Coordinating reintegration efforts in unique contexts

A case study on Nordic cooperation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I)

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Return and reintegration have increasingly become central priorities in European migration policies. To promote more sustainable returns, many countries have turned to capacity-building projects and development cooperation in key regions of origin. This policy brief examines how the Nordic countries—Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland—collaborated to establish the Nordic Cooperation on Return and Reintegration in Iraq (NORAQ) platform, and more particularly the establishment of Migration Resource Centres (MRCs) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), aiming to improve coordination and enhance reintegration outcomes. Drawing on lessons learned from NORAQ, the policy brief highlights both the opportunities and challenges of joint reintegration initiatives and explores the potential for replicating this model in other migration-relevant contexts.

Return and (sustainable) reintegration as a policy priority

Over the past decade, the return of migrants who are not granted legal residence has become a growing priority in migration polices of the European Union (EU) and its Member States. As noted in a 2018 synthesis

report from the European Migration Network (EMN), return "is widely considered as a priority across Member States," with nearly all EU countries identifying return of irregularly residing third-country nationals as a national objective (EMN, 2018).

This increased focus on return has been accompanied by a broader emphasis on making the return and reintegration process more "sustainable." While no universally accepted definition exists,[1] sustainability in this context is often understood as the ability of migrants to return to their country of origin in a safe and dignified manner. The United Nations Network on Migration, for example, defines sustainable *reintegration* as "[a] process which enables individuals to secure and sustain the political, economic, social and psychosocial conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity in the country and community they return or are returned to, in full respect of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights" (United Nations Network on Migration, 2021, p. 2). This individual-centred approach aligns with Objective 21 of the 2018 Global Compact for Migration, which highlights personal safety, economic empowerment, social inclusion and cohesion as crucial for sustainable return (United Nations General Assembly, 2020).

At the same time, a narrower definition of sustainable return persists in global policy discussions, where success is sometimes measured by the "absence of remigration" — that is, whether a returned individual stays rather than migrating again (Şahin-Mencütek, 2024, p. 2133). Though researchers have cautioned that this represents a "reductionist" understanding of sustainability (Kuschminder, 2017, p. 108), it is important to note that the two perspectives – the narrower focus on the absence of remigration and the broader understanding of sustainability – are not necessarily contradictory. Improved political and personal safety, economic opportunities and social cohesion can, under certain conditions, have a negative effect on an individual's aspirations to (re)migrate through irregular or unauthorized channels.[2]

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[1] See, for example, Vera-Larrucea and Luthman (2024, p. 17) and Hammarstedt and Luthman (2025, p. 20) for a discussion of the term "sustainable" within return studies, highlighting the lack of consensus in both academic and policy discussions regarding its definition.

[2] In their study on the reintegration of return migrants in Northern Ghana, Adu-Okoree, et.al find, for example, that improved employment opportunities and social factors made returning migrants less inclined to remigrate (Adu-Okoree, Sedegah, Premkumar, & McApreko, 2023). Kuschminder (2017, p. 117) also shows that returnees who are reintegrated—defined as

Building on this logic, many EU Member States have increasingly sought to link development cooperation with migration management (EMN, 2024, p. 4). Development aid is used both to address the so called "root causes" of irregular migration and to support sustainable reintegration by helping returnees access housing, livelihoods, and psychosocial support. At the EU level, instruments such as the 2015 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe) have been mobilised to advance these goals. Within NDICI, the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) plays a central role by, for example, promoting sustainable development, tackling the socio-economic drivers of migration and displacement and supporting returnee reintegration (Cassarino, 2025, pp. 3-4).

As part of broader efforts to link migration management with development cooperation, the EU has increasingly emphasised the need for coordination in return and reintegration programming. This is reflected in the EU's 2021 Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, which promotes a more coherent EU-wide approach to return. The strategy underscores the need to "work together and develop joint tools", highlighting also that reintegration programmes need to "be designed with the involvement of national and local authorities, host local communities and civil society to help give tangible future prospects for the returnee and their local community" (European Commission, 2021).

Aim and methodology

In line with the broader policy shift towards linking migration management and development cooperation in a coordinated manner, but outside the formal framework of the EU, the Nordic countries—drawing on a long tradition of cooperation across various policy areas, including development—have increasingly explored ways to "strengthen and expand Nordic cooperation in the area of return" (Government of Iceland, Ministry of Justice;

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individuals who have re-entered the economic, social, and cultural life of the country of origin and feel safe and secure—are less likely to want to remigrate or to have concrete plans to do so. At the same time, her findings suggest that an aspiration to remigrate can also be a meaningful proxy for dissatisfaction with the return experience, rather than reintegration outcomes overall. However, Ruiz Soto and Le Coz (2022) point out that intentions to remigrate—particularly through legal and planned channels—can also be a result of successful reintegration, where returnees leverage new skills or resources to pursue onward mobility.

Ministry of Immigration and Integration, Denmark; Ministry of the Interior, Finland; Ministry of Justice and Public Security; Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry of Justice, 2023). One example is the platform for Nordic Support on Return and Reintegration in Iraq (NORAQ), which brings together Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland to coordinate capacity-building initiatives in Iraq.

This policy brief builds on the findings from an AMIF-funded research project on Nordic cooperation on return and readmission,[3] with a particular focus on how coordination plays out in practice in countries of origin. **The aim is to highlight both the opportunities and challenges of joint reintegration initiatives, drawing on lessons learned from the establishment and operationalisation of the NORAQ platform.** The analysis is based on observations and informal interviews conducted during a study visit to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) in January 2025, which included meetings with local stakeholders in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and participation in the opening of the Sweden-funded Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) in Sulaymaniyah. Unless otherwise indicated, the empirical material presented in this policy brief originates from this fieldwork.

The NORAQ platform: A framework for joint coordination

The importance of donor coordination is well established in the field of development cooperation, as fragmented aid efforts often result in inefficiencies, duplication and limited impact (Bigsten & Tengstam, 2015; Šárka, 2023). These lessons are increasingly relevant in the context of migration governance, where host countries are showing growing interest in investing in reintegration programmes to strengthen the capacity of countries of origin to receive and support returnees. When programmes involve a wide range of actors operating across multiple levels, and without

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[3] On 1 February 2023, Delmi launched a three-year research project titled *Return as International Migration Policy: Coordination within and across National Borders*, funded by the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The report *Nordic cooperation within return and readmission* (2025) by Hammarstedt and Luthman is the second sub-study within the project, focusing on how the Nordic countries cooperate on the return and readmission of migrants subject to legally binding return decisions. As part of this sub-study, and in order to gain a contextual understanding of how Nordic cooperation unfolds in practice, the authors of this policy brief travelled to the KR-I in January 2025 to attend the opening of the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) in Sulaymaniyah. The empirical material used in this brief was collected during that visit.

effective coordination, efforts risk becoming siloed, inconsistent, and poorly adapted to local realities. In contrast, coordinated approaches grounded in strong partnerships with local institutions tend to be more effective, sustainable and responsive to the socio-economic needs of returnee (ICMPD, 2021; IOM, 2019, p. 17).

Structure and partners

The NORAQ platform, which was officially launched on June 4, 2024, (ICMPD, Project News, 2024), represents a concrete example of how such coordination can be operationalised in practice. It currently includes four Nordic countries,[4] and serves as a framework for joint reintegration programming in Iraq (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025, p. 89). Within the platform, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland fund individual projects, implemented on the ground through partnerships with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Rwanga Foundation, in order to support the Government of Iraq (GoI) and partners of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with migration management goals. When it comes to chosen partnerships, the ICMPD, an intergovernmental organisation based in Vienna, have a decade long history of supporting authorities in the reintegration of returnees in Iraq (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2). Additionally, the Rwanga Foundation, a local NGO based in the KR-I, has played an important role in assisting with returnee reintegration on the ground (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2).

The aim of NORAQ is to secure "…aligned, sustainable, and transparent reintegration services for all returnees to Iraq and to support the establishment of a robust and professional migration management capacity in Iraq" (NORAQ, 2025, p. 1). Together, the four Nordic countries make up a joint steering committee for NORAQ, in which each country is granted an observer status in relation to the projects funded by their Nordic neighbours (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2). Through this set-up, NORAQ intends to ensure that projects are in sync with one another rather than overlapping (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025, p. 89), allowing for "…effective coordination, flexibility, and

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[4] The NORAQ platform has stated that they are also open to the inclusion of non-Nordic countries within the platform. Admittance would rely upon a Nordic consensus and a "+" would have to be added to the platform's name (NORAQ+), were this to be the case in the future (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2).

joint communication/approach towards Iraqi stakeholders" (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2).

Streamlining national funding in joint initiatives

Current Nordic cooperation on capacity-building is taking place in a context where return migration and development aid are increasingly converging in the political agendas and strategies of the individual countries. The NORAQ initiative reflects this shift, aligning diverse funding mechanisms in pursuit of shared objectives. What sets the NORAQ platform apart is its flexible structure: some activities are implemented jointly, while others are led and financed by a single national actor (NORAQ, 2025, p. 2).

This means that different funding mechanisms are allowed to co-exist within the platform, as some projects can be funded by development funding, while others can be funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), depending on the Nordic country with funding ownership over the project. NORAQ has therefore been unique in organizing *different funding mechanisms* into a *joint funding platform* with a *shared management structure* (i.e., the joint steering committee). There are no set requirements for the Nordic countries to provide the same amount of funding or have the same targeted returnee beneficiaries for individual projects, as their Nordic counterparts within the platform. Projects can either be directed towards returnees from any EU country or towards returnees from the specific Nordic country providing the funding.

Joint training

Nordic cooperation within the NORAQ framework allows for differentiated national approaches while still contributing to a coordinated effort. To guide this cooperation, a number of thematic focus areas have been identified: return and reintegration, irregular migration, awareness raising, migration and development, general migration management and capacity support (ICMPD, 2024).

An example of a project within the NORAQ platform that covers these thematic areas is the Sweden-Iraq Cooperation on Migration Governance (SI-COM).[5] The project has three components: strengthening and expanding

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[5] The SI-COM project is funded by the Swedish Ministry of Justice and the Swedish Migration Agency, implemented on the ground in Iraq by ICMPD and the Swedish Migration Agency, and running from June 2024 to May 2026 (NORAQ, 2024).

the network of Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs);[6] strengthening project management and monitoring, and evaluation and learning capacities of governmental partners in Iraq; and strengthening institutional capacities of governmental partners in Iraq in key areas of migration management (NORAQ, 2024). The intended outcomes of the SI-COM project are therefore two-fold: to provide information on migration and relevant available services in Iraq to intending, outgoing, and returning migrants through MRCs, but also to build up the institutional capacities of governmental partners through, for example, different trainings.

Through the NORAQ platform, information is shared, and forums are put into place for continuous dialogue between the Nordic countries and local governmental authorities, training is coordinated for reintegration staff across agencies, local actors are consulted for their contextual knowledge and integrated into the projects and local capacity is enhanced through joint programmes. Although the NORAQ platform was established to support migration management and sustainable reintegration across *all* of Iraq, it is important to bear in mind the complexities of Iraq's political landscape, in which the KR-I operates as a semi-autonomous region.

Reintegration challenges in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) and implications for joint programming

The KR-I offers a useful example of how coordination between national governments, international organisations and local actors is being pursued in practice. While challenges remain, institutions in the region have demonstrated a willingness to engage on return and reintegration issues. This makes KR-I a relevant case for exploring the potential and limitations of joint programming in complex and resource-constrained contexts.

Opportunities and coordination mechanisms

In contexts where individual host countries lack sufficient funding or operational capacity, joint programming allows for the pooling of resources

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[6] The current network of MRCs in Iraq includes one centre in Baghdad (established in December 2020 and funded by Denmark), one centre in Erbil (established in June 2024 and funded by the Norway) (ICMPD, 2024, p. 18; NORAQ, 2025), and one centre in Sulaymaniyah (established in January 2025 and funded by Sweden). Thus the MRC network is a prime example of how the Nordic countries have, through their different projects, established centres with similar priorities. The centres, however, reach different groups of migrants/returnees due to their different geographical locations within the KR-I/Iraq, and thus a project overlap in the region is also avoided.

and expertise. This not only increases the impact of interventions but can also contribute to greater consistency in service delivery. Several successful coordination efforts in the KR-I underline this potential. The establishment of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP), for instance, has created a valuable space for dialogue, strategic alignment and the identification of common reintegration priorities (ICMPD, 2024, p. 23). Similarly, the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) has emerged as a key institutional actor, actively promoting the use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a centralized framework for both operational coordination and financial accountability.

Returnees in the KR-I have also benefited from direct cash assistance as part of reintegration packages. While the standard support provided by EU-funded programmes is often limited in scope, bilateral "top-ups" from countries such as Sweden, Finland and Norway have offered additional financial relief to returnees. However, these supplementary payments may challenge broader EU efforts to harmonise migration and return policies under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Without coordinated standards, such differentiated assistance can lead to inconsistencies in return outcomes and complicate efforts to streamline reintegration processes across the EU and partner regions. Moreover, the variation in available support can create confusion among returnees about what assistance they are entitled to. This lack of harmonisation may also pose challenges for Migration Resource Centre (MRC) caseworkers, whose ability to provide accurate guidance is hampered by the complex and divergent rules and procedures across different countries.

Political and operational constraints

The political and administrative relationship between the KRG, i.e. the official executive body of the KR-I, and the federal GoI presents ongoing challenges for return and reintegration efforts. One key observation found, was that due to the KR-I's semi-autonomous status, regional institutions are often not fully included in national-level planning or implementation processes. Reintegration support in the KR-I is largely delivered through NGOs rather than government bodies, which could potentially undermine long-term institutional ownership.

Discrepancies in the flow of international reintegration assistance have also been noted. For example, international reintegration support is typically

channelled through GoI structures, which may result in uneven levels of assistance for returnees in the KR-I compared to other regions. This has led to regional institutional actors in the KR-I expressing a desire for a more integrated, whole-of-government approach. Navigating these political and logistical dynamics remains a key consideration for actors involved in joint programming initiatives in the country.

Furthermore, the KRG's stance against accepting forced returns introduces operational complexities. Returnees are often returned via Baghdad rather than directly to the KR-I, raising concerns among some stakeholders about safety, mobility, and access to reintegration assistance. To mitigate this, actors such as the European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC)[7] have been working to receive and assist returnees upon arrival in Baghdad. However, this requires proactive coordination and additional resources, which can strain existing capacities.

The experience in the KR-I thus illustrates that effective joint programming requires more than aligned funding and shared goals—it must also be designed to accommodate the political and institutional asymmetries of the context. Iraq's layered governance structure means that regional institutions in the KR-I operate with significant autonomy and often without full integration into federal-level planning. In this setting, joint initiatives like NORAQ benefit from being flexible enough to engage with both federal and regional authorities in ways that are both context-sensitive and operationally coherent.

Balancing policy goals with local ownership

With return migration remaining high on the political agenda in many Nordic countries, initiatives such as NORAQ represent a concrete effort to operationalise national return policies through coordinated international programming. This could potentially create a tension between the political imperative to demonstrate prompt and measurable results and the necessity of fostering reintegration solutions that are sustainable, context-sensitive, and locally owned. In such politically charged environments, there is a risk

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[7] The ETTC is a non-profit organisation working to contribute to sustainable development in Iraq. Since 2022, ETTC is the reintegration service provider for Frontex's Joint Reintegration Services in Iraq.

that local needs and institutional capacities may be overshadowed by a desire for quick wins and visible outcomes.

To help make reintegration efforts more effective and sustainable, it is important to anchor initiatives in local realities and take into account the capacities, needs, and aspirations of the communities involved (Knoll & Vernon, 2023; IOM, 2019). For joint programming initiatives like NORAQ, this also means recognising that political and institutional asymmetries—such as those between the GoI and the KRG —make locally anchored partnerships all the more important. In such settings, engaging regional actors like the Rwanga Foundation, rather than centrally based counterparts, can enhance programme legitimacy, strengthen trust with returnees, and ensure context-specific service delivery. Here, the added value of joint programming lies in the ability of donor countries with more experience or longstanding engagement in a particular region to share knowledge with their Nordic partners about which local organisations are most credible, effective, and contextually appropriate. By leveraging this collective knowledge, joint initiatives can reduce the risk of duplication, build stronger local relationships, and ensure reintegration support is both relevant and locally rooted.

Building on these efforts to strengthen local partnerships, effective coordination tools are also essential to ensure that reintegration support is delivered in a consistent and structured manner across actors. In line with this, the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) have highlighted the importance of utilizing the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a database that allows returnees to register and access information about reintegration services (ICMPD, 2024, p. 5) more extensively, both within the governmental entities and NGOs, as a central channel for coordinating financial and operational support. Taking into consideration that coordination efforts are relatively new and still developing among reintegration actors, returnees face numerous reintegration barriers. These include limited incentives for private sector involvement, as well as sufficient integration with broader public sector services such as housing and mental health services. While reintegration service providers now have a designated coordination platform, a Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP)[8], supported by ICMPD with Danish

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[8]"MSP is a platform which "brings together public and private sector entities, which are either mandated or willing and interested to partake in coordinated activities and dialogue contributing to sustainable reintegration of returnees" (ICMPD, 2024, p.12).

funding, additional efforts could potentially be needed to strengthen the cooperation and ensure a harmonized approach across all actors working with reintegration support (ICMPD, 2024, p. 23).

Misaligned support and communication gaps

Despite progress, several key areas require further attention. Returnees in the KR-I receive cash assistance, although the amount is, according to the testimonies of local actors in the field, not aligned with the local cost of living. The reintegration assistance provided by Frontex, for instance, is uniformly allocated regardless of regional economic differences. According to Lindberg (et al. 2021), there is also a limited demand for vocational training among returnees, who instead prioritize meeting immediate needs and repaying debts over long-term income-generating activities. This was also reflected in the testimonies of local actors.

Communication remains a significant challenge in the return process. Many returnees report not receiving adequate pre-return information about their rights and the support mechanisms available to them, a challenge voiced during our interactions with local actors in the KR-I. This issue is further compounded by capacity limitations within institutions such as the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC). While the MRC aspires to function as a "one-stop-shop" — aiming to coordinate the various needs of migrants and returnees in a streamlined and accessible manner — these ambitions are often constrained by capacity challenges, in terms of a limited number of employees. These communication and capacity challenges reveal a broader implication for joint initiatives: harmonisation of reintegration services must be balanced with responsiveness to local conditions.

Monitoring, psychosocial support and long-term strategy

Another area for improvement is the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation. Although evaluation processes do occur and are implemented as a part of individual project plans, the rapid rollout of MRCs in Iraq, means that a new centre is opened before an existing one has had the chance to be fully evaluated. Replicating MRCs from Baghdad to the KR-I without sufficient contextual adaptation, risks creating unnecessary bottlenecks in the start-up phases. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this rapid expansion also reflects a certain momentum — a political and institutional drive to act quickly in response to pressing return challenges. While this

momentum can be valuable, it should ideally be balanced with space for evaluation and learning.

Furthermore, the reintegration process currently lacks a comprehensive 'whole-of-society' approach, despite the fact that returnees consistently emphasize that psychological well-being and a sense of personal security are just as essential to sustainable reintegration as financial stability. According to Lindberg et al. (2021), the absence of psychosocial support is a major barrier to long-term reintegration. Institutions such as the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC), European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) and MRC acknowledge this gap and underscore the need to establish focal points to deliver comprehensive psychosocial services – something that could be a potential future priority for the NORAQ platform.

Lastly, the financial support allocated to initiatives such as the MRCs is often tied to short-term funding cycles, which limits sustained engagement and institutional development. In the complex political and logistical landscape of Iraq—particularly in the KR-I—this highlights the need for a long-term, flexible strategy. For platforms like NORAQ, this means coordinating horizons for planning and funding across donor countries. Aligned project cycles and evaluation timelines, combined with longer-term funding commitments, can help prevent fragmentation and fatigue. Maintaining a small-scale coordination structure, like NORAQ's steering committee, also enables agility and reduces bureaucratic burden.

Broader lessons for future reintegration initiatives

The experience of establishing and operationalising the NORAQ platform in the KR-I offers several broader insights that may be applicable to other reintegration contexts. While the KR-I presents a unique political and institutional landscape, many of the core dynamics observed—such as the need for coordination among diverse actors, the challenges of harmonising reintegration standards and the tension between short-term results and long-term sustainability—are common across a range of post-return environments.

Taken together, the lessons from NORAQ suggest that joint reintegration initiatives can be most effective when they are inclusive, adaptable and anchored in local realities. While the KR-I context, as outlined above, presents challenges for reintegration actors— the experience from establishing the NORAQ platform can offer valuable guidance for actors

working in similar complex settings. As migration governance and developmental aid become increasingly interlinked, the need for collaboration will only grow. Leveraging insights from initiatives like NORAQ, which have brought together host countries with different funding mechanisms, but with similar return goals, in a flexible and small-scale coordination platform, can help inform future efforts towards sustainable reintegration programming.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on lessons learned from the NORAQ platform and broader reintegration efforts in the KR-I. While they reflect the specific context of joint Nordic programming in Iraq, they also speak to reintegration programming more broadly. The recommendations aim to inform both future joint initiatives and general reintegration efforts by highlighting ways to improve coordination, sustainability, and local ownership.

1. **Integrate diverse funding streams under a shared management framework**

   The NORAQ platform has shown that it is possible to coordinate different funding mechanisms—including development aid and migration-specific funds such as AMIF—within a common structure. Future joint initiatives should build on this model by establishing shared management frameworks that allow countries to contribute at varying levels while maintaining alignment in objectives, implementation standards and communication with partner countries.

2. **Prioritize cash assistance, aligned with the local cost of living, over vocational training.**

   Local stakeholders have emphasized the importance of aligning cash assistance with the local cost of living, as regional economic disparities can significantly affect the reintegration opportunities available to returnees. In some areas, the cost of basic needs are substantially higher, making a standardized approach to financial support inadequate. Tailoring cash assistance to reflect these local realities is therefore crucial for ensuring meaningful and equitable support.

In addition, several local actors have pointed to a relatively low demand for vocational training, noting that such programmes are often oversupplied. Given this mismatch, and the more immediate need for cash assistance, financial support should be prioritized over vocational training as a more effective tool for supporting returnees' reintegration.

3. **Keep joint programming small-scale to facilitate coordination and strengthen local engagement**

The example of the NORAQ platform shows that, in complex environments, joint reintegration initiatives benefit from being relatively small in scale—particularly in terms of the number of participating host country actors. A more limited setup facilitates coordination both among the participating countries and with local stakeholders. The fact that the Nordic countries involved in NORAQ share similar goals, institutional structures and policy priorities has also supported smoother collaboration with implementing partners such as ICMPD, as well as more coherent engagement with regional institutions. While joint initiatives can be embedded within broader EU frameworks, the implementation of programming should remain streamlined to allow for agility, short communication channels and more equal partnerships with local actors.

4. **Promote inclusive and coordinated referral systems for reintegration support**

Reintegration databases, such as National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs), should adopt an inclusive approach by integrating a broad range of stakeholders beyond government entities, international organisations and civil society. They should include local and international NGOs, private sector actors and community-based initiatives. Broadening participation helps create a more comprehensive service database and enables the provision of tailored, context-specific support to returnees.

Establishing a unified referral platform not only ensures that all returnees can access the assistance they need, but also brings diverse actors together within a coordinated framework. An inclusive referral system is therefore better equipped to reflect and respond to

the complexity of reintegration needs, particularly in fragile or politically sensitive contexts.

5. **Strengthen the role of local actors in reintegration programming**

Experiences from NORAQ underscore the value of involving local institutions in the design and delivery of reintegration support. Local actors bring essential contextual knowledge and can enhance the relevance, responsiveness and sustainability of programming. Future joint initiatives should be designed to actively include regional authorities, civil society organisations and community-based stakeholders from the outset—both to improve coordination and to foster long-term local ownership.

6. **Strengthen learning across projects through coordinated monitoring and evaluation timelines**

Within joint programming platforms such as NORAQ, individual projects are typically subject to their own monitoring and evaluation processes and mechanisms for sharing lessons across the platform are already in place. However, the rapid rollout of new initiatives can limit the opportunity to reflect on and incorporate learning from earlier efforts. To make full use of the potential for cross-project learning, future programming should allow sufficient time for completed projects to be evaluated before new ones are launched. This would support more informed decision-making, enhance context sensitivity and improve overall programme coherence within joint reintegration frameworks.

7. **Strengthen communication and planning before and during return**

Early and informed reintegration planning significantly increases the chances of sustainable outcomes, especially for individuals returning after long periods abroad. Engaging returnees as active participants in shaping their reintegration pathways is essential. In host countries, assigning return caseworkers to specific countries or regions of origin can foster expertise, enabling better pre-departure support and closer collaboration with local reintegration stakeholders.

This can be achieved through a network of Nordic return caseworkers and local actors working with reintegration services in the countries of origin. Such a network can facilitate mutual learning by

continuously sharing information—for example, updates in legislation or changes in local conditions. This model is not only applicable in the Nordic context but can also be adapted to other host countries with similar migration-related frameworks.

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Co-funded by
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