

ARE: Det här är Delmi-podden, en podcast om migration och integration, som ges ut av Delegationen för migrationsstudier.

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ARE: Hello and welcome to this podcast from Delmi, the Migration studies delegation in Sweden. In this episode we will discuss return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq, based on a new study and a project on this topic. The project is financed by the Asylum-, migration- and integration fund and includes interviews with 100 asylum seekers who has return to their countries of origin. My name is Ann-Louise Rönestål Ek. I will talk to two of the researchers, please introduce yourselves.

CVL: My name is Constanza Vera-Larrucea and I am a research coordinator at Delmi and I was in charge of analyzing the data for this study.

ARE: Welcome. And with us on Zoom we have:

NM: Hello, thank you for having me, my name is Nassim Majidi. I am a scholar and the co-founder and the director of Samuel Hall, a social enterprise dedicated to migration research. And we were tasked with collecting the data with 100 in depth qualitative interviews across Afghanistan and Iraq for this important study led by Delmi.

ARE: Welcome to Delmi podcast Nassim. Constanza, tell us more about the project. What is the purpose and how did you find participants to interview?

CVL: Well, this is a bottom-up approach to study return and reintegration and we are trying to focus on the experiences of rejected asylum seekers, returning from Sweden to Afghanistan and Iraq. And we have mainly two aims, the first one is to fill knowledge gaps on return and reintegration off this very group, rejected asylum seekers, and then to contribute towards a well-functioning return procedure, grounded in sustainability and humanity. And for us it was very difficult to take ourselves to the region to conduct the interviews by ourselves.

ARE: Why was that hard for you?

CVL: Well, not only because of the security issues and the logistic implications of it, but also because we are not local researchers so we didn't have the knowledge, we didn't manage the language and we thought that we would never generate trust among the respondents. And that's how we turned to procurement procedures, and we found Samuel Hall and we realized they had plenty of experience within it, and also that Nassim has been doing research in the field. So, we thought it was the right actor to collect data for us.

ARE: Nassim, what about the transit, the journey, explain, how does that work?

NM: The report, I think, states it very well. That we need to have a whole of migration perspective when we talk about return and when we think about what happens post return. Because very often, the reasons for the migration are as important as the experience of migration throughout. And here you ask me about transit and that concept is interesting, because for some transit it will be a two-week journey to get to their destinations, for others it takes two years. So, the whole experience of transit across time really varies for different people. And the experiences of transit we saw are also different for Afghans and Iraqis, so we can't generalize it. So, for example, Iraqi respondents that we interviewed often travelled as family units, were older, they were more established socioeconomically, so their experience of the transit also differed. But if I think about the communalities and the transit and the journey, then I definitely first think about how traumatic it can be. There are incidents of shooting at the border, for example, between Iran and Turkey that our Afghan respondents talk about, but also police harassment in various countries. Iraqi respondents also, and Afghans also, reported incidents of family separation in transit, which includes, for example, children being separated from their families. And of course, it is also, I think, what the European audience is more aware of these days is the challenges around boat crossing and descriptions of overloaded boats hitting rocks, people dying in front of their eyes. So, when we talk about the journey, there is a time dimension, the risks I just mentioned, but also interestingly the journey continues after return, in a way. Because even after return, when we met returnees in Iraq and Afghanistan, they were still trying to make sense of their migration journey and there was still a lot of lack of understanding of what really happened to them, that still lingers on after return.

ARE: Constanza, why do you think it is important to include the returnee's perspective?

CVL: Because we can see things that we cannot evaluate from a long distance, and we can also see this objective part of return. There is a lot of talk about sustainable return and reintegration, but we only know by approaching them, how sustainable can return be. And these returnees are going back to two of the most difficult contexts in the world. Not only because of the security and instability, but also because they lack the economic opportunities to be re-embedded into the country where they are supposed to come from. And also, because sometimes there are minorities, as was the case of the Hazaras, which are overrepresented in our sample in Afghanistan, Kurds for example in Iraq. So, there are lots of things that we cannot really measure from abroad and we cannot measure if we don't turn to the people that are suffering and going through it. So, if we consider sustainable as people staying in the country where they are sent to, we need to really understand how they manage, how they thrive in their daily lives and whether they are trying to stay or in the case of our respondents, most of them hold the dream to remigrate and some of them want to remigrate to Sweden.

ARE: Nassim, how do you conduct research in conflict areas?

NM: So, we've been working in Afghanistan and Iraq for the better part of ten years now, a decade conducting research in different conflict or fragile settings. And we are very aware as researchers about ensuring that we have proper ethical standards, safeguarding procedures to protect ourselves as researchers, but also to protect, obviously, participants and those who accept to share their time and speak with us. But I think, to answer your question, there are several myths around doing research in conflict areas. One of them, obviously is access, how easily we can access population that we need to learn from. And here our response has been to really localize research, the way we hear of localizing aid. Since the global humanitarian summit, we often talk about localizing research. So, our whole model of research is built on working collaboratively with local researchers and being embedded in the context that we study. So, we have an office in Kabul, we have networks throughout Afghanistan, similarly we have networks in Iraq. So, we really invested and built assistance to strengthen our access, to also train researchers, and that's what we do as a social enterprise. We also invest in trainings of Afghan

and Iraqis researchers, and I believe that we also need to be very aware, that we need to challenge the experts and challenge those who might not be in those contents by really giving a voice to the national researchers. And I think another key recipe for success, I would say for us, is the principle of partnership. And this goes back again to the question of the importance of building trust with the right partners to also gain the trust of respondents. Who we partner with is essential and for example, for this research, we partner with a returnee, Abdul Ghafoor, who has set up his own civil society organization that is mandated to support returnees like himself. So, his work through AMASO is to provide assistance to returnees. He was actually one of our also researchers, he was part of our research team. And I think that brings me to the last point, another key requirement when working in conflicts, I think, is to not just interview people as subjects of our research, but really integrate them as active participants in the research that we do.

ARE: Mm, Constanza, what factors before migration affect reintegration?

CVL: Well, first of all the embeddedness, the pre-embeddedness they have to the context. In this case, some of the young males that were sent to Kabul had never been in Afghanistan or have no connections, or they have no family members left there, because they migrated early to Iran. So, it was very difficult to expect them to actually reintegrate into a context that they were not familiar with. And then all the characteristics of the returnees, before the migration period, their level of education, all of that reflects after return. So, the situation that they face, the push factor that led them to migrate, actually remains after migration, after return. And then, of course, during their trip towards Europe, they suffer through traumatic situations. And, well, Nassim mentions some of them, and these situations are not overcome, so they follow them after the return. And then we have some issues happening in Sweden, as well, the length of the processes, some sort of lost on translation with the authorities, lack of knowledge in the asylum process. And all of that leads to frustration because many of them were in Sweden for about four years and they never received asylum. And many of them had no idea of the reasons behind these. And these impacts, of course, there are health, their mental situation, but also the willingness to do something about it of course, because they are being unable to work with this process.

ARE: Nassim, what does life look like for those who return to Afghanistan and Iraq?

NM: The report states it very well. There is a general lack of positive impacts from the migration experience on the lives of those who return to Afghanistan. First, there is not necessarily a return home in the Afghan context, as half of the Afghan respondents had lived in Iran before the departure towards Sweden. So, they don't actually know the context of return and they're shocked, scared, and often feel helpless. And across both countries there is a social exclusion, they feel shame, guilt and fear, a sense of failure that is very pronounced. And this failure is both self-perceived, but also, it's the perception of their families who counted on them and on a different outcome of their migration, than return. And lastly, I would say, the economic situation for returnees is very bleak, to put it mildly. Very few have been able to resume an economic activity and also because this research was led during the corona virus pandemic. So, setting up a shop or business during corona, which is part of the programming that they're investing themselves in after return, is often close to impossible.

ARE: I want to ask you, Constanza, Nassim is talking about this stigma of returning.

CVL: Yes, well this has been researched before and the stigma of returnees when their communities believe that they must have done something wrong, something criminal to be sent back. It's either that, or the fact that they think of them as foolish for returning from a better life in Europe.

ARE: What do policies and programs need to do to adapt the findings of this and other reports on return and reintegration do you think?

NM: First there is their lack of information throughout the migration process, in transit for example. Afghans choosing their destination when they're in Germany to go to Sweden based on faulty information. But also on arrival, they're not getting enough support from their consular offices, so there is definitely an emphasis there to put on consular assistance. They don't have information about the asylum process. More needs to be done to share information on that. And then there is the language barrier, many of them complain about inadequate legal assistance, inadequate due process, often because the interpreters where not translating the

statements well enough, or because they didn't have adequate legal representation. So, there is definitely a need to work on information and legal assistance and language support for all migrants.

ARE: And one final question, Constanza, what are the studies recommendations, what needs to be done to improve the process of return and reintegration?

CVL: Well, there are several things. I would like to emphasize that we recommend tailor made programs to reintegrate, based on the needs of the people returning. For example, in this case, people who are not returning home, they need extra support and it's not enough with the normal reintegration grant. And we have some recommendation, as Nassim mentioned, towards the Swedish authorities to provide with better support and especially the role of the legal assistance and interpreters. And then we also believe that the academic community, but also among politicians, we need to reformulate or at least open the debate regarding the terminology about reintegration and return. Because not everybody sent to a certain country that recognize them as citizens are actually returning to their country of origin and that leads to several challenges that need to be taken care of.

ARE: It was a pleasure talking to you both, Constanza Vera-Larrucea and Nassim Majidi. The study and more information on the topic of reintegration and rejected asylum seekers is available on the Delmi website, Delmi.se. Thank you for listening.

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