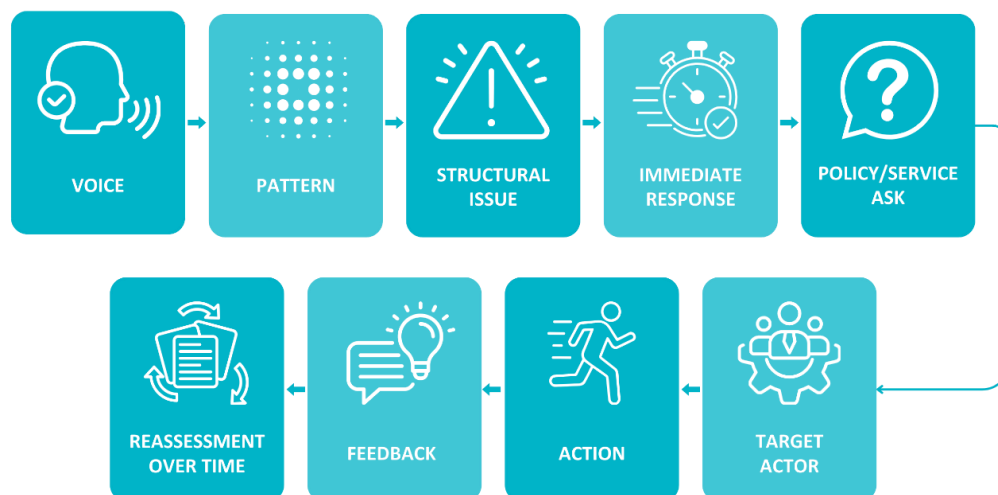
- Create voluntary peer groups with clear confidentiality rules.
- Compensate peer mentors when they take on a structured role.
- Train facilitators to recognise safeguarding, distress and referral needs.
- Use peer groups to identify repeated service barriers
- Invite peer groups to help define service standards, priorities and meaningful improvements
- Feed practical lessons back to municipalities, service providers and programme managers and report back on what changed.

4. FROM STORIES TO POLICY INFLUENCE: THE STORY-TO-CHANGE METHOD

Turn stories and practice evidence into service and policy change

A story can create attention. Practice evidence becomes influential when it shows a repeated pattern, identifies the system behind it, names who can act and defines what change should be tested. The strongest use of voice is not visibility alone, but influence over the response and how success is judged.

Story-to-change method:



Example	Pattern / structural issue	Concrete ask	Target actors
Stigma and social exclusion	Returnees avoid communities or services because return is associated with failure, deportation or shame.	Include psychosocial referral, peer support, privacy safeguards and community-level stigma reduction.	Municipality, social-welfare ministry, reintegration agency, donors, CSOs, community leaders
Low preparedness after constrained return	People arrive with little notice, limited information, unresolved assets/family issues or no realistic plan.	Use joint pre-return assessment and handover; base support on preparedness and need rather than return modality alone.	Return authorities, receiving authorities, reintegration agencies, IOs, donors

Digital and administrative barriers	People are formally eligible but cannot complete online applications or navigate registration.	Maintain in-person access, simple information and staff accompaniment.	Municipalities, service providers, programme managers
Skills but blocked opportunity	Returnees have skills or qualifications but face weak recognition, labour-market mismatch or limited networks.	Combine recognition pathways with market-linked support, employer engagement and mentoring.	Employment agencies, municipalities, private sector, ministries, chambers of commerce
Programme success but lived instability	Outputs are completed, but housing, stigma, debt or wellbeing remain unstable months later.	Extend follow-up and ask returnees whether support remains useful and whether improvements remain viable over time.	Programme managers, donors, municipalities, service providers

Advocacy messages practitioners and civil society can adapt

Core message	Policy / practice asks
Participation and definitional authority	
Returnees should not only be consulted; they should help define needs, objectives, service standards, priorities and what successful reintegration should mean.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisory groups set up • Returnee-led organisations in design and review • Co-defined service standards • Safe feedback and complaints mechanisms.
Legitimacy	
A completed and lawful return can still create unacceptable consequences if dignity, preparation, family circumstances or post-return needs are ignored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding; • Proportionate implementation; • Documentation of foreseeable consequences; • Escalation routes.
Responsibility-sharing	

Return should not transfer unresolved responsibilities to receiving actors and families by default.

- Joint pre-return assessment;
- Clear handovers;
- Agreed responsibilities for medical, documentation, reception and serious needs.

Stigma

Stigma is a reintegration barrier because it affects wellbeing, service use, family relations and community acceptance.

- Psychosocial support;
- Peer support;
- Community sensitisation;
- Privacy protections.

Municipal and local capacity

Reintegration happens locally, but local actors need resources, tools and functioning referral pathways.

- Local budgets;
- Frontline training;
- In-person information;
- Mapped and verified referral networks.

Needs and preparedness

Return category does not tell us enough about who is prepared or who needs support.

- Individual assessment of preparedness, capacities, vulnerabilities, degree of agency and post-arrival realities;
- Flexible support.

Transnational lives

Return is not always final and mobility is not automatically failure.

- Mobility-sensitive support;
- Portable skills/qualifications;
- Recognition of cross-border family realities where policy allows.

Contribution without conditionality

Returnees may bring skills and networks, but support and dignity should not depend on visible economic contribution.

- Recognition of skills and opportunities alongside rights;
- Services and structural investment.

5. BUILD A PRACTICE-TO-POLICY FEEDBACK LOOP

1. **Record the barrier safely:** What happened, to whom, at what point in the return or service pathway?
2. **Check the pattern:** Is this repeated across cases, profiles, locations or service providers?
3. **Identify the system behind it:** Is the cause a rule, information gap, coordination failure, eligibility criterion, social norm, funding constraint or capacity gap?
4. **Resolve the immediate case where possible:** Use referral, accompaniment, safeguarding or case management.
5. **Clarify responsibility:** Who should have prevented or addressed the gap - sending actor, receiving authority, municipality, programme, service provider or another institution?
6. **Aggregate evidence:** Protect individuals while making the pattern visible.
7. **Co-define the ask:** Where possible, involve returnees and frontline actors in defining the change and what success should look like.
8. **Take the recommendation to the actor who can change the system:** Be specific about the rule, service, budget, handover or practice change requested.
9. **Follow up and report back:** Close the feedback loop with returnees, peers and frontline staff.
10. **Reassess over time:** Check whether the change improved people's experience in practice, not only whether it was formally adopted.

FAiR evidence base used for this revised toolkit

- [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.