Re-balancing the reintegration process and the potential of mentoring for returnees: evidence from Senegal, Guinea and Morocco

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Abstract
This article answers a key research question on the geopolitics of reintegration assistance, based on research in Senegal, Guinea and Morocco in 2020. Our research began by asking: Can a social-work-inspired case-management approach, provided by local mentors, improve reintegration outcomes for migrants returning to their countries of origin? We examined the role and effect of local mentors, employed as part of a pilot reintegration support project, by analysing quantitative data from reintegration sustainability surveys collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), triangulated with additional quantitative and qualitative data. We found that mentoring has a small but significant and positive impact on reintegration, which suggests that a further expansion of approaches at the cross-section of social work and reintegration may result in improved reintegration outcomes. Although longitudinal research, monitoring and analysis of trends across additional contexts is needed, one of the greatest promises of the pilot mentoring approach presented in this article, if improved and enhanced in the long term, could be to change the geopolitical power imbalances in reintegration planning. Enhancing the mentoring approach would mean giving more weight to local contexts and national actors and letting mentors and mentees, together, decide on what and when assistance needs to be ‘triggered’ to support them. It would take reintegration approaches a step away from the migration-management agenda of regional powers such as the European Union and a step closer to the goals of empowerment and self-determination of migrants and sending countries in the Global South.

Keywords: return migration, mentoring, reintegration, geopolitics, assistance

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Re-Balancing the Reintegration Process and the Potential of Mentoring for Returnees: Evidence from Senegal, Guinea and Morocco

Introduction

‘Migration has long been a barometer of geopolitics’ (Hyndman, 2012: 243) and states’ combined efforts to contain and deter migration are often at odds with individual mobility patterns and aspirations. The assisted return and reintegration process is a space where the imbalanced power dynamic between people on the move from countries like Guinea, Morocco and Senegal and institutional and national migration-management regimes is clearly visible. Return programmes are an integral part of states’ migration-management agenda (Koser, 2001) and represent a wider political project to curb migration from the Global South towards the Global North. Imbalanced power dynamics between those on the move and those leading migration-management agendas are visible in transit and at destination: increasing numbers of migrants end up having to ‘choose’ assisted return, by default entering a political arena that was not part of their original migration plan (Carling et al., 2015; Majidi, 2020).

Geopolitical analysis of migration management further reveals the power imbalances that exist between origin and destination states; however, in considering the geopolitics of reintegration assistance, we take inspiration from feminist geopolitical scholars who emphasise the embodied experiences of local–global power interactions in people’s everyday lives (rather than in state-to-state interactions) as well as the potential for actions of care to be analysed through a geopolitical lens (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2019; Massaro & Williams, 2013; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). The power dynamics that lead migrants in situations of precarity to accept assisted return are also too often replicated after return as part of a continuum of force and influence affecting their lives. As ‘return-and-reintegration’ programmes have so often been paired with overseas-development assistance in countries of origin, this results in a continued salience of the agenda of the Global North in the Global South, rather than enabling reintegration support as a stand-alone, locally embedded process.

This article examines one recent approach that holds the potential to, at least partially, re-balance assisted reintegration by enabling a more localised holistic approach to reintegration support: a returnee mentoring programme facilitated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Senegal, Guinea and Morocco. First, we provide a brief overview of how reintegration programmes and narratives have shifted in recent years and how that might affect returnees in our case-study countries. Second, we review what the existing literature on social work and social protection tells us about the possibilities of mentoring to provide a new (and more balanced) approach to reintegration programming, as well as some of the critiques of social workers’ ability to address migration and mobility-related issues. Third, we assess whether the presence of a mentor ‘makes a difference’ in returnees’ reintegration. Fourth, we analyse the key strengths and weaknesses of the mentors and of their relationship with returnees, as well as the importance of localising reintegration support. We conclude with reflections on the extent to which new forms of reintegration support, including mentorship, can address power imbalances in the reintegration agenda, arguing that whilst a mentoring programme in North and West Africa cannot fundamentally disrupt migration management agendas originating in and resourced by European governments, the intimacy geopolitics of ‘quiet interactions’ (see Askins, 2014) can lead to better reintegration outcomes, at least at the individual level.

Recognising the Challenges of Reintegration Processes and Programmes

Since 2017, the IOM – the main facilitator of assisted voluntary return and reintegration support worldwide – has revisited its definition of sustainable reintegration in recognition of the multidimensional nature of reintegration, acknowledging that re-migration only represents a failure of reintegration if it is through necessity rather than choice (IOM, 2017).1 This new definition offers the

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1 The IOM now defines sustainable reintegration as follows: ‘Reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable
potential to push back on the agendas of Global North migration regimes. The IOM sought to operationalise this definition in a revised approach to Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes and, in 2018, began piloting an approach employing local mentors to enable and, ideally, empower individuals to manage their own reintegration. Analysis of this pilot programme is the empirical basis of this paper.

Within the framework of the imbalanced power dynamics that prevail in the return and reintegration process, we explore reintegration outcomes from the perspectives of returnees who were supported by a mentor and those who were part of other reintegration-assistance streams, based on mixed-methods fieldwork in three countries – Guinea, Morocco and Senegal. Most of the mentors employed by the IOM had a social-work background, acquired through education, prior work experience with referrals, support services and safeguarding requirements, and further training with the IOM. Most of the returnees we spoke to in Guinea and Senegal had returned from Niger or Libya, where they had become ‘stranded’ whilst attempting to reach Europe. Those in Morocco had returned after being ‘irregularised’ in Europe. Data collection was originally conducted for the IOM as part of an assessment of selected outcomes of their ORION Project (Operationalising an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the Framework of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration), 2018–2020, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) under the ‘Safety, Support and Solutions in the Central Mediterranean Route’ programme.

Assessing what happens within the IOM’s revised AVRR programming narrative is key to understanding its potential to shift power dynamics during reintegration. Our focus in this article is on the outcomes and effects of the mentoring approach on reintegration; we examine the extent to which it does or does not empower returnees to succeed in their reintegration plans.

Return migrants go through processes of readjustment and reintegration that can be just as challenging as the initial migration and integration – sometimes even more so (Carling et al., 2015; Gmelch, 1980; Muggenridge & Donà, 2006; Oeppen, 2013). A small but growing body of research has explored the factors that can influence the success (or otherwise) of reintegration, as well as how different types of migration and return can affect reintegration experiences (Carling et al., 2015; Guzman Elizalde, 2017; Kuschminder, 2017). While the focus of reintegration-assistance programming over the last half-century has traditionally been skewed towards structural assistance – including incorporating returnees into schools or labour markets – non-economic dimensions are now also recognised as critical to the success (or otherwise) of reintegration. These changes have occurred alongside a wider academic discussion on reintegration, which has highlighted the importance of feelings of belonging, social-network membership and individual aspirations in reintegration outcomes (Fransen & Bilgili, 2018; Kuschminder, 2017; Majidi, 2020).

While objective economic challenges such as debt and a lack of access to livelihood and labour opportunities are clearly obstacles to reintegration, a range of subjective, psychosocial challenges (feelings of loneliness, stigma, not being understood by loved ones and not fulfilling family expectations or responsibilities) can be just as important. Feelings of underachievement, shame and failure abound in the testimonies of returnees across multiple geographical settings (Hagan et al., 2019; Oeppen, 2013; Schuster & Majidi, 2015; Vathi & King, 2017). When this is added to traumatic migratory experiences and, for some, mistreatment by border authorities and detention (e.g. those returning after being stranded in Libya), a negative impact on reintegration is to be expected. While our participants left as migrants, aspiring to a positive change in their lives and future opportunities, they confronted unexpected realities in transit, only to return to a context they had sought to leave but with, for many, added burdens of accumulated debt, trauma and feelings of time wasted and hopes destroyed. The literature on assisted reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity’ (IOM, 2017: 3).

Case management counselling is a social-work practice built into the IOM’s reintegration approach since 2017, after Samuel Hall & IOM (2017).

The ORION project comprised four elements: the production of a Reintegration Handbook (IOM, 2019a) and related training curriculum, the analysis of reintegration outcomes based on Returnee Sustainability Surveys (RSS), the piloting of a returnee-mentoring approach in Guinea, Morocco and Senegal, and cross-regional workshops for reintegration practitioners in the three pilot countries.
return is filled with such cases (e.g. Carling et al., 2015; Guzman Elizade, 2017; Schuster & Majidi, 2015).

However, the reintegration literature has less to say about what can be done to help returnees to feel empowered and hopeful about their present and future. What is normalcy after ‘failure’, shame and non-voluntary return? How can returnees feel equipped for the reintegration process ahead of them? Often the social-protection systems in countries of return do not provide an adequate safety net; even where support is available, a lack of information about provision or a reluctance on the part of returnees to approach such sources of support is often evident (Vathi et al., 2018). Can a programme or approach funded by the states who determined their return ever empower returnees’ reintegration process? The investment in mentors to support reintegration could be part of it and is what we examine in this article.

Policymakers tend to consider reintegration support as a continuation of the assisted-return process. Yet, from the migrants-turned-assisted-returnees’ perspective, there is often a clear break: while the terms of the assisted-return process are relatively clear (at least once the decision to return is made), there is much uncertainty linked to the reintegration phase. The risks inherent to such an uncertain process come from the fact that the migrant returns a changed person (Muggeridge & Doná, 2006; Oeppen, 2013), while the drivers of initial migration often remain – and governments and other stakeholders continue to show their inability to anticipate and address the needs of returnees in a way that empowers them not only to rejoin their community but to become an engaged participant in community life and ensure that future migration is due to a proactive choice (Majidi, 2020).

Social Work, Mentoring and (Re)Integration

Since 2015, coinciding with increasing numbers of migrants\(^4\) to Europe, the UK and the USA – and specifically of unaccompanied under-18s arriving in many countries (resulting in social workers acting in loco parentis) – the number of publications linking social work and migration has risen (Haider, 2020; Valtonen, 2015). Such writings emphasise the unique role of social workers in connecting migrants, refugees and their advocates with more effective access to local services and social-justice mechanisms. Little has been published on the role of social workers in relation to reintegration. What is available focuses on social workers’ potential role in preparing people for AVRR (Carr, 2014; Lietaert, 2017, 2019). However, we can draw upon research that has explored the role of social workers in migrants’ integration and see whether this can be applied to a return-migration context. For example, Viola et al. (2018) conclude that social workers act as a necessary ‘relational bridge’ between newcomers and their host societies. Meanwhile, Drammeh (2019) explores how social workers can enable unaccompanied young migrants to create spaces of belonging. It is on the basis of such ideas and observations that the IOM’s ORION project was developed: to see whether, by adding an additional independent actor (e.g., a social worker/mentor), reintegration outcomes could be improved in countries of origin and hence replicate similar positive outcomes in empowering those assisted as found in integration settings.

One approach used by social workers is mentoring, which can be defined as ‘help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking’ (Megginson et al., 2006: 4–5) and this is what the ORION project aimed for in a return-migration context. Mentoring begins by establishing a relationship of trust that enables the exploring of goals, setting objectives and using a range of skills and support systems, as well as developing experience and knowledge to reach these (HSCB, 2014). Across a range of 30 studies reviewed by the Health and Social Care Board (2014:10), many of which focus on work-place mentoring, ‘being mentored was associated with feelings of competence, confidence and job satisfaction’. There is some literature on mentoring that specifically examines its effect on migrants, including refugees. For example, Messiou and Azaola (2018) examine the peer-mentoring of immigrant students and argue that host students supporting them can enhance the socialisation process, increasing confidence for both mentor and mentee. However, they found the lack

\(^4\)We use the term ‘migrants’ here as an umbrella term in recognition of the often-blurry boundary between migrant categories, including labour migrants, irregular migrants, asylum-seekers, resettled refugees, family-reunification migrants etc.
of support beyond the individual a limiting factor, as assistance is focused at the one-to-one level, rather than a process that expands to an entire school’s approach to immigrant integration and inclusion.

The mentoring of returnees has the potential to be a form of ‘humane and negotiated support’ (Lietaert, 2019; see also Askins, 2014), presenting a more personalised approach in the expanding field of reintegration programming and empowering returnees to take control of their reintegration process. ORION is the IOM’s first pilot of a reintegration-mentoring approach across countries, so analysing its outcomes is important. A mentoring approach potentially fills a gap by addressing people’s individualised needs in a range of reintegration dimensions and could provide independent monitoring enhancing protection and providing a ‘worthy reception’ for returnees (after Gustafsson and Johansson, 2018). The literature exploring social work in relation to migrant integration has emphasised the positive potential of localised community-based approaches (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018; Popsecu & Libal, 2018) which mentoring could enable; the importance of convivial localised interactions as a means of enabling integration is also noted in the wider integration and multiculturalism literature (Lewis, 2010; Neal et al., 2013; Wessendorf, 2016).

Popsecu and Libal (2018) stipulate that, in a context of migration management geared towards restrictions instead of protection, as well as a growing sense of xenophobia in national migration or immigration policies, there is an increased need to localise support for refugees. The challenge for mentors (including social workers) is to combine localised (re)integration support with an awareness of wider global, geopolitical structures that shape migrant experiences (see Dibbets & Eijkman, 2018; Sewpaul, 2006). This juxtaposition of the necessity of localisation at the same time as transnational (globalised) knowledge, speaks directly to the concerns of feminist geopolitics – the need to recognise local–global geopolitical relations as enacted in people’s everyday lives and interactions (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). However, whilst social workers and mentors have the potential to disrupt unequal power relations through everyday humane interactions, social work has itself also been criticised for maintaining inequality and feeding into Western neo-imperialism, especially where social-work education and training does not adequately acknowledge local knowledge and/or only follows Western curricula (Ashencraft Crabtree, 2008; Deepak, 2012; Gray, 2005).

An additional challenge to combining the local and the global is that, whilst there is a growing awareness of transnational social work (e.g. Lyons, 2015) – opening the possibility of linking social work and migration issues beyond the sovereign limits of one nation – to capitalise upon it social workers need to understand the effects and experiences of migration, which not all do (Lietaert, 2017; Lyons, 2015). Similarly, migrants and the organisations representing them need to trust in the potential of social workers as enablers, while social workers need to understand why migrants may distrust their motives, especially where the migrant has an insecure status and the social worker is perceived as a government employee. Also, despite discussion of the possibilities of transnational social work, it remains rare for a reintegration support project to operate both before and after return, although this is gradually changing with a growing awareness of the way in which pre-return support can aid reintegration. Where efforts are made, a lack of communication between social workers in different locations raises challenges for coordinated transnational social work, as Lietaert (2017) found in her research with Belgian social workers attempting to provide transnational support to migrants/returnees. It is also clear that, in some cases, the physical context of return is simply not conducive to significant pre-return or transnational reintegration support – the case with our Guinean and Senegalese interviewees being returned from Libyan prisons.

Social workers and mentors face many challenges in providing localised, personalised support for returnees, whilst also acknowledging the globalised, transnational power structures linked to migration management that have, in many cases, led to their return. Popsecu and Libal (2018) detail the importance of social workers addressing questions of trauma, self-care and mental-health care and they cite the work of Gustafsson and Johansson (2018), which emphasises the necessity of moving away from ‘minimum standards’ towards a ‘worthy reception’ of new arrivals. Our research builds on the above-discussed literature, most of which is from an immigration context (rather than a return context), to explore how

5 For example, the IOM’s SURE project (the Joint Complementary Mechanism for Sustainable Reintegration in Brazil) and FORAS project (Reinforcement of Reintegration Opportunities) both aim to include ‘pre-departure assistance’ that is integrated with reintegration support after return.
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mentors might be part of a ‘worthy reception’ for assisted returnees, whilst recognising that reception is only the initial part of the reintegration process.

**Methodology**

We used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of the RSS (Return Sustainability Survey) data collected by the IOM during 2018–2020 with our research team’s independent field-research in Guinea, Morocco and Senegal in 2020. These three countries were chosen by the IOM to pilot a mentoring approach as part of the ORION project and they represent different contexts, knowledge bases and approaches to return migration. In Guinea, research on returnees is very limited. The returnees assisted by the IOM were mostly male and RSS data suggest they had limited access to education and suffered high levels of psychological stress upon return. However, community involvement in reintegration efforts is strong and interest in targeted programming (including mentoring) was high. In Morocco, there is more existing knowledge about return migration and the returnee cohort covered by this study is more mixed. Returnees appear less keen to participate in schemes specifically targeted at them. In Senegal, quantitative work on return migration is scarce, although there is more available qualitative research on return migration (see Flahaux, 2017; Sinatti, 2015). The government is beginning to support reintegration but assistance remains largely targeted at the individual rather than the community.

Our wider analysis of the IOM’s RSS data across 17 countries (see Samuel Hall & University of Sussex, 2020) demonstrates that returnees to Guinea and Senegal have amongst the lowest reintegration scores (Figure 1). Whilst a ‘reintegration score’ can never fully represent the complexity of reintegration processes and experiences, the RSS is based on a series of survey questions eliciting data on indicators of economic, social and psychosocial reintegration, so it is possible to disaggregate different aspects of reintegration (see IOM, 2019a). We are also reasonably confident that the RSS survey questions do represent our own operationalisation of sustainable reintegration, given our collaborative involvement in developing the framework that shaped the survey (see Majidi & Nozarian, 2019; Samuel Hall & IOM, 2017).

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

The mentoring approach implemented in Guinea, Morocco and Senegal under the ORION programme was often combined with other types of reintegration assistance ranging from microbusiness support and training to material and medical assistance. Local mentors would welcome the returnees, help them to develop networks and serve as a link between the mentees and the IOM. Mentees are selected based on location and reintegration needs (RSS scores) – their participation in the mentoring scheme is entirely voluntary. Approaches to mentoring can differ between countries and, indeed, between mentors, although guidelines are established to inform the activities.

We used the RSS data to quantitatively analyse the impact of mentoring on reintegration. These data provide an opportunity to conduct a quantitative analysis of reintegration outcomes, albeit only with IOM-assisted returnees. In a meta-review of mentoring impacts, Underhill (2006) suggests that the analysis of mentoring requires the comparison of beneficiary and non-beneficiary groups to quantitatively measure the impact of mentoring over time and context. In keeping with this, we analysed reintegration outcomes across two groups – those receiving mentoring support through ORION and those not being mentored (although sometimes receiving other AVRR support, such as small grants).

To explore the differences between returnees who received mentoring and those who did not, a panel dataset (n=208) was created containing returnees who had completed two or more RSS surveys post-

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6 See Samuel Hall and University of Sussex (2020) for a more detailed methodology, including how we adapted fieldwork to the Covid-19 pandemic context which arose mid-way through the research. Although our focus in this paper is on mentoring outcomes in the three pilot countries, our analysis of reintegration outcomes was also shaped by a wider analysis of RSS data across 17 countries (those with 50+ individual surveys collected by the IOM), which is also discussed in the wider report.
return and comparing their first and last surveys to assess change over time (on average there was just under a year between the two). This panel dataset covers Guinea and Senegal only, as there was not a large enough number of returnees in Morocco to allow for statistical analysis. For Guinea and Senegal, RSS data were complemented with phone surveys, in some cases, to add an additional datapoint to the panel analysis. Reintegration outcomes over time were explored in different dimensions (economic, social, psychosocial), contrasting ORION mentees with other returnees assisted by the IOM. A regression analysis was conducted to control for other programming which returnees might have received (such as microbusiness, training, material assistance, etc.), as well as time since arrival, gender and age. A difference-in-difference analysis was performed comparing the evolution of scores between mentoring beneficiaries and a control group over time.

The above quantitative analysis was enriched by the collection of qualitative data in Guinea, Morocco and Senegal using a variety of techniques. Our participants in qualitative-data collection were accessed via mentors or, for those not receiving mentoring, via contact information on assisted returnees kept by IOM country offices. They are not statistically representative of all returnees but we endeavoured to obtain a mix of gender, age, education levels, modes of return and types of assistance received. Alongside semi-structured interviews with mentored and non-mentored returnees assisted by the IOM, the team also conducted interviews with mentors, family and community case studies – which explored community dynamics and networks – and key-informant interviews with local stakeholders. Sample sizes for all primary-data collection are shown in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

**With or Without a Mentor? Their Impact on the Reintegration Process in Guinea and Senegal**

Analysis across the IOM’s RSS data suggests that returnees in Guinea and Senegal are among the least likely to be able to borrow money upon return and many have not been able to turn employment and training opportunities into jobs, justifying the choice of these countries for added support (see Samuel Hall & University of Sussex, 2020). Access to services is a challenge; for example, returnees in Senegal reported the highest level of out-of-school children, despite rating overall access to education as relatively high. Returnees in Senegal and Guinea also reported high levels of feelings of discrimination, suggesting obstacles to reintegration were present at the community level; family tensions and conflicts also hindered reintegration. It is in such precarious reintegration contexts that ORION-project support was offered to some assisted returnees, adding the mentoring component to a more-traditional material-assistance package.

Using data from individuals in Guinea and Senegal who had completed two or more RSS surveys, our panel dataset explores whether there are quantitative differences in reintegration indicators between those who were mentored and those who were not. According to an internal document shared by IOM staff, the criteria for selecting mentees are threefold: location (being in an area where a mentor is present); voluntariness, in recognition of the extra commitment to meetings and monitoring that a mentoring approach requires; and reintegration needs based on an individual’s baseline RSS score (those with a score below 0.33 were to be given priority). However, our panel data suggest that the RSS score was not always used as a selection criterion, as the mean RSS scores for those mentored were above 0.33 at the time of the first RSS survey (0.45 in Guinea, 0.62 in Senegal). Conversations with IOM staff suggest that, in practice, the RSS score was only one part of the determination of reintegration needs. As suggested by a mentor in Guinea, mentors were combining their own local knowledge with the RSS scores in order to prioritise mentees: ‘a person becomes a beneficiary of the ORION project if they have a low [RSS] score. But we are in the community, so we also use our own observations to find out whether a [potential] beneficiary deserves or needs this support’. The same mentor told us how this was something they had discussed with the IOM during training – the need to combine RSS scores with local knowledge, as well as the character of the potential mentee.

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7 Reintegration through the mentoring approach: The selection of beneficiaries, n.d., ORION: DFID SSS CMR.
Figure 2 illustrates the way in which RSS scores – disaggregated by dimension – have changed over time for those mentored and not mentored in our panel data. In Guinea, average RSS scores had visibly improved over time in all three reintegration dimensions for mentees whereas, for the others, there is only a small improvement in the economic and social dimensions and a slight loss in the psychosocial dimension. In Senegal, the differences between those mentored and those non-mentored are much less pronounced, as are overall changes over time. Mentors saw a slight increase in the economic and social-dimension scores and a slight decrease in the psychosocial dimension, whilst those not mentored show a decrease in scores across all dimensions.

[FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

Whilst Figure 2 is based only on simple averages, it does point to differences in the effect of mentoring in Guinea compared to Senegal and in terms of the effect of mentoring on different dimensions of reintegration. Reintegration is not a linear process and returnees will probably experience ups and downs in terms of their reintegration experiences, not captured in a two-time-point dataset. An awareness of this in practitioner terms has also been codified in the growing awareness and use of the ‘W-model’ by the IOM, FCDO and others to visualise this non-linear aspect (see Majidi & Nozarian, 2019); however, analysing this quantitatively requires resource-commitment to longitudinal research. Nevertheless, whilst keeping these limitations in mind, mentored returnees in Guinea do appear to be doing visibly better socially and psychosocially and mentored returnees in Senegal were faring better than returnees who did not benefit from mentoring support.

A difference-in-difference analysis confirmed the positive impact of mentoring on reintegration. Figure 3 shows how those mentored fare compared to non-mentored returnees and how their situation evolves across time. Such analysis suggests that mentoring may have contributed to a small but significant (p-value < 0.01) degree of improvement in RSS scores.

[FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

Qualitative fieldwork in Guinea, Morocco and Senegal suggests that part of what made a difference was not just the individualised support given by mentors but their capacity to bring returnees together. Although this was not happening across the board, where it was happening (for instance, as part of cooperatives, through collective approaches to jobs and livelihoods) it did appear to have a positive effect. In Guinea, mentors described connecting returnees to community-based income-generating activities that were being established as part of an EU–IOM Joint Initiative. The mentor provided assistance in setting up a potato-farming project and, in another case, a soap-making project, leading to a small positive financial result for returnees. Other examples were given of the mentors’ capacity to support returnees in moving beyond getting stuck in precarious jobs, through supporting their career and business-planning efforts. Where returnees lacked professional networks, mentors provided much-needed support. Nevertheless, most enterprises in the study were found to be fragile, with returnees not having the economic resources to build stable, resilient businesses upon return. In Morocco, the low numbers of assisted returnees also made enterprises based on cooperation between returnees more difficult.

The mentors emphasised the importance of supporting returnees to gain access to documentation, as a first step towards empowering them to consider themselves as citizens entitled to the same level of support as others in their communities. Many returnees do not have formal civil status, having lost their paperwork; they also showed uneven understanding of the bureaucratic processes to redeem the situation. The mentors provided an administrative link to the state, building on their experience of social work, to ensure that returnees’ access to documentation would position them to access social services and a range of other rights. The mentors reported that, even if returnees were aware that ‘services exist’, they may not feel comfortable accessing them, thus supporting them in this area is something they saw as a key part of their role. The next section explores the profile of the mentors themselves and what else their relationship to returnees has done in terms of addressing power imbalances upon return.
The Mentors and their Relationship to the Returnees

According to the IOM (2019b: 4), mentors ‘serve as a link between returnees and the community and help returnees to implement their reintegration plans’, as well as ‘play a key role in developing networks and raising awareness about reintegration among relevant local authorities, institutions and non-governmental and civil society organizations in their communities’. Our field research suggests that the former is true; the latter, less so. A Guinean mentor said, ‘In general, my role is to mediate between return migrants and their needs. But I also have the role of mediating between [mentoring] beneficiaries and the IOM’. Although mentors have developed some localised networks, such as asking personal contacts to help to find jobs for returnees and supporting collective efforts such as the soap-making and potato-farming projects mentioned above, they see their role as primarily supporting the individual needs and plans of their mentees, helping them to access civic documentation and material support from the IOM, rather than raising awareness about reintegration in the wider community. Arguably, a focus on an individual’s needs, rather than wider advocacy work, is actually more in line with a mentoring role.

The mentors come from the communities to which migrants return and were all selected and trained by the IOM. While one mentor was also a returnee, the majority were selected based on their social-work background (or a closely related field). Many had worked for international and non-governmental organisations and were well-versed in the importance of neutrality and impartiality in their work, motivated by a willingness to help and empower citizens. This was seen further in cases of mentors who had later joined the national education system to further their impact beyond individual mentorship, to serve future generations. In addition, mentors were largely male – only two of the eight mentors spoke to for this study were female. All mentors in Guinea were male. Female mentors noted that, while their gender initially might have evoked some wariness on the part of returnees concerning their ability to effectively support them, this was fairly quickly overcome and led to relationships of trust with individual returnees. However, the one female mentor in Senegal said that mediating wider family relationships as a woman was particularly delicate: ‘When I go to visit a family [of a returnee], I don’t seek to find or to speak to anyone in order to not create problems. This is also because of my status as a woman; women do not have power to resolve family problems’.

Our research team observed that the mentors took a thoughtful approach to reintegration and were highly conscious of its nature as a multidimensional, multilevel process. They were well acquainted with the practical needs of returnees and aware of the possibilities afforded by their position and role by the side of the returnee. In addition to formal training from the IOM, the mentors in each country support each other; for example, the mentors in Guinea have a WhatsApp group, which they told us was useful for creating a ‘collective vision’ on the matter of reintegration support. Their theoretical understanding of reintegration as a process, in addition to their practical local knowledge, put them in a potentially strong position to support returnees.

The relationship between mentor and mentee was positive, with most mentees saying that they trusted their mentor to support them. However, the interviews show that this trust is not automatic and must be developed over time, sometimes using mediators (other return migrants who introduce mentors to potential mentees). One mentor explained how returnees’ previous experiences of being misled, exploited and mistreated – related to the migratory experiences of struggle, precarity and having to negotiate ways around structural obstacles – meant that, initially, mentees saw them as just one more structure to ‘get around’ in their quest to leave the country again. However, over time this changed and gradually the mentees placed more trust in their mentor.

The mentors also highlighted how their role as a community member – i.e. perceived as separate from IOM staff – could help in creating a partnership relationship between them and their mentees. The mentors recognised the difficult position many of the returnees were in – the fact that many did not want to return in the first place. Returnees saw themselves as ‘failures’ and felt that their needs could not be met in their country of origin. Providing a sympathetic ear and managing expectations were part of the role which mentors saw for themselves, as one in Morocco said:

I don’t see myself as only an advisor but as a person who listens. For someone returning to their country of origin, finding someone who can listen to them is really important. People whose
family have rejected them, and still think Europe is El Dorado. For me, the fact that I listen creates a link with the mentees. You have to explain what you can and cannot do but even just talking to them, that’s already great.

Mentors saw their roles as including active listening and emotional support and returnees confirmed the impact this has had on transforming their uncertain feelings about return into feelings of strength in moving forward with their reintegration process. As a mentored returnee in Dakar said, ‘Thanks to [my mentor]; it was she who gave me courage. She said to me, “You can do this”. She gives me peace’. Other mentored returnees echoed the sentiment. As one said: ‘She makes me happy, seriously! I appreciate her role as someone who gives advice, that she listens to me, she’s understanding’. Overall, both mentors and mentees reported that the relationship was a positive part of their lives, once they had established a trusting partnership.

However, mentors did highlight some challenges – including practical ones, around accessing returnees in more-remote rural areas, especially when people did not always keep the same mobile-phone number – and concerns about the limitations of project-based funding and the longevity of mentoring; there were also challenges that combined practical issues with trust issues. Firstly, the issue of how and whether to involve returnees’ families; secondly, coordinating mentoring with other forms of material support.

Regarding families, mentors saw them as a key component of mentees’ successful reintegration. As a mentor in Guinea explained, being introduced to their mentee’s family is ‘a Godsend, because the family is the best means of reintegration’. Mentors were keenly aware of the risk to reintegration from negative family interactions and highlighted particularly difficult cases where the returnees had initially migrated without saying goodbye and borrowed – or even stolen – money in order to leave. A key informant at a community organisation in Senegal said:

If you come back without means you are stigmatised and we anticipate that this stigma affects the welcome the family give to their son, who has returned under extremely difficult conditions to integrate in his family, to recover the affection of his parents. Often parents are quite disappointed; they say, ‘Before, he was the one who sent money, who ensured the education of my [other] children’. We feel their disappointment and we explain that it’s not their son’s fault. Some understand but, unfortunately, others do not.

Mentors also said that, often, the returnee’s family did not fully understand the reasons and circumstances of the return and that a disappointed hope for remittances could lead to tensions. Where mentors were able to meet with mentees’ families, they made families aware of the difficulties of migration and return.

Mentors and mentees told us of their frustration with the lack of linkage between mentoring and other forms of material support and how delays in access had negative knock-on effects on their working relationship. The two main sources of material support for returnees in the ORION project are the joint initiatives between the IOM and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and the FCDO portfolio for reintegration support. Part of the mentor’s role is to help returnees to access this support. Managing mentees’ expectations as to what support mentors themselves could provide was challenging, especially as the mentoring approach does not provide material support directly. As a mentor in Senegal said, ‘They [the mentees] have high expectations, they expect a lot from us, especially in the economic dimension. Meanwhile we don’t have that – ORION is more at the psychosocial level’.

This managing of expectations was something which mentors saw as the hardest part of their job: ‘The hard part of this job? It’s a relevant question [laughs]. The first thing you realise the importance of is the expectations of the beneficiaries. The first thing for them is economic aid’, said a mentor in Morocco. The mentors’ job was made more difficult by delays and a lack of coordination between support programmes. As the mentors are usually the main point-of-contact for the returnee, they are the ones who receive criticism, as a mentor in Guinea explained: ‘The administrative burden is a problem,

\footnote{Not all returnees were men although the vast majority were and this is reflected in the way interviewees spoke about returnees.}
there are a lot of delays. As we are the ones in direct contact with the beneficiaries, if there are delays, it’s us they put pressure on. This can damage the trust between mentor and mentee that is key to the mentoring relationship.

In our recommendations to the IOM (see Samuel Hall & University of Sussex, 2020) we identified the lack of linkages between mentoring support and other financial or material sources of support as a key limitation of the pilot mentoring approach. The absence of this connection had resulted in ‘silied programe’ – with ‘traditional’ material reintegration support being disconnected from the personal, social and psychosocial support provided by mentorship. Mentoring cannot, in and of itself, disrupt the power imbalances regarding material assistance that comes from destination countries in Europe. It can possibly do so if it is matched by actual decision-making over economic aid, cash support and a range of other responses tailored to the needs of each returnee. That decision, we suggest, needs to rest in the hands of mentors in partnership with their mentees, if they are to succeed as the ‘relational bridge’ between states, institutions and returnees.

Localising Support For and Beyond the Mentors

In returnees’ accounts, mentors are not the only actors in their reintegration process, although they are a critical element of it. Some returnees are confident enough to rely on themselves and see an inner leadership potential to build upon. However, such cases are rare; as highlighted above, many acknowledge that the mentors provided them with the courage to proceed in making life plans after return and were a necessary support in the reintegration process. Many continue to hope for their mentor’s involvement long past the first stages of their reintegration process. At times, the mentors act as a sense-test on returnees’ plans: when one returnee came to a mentor in Senegal with the suggestion of setting up a returnees’ association, the mentor’s reaction was to challenge him: ‘I asked him what his objectives were, whether it would be a formal association with clear objectives. When he told me it would be to “sensitise the population”, I told him “sensitisation alone? Do you think you will get the support from donors?””. In their subsequent discussion, the returnee identified the need to involve and speak directly to local authorities.

Such learning moments result from mentoring and this particular incident reinforces the fact that mentors need to be able to refer returnees to actors other than the IOM – including civil-society actors better versed in community organising and mobilisation or local-government actors and national institutions who can support local associations. The capacity of returnees to localise and mobilise support beyond the mentor is a key test of the true nature of the geopolitics of reintegration. Learning from Senegal and Guinea will be key when planning for stronger mentoring and referrals in Morocco, where returnees spoke of the lack of support from their immediate networks and the isolated position of returnees. Such learning is ongoing, with efforts by the IOM, for instance, to evaluate its referrals approach to reintegration support (IOM, 2021).

Mentors acknowledge the need for them to perfect certain aspects of their skills and knowledge. As one mentor in Senegal explained, ‘I would like to have more technical skills in certain domains. The contexts are fast evolving and there are other actors that can provide support’. A mentor in Guinea confirms that his field experience allowed him to know which returnees need the most support, to build a relationship of collaboration; another, in Senegal, spoke of the capacity to develop a planning timeframe, to support the beneficiary, through a routine of calls and support. However, they also acknowledge when they need to localise their support further, for instance by relying on the leadership of other returnees. In Guinea, return migrants played the role of mediators between mentors and new returnees. Mentors would seek out a returnee whose voice and opinions carried the most weight, to whom other returnees would listen. In Dakar, local NGOs were relied upon in orienting young returnees towards formal professional training. This was the role played, for instance, by Action Sociale, a Senegalese government organisation that insisted on the importance of ‘trying to understand returnees’ experience, to accompany them – including those who return by force from Libya – and connect them to the government, while accompanying them and meeting their psychosocial needs, so that they can feel a sense of relief and stability’. Such training is organised by the government of Senegal – a recent step towards localising the approach to reintegration, beyond European agendas. Action Sociale
recommends selected young Senegalese to be enrolled in training in various sectors – agriculture, livestock, trade – and their future then leaves the hands of a specific reintegration programme.

This type of multi-dimensional support and integration in local and national systems is ultimately what could be one outcome of a mentoring approach: often, the lack of community and returnee knowledge of these programmes remains a barrier. Mentors can ensure that returnees have the information and an awareness of the structures that can support them and of their own potential. ‘I know there is an opportunity with the financing and that they have an experience they can build on and build further; if I orient them to these structures, they can succeed’, explains a mentor in Senegal. The same interviewee continues: ‘I push them towards dedicated services and structures, so that if they want to enter the agricultural sector, they go there, but if they want to go elsewhere, I can direct them too. They know that I have those connections and they contact me so that I can orient them’.

Senegal’s governmental institutions and civil society are planning a new strategy to meet such a demand. A key informant at the National Agency for the Promotion of Youth Employment explained the need to develop further partnerships to address the need for returnees’ reintegration. Their specialised support to return migrants is increasing, supported by European donors. While the funding is driven by Western donors, the willingness to develop a sound strategy is a local conversation. Their current actions are mainly around sensitisation and building awareness of the risks of migration. More could be done, through local authorities, to highlight what is possible upon return: in Guinea, municipal officials in one fieldwork location, including the mayor, had taken an active hand in supporting reintegration programming, including facilitating free access to venues for training and actively following up on individual returnee outcomes. The impact of local officials’ involvement in reintegration is something that warrants further investigation, in terms of the possible benefits of localising reintegration support.

**Conclusion**

Reintegration is a multidimensional process and progress cannot be made if returnees do not feel they can cope with their present and future situation. The value of mentoring’s focus on psychosocial reintegration and its role in supporting access to economic and social reintegration was raised repeatedly in our interviews. The psychosocial support that mentoring provides is not just a ‘soft’ addition to economic support but is key to enabling returnees to build their confidence and capabilities, enabling sustainable reintegration. The ORION mentoring approach *does* contribute to improving reintegration outcomes – as measured qualitatively and quantitatively – and there are ways in which this can be further strengthened for greater impact going forward. In our report to IOM (Samuel Hall & University of Sussex, 2020) we made detailed recommendations about how it could be strengthened, including by enabling mentors to facilitate economic as well as social and psychosocial support and by exploring ways to further involve families’ and returnees’ wider community and neighbourhood of return in reintegration. In so doing, the mentoring approach would come closer to a more comprehensive case-management approach to reintegration, building on social-work models – as originally proposed in previous work on assisted-reintegration standards (Samuel Hall & IOM, 2017).

Given the lack of existing literature specifically on the role of mentors, we looked at how social workers have supported migrants. Much of the literature on this discusses social workers supporting migrants in immigration contexts, highlighting the potential role for the former in creating a ‘worthy reception’ for new arrivals, rather than just meeting ‘minimum standards’ (after Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018) and enabling migrants to create spaces of belonging in their new environment(s) (Drammeh, 2019). Whilst our literature review indicates that the role of the social worker is not necessarily straightforward, especially when combined with postcolonial and transnational interactions and reflections, they still have the potential to bring clarity to those being assisted, whilst maintaining some degree of human, rather than solely bureaucratic, touch. Mentors – especially if given a more comprehensive case-management role and more access to enabling material support – could provide this role in the reintegration context, helping returnees to negotiate the ambiguities and confusions that can prevail in reintegration assistance.
One of the key critiques of social work in relation to migration and return – again, albeit focused on immigration contexts – is the lack of transnational knowledge which social workers have about mobility and return contexts, which leaves them unable to provide informed assistance to those considering return (Carr, 2014; Lietaert, 2017, 2019). However, our research shows that the mentors in Guinea, Senegal and Morocco have a nuanced understanding of the transnational aspirations of returnees as well as the challenges of attempted migration to Europe and the difficulties of reintegration after a perceived ‘failed’ migration project. Arguably, these mentors are themselves integrated into a culture of migration in West and North Africa, which helps the quiet ‘intimacy-geopolitics’ (Askins, 2014; Pain & Staeheli, 2014) of the relationship between mentor and mentee.

One of the greatest promises of the mentoring approach, if improved and enhanced in the long term, could be changing the geopolitical power imbalances in reintegration policy. Enhancing the mentoring approach would mean giving more weight to local contexts and national actors and letting mentors and mentees, together, decide on what and when material assistance needs to be ‘triggered’ to support them. It would change the balance of decision-making towards the local and would be vested in individual returnees and their communities. It could take the approach a step away from European migration-management agendas – albeit, still part of them – and a step closer to the goals of empowerment and self-determination. Ideally, this process will enable returnees to decide whether staying or leaving again is the best outcome for them and for mobility to be a matter of choice, rather than necessity.

Migration-management regimes, including assisted return and reintegration, are shaped by the political agenda of the Global North. We do not suggest that this new mentoring approach fundamentally disrupts this wider geopolitical power imbalance. However, our research shows that mentoring has the potential to provide a genuine contribution, supporting and empowering returnees at the local level, despite the constraints of wider structural factors and agendas. As such, it is a starting point for a more localised reintegration support that challenges the power imbalances that put donor states’ objectives above individuals and countries of return on the reintegration agenda. The mentees and their mentors engage in mostly supportive relationships which, when viewed through the lens of a feminist geopolitics of intimacy (Pain & Staeheli, 2014), illustrate how the complex interactions between large-scale geopolitical structures, globalisation processes and international migration can affect the ‘everyday’, ‘local’, lived experiences of reintegration.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1 Number of research participants accessed directly by the research team

| Data collection method                  | Guinea | Senegal | Morocco | Total |
|----------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|-------|
| Semi-structured interviews with returnees (mentored) | 8      | 8       | 8       | 24    |
| Semi-structured interviews with returnees (not mentored) | 8      | 8       | 8       | 24    |
| Semi-structured interviews with mentors  | 2      | 2       | 2       | 6     |
| Case studies with returnees             | 4      | 4       | 4       | 12    |
| Key informant interviews                | 10     | 9       | 1       | 20    |
| Quantitative phone survey               | 107    | 61      | 1       | 174   |
| **Total research participants**         | **139**| **92**  | **29**  | **260**|

Fig. 1 Mean average RSS composite score for 17 countries, where the possible RSS scores range from 0–1, with 1 representing the most (re)integrated.

![RSS Composite Score](image-url)
Fig. 2 Comparing mean RSS scores by reintegration dimension, over time, for those receiving and not receiving ORION mentoring: Guinea (2.a) and Senegal (2.b)

2.a Guinea

![Graph showing RSS scores for Guinea](image1)

2.b Senegal

![Graph showing RSS scores for Senegal](image2)
Fig. 3 Visualisation of a difference-in-difference analysis, statistically comparing mentored and non-mentored returnees in Guinea and Senegal, over time and by reintegration dimension

Note: Figure 3 is colour-coded by whether returnees are mentored or not (blue = mentored, red = not-mentored). Data points below the diagonal indicate decreased RSS scores and, by implication, a worsening of reintegration indicators, while data points above indicate improvement. The vertical lines are the mean scores at the first RSS, the horizontal lines are the mean scores at the last RSS and the height of the shaded area is the change suggested by participation in ORION; in other words, the apparent added value of the mentoring approach on reintegration.