

The bittersweet return home

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Migrants left Libya in haste and in fear for their lives. Possessions and valuables were abandoned in the rush to leave. A rapid international response saved lives and facilitated the return home but a premature return may have some unwelcome repercussions.

This article draws on assessment reports and profiling exercises carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to map out needs in areas for return and to pave the way for reintegration and community stabilisation programmes. The findings of the assessments reports led to some reintegration projects being started in Ghana for example. The assessments were carried out between June and October 2011.¹

Nearly 800,000 migrants fled Libya in 2011, of whom 212, 331 West African nationals returned to six home countries², 130, 677 by direct border crossing from Libya and 81, 654 with IOM assistance, the majority by air. The vast majority of West African returnees were males (98-99%), mostly aged between 20 and 40 years old, of whom a high percentage held low-skilled jobs in Libya, such as labouring, farming and construction.

It has been estimated that migrant workers in Libya remitted nearly US\$1 billion in 2010. The majority of returnees were from impoverished and underdeveloped communities which experience agricultural failure, food insecurity, malnutrition, an absence of economic opportunities, and inadequate health infrastructure and education services. Labour migration was a key coping strategy with remittances from returnees playing a major role in household survival. These were used to meet basic daily needs – food, housing, health and education – and little was left over for investment. In fact most remittances were spent on food, with nearly 90% of remittance income going towards this basic essential in some countries. If money was spent on buying assets, this tended to be on agricultural assets.

The economic impact of the loss of remittances was felt at individual family and community levels, although other findings appear to show that remittances actually had little effect on the wider community. Family consumption was undoubtedly affected, money for housekeeping and daily food was a problem, and some had to consider withdrawing children from schools. The problem seems especially acute in places which had suffered severe food insecurity for years such as Niger or where there was a particularly heavy dependence on remittances such as in Mali. In Niger the abrupt termination of remittances had a negative effect on local markets and traders. In Senegal, villages with a large expatriate community in Libya suffered acutely; in one village 75% of the village income was derived from remittances from Libya or elsewhere.

Reception at home

IOM worked with government and partner agencies to ensure reception facilities were in place. This involved setting up transit centres to provide food, water and sanitation while arranging transportation to final destinations. In some countries, returnees were met in their home towns with food and accommodation provided by local authorities and NGOs.

The return and reception of migrants appears to have been systematically organised across the countries of West Africa but measures faltered, perhaps inevitably given the circumstances, when it came to reintegration support. In terms of reception, the approach in Senegal seems typical of other countries in the region. The government mobilised a national committee with the help of IOM and other agencies to plan a response. This involved



Returnee migrants from Libya to Chad

meeting returnees at international airports or at land border crossings, providing them with basic assistance and then organising transport for them to get home.

Returnees are back safe and sound but what is much needed is reintegration support. In Niger, the government issued an order for support to returnees comprising food distribution, seed supply, distribution of livestock and cash support. But implementation varied at local level. Some local authorities had done little, and did not even have a clear registration process; other authorities, while slow to start, had plans in place for cash transfers, cash for work, and strengthening grain banks. In Chad some regions had set up welcome committees and were carrying out registration as a prelude to other activities, while others were doing nothing. In Senegal part of the problem appeared to be that return was managed at central level without the involvement of local authorities which made for a weak response at local level. In Ghana, despite the stated good intentions of government, no reintegration programme had been started. A returnee in Niger said, "I've been here four months and no support has reached us. It seems that something is scheduled for us but it remains blocked for some reason in Niamey."

An important lesson learned is the need to introduce specific measures to facilitate the reintegration of the returnees in a timely way. An innovative reintegration scheme for returnees was introduced in Bangladesh [see following article]. It is too early to assess the longer-term outcomes of this scheme but it could be a model for other countries in the future.

The reception on arriving home was a bittersweet experience for many returnees. Reunions were emotional; families were relieved to see family members come home safely but joy quickly turned to worries about making ends meet and embarrassment among returnees at coming home empty-handed. Most returnees were from poor families anyway and the return home heightened the vulnerability of already struggling households.

Returnees in all countries found themselves in very difficult circumstances and commonly expressed sentiments of desperation, anxiety and frustration. Above all, the human tragedy of young men and women, suddenly uprooted from their livelihoods, and transplanted back to a situation of dependency, and facing a bleak and uncertain outlook, comes across forcefully in all the reports. Returnees frequently talked of feeling humiliated, and commonly expressed sentiments of despair, anxiety and frustration; of scorn and abuse by community members; and of fragile and unstable emotional states of mind. The most common and obvious concerns were employment, daily expenses and housing. In Burkina Faso most returnees were living with relatives or friends in homes made of temporary materials. Some appeared to have problems finding the next meal, and with meeting the costs of schooling and health care.

Returnees are responding to this situation by turning to a variety of measures to make ends meet. Local bank managers in Ghana reported the withdrawal of deposits

and early redemption of fixed deposits as well as an increase in demand for loans. In Burkina Faso, animals were being sold to meet immediate needs. In both cases, this was in effect cashing in important investments.

Some returnees returned to their former occupations but not many had returned with sufficient savings to set themselves up. In all these countries returnees had ideas about starting new income-generating activities, and were keen to do so, but needed money and materials to help launch these initiatives.

Apart from money, other key barriers to reintegration included psychological trauma, loss of property or investment, and debts. The 'culture shock' of returning home seems to have been an issue for some; having got used to a different lifestyle in Libya, they were described by community members as dressing differently, standing out and engaging in what was seen as inappropriate behaviour. In some cases they appeared unwilling to do the work they did before and wanted more skilled work. It is not surprising that the assessments found some returnees turning to the idea of migrating again. What is interesting, however, is that most of the returnees were keen on staying at home and adapting to local conditions, if only they could be assisted to find jobs or set up enterprises.

In some communities where labour migration was a key coping strategy, such as in Ghana, community members were generally sensitive to the difficulties facing returning migrants, and concerned about the social instability that might arise if these hardworking young men were unable to find jobs. By contrast, in Burkina Faso there was little community support, probably due to a lack of investment by migrants in their places of origin while they were away.

Conclusion

There is a reasonably clear and consistent picture across countries. The efficiency of the repatriation operation carried out by the international community, governments and NGOs, in response to the most immediate danger, saved the lives of thousands of migrant workers and prevented the Libyan crisis from spilling over into other countries and turning into a much larger humanitarian catastrophe. Several months on, and with immediate security threats at bay, what is most visible now is the hardship and disappointment faced by tens of thousands of young men suddenly robbed of the livelihoods they had journeyed so hard to find, and with no means of helping themselves back home. Programmes for socio-economic integration are badly needed not only to help individual returnees and families but also for the peace and stability of wider communities, countries and the region as a whole.

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1. The reports are available on request from IOM.

2. Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal.