



Operational manual on return counselling



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About ERRIN

The European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) is a joint initiative of 15 EU Member States and Schengen-associated countries¹, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA/FRONTEX) and the European Commission. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development provides expertise and support as implementing partner.

Operational since mid-2018, ERRIN is funded through the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), with co-financing from participating national authorities. The Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (Return & Departure Service) is the lead partner.

Ensuring that migrants can return to their home countries in a dignified and humane manner is a key part of the European Union's efforts to manage migration. However, it is operationally challenging. Many aspects cannot be addressed effectively on a national level. Because of this, EU-wide collaboration is needed to improve both return processes and the quality of reintegration support offered to returning migrants.

In a nutshell, ERRIN seeks to strengthen cooperation between migration authorities, with the aim of:

- enabling and improving return and reintegration through joint contracting of service partners for delivery of reintegration support;
- serving as an 'innovation hub' for members to improve practices, share learning and pilot new approaches to return and reintegration; and
- investing in knowledge to improve understanding of return dynamics.

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PHOTO CREDITS

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Terms and abbreviations used in this manual

Application for asylum: an application made by a foreigner or a stateless person which can be understood as a request for protection under the Geneva Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, or the national refugee law (source: European Migration Network – EMN – Glossary).

Closed reception facility: a specialised facility used for detention of a third-country national who is the subject of return procedures, be it the return preparation and/or the removal process (based on EMN Glossary).

Dublin procedure: the process of establishing which the EU Member State is responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the EU Member States by a third-country national under Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation).

Forced return: compulsory return of an individual to the country of origin, transit or third country (i.e. country of return), on the basis of an administrative or judicial act (EMN Glossary).

Irregular migrant: a third-country national present on the territory of a Schengen State who does not fulfil, or no longer fulfils, the conditions of entry as set out in the Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code) or other conditions for entry, stay or residence in that EU Member State (EMN Glossary).

Legal stay: the presence, on the territory of an EU Member State, of a third-country national who does fulfil the conditions of entry as set out in Art. 5 of the Regulation (EU) 2016/399 (Schengen Borders Code) or other conditions for entry, stay or residence in that EU Member State (based on EMN Glossary).

Open reception facilities: all forms of premises used for accommodation of applicants for international protection and other categories of migrants and refugees (based on EMN Glossary).

Pre-departure counselling: counselling provided prior to departure of a migrant to the country of return, preparing the migrant for their departure and reintegration.

Re-entry ban: an administrative or judicial decision or act prohibiting entry into and stay in the territory of the EU Member States for a specified period, accompanying a return decision (EMN Glossary).

Refugee status: recognition of a third-country national or stateless person as a refugee by an EU Member State, according to the Geneva Convention of 1951 and 1967 Protocol (based on EMN Glossary).

Reintegration: re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or a process, e.g. of a migrant into the society of their country of return (EMN Glossary).

Rejected applicant for international protection (asylum seeker): a person covered by a first instance decision rejecting an application for international protection, including decisions considering applications as inadmissible or as unfounded, as well as decisions under priority and accelerated procedures, taken by administrative or judicial bodies during the reference period (EMN Glossary).

Return Decision: an administrative or judicial decision or act, stating or declaring the stay of a third-country national to be illegal and imposing or stating an obligation to return (EMN Glossary).

Schengen (agreement): an agreement between some EU Member States and some neighbouring non-Member States to gradually remove controls at their common borders and introduce freedom of movement for all nationals of the signatory Member States, other EU Member States or third countries (EMN Glossary).

Transit (migrant): passage through a country of transit of a third-country national travelling from their country of origin to an EU Member State (EMN Glossary).

Order to leave the Schengen area: a Return Decision.

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1. Overview and background

European countries offer return and reintegration programmes to migrants who want or have to return to their country of origin. The shared challenge is finding the right methods of informing migrants about these programmes and providing the best support possible in making an informed decision about return.

1.1 Introduction

The ERRIN network offers a hub for collaboration. Members work together to explore innovative approaches to return and reintegration, and to improve understanding of return dynamics. One important area of exchange is return counselling. To this end, an operational learning cycle on return counselling was established by ERRIN, with the aim of facilitating exchange and the pooling of ideas, and developing practical tools to support counsellors in their day-to-day work. The results of the 2018 – 2019 exchanges, field visits for counsellors and peer-to-peer workshops are summarised in this manual.

1.2 Purpose of the manual

This manual has been designed to serve as a practical tool to support counsellors in their day-to-day work. It reflects the outcomes of discussions from international workshops and field visits, featuring input from both governmental and non-governmental counsellors from within the ERRIN network and throughout wider Europe.

It brings together experience of field workers who provide counselling for migrants on a daily basis, together with practical tips for organisations on how to facilitate counselling meetings.

This manual is a 'living document' and might be subject to update following future consultations with counsellors from ERRIN partner countries and reintegration service partners in the countries of return.



2. Return counselling – principles and concepts

Return counselling is more than just providing information about the possibility of return to a migrant. It also involves guiding the person through the decision-making process and engaging in a significant dialogue about return. In this chapter, we explore some key principles and concepts around return counselling.

2.1 Definitions

Different countries use various definitions of return counselling. In the (draft) **EU-Framework on Return Counselling**², return counselling is defined as follows:

Return counselling is a key component of the return process and a crucial element to assist asylum seekers and illegally staying third-country nationals to obtain correct information about their legal possibilities to remain in Europe, as well as their opportunities to return and reintegrate in their country of origin. In addition to providing up to date and reliable information, the purpose of return counselling is that of supporting third-country nationals in accessing assistance and in planning their return and reintegration. Return counselling should not be considered a stand-alone activity as it is a part of a broader approach to migration management that respects the dignity of migrants.

Although return counselling serves the purpose of helping migrants take an informed decision about return, the activity supports the effective implementation of migration policies by encouraging voluntary return and ensuring compliance with return procedures. For these purposes, counselling should provide timely and reliable information that is tailored to the different stages of migration and to individual circumstances.

During the ERRIN exchanges with counsellors, a number of common elements emerged from discussions. Participants highlighted that return counselling involves:

² Draft-EU Framework on Return Counselling, p. 2-3 ('Definition and Purpose')

- informing a migrant about their current status and remaining legal options;
- supporting the migrant in recognising their current status;
- engaging the migrant in a dialogue about their future (return);
- supporting the migrant in making a decision about their future and in reorienting their initial goals (which initially was e.g. obtaining a legal stay in Europe);
- trying to solve practical obstacles that migrants face throughout this process;
- informing and supporting migrants at every step of the return process, preparing them for return and reintegration in their home country.

2.2 Main operational challenges

Return counselling is a process that may take time and that consists of different stages, depending on the person's administrative status and the particular context or setting in which they live.

Counsellors are highly dependent on external factors that might jeopardise their credibility:

- Counsellors are not the only source of information for migrants who receive a lot of 'informal' information from numerous sources, e.g. the internet, friends, family, diaspora organisations, etc. This can make it challenging for counsellors to get their message across and to develop mutual trust.
- Nationals of some countries cannot be forcefully returned (e.g. if there are no EU or bilateral readmission agreements in place with the authorities in the countries of return). In such cases, counsellors are entirely dependent on the willingness of the person to return.
- Counsellors often must operate in a very vague legal context, e.g. with lengthy legal procedures ongoing, or face inconsistencies in the application of asylum procedures in Europe.

This means that, in spite of efforts made by counsellors and the quality of their work, their interventions will not always automatically result in a bigger number of voluntary returns.

Counsellors can also find themselves caught between decisions taken by the government administration, which obliges the person to return, and the expectations of the migrant, who wishes to stay in a European country. This can result in 'role stress' among some counsellors.



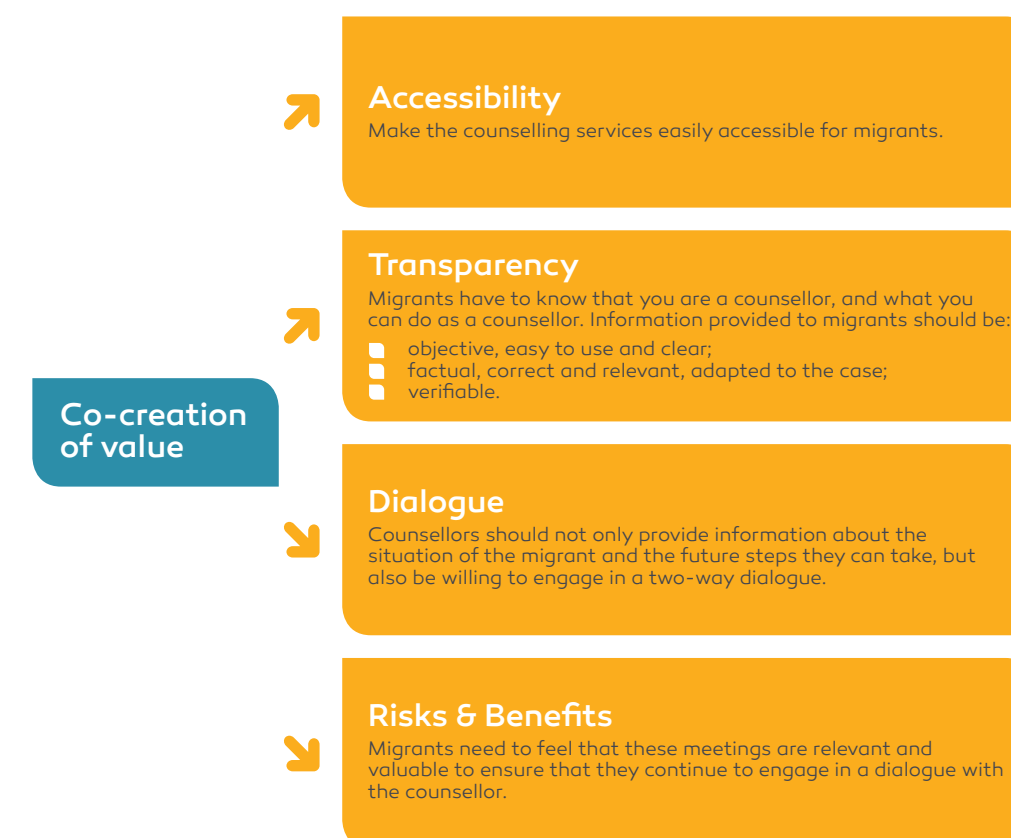
Source: Based on the scheme used by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil).

Governmental institutions can try to diminish the risk or role stress, for instance, by:

- embedding return counselling into existing social care services or reception structures. This way, return counselling would not only be considered the responsibility of a limited group of specialised counsellors, but constitute an integral part of services provided to migrants, e.g. by NGOs, local governments, hospitals, outreach officers, reception facilities etc.
- developing adapted structures and tools to facilitate the work of counsellors.

2.3 Creating the right environment

Meetings should always take place in a comfortable environment that is conducive for building a trustful relationship with the migrant. Some basic principles related to the delivery of services to migrants are represented in the scheme by C.K. Prahalad, the so called 'DART' model. Taking these principles into account is a precondition for building the right image and the organisation's credibility. In relation to return counselling, this means:



Note: The 'DART' model is used by Fedasil in their training modules for counsellors.

Other practical tips:

For the organisation – arranging the counselling space

- You can try to approach migrants outdoors in public areas, but avoid having in-depth conversations in public. Instead, find a quiet and neutral space where you can sit down to talk to the migrant.
- Make sure that the person can easily make an appointment, e.g. by providing a free telephone number, and provide free consulting hours that are clearly communicated, e.g. on an info plate outside the counselling office.
- Make sure that the person can easily find the office space, e.g. by putting a name plate outside the office, and, if applicable, in the corridors of the building.
- Make sure that other people cannot hear what is said during the meeting.
- Make sure to provide a dedicated space where people can sit inside while waiting. The waiting room, counselling space and desk should be orderly.
- Avoid long waiting lines for the migrants; this can be ensured by having a focal point for intakes and a schedule with separate time slots for counselling meetings.
- Provide a replacement in case of absences.
- Avoid overloading the migrant with too much information in the office, e.g. by placing too many posters around or allowing external noise in.
- Provide some toys or colouring books for children.

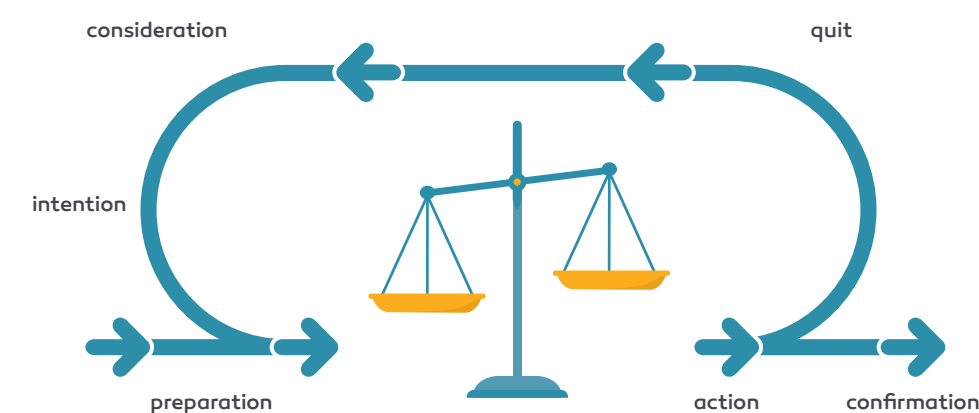
For the counsellor

- Be clear about who you are, what your role as a counsellor is and what you can and cannot do. State clearly what your limitations are.
- Wear neutral clothes – no police uniforms or visible weapons.
- Stay neutral – do not give your personal judgement about decisions or actions taken by the migrant, e.g. why they have decided to stay in Europe illegally, or why they have worked without a permit.
- Be authentic in what you say, give the person your full attention and look at them while talking.
- Be responsive; provide answers to questions within a specified time period, or refer the migrant to another service, if applicable.
- Avoid disturbances (phone calls, interruptions from other people). If needed, establish ‘speaking hours’ when you do not wish to be disturbed.
- Give migrants something ‘tangible’ once the meeting is over, e.g. a visiting card, a note with the date of your next appointment, etc.

- Establish an internal reporting system about all the counselling sessions you have held with the person to:
 - ensure continuity of the counselling meetings;
 - show that you really captured their key concerns;
 - use when meeting with other counsellors to ensure consistency;
 - have a back-up in case of the (unexpected) absence of a counsellor.

2.4 Understanding sequential decision-making

Decision-making is always a process. Depending on the particular circumstances and personal characteristics, a temporary relapse in the decision-making process might occur. The below sequence can also be identified while migrants are considering the option of return.



Source: A scheme used by Fedasil in their training modules for counsellors.

What does it mean for return counselling?

- **Consideration:** The person is aware that they have to reconsider their plans for the future. At this stage, they are not yet willing to have a real dialogue on return. The counsellor should limit guidance to providing basic information, e.g. provide them with a leaflet about available return and reintegration programmes, and be there to answer possible questions and concerns.
- **Intention:** The person actively seeks information, or is more willing to hear about return options. Counsellors can start providing more information about further legal possibilities, mentioning the available return and reintegration programmes.

- **Preparation:** the person starts to take some steps to prepare for a possible return. They collect information about return and reintegration programmes and may contact their family to weigh up pros and cons. Counsellors can provide support here by asking some reflective or exploratory questions, and showing some real examples of return stories.
- **Action:** The person makes a decision and starts taking action to execute this decision, e.g. by signing a declaration to return.
- **Confirmation:** The person confirms their decision through a departure to their country.

2.5 Adapting the communication style

The way counsellors communicate with the migrants should be adapted, following the different decision-making stages mentioned above. This also means that different types of information and levels of support are required at different junctures of the decision-making process.



Source: Based on a scheme used by Fedasil in their training modules for counsellors.

What does it mean for return counselling?

- **Informing:** Counsellors should initially limit themselves to providing *standard* information (e.g. leaflets speaking to the possibility of return), but be available to answer any questions, address migrants' concerns, etc. At this stage, people are not yet in the 'consideration' phase.
- **Dialogue:** For those who are further into the process, or who may have received an asylum rejection by the government administration, counsellors can gradually start to communicate in a more direct way. This can help the migrant better understand their options, legal and irregular, and the consequences of pursuing different paths.

- **Guiding:** At this stage, communication should focus on supporting the migrant in weighing up their possibilities, and based on this, in making a decision to comply or not with a return option.

Counsellors should tailor their communication strategy to each individual situation and the needs of the person, taking into consideration:

- their individual characteristics, and those of the counsellor;
- their administrative status in the European country where they reside; and
- the type of structure or context in which they are living.

In chapter 3, we will elaborate in more detail on the characteristics and types of counselling.

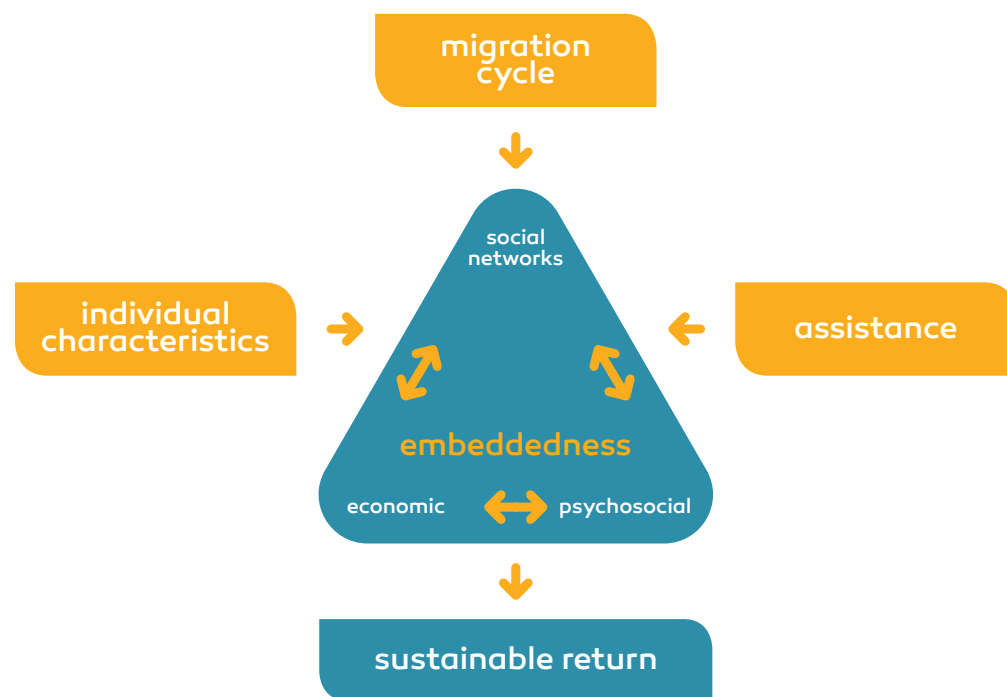
Tips

- Use **everyday language** that the person can understand – avoid jargon!
- Make sure that you are **comfortable with the communication style** used by your organisation. If you are not, you might find yourself at risk of higher 'role stress', which could influence the quality of the counselling session.

2.6 Factors affecting the decision to return

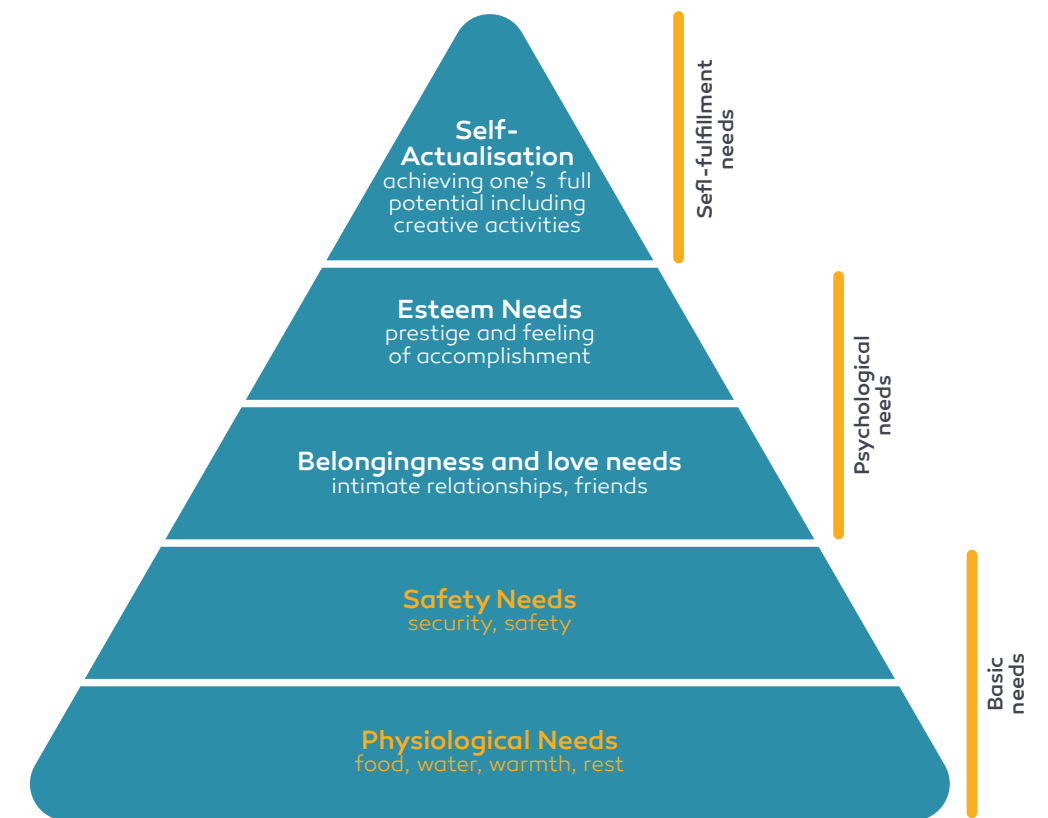
Multiple factors come into play when a migrant considers to return:

- *economic* factors e.g. prospects of earning an income;
- *social* factors e.g. family and friends on whom they can rely on, and the extent to which they are accepted (or stigmatised) by this network;
- *psychosocial* factors e.g. mental wellbeing;
- *individual* factors: e.g. personal skills, resilience, underlying health conditions etc.;
- *assistance* a person can receive: e.g. access to (in)formal social services in the European country, reintegration support in the country of return etc.



Source: Davids and Van Houte, 2008.

Reintegration entails much more than just receiving money to start anew. The individual personality of a returnee, their psychosocial well-being and the availability of reliable networks are also important factors that come into play. This process is also influenced by the needs a person has at a specific moment (see: *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*). Regardless of their cultural background, people first have to fulfill their fundamental, physical needs and feel secure before they can even consider other things or make plans for the future, that is – to possibly return to their home country. This can be achieved e.g. by providing a clear timeframe and explaining the applicable procedures, as it gives people the feeling of having control in the situation.



Source: Maslow's hierarchy of needs; Maslow, 1943, 1954

Keep in mind

- Be aware that people whose core needs have not been met are not mentally ready to receive detailed information, or to have a dialogue on return.
- This is often the case for migrants living on the street, or without any fixed address, whose main concerns are related to immediate survival: finding something to eat or a place to sleep.
- Counsellors working with these groups should first focus on outreach and referring them to relevant social services before starting a more in-depth dialogue on future steps.



3. Return counselling – contexts and structures

Counselling interventions may take place at various stages of any process of applying for international protection, and within different structures. Depending on the particular circumstances, the migrant may be living in an open reception structure, (semi)-closed structure, have a private address, or even remain homeless.

Different settings and varying status of the migrants require different counselling approaches. Each approach requires different strategies, structures, competencies and supporting tools.

3.1 Return counselling in OPEN RECEPTION STRUCTURES

3.1.1 Characteristics

- Various nationalities with different migration backgrounds and different legal perspectives for staying, at different stages of the asylum procedure.
- Migrants staying in an open reception structure might be very reluctant to return or even have a dialogue on return.
- They often have access to multiple alternative sources of information on how they can settle (irregularly or legally) in Europe.
- Many are still awaiting a final decision on their applications. This can make it difficult for counsellors to get the message about the possibility of return across.
- In comparison with other settings, an open reception structure is usually equipped with appropriate facilities to hold counselling meetings. As people's basic needs are taken care of, they may have more time and mental space to reflect on their future.

- It happens that some people do not want to wait for a decision regarding their asylum application any longer, and decide to return because they are disappointed about their life or future prospects in Europe. In general, these groups want to return as quickly as possible.

Given the above, return counselling in open structures is mainly about:

- Informing the migrants about their current options, consequences and risks related to each option;
- Raising awareness on the existence of return and reintegration support (if applicable) and on the possibility to return;
- Motivating the people who have received an official Return Decision to reflect on or to consider a voluntary return to their country, and supporting them in this reflection process.
- If applicable, preparing the person for the return process, or referring them to other services to organise their return.

3.1.2 Communication between counsellor and migrant in open reception structures

Given the different backgrounds of persons staying in an open reception structure, counsellors should adapt their message and advice accordingly.

Information

- The information needed by the migrant staying in these settings will depend on their legal prospects in the Schengen area:

Persons *without* a Return Decision (persons with a pending asylum request, or a suspended court appeal), need additional information about, among others:

- rights and prospects in the European country, and the consequences of their choices,
- the possibility to return and existence of return and reintegration programmes;
- where the person can get more information on, or apply for this option – who to contact;
- the counsellor can already mention that the application for international protection might be rejected and that the migrant could eventually receive a Return Decision. This is particularly the case for people whose countries deemed ‘safe’ (see an EU ‘Safe countries of origin’ list).

Persons *with* a Return Decision, need additional information about, among others:

- rights and prospects in the European country, and the consequences of their choices, including that of not complying with the Return Decision;
- if applicable, perspectives for support within the applicable timeframe: how long a person can have access to accommodation and other services, etc. This will give the migrant a certain feeling of certainty (‘security’).

Options to consider

Depending on the asylum status of the migrant, their legal perspectives in the European country will vary:

- Persons *without* a Return Decision, have to decide whether:
 - to continue pursuing their application for a legal stay in Europe (i.e. asylum application);
 - to choose an option of voluntary return; or
 - to look for alternative (legal or illegal) ways to stay in Europe.



- Persons *with a Return Decision*, have less options and have to decide whether:
 - to comply with a (voluntary) return;
 - to cooperate on their identification (i.e. for obtaining valid travel documents);
 - to look for alternative or illegal ways of prolonging their stay in Europe.

Counsellors can support this reflection process by:

- making a list of pros and cons together with the migrant, weighting the different options, consequences and risks;
- highlighting the difference between a voluntary return (dignified, with a certain feeling of ‘control’ over the process), and a forced return (escorted return under restrictive measures).

Preparing the departure

As mentioned above and in comparison to other settings, counsellors working in open reception structures generally have more the time and appropriate facilities to prepare the person for their departure and reintegration in the country of origin.

3.2 Return counselling in CLOSED STRUCTURES

3.2.1 Characteristics

- Closed reception structures are inhabited by migrants of different nationalities, backgrounds, with different migration stories.
- Some might already have had multiple counselling meetings on return. Others might have followed ‘integration’ activities or language courses, worked with a formal work permit or in the informal labour market.
- Moving a migrant to a closed reception structure can therefore be confusing for the person, and may inspire some protest actions from their local network (e.g. school, former employers, youth organisations, neighbours, etc.).
- Some people might have left their home country several years ago and have complicated relationships with their family circle or other networks there.
- Some may still have a negative image of the ‘past’ and be unaware of any changes in the home country. ‘Returning home’ may imply returning to a country that is ‘new’ for them, and where they have to rebuild social networks.

- Migrants staying in these structures generally have very limited perspectives for obtaining a legal status in a European country. This means that, for most cases, the intended outcome is ‘return.’ It is up to the person to decide how to return: either voluntarily, or by force.

Given the above, return counselling in closed structures mainly concerns:

- prioritising voluntary return through giving information, stimulating reflection, and supporting migrants in making a decision to return voluntarily;
- achieving maximum compliance from the migrant to cooperate on this return;
- facilitating an effective return: organising the return, or referring them to other services to organise their return and reintegration in the home country, if applicable.

Counsellors working in these structures:

- will often be confronted with resistance to engage in a discussion, which can make it difficult to get the message across; and
- have to be able to work in different timeframes, varying from a very limited number of days to several months.
- need to be able to deal with the migrant’s frustrations and possibly physical or verbal aggression;

Keep in mind

Migrants staying in these structures are often unwilling to cooperate on return. This can be due to the restrictive environment, their past history in Europe and negative experiences on migration routes to Europe. Their tolerance levels may be very low, which means that they can express their frustrations by acting aggressively towards their peers, the staff, or turn their anger against themselves, inflicting self-harm, going on hunger strikes, or even making suicide attempts.

Some of them might look for ways to escape. Others may appear very passive or institutionalised. They may find it difficult to make decisions on even minor issues, or appear disinterested when talking about reintegration plans. For some, this long period of lacking ownership and ‘control’ may be expressed through ‘strange’ behaviour, e.g. sitting very close to the counsellor to find ‘protection,’ appearing very nervous, or being impatient.

3.2.2 Communication between counsellor and migrant in closed structures

Migrants staying in closed reception structures are generally more dependent on their counsellor as their access to alternative sources of information is more limited. Nevertheless, counsellors should be aware that in these structures migrants will still look for, or receive alternative information that can be different from the information provided by the counsellor.

Information

In general, migrants staying in closed structures need information on, among others:

- the counsellor's role and mandate - this is particularly important in this context as it provides the person with more clarity, feeling of 'security' and 'control';
- the situation – questions such as, 'What is going to happen with me?' Explain how long they will stay in the closed structure, why they are there; explain the applicable procedures and law, as well as a daily life in the respective setting;
- the status of their pending procedures for obtaining a legal stay in the European country, where applicable;
- the fact that the migrant received a formal (legal) decision to return;
- the consequences of complying – or not – with a Return Decision;
- future prospects for any children;
- the departure process, and steps to be taken in preparation for return (e.g. an interview with consular services, etc.); and
- the arrival in the country of origin, and possible reintegration services that can be offered.

Options to consider

Migrants staying in a closed structure do not have many options. In principle, they can only choose:

- how they want to return: either without (= voluntary) or with (= forced) restrictive measures/escorts (possible in case of course a forced return);
- the extent to which they cooperate on their identification process; and
- if they wish to (re)launch alternative procedures to obtain a legal stay in Europe.

Counsellors can also support migrants in this decision process by highlighting the consequences (pros, cons) of each option.

Preparing the departure

In these settings, migrants usually have very little time to make a decision and prepare for return. There is a number of practical tools that can help counsellors to support the migrant and to liaise with the administration within this short time frame, when a respective government institution makes all the necessary arrangements for return. More information on pre-departure counselling can be found later on in this chapter.

3.3 Return counselling for irregular migrants OUTSIDE official RECEPTION STRUCTURES

3.3.1 Characteristics

- Irregular migrants often dwell in urban areas characterized by high criminality, poverty rates and insecurity, surviving on informal jobs and housing structures.
- This group is generally distrustful towards local and public services.
- In this context, the working relationship between a social worker and a client often fluctuates or is limited to ad hoc meetings.
- This group consists of people with different migration backgrounds i.e.:
 - irregular migrants who have never applied for a (temporary) legal status and who may or may not have received a Return Decision;
 - persons who have received a Return Decision after a final rejection of their application for protection;
 - persons whose temporary legal status (e.g. temporary visa) has expired.

These people might be already partially or fully settled in a European country. Among them, we identify:

- Those **who intend to stay for a short period**, e.g. transit migrants whose main purpose is to travel further to other European destinations:
 - Many in this group are homeless and lack the most basic things. They mainly get information from their peers both in Europe and in their home countries, or from the networks that provide basic humanitarian services (i.e. volunteers, urgent medical services, NGOs, and possibly even people involved in human smuggling or trafficking).

■ Those **who have been in the country for a longer time:**

- They are generally more settled in their neighbourhood and can receive information from local social or medical services, charity services, the informal job and housing market, religious networks etc.
- They may already have had multiple information or counselling meetings about return if they had stayed previously in open or (semi)-closed reception structures, or from former meetings with social workers. Others might have followed 'integration' or language courses, or have worked informally or (temporarily) formally.

Keep in mind

Counsellors should be aware that when working with this target group, they will be dealing with people in highly precarious situations:

- They may have been abused by their own peers or local citizens, and have little confidence in the system.
- They may have lost contact with their home network or have difficult relationships with friends and family in their home country.
- They may have memory problems ('cognitive impairments') from long periods of homelessness and stressful living conditions, or, in some cases, due to substance abuse.

As a result, they may be suspicious of counsellors and unwilling to talk about their personal situation. They may also have a low frustration tolerance, which means that they can easily behave aggressively towards their peers, staff, or even themselves.

Taking this into account, return counselling in this context mainly concerns:

■ **Making and keeping contact** with the target group in particular through:

- Outreach – to homeless irregular migrants or without a fixed address;
- Assessing their immediate needs and directing them to other services, where required;
- Building a working relationship (making a 'connection').

■ Once a more structured relationship with the migrant has been made, more **in-depth counselling** meetings can take place. The role of the counsellor here is to:

- Get a clearer view of the person's current situation, i.e. living conditions, background, network, pending procedures for legal stay in the country etc.;
- Make them aware of their current situation and the (further) risks of an irregular stay in the European country;
- Provide information about their future legal prospects and refer them to other services where required;
- Start a dialogue on the next steps, and encourage them to reflect on their different options, including the possibility of return;
- If applicable, refer the person to a specialised return desk for more information about return and reintegration services available in the country of origin.

Keep in mind

- Counsellors should be aware that reaching out to this target group mainly happens informally through word-of-mouth channels within the migrants' network, and contacts with multiple local services.
- It is crucial for the organisations and counsellors to develop networks that connect them with the target group, and to build trust that will eventually enable them to refer migrants to the official services.

■ Counsellors working with this target group should be able to:

- Undertake outreach work to build a 'connection' with the target group. This can be done through direct contacts, or contacts made via a local network of stakeholders, i.e. social workers on the street, local police, social services in homeless shelters or hospitals, etc.
- Adapt their counselling style to the person, their different features and varying background.
- Deal with the potential frustrations and aggression of the migrant, and adapt their communication style
- Build a network of stakeholders to refer migrants to for further support (i.e. urgent medical care, food, return possibilities and procedures, etc.).

The counsellor must have good knowledge of interaction techniques for social work and intercultural dialogues.



3.3.2 Communication between counsellor and irregular migrants

Information

- Return counselling for this target group is part of a more 'holistic' or multidisciplinary counselling approach (i.e. on return, legal stay, social/urgent medical care, rights in the European country, child support, etc.).
- For people suffering from memory loss, more time for outreach and counselling should be factored in. Counsellors will often have to repeat their message to ensure that the information is really captured by the migrant

Options to decide on

In this context, decision-making process largely depends on the characteristics and background of the migrant. For target group, the wellbeing of the person, especially when it comes to people living on the street for an extended period of time, is the key for counselling. One should always aim at developing a connection and creating enough trust to be able to refer the migrants to the official services in the relevant European country.

Preparing the departure

Due to the lack of available ID documents, the precarious health situation of the migrant, impulsive decisions taken by the migrant etc., the risk that they cancel their application for voluntary return can be high. As they may have lived for a long period outside the formal structures in the European country, and often have moved within this country – or even within several countries in Europe – it might take some time to trace the necessary documents to prove their identity.

3.4 PRE-DEPARTURE (reintegration) counselling

When a person decides to comply with their return, some preparatory steps need to be taken. They will require information on:

- Travel documents required – e.g. ID card, laissez-passer, or other administrative requirements;
- Travel logistics, i.e. when and where to meet at the airport, travel itinerary, luggage that can be taken, assistance in transit airports, etc.;
- Arrival at the airport in the country of return; and
- If applicable, reintegration services that can be provided.

Tips

- Encourage the migrant to contact their family/social networks in the country of return
- Be aware that persons who have been abroad for a long period may have complicated relationships with their family in the home country (e.g. certain financial expectations such as remittances may not have been met, or debts that have to be paid)
- Help to facilitate this contact if required e.g. by providing access to a phone so that they can call their relatives, particularly for those in a closed reception centre where their communication channels are more restricted
- Allow enough time for finalising administrative and logistical issues. They may need help with terminating rental contracts, selling belongings that cannot be taken back, compiling school certificates for minor children, etc.

Talk with the migrant about their plans once they are back in their home country:

- Which city or area they want to go to?

- Who will pick them up at the airport?
- Where can they stay during the first days after arrival in the country of return?
- What are their plans for settling back in their country, and re-establishing their independence?
- What other immediate needs must be addressed upon arrival (i.e. medical follow-up, etc.)?

(With regard to children returning with the family, see Chapter 4 – *Preparing minors for return*).

In cases where the person is eligible for reintegration support in the country of return:

- Talk about how the migrant can use this support to settle back, or refer them to a more specialized reintegration counsellor. In the ERRIN country leaflets (www.returnnetwork.eu/resources), you can find practical information about the service partners in the country of return, and the reintegration services offered;
- Ensure that the migrant is well informed about the conditions and procedures to follow to receive this reintegration support (*See Annex 1: Checklist for counsellors for the pre-departure counselling of reintegration cases*).



- Ensure that the local reintegration service partner is informed about the arrival well in advance prior to departure: *Who will arrive, where and when* (date, flight number), any *immediate needs* to be addressed upon arrival, *contact number* (in the country of return) of the returnee and their family if available, etc.
- Do not forget to inform the returnee about changes in the application for post-arrival/reintegration support, i.e. in the assistance that can/cannot be provided at the airport, etc.
- Be aware that the amounts available for post-arrival/reintegration support are often limited, so keep expectations realistic and do not make (detailed) promises about the services the migrant will receive back in their home country.

- Be aware that wrong information provided prior to the departure, or wrong expectations about the reintegration services, will only lead to a lot of frustration once the migrant has landed back in their home country. These frustrations might only delay and complicate the reintegration process.

It is crucial that the services (return travel and reintegration services) function well and can be provided within a reasonable timeframe. This is in particular the case for:

- the organisation of return travel;
- the preparation and activation of the post-arrival/reintegration services: i.e. quality of the information provided before departure, duration for the approval and activation of reintegration plans after arrival in the return country, quality of the counselling and referral services provided in the country of return, etc.

The quality of these services, as perceived by the migrant, will strongly influence the overall credibility of a return and reintegration programme within the target group, and consequently, also the credibility of the counsellor during return counselling meetings with the migrants in a European country.



4. Preparing minors for return

4.1 Challenges

When preparing the return of a family with minors, counsellors have to be aware that the children also need to be prepared for the move. For minors, the return implies huge change in their lives.³

This might mean that:

- They have to leave the familiar environment, eg. a house, accommodation, school, village/ city, teachers, etc., their caretakers and friends.
- They will arrive in a country or surroundings that might look partly or even completely new for them: i.e. another neighbourhood, climate, language, housing, people, noises and smells, rules at school and at home, dress codes (i.e. for girls), etc.

These enormous changes can be very confusing and stressful for children, and can make them feel 'insecure' or to an extent even 'lost'. This might be expressed in behavioural changes (i.e. unadapted or problematic behaviour, aggression), or psychosomatic complaints (i.e. stomach pains, nightmares, bedwetting, etc.).

Moreover, counsellors should be aware that many of these children (6+ years) might have been raised or born in Europe, and have been living in different places in Europe, i.e. collective open or closed reception facilities, temporary/irregular housing in big cities/transit areas, etc. This implies that they often 'culturally' behave just like European children, and do not always have a (strong) link with the country of return. Hence, they are not always aware of the local norms or values in the country of return, and do not always have an appropriate knowledge of the language (writing/speaking) used at schools.

³ Based on the basic principles of the psychology of the child

As a consequence, they will need some time to adapt to the new environment in the country of return, different climate, food and local attitudes (i.e. norms, values and dress codes). This is especially the case for young adolescents and girls. Because of their 'strange' (European) behaviour and language accent, they even might feel some additional burdens in being accepted by the children in their new school and environment. As establishing friendships (feeling of belonging to a 'group'), are fundamental elements in the overall socio-emotional development of a child or adolescent, this might have repercussions for their self-confidence and self-esteem, and hence their overall wellbeing at a later age.



When preparing a return of a family with minor children, counsellors should also give sufficient attention to the wellbeing of the children and support the parents/ guardians in preparing their children on their return. Crucial for this well-being is that these children have a certain sense of 'security' or 'control'. This means that things have to be in a certain way 'predictable' for them (they have to know and understand what to expect), and that they have the feeling of 'autonomy' or being 'involved' (they are also heard when making choices).⁴ This counselling must be adapted to the age of the minor.

4.2 Tips for preparing minors for moving to another country

■ Children between 3 – 5 years

Children at this age are not yet able to build real friendships with other children and are in general still very connected to their caregivers, i.e. parents and teachers. At this age, they still need a lot of physical affection (i.e. hugs, sitting on someone's lap, etc.) and responsiveness to have the feeling of being 'protected' and 'appreciated'. Cognitively, they are not yet able to think abstractly or in a chronological way, or to see details.

Tips

- Tell the child what will happen without giving too many details. Visualise your message by making a simple drawing with a flat/simple figures, or by using a 'comic sheet' with fantasy characters, i.e. animals.

4 Deci E.L. & Ryan R.M., *Self-Determination Theory* (2000)

- Let the child draw too so that he/she can process this new information (i.e. drawing of a plane, etc.).
- Be responsive (to build/keep a 'connection'), answer their questions raised at different times. Children at this age need some time to process the information they receive, and will keep their questions about things that they do not really understand they might ask at a different (unexpected) moment.
- When talking to children of this age, be sure that your face and eyes are at the same level as theirs, i.e. kneel down when talking to them, and take their hand, or put your hand on their lower arm (to make 'connection'). Small children do not like it when you stand in front of them and (physically) look down at them.

■ Children between 5 -7 years

At this age, children are still very connected to their caregivers (they are their 'heroes'), but they also start to establish their first real friendships. Cognitively, they start to think in a more 'chronological' way'.

Tips

- Visualise your message, i.e. by using a simple comic book with fantasy characters (i.e. animals).
- Help them to understand the timeframe: i.e. visualised (with pictures) in an agenda, a countdown calendar, i.e. when they have their last day at school, when they have their goodbye party, when they will go to the airport, etc.
- Let them draw to process this information.
- Again, stay responsive to questions raised at different times.
- Make sure children can say goodbye to their school friends and teachers (i.e. via a goodbye party at the school, collecting addresses via a 'friends' book', photo book, etc.).

■ Children between 7 – 12 years

At this age, establishing more deep friendships (belonging to a 'group'), becomes more and more important for the overall wellbeing and development of the child. Cognitively, children are now able to think in a more chronological and abstract way.

Tips

- Explain in more detail what will happen. At this age, you can do this for instance via comic books (with realistic pictures). Tell them clearly that the decision taken by the government (i.e. a Return Decision) is completely independent from the child's behaviour, school results, etc. At this age, children might indirectly project certain events (i.e. a decision to return) on themselves and 'take responsibility' for what has happened (i.e. *'It is my fault that we have to return, because I did not achieve high results at school'*).
- Be clear on the timeframe, i.e. by showing them an agenda with some key words.
- Give them white papers or note books for making drawings or notes at other moments to process this information, or to express their feelings or fears.
- Make sure children can say goodbye to their friends, to collect addresses and photos, etc.
- Ensure that school documents (i.e. about their school grades) are collected and translated into the formal language of the country of return. In this way, the child can more easily start again in a new school in the country of return, without 'losing' too many school years in comparison to other children at their age (which might jeopardise their overall self-confidence).

■ + 12 years

At this age, youngsters will distance themselves a bit more from their caretakers (parents), and will mainly rely on their friends and peers. Having deep friendships and belonging to a 'group' is fundamental for their well-being and their development into autonomous and self-confident adults.

Tips

- Explain what will happen, why and when. Tell them clearly that the decision of the government to issue a Return Decision is completely independent from their behaviour, school results etc., and of their parents decisions. Children at that age might i.e. perceive that it is their 'fault' that their parents did not obtain a legal status in the European country, or blame their parents.
- For this age, you can support your message via different tools, eg. comic books, apps, etc.
- Foresee enough time to talk about their concerns and the way they perceive their future, stay responsive and remain available for their questions.
- Make sure they say goodbye to their friends, to collect or update their contact details, for example via social media, a personalised photo book, etc.
- Ensure that school documents are collected and translated.

5. Organisational support

Return counselling is not always an easy task. Counsellors often deal with sensitive cases, resistance, frustrations and lengthy legal procedures, which often create an uncertain working environment for them. Moreover, they have to work in a context where migrants will also receive alternative, sometimes conflicting, information from other actors or informal networks. It is therefore vital that counsellors have the necessary support to remain credible towards the target group. Organisations can support counsellors in their daily work by having a clear strategy, adapted structures, and tools.

5.1 Strategy

Overall

Organisations should have a clear strategy on:

- The mandate and role of the counsellor: the function, objectives, terms of reference, limitations, i.e. the type of information or action that can or cannot be provided, such as legal counselling, advice on temporary shelter, etc.
- The message to be provided to the target group, as well as the communication style and approach, i.e.:
 - a pro-active approach, where the initiative comes from the counsellor to start the dialogue on return, i.e. by inviting or going to the migrant for a meeting, or by going to spots where migrants often come together;
 - a re-active approach, where the initiative has come from the migrant, and where the counsellor's action is only demand-driven, based on the migrant's request.
- How to counter resistance: i.e. the availability of reintegration assistance can support counsellors to start a dialogue with migrants about the possibility of returning voluntary, or to address certain concerns coming from the migrant, i.e. regarding housing, income, etc.

- How to incorporate the expertise from staff on the ground for the design and improvement of projects, i.e. by regularly having multidisciplinary (intra-organisational) meetings.

Open reception facilities

Organisations should have a strategy on how to use key moments. Key moments can, for instance, be the different stages of the asylum procedure, where an interaction between a counsellor and migrant can be especially convenient.

ADVANTAGES - key moments

For the migrant:

- It will make the process more predictable: *'they will know what to expect'*.
- It will give a feeling of certainty and 'security', which will create an openness to receive new information (i.e. about return and reintegration programmes), or to have a dialogue on how they see their future.

For the counsellor:

- It will give some handgrips (framework) to guide counselling meetings.
- It will give the counsellor and the migrant the feeling that return counselling is a shared task of the whole organisation, and not just of the counsellor.
- It will ensure a minimum of continuity and consistency in the messaging, even in the case the migrant stays at multiple reception facilities during their asylum process.

For the organisation:

- It will ensure that return counselling is embedded in the whole asylum procedure, regardless of which reception facility a migrant stays in.

Irregular migrants staying outside reception facilities

Organisations should have a strategy on:

- How to identify and locate the migrant group: This can be done for example by working together with other stakeholders that already have access to or a relationship with the group, i.e. social and free medical services in large cities, first aid services at hospitals, 'community guards' in cities, etc.

- How to contact the migrant group (outreach): i.e. direct outreach on the street, together with intercultural mediators, through intermediary organisations (civil society), through existing services that are in contact with the target group and are already embedded in the city, through setting-up clear referral flows to counselling services (i.e. return desks) with these services, etc.

5.2 Structures

Organisations have to provide the necessary structures to create the appropriate environment for counsellors to conduct counselling sessions and to support them in their daily work.

Tips on how to provide these structures

General

INFORMATION

- Provide up to date and easily accessible information on return and reintegration services and procedures to follow.
- Organise a pool of counsellors or experts who can act as a focal point (i.e. in the reception facilities, in the city, etc.) and further disseminate relevant or updated information on return and reintegration to other colleagues or stakeholders.
- Make reintegration 'tangible' for counsellors, so that they know what they are talking about: i.e. by giving them instant feedback on the reintegration of the cases that they have been involved in, or by bringing them in direct contact with reintegration counsellors from service partners, i.e. via phone conferences or during visits from service partners to Europe.
- Arrange an internal reporting system to guarantee back up, facilitate self-learning, etc.



TRAINING

- Develop an introduction or training programme for new counsellors: i.e. training courses, assigning a mentor (an experienced counsellor) to the new counsellor.
- Facilitate mutual exchanges among counsellors (intra-organisational, intra-sectoral) to share experiences (good and bad), to ensure a minimum of consistency in the messaging to migrants, to promote self-learning, to improve counselling methods, to share experiences on how to handle certain complicated cases, and to collect (bottom-up) input for the improvement of or design of projects.

WELL-BEING

- Pre-plan time and space in the working scheme for counsellors to (informally) interact with each other and to ventilate if necessary, i.e. by having fixed coffee breaks during the day.
- Facilitate access to psychological support for counsellors, if needed.
- Foresee a safety protocol for counsellors, e.g.:
 - an adapted lay-out of the counselling space, i.e. let the counsellor sit with their back to the door or a corridor so that they can immediately leave the room, if needed;
 - the presence of other counsellors or back office colleagues in the counselling space,
 - (gender) composition of counselling teams working on the street or conducting home visits;
 - interactive trainings on how to deal with verbal and physical aggression.

ASSESSIBILITY of Services

- Make counselling services sufficiently accessible to migrants.
- Work or cooperate with native counsellors or those familiar with the language, culture or context of the country of return. Be aware that working with native counsellors can raise suspicion among migrants, or set the loyalty of the counsellor versus the expectations of the counselling organisation.

In OPEN and CLOSED reception facilities:

- Create an environment in which migrants' basic needs (food, shelter, water, hygiene) are met, and in which migrants can keep a minimum of autonomy in the exercise of their daily lives.

For example: avoid a hostile environment and try to create a good (friendly) atmosphere in the reception facility. Minimize risks of conflicts with other residents, give access to cooking facilities, let the migrant bring their kids to school on their own, etc. This will avoid the person becoming too passive ('institutionalized') in the exercise of their daily life and will enhance the person overall well-being. This will make it easier for the counsellor to have a dialogue with the migrant on how they see their future.

- Assign an individual –if possible the same – counsellor to each migrant or family, to maintain continuity and build a relationship of trust ('connection').
- Provide migrants access to social services (and/or dedicated NGOs) who can be seen as neutral actors providing information.
- Ensure that return counselling is not only the task of a social worker or counsellor in the reception facility, but that it is supported by the whole reception facility. Other staff members (logistical staff, medical staff, etc.) working at the reception facility should be aware of the existence of return and reintegration programmes, and be able to refer migrants to the appropriate actors (i.e. a return counsellor).
- Design an internal communication plan on: i.e. who the focal point and back-up are, which information has to be shared with other services in the facility, how to disseminate this information to these services (i.e. intranet, bimonthly update at team meetings, etc.), and how and when refer migrants to the focal point, etc.

OUTSIDE reception facilities



- Work from a multidisciplinary approach in which return counselling comprises part of a more 'holistic' counselling to the migrant: i.e. about social rights, child support, access to urgent medical care or social aid, (referral to) legal counselling, etc.
- Make counselling services easily accessible: i.e. have desks at a reasonable distance from areas where many (homeless) irregular migrants live or come together, or are regularly (i.e. biweekly) present 'on the spot' (e.g. at food aid and distribution services, churches, temporary shelters, services for urgent medical care, railway stations, parks, near Wi-Fi access and phone charging points).
- Have dedicated (familiar) staff (or pools of staff) for counselling sessions. This will allow migrants to more easily recognise the counsellor and to facilitate building trust ('connection') between them.
- Plan enough time for counsellors to establish contacts with the migrant (outreach), to have several meetings with them, to listen to their concerns (i.e. the space to 'ventilate'), and to create an environment of trust in which the counsellor can have an in-depth dialogue on their current situation and their future prospects (i.e. return).
- Set up a clear referral process that social workers or counsellors can use to refer a migrant to, i.e. a return counselling desk.

PRE-DEPARTURE counselling

Crucial for the credibility of the counsellor and the overall reintegration programme, is that they can prepare the return and reintegration of the migrant effectively and efficiently.



- Establish clear procedures for counsellors to apply for reintegration services in the country of return: i.e. who to contact, how to contact them (contact details), eligibility criteria, amounts that can be allocated, forms that have to be completed, etc.
- Ensure that the return travel can be organised within a reasonable timeframe, and that the reintegration services for which the returnee applied can be effectively and swiftly (with minimum delay) activated.
- If possible, give instant feedback to the counsellor on the reintegration process of the returnee. This will make the process more realistic (tangible) for the counsellor. Moreover, counsellors can use this feedback as 'examples' (return stories) when having counselling meetings with other migrants.

5.3 Tools

Have adapted tools to support counsellors in their outreach towards and counselling with the migrant group. More specifically, it concerns:

- equipment that counsellors can use to make themselves identifiable ('recognisable') towards the migrant. For example: a badge with the logo of the organisation, jacket of the organisation, i.e. when making house visits or doing outreach on the street.
- up-to-date, factual and easy to understand information sheets/ data systems for counsellors and ensure that counsellors can easily have access to these sheets. This information material should contain relevant background information on:
 - For example return programmes, procedures to apply for return or reintegration services, reintegration possibilities in the country of return, contact details for more information, etc.
 - Other information about specialised services to refer migrants to, if needed, i.e. for urgent medical care, services for potential victims of trafficking, etc.

- information tools (brochures, apps, etc.) that counsellors can give to migrants to support their message during counselling meetings. Ensure that the format of these information tools is adapted to the context in which the counsellor has to operate, i.e. small business cards are more discrete than leaflets, when doing outreach to irregular migrants staying in public areas.
- visual aid tools that counsellors can use to explain return or reintegration programmes: i.e. posters, videos, comics and testimonies from other returnees (success stories).
- 'self-service' tools that migrants can use (and share amongst themselves) to inform themselves about possible return or reintegration services (giving autonomy to the person): i.e. movies via YouTube, Apps, free hotline numbers, etc.

In open and closed reception facilities:

Work with semi-standardised counselling formats that give counsellors a basic outline or guidance to structure or support their counselling meetings, and to ensure a minimum level of consistency in these meetings. Formats should be adapted to the different steps in the asylum process, and should give enough space for the counsellor to adapt their interaction to the context and individual characteristics of the migrant.

At the pre-departure counselling stage:

- Provide updated information about the service partner and available post-arrival/ reintegration services.
- Provide semi-standardised forms for counsellors to request or apply for post-arrival/reintegration services and to assemble the necessary information about the returnee needed by the service partner to provide (immediate) assistance upon the returnee's arrival in the respective country.
- Be clear on the information a counsellor has to provide to the migrant prior to departure to manage the expectations of the migrant and inform them on how to activate the requested post-arrival/reintegration services in the country of return (See Annex 1).

6. The impact of COVID-19 on return counselling

Counsellors often have to work in a continuously changing context that requires a lot of flexibility and creativity from their side. Special circumstances, such as the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, are a challenging period for all first-line organisations providing services, aid or education. This is also the case for services in Europe providing return counselling, or services in countries of return that provide reintegration support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges both for return counselling and migrants themselves. These include:

- the impact of the situation on the general well-being of the counsellor and the migrant;
- concerns about infection risks (health risks) when having counselling meetings;
- lack of clarity and certainty for counsellors and migrants on what will happen, for example:
 - uncertainty about the near future and possible concerns about the impact of/ or direct consequences of COVID-19 on their private life.
 - clarity about legal future perspectives of the migrant in the European country, i.e. because of longer lasting asylum procedures, etc.
 - clarity about return and reintegration services that can be provided: i.e. borders that are or can suddenly be closed, flights that are not available or suddenly cancelled, possible obligation of strict quarantine periods after arrival in the country of return, reintegration counselling services that can be suddenly temporarily suspended, etc.
 - concerns about risks for the near future in case of a return of the migrant, i.e.:
 - health risks for the migrant in case of a return to countries that are (highly) affected by COVID-19;
 - how COVID-19 will impact the daily life of citizens in the respective country of return, i.e. economically (i.e. lesser job or business opportunities, increasing prices, etc.), stability of and access to health care services, fragile political contexts, changing or negative attitudes of the (local) society towards returning labour migrants.

- lesser accessibility of counselling services:
 - face-to-face meetings that are temporarily suspended (or replaced by digital meetings), meetings that can only take place after appointment, lesser possibilities for more pro-active counselling meetings, etc.
 - counsellors might currently have other urgent priorities, i.e. awareness raising towards migrants about COVID-19 preventive measures, supporting them with urgent basic needs (i.e. food packages), looking after the overall (mental) well-being of their clients, conflict prevention and stress reduction, possible interventions within i.e. families e.g. in cases of intra-familial violence, child abuse, negligence, etc.

Organisations can support counsellors during this specific period by:

- Adapting the structures and providing/installing sufficient protection material at the counselling desks (masks, hand gels, cleaning products, plastic plates between the counsellor's desk and the migrant's chair), adapted cleaning protocols, etc.
- Reorganising office hours and internal office structure: i.e. providing only counselling meetings via appointments, limiting the number of persons that can wait in a waiting room and establish an internal rotation system for when counsellors can work at the counselling desk (to respect hygiene rules).
- Systematic providing of up to date information on:
 - return possibilities to the respective countries of return: i.e. availability of flights, access to the borders or landing permits, additional conditions for entering the country (i.e. mandatory COVID-19 tests/ quarantine period), etc.
 - accessibility of reintegration services provided in the respective country of return, and/or additional measures to take by the migrant to access these reintegration services: i.e. only reachable by phone, possible delays in case handling, limitations in the reintegration services that can be provided (i.e. trainings that are temporarily suspended), etc.
 - possible alternative systems of reintegration services that can be provided (i.e. cash assistance via money cards, additional support to the returnee to overcome periods of quarantine upon arrival in the country of return, etc.).
 - instant feedback on the cases that have returned and reached out for reintegration support (service partners updating the counsellor on the situation of the returning migrant).
- Paying attention to the overall mental well-being of the counsellor and the migrant.

7. Monitoring of return counselling

Typically, (irregular) migrants do not stay at the same address during their stay in a European country. They move from place to place (different reception facilities, private houses, etc.), and possibly also to other European countries. During their stay, they are in contact with, or have counselling meetings with multiple (social) services or counselling organisations. This makes it difficult for governments to follow up and have an encompassing monitoring system on the counselling provided to migrants during their stay in Europe.

Nevertheless, counselling organisations can rely on certain indicators to monitor their services. The findings can be shared or discussed with counsellors or other stakeholders to get a better understanding of the results of their counselling activities.

7.1 Examples of QUANTITATIVE indicators

For a counselling organisation

■ Overall

- Number of migrants who received information about the opportunity to return during an individual or group counselling meeting,
- Number of individual return counselling meetings with a migrant who did not yet sign an application to return (or who did not yet make a decision to return),
- Number of migrants who signed an application to return voluntarily, and
- Number of migrants who departed via a voluntary return programme to their country (country of return).

■ For open or closed reception facilities

- Number of migrants who absconded from the reception facility after having at least one counselling meeting.

■ For counselling services to irregular migrants staying outside reception facilities:

- Number of migrants who received information about the possibility of return during an individual meeting with a social worker or counsellor (from i.e. a welfare organisation, social service at a hospital, local NGO, via outreach on the street, etc.),
- Number of meetings during which a social worker or counsellor was able to have a dialogue with the migrant about the possibility to return voluntarily,
- Number of migrants who disappeared, or no longer attended meetings with the social worker or counsellor, i.e. to ask for support or to talk about any issue or topic (i.e. daily life, support for kids, information for social or medical services), or to continue the conversation about the opportunity to return.

For the OVERALL monitoring of counselling services in the European country:

- The number of migrants with a pending or rejected asylum request who received information about the possibility of return during an individual or group counselling meeting.⁵
- The number of migrants who formally proved that they left the Schengen area, i.e. their return travel has been paid by the government, or where was a formal proof of registration from a border control at an airport (i.e. for migrants who paid their return travel themselves).

7.2 Examples of QUALITATIVE indicators

Qualitative indicators can be used by organisations to assess the quality of their counselling services provided to migrants. This can be done for example via:

- assessments of:
 - the *conditions* provided by the organisation to support counsellors in their daily work, i.e. structures and tools, and
 - the *individual counselling meetings* conducted by counsellors.
- collecting feedback from returnees and service providers in the country of return about how they perceived the quality of the counselling services provided prior to their return.

⁵ In case the organisation works with 'key moments,' during which return counselling is provided, there is the assumption that all migrants with a pending or rejected asylum request have had at least one counselling meeting about return possibilities.

8. Contact

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ANNEXES practical manual on return counselling

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1. Checklist for counsellors for the pre-departure counselling of reintegration cases

This checklist gives an overview of the **minimum information** that should be provided to a person in a European country who is preparing his reintegration in the country of return. Providing correct information to a migrant prior to departure on the reintegration services he/she can receive once back in his country, and the steps to be followed in order to benefit from these services is crucial for the overall reintegration process of the returnee once back in the country of return. Giving correct information about the return travel and the procedures a person has to follow to benefit from reintegration services, will make the whole process more 'predictable', give the returnee the feeling of having 'control' of the situation, and making this return less stressful. Be aware that providing incomplete or incorrect information to a migrant prior to departure about reintegration services that can be received once back in the country of return will only raise wrong expectations and many frustrations from the returnee and his dependants towards the service partner, and in the end also delay the provision of reintegration services to the returnee.

More detailed information about the service provider in the respective country of return, and complementary country-specific points of attention can be found in the ERRIN country briefing notes.

1. Information about the return travel and arrival in the country of return

- Date of the return travel
- Flight information (flight number, airport destination, etc.)
- (Volume of) luggage that can and cannot be taken
- Where to meet at the airport in the sending European country (if applicable)
- Contact details and opening hours for the reintegration service partner in the country of return
- If airport assistance in the country of return is requested: Where to meet the reintegration service partner at the airport⁶
- Documents should be kept at the airport to present afterwards to the reintegration service partner (e.g. ID document, boarding passes, etc.)
- Documents that are preferably already prepared and formally translated in English, or in the formal language of the country of return:
 - School certificates for children, birth certificates of children born in sending country (or other European country)
 - Medical certificates if medical follow-up is required
 - Certificates of previous work experience if applicable

⁶ When requesting airport assistance upon arrival in the country of return, or onward transportation, be sure that the returnee will not already be picked up by i.e. family. In case of changes (i.e. airport assistance is not anymore needed, or the service provider is not able to pick up the returnee at the airport), do not forget to inform all the parties about these changes!

2. Information about the procedures to follow to receive reintegration support in the country of return

- Once arrived in the return country, returnees must contact the SP themselves.
- The returnee has to bring his/her **ID document** during the first meeting with the SP, and if applicable any other document provided by the responsible authority in the European country (e.g. confirmation of eligibility for the programme or allocated amount).
- The **eligibility** of the returnee for reintegration services, and allocated amounts are not defined by the SP but by the responsible authority in the European country.
- If not yet confirmed, the SP will verify with the responsible authority in the European country whether the returnee is eligible for the reintegration service, and the amount that can be allocated. This process can take a few weeks.
- The SP can only provide **in-kind** assistance, and not cash⁷ (except as otherwise stated by the responsible authority in the European country).
- The reintegration amount can only be used for purposes directly linked to the **reintegration** of the returnee⁸ and not for buying food, drinks, payment of debts or luxury items.
- The allocated reintegration amount will be exchanged from EUR (or the currency of the respective sending country) to the **local currency**. Differences in exchange rate and banc charges will be deducted from the reintegration budget. Please note that in some countries this currency may fluctuate widely.
- Costs made by the SP before or upon arrival⁹ of the returnee will be paid via the allocated reintegration amount.
- For some countries, taxes should be paid on the allocated reintegration amounts. These taxes should be paid from the returnee's reintegration budget (i.e. in Ukraine, Russian Federation, etc.).
- The SP will prepare **reintegration plan** with the returnee on how the allocated reintegration amount will be spent. This plan has to be approved by the responsible authority in the sending country before the allocated amount can be spent. This approval can last a few weeks.

⁷ This means, for instance, that the SP directly pays the allocated amount to the pharmacy, shop, etc. or that he reimburses the returnee, based on formal proofs of payment. Important: this type of grant might differ from in-cash amounts provided at the airport in some European countries.

⁸ For instance: housing, courses, schooling for children, medical treatment, medical examinations, purchase of medication, income generating activities (i.e. micro-business), etc

⁹ For instance: onward transportation, temporary housing, (continuity) of medical care. Note: transport costs made by the SP, i.e. for going to the airport or to conduct field visits to the returnee's place, will not be deducted from the allocated reintegration amount

□ The SP has to justify the spending of the allocated amounts to the responsible authority in the sending European country, and will follow-up on the reintegration of the returnee.¹⁰ All expenses should be made within 12 months after the departure date in order to be reimbursed by the responsible authority in the sending country.

- Persons will **not** receive reintegration support in the case that they:
- do not provide the SP the requested proofs of payment
 - do provide incorrect information to the SP
 - they act aggressively towards the SP

In case of complaints about the SP case worker, the returnee can contact the hierarchy of the SP, or his contact person from the responsible authority in the sending country.

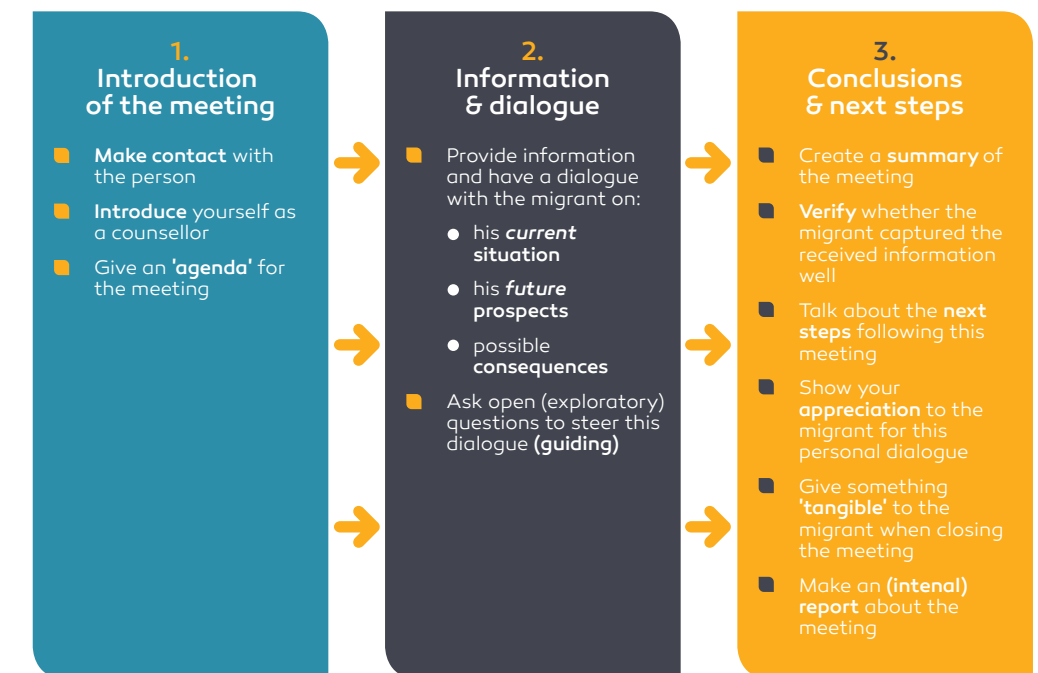
¹⁰ The expenses incurred by the SP will be controlled by the responsible authority in the sending country via reports and other supporting documents (i.e. proofs of payment, pictures of the purchased material, etc.).



2. Basic outlines for individual counselling meetings with migrants on the option to return

These formats give some ‘handgrips’ for counsellors to start/have a dialogue with migrants on the option to return. Counsellors can use this format as a basic outline to talk with migrants on their current situations, to inform them on the remaining perspectives (inter alia a ‘return’ to their country), and to support them in taking a decision on the way forward. The topics in this format can be handled during one or more meetings, depending on the available timeframe, context and characteristics of the person. The order of the subtopics might differ, depending on the profile and characteristics of the person – and the counsellor. Expected duration of this meeting: 30 – 45 min.

Overall outline of an individual counselling meeting



What can you say during the INTRODUCTION of the counselling meeting?

<p>Make contact with the person</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show your appreciation to the migrant for coming to this meeting. Thanks them for responding to your invitation. Coming to the meeting means that a step has already been taken. When a person comes on their own initiative, ask what brings them to the meeting. Try to <i>'break the ice'</i> to make contact ('connection') with the person and ask 'easy' questions. Talk about practical issues in the reception structure (i.e. where they can find certain material in the reception centre), the weather, the kids, etc.
<p>Introduce yourself as a counsellor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first time that you talk with the person, introduce yourself, your role and the organisation for which you work. Be transparent and explain what you can do and what certainly you cannot. Be clear on your limitations and on the expectations the person can have, and explain what information you (as a counsellor) can share or not with others (confidentiality). If applicable, explain that your role (i.e. as a voluntary return counsellor) might change, i.e. in case the counsellor is also in charge of the preparation of a forced return. If needed, repeat again your role and limitations during other follow-up counselling meetings.
<p>Give an 'agenda' for the meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In case the person comes to the meeting on your request, you can ask him what they expect from the meeting, i.e. to check which information they already heard from other peers. Explain the purpose of your meeting, and give an 'agenda' (outline) so that the person knows what to expect ('nothing else will happen'). Having an 'agenda' for the meeting will also give the counsellor some guidance ('control') about the outline of the meeting. Explain that you would like to talk with them about their current situation, and possible perspectives – and ask for permission (giving feelings both of 'certainty' to the person and of having 'control' of the meeting). In case the person comes on their own initiative, you can ask what they would like to talk about – or whether they would like to talk about their current situation or prospects. Note: in some cases, the person will automatically start to talk about their past, i.e. to 'ventilate'. Tell the person they do not have to take a decision today and be clear on the applicable timeframe and time limits, and on what will follow or what they can expect, i.e. how long they can stay in a reception structure, when they must take a decision on next steps (i.e. complying with a return), etc. By being transparent on this, you give again a feeling of 'control'/'certainty' to the person. If needed, repeat this information during other follow-up counselling meetings as well.

'Handgrips' for providing INFORMATION and having a DIALOGUE

For this part of the meeting, the counsellor can make use of a *'cross road'* method, which is a mix of *monologues* from the counsellor (to provide information), and *dialogues* with the migrant (to direct and guide the person in making a decision). The content of this part of the meeting will vary depending on the status of the migrant's procedure (i.e. asylum procedure or other applications for a legal stay in a European country).

Note: If the person does not want, or is not able, to continue this dialogue, close the meeting and invite the person to talk further on this issue another time. Always close a meeting when a person gets (verbally) aggressive. Continue (or restart) your meeting at another time, if possible.

- For migrants with a **pending suspensive appeal** against a negative decision on their asylum request

Note: can also be used for persons from a *'safe'* country included in the 'EU list of safe countries of origin' who are waiting for a decision on their application for international protection.

<p>Conversation about CURRENT situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk with the migrant about their current legal status or pending procedures. Tell them what you know about their current procedure(s) and/or check the status of these procedures together with the migrant. Make the migrant aware of the fact that the decision on their asylum request might be positive (refugee status or subsidiary protection), or negative (rejection of the asylum request). Check whether the person understands their current situation and procedure(s), and correct if needed.
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<p>Conversation about FUTURE perspectives of the migrant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give information about the remaining options for the person and explain the consequences of each of these options (+, -). Make it concrete, and give examples relevant to the respective person. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'You are waiting for the final decision on your asylum request? Did you already think about the decision you might receive? Or have you already thought about the outcome?'</i> • <i>'Do you have any idea what will happen when you have a positive decision?'</i> • <i>'Are you already thinking about what you are going to do in case the decision is negative?'</i> • In this case, you can refer to supporting programmes to return voluntarily and (if applicable) to receive reintegration support in the country of return. Ask the person for permission to give more information on these programmes (again, giving the person the feeling of having 'control'). • Make it concrete by using examples, i.e. parallel stories of previous clients, return stories, etc. Support your message by referring to the sources (being transparent to the person) where they can find this information, or check these sources, i.e. internet website, folder, etc., together with the person. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'There are specific programmes that can support people who would like to return to their country, and that can provide these people some support to settle again in the country. Would you like to hear more about this?'</i>
<p>Dialogue and guiding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once you have informed the migrant on their possible options, ask open (exploratory) questions to start a dialogue. • Asks the migrant how they feel about the information they received. • Explore how they think about their future (near, mid-term, long-term future). • In case the person does not want, or is not able, to talk about real plans, you can ask him what their plans were when they came to Europe. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'What makes you want to live in country x? What do you think you will be doing within 6 months, within 2 years? What do you think your family (and kids) will do?'</i> • Ask the person what their plans are in case they are not able to obtain a legal stay in the European country. • Talk with him about possible obstacles they see (or feel) to returning i.e. concerns, feeling of safety, being accepted or not by the family or local network (i.e. feeling of shame, failure of the 'personal migration project'). • Explore how they can find new goals with them (and their family) and ask them to think about it. Here, you can also talk about other persons (i.e. previous clients) you met with a similar story. • Show your appreciation of what the person already has done, or stresses their personal strengths. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'Coming to Europe via an alternative way, and staying for a long period in a reception structure means that you can be very brave and have a lot of perseverance.'</i>

- For migrants with a **final rejection** on their application for international protection (asylum request)

Note: can also be used as a 'handgrip' for counselling migrants staying in a closed reception structure. These meetings might take longer, up to 45 – 60 minutes per counselling meeting.

<p>Conversation about CURRENT situation migrant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with the person about their current procedure(s). Tell them what you know about this and/or check the status of these procedures together with them. • For example (in case the migrant is in a closed reception structure): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'Do you know what causes you to be here in the centre?'</i> • Make the person aware of the fact that the final decision on the asylum request is negative. • Check whether the person understands their current legal status or pending procedure(s), and make sure they are aware of this current reality before going to the next step. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'You received a negative decision. Do you know what it means?'</i> • <i>'Did you expect to receive this decision?'</i> • <i>'Does this decision affect your plans?'</i> • <i>'Do you know what you are going to do now, or did you already undertake any actions?'</i> • In case you have already had a conversation with the migrant on this decision, you can refer to what has already been discussed during a previous meeting. This will give you an idea on how the person looks back on the previous meeting, and on the options or perspectives that have already been discussed. • For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'Did you talk with other people about our previous conversation?'</i> • <i>'Have you been thinking about the previous conversation?'</i> • <i>'Did you talk with your family about this decision? What did they say, what was their reaction?'</i>
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Conversation about FUTURE perspectives migrant

- Give **information** about the current options for the migrant and explain the consequences (+, -) of each of these options.
- For example:
 - *'This rejection of your asylum request must be difficult for you (show empathy). We can talk together (giving 'ownership' to the person) about the options you have in this situation.'*
- You can **visualise your message** by drawing the different options on a piece of paper, or by writing some key words on a paper and giving this paper to the person when closing the meeting, in order to make it more 'tangible.'
- When explaining the possible options for the person, also be clear on the **consequences** of not complying with a return. Consequences if not complying with a return can be i.a.:
 - forced return¹¹;
 - re-entry ban;
 - no access to social services and/or accommodation in the European country;
 - economic or physical abuse while staying illegally¹² in the European country, or when trying to move to another European country;
 - application of the Dublin procedure.
- Refer also (or again) to the existence of supporting **voluntary return** and (if applicable) **reintegration** programmes. Make it concrete and adapted to the case, i.e. by referring to some examples of parallel stories. Ask the person to think about this
- For example:
 - *'There are specific programmes that can support people who would like to return to their country, and that can provide these people some support to settle again in their country. Would you like to hear more about this?'*
- Support your message by referring to **sources** where the person can find this information (giving 'control'/'ownership' to the person), or check these sources (i.e. website, flyer, etc.) together with them.

¹¹ In case a return by force is not possible, make the person aware about the fact that this reality can always change.

¹² Examples of the risks of illegal stay: reduced social support or no access to formal services, risk of financial abuse by lawyers etc., risks of financial/physical abuse by irregular house owners, illegal employers, human smugglers etc., risks of 'fake' stories that can create false hope, etc.

Dialogue and guiding

- Once the person has received the information on their possible prospects, ask **open (exploratory) questions** to start a dialogue.
- You can ask **how they feel** about this to start a dialogue.
- Try to explore **how they think** about his future (near future, mid-term, long term). In case the person does not have or does not talk about real plans, you can ask them what their plans were when they came to Europe.
- For example:
 - *'What makes that you want to live in country x? What do you think you are doing within 6 months, within 2 years? What do you think your family (and kids) will do?'*
- Talk with the person about what they still have, how they can find **possible new goals** for themselves (and their family). People are often 'stuck' in their dream of the past. Try to explore what brought the person to Europe, and how they can reorient their initial goals. What could it be? What are the possibilities, and pros/cons (+, -)?
- Here, you can also talk about other persons you met with a similar or **parallel story**: i.e. persons who were in the same situation, or completely 'stuck' in their illegal stay in the country/Europe.
- Talk with the person about **possible obstacles** they see (or feel) to return: i.e. concerns, feeling of safety, being accepted or not by the family or local network, feeling of shame or failure about the *'personal migration project'*, etc.
- Show your **appreciation** for what the person has already done, or stress their personal strengths, i.e. coming to Europe via an alternative way and staying for a long period in a reception structure means that the person can demonstrate a lot of perseverance.

How can you CONCLUDE or wrap-up the counselling meeting?

Summarise the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reformulate or summarise what has been said. Check whether the person captured the provided information well, correct them if needed and ask whether they have questions.
Talk about the next steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a list with next steps with the person (inclusive time-frame) or ask them what the next steps can be ('to stay in touch with the person', or 'to keep the door open to plant new ideas'). For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'How would you like to continue from here?' Here you can also make an 'agreement' with the migrant. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'You try to contact your family, and I will verify' (i.e. a specific topic of information).' Make an appointment for a next meeting, or give your contact details (and office hours) during which the person can reach you.
Show your appreciation to the migrant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask for feedback from the person about the meeting. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'How do you feel about this meeting?' Thank the person, or show your appreciation for having this personal dialogue with you, and give them something 'tangible' to close the meeting: i.e. a note with a short summary of next steps, a flyer, a note with a next date for a meeting, etc.
Make an internal report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make an internal report about the meeting.

3. Practical tips for having group information sessions on return and reintegration programmes

One method to reach persons to inform them about return and reintegration programmes is conducting 'group information sessions'. These sessions can be used to reach large group of migrants, or to pave the way for more in-depth individual counselling meetings at a later stage. The average duration of these group session is about 55 minutes (30 minutes presentation + 25 minutes questions & answers).

These sessions can be given together with a counsellor from a local service provider providing services to returnees in the respective country of return. ERRIN can provide support to Member States to facilitate these meetings, i.e. by inviting representatives from its service providers to Europe.

Step 1: Preparing the group information session



As you work with a group of people that have to cope with (long periods) of living in an unsecure and hence stressful situation, certain (underlying) frustrations might influence the group dynamics of these information sessions. Therefore, good preparation for this type of information session is crucial!

Practical tips for preparing a group information session

- Limit the number of participants for this information sessions. Sessions with 10-15 persons (adults) are ideal for remaining able to manage the dynamics in the group.
- Work in tandem with another colleague/counsellor when giving this information session.
- Define the scope of the group information session and focus also on topics other than return.

For example: 'Giving practical information about prospects after the asylum procedure.'

- Define the target group. You can do this, for example, per language (mixed group of nationalities), or per nationality, i.e. in case you invite a reintegration counsellor from a service provider.

- Define the agenda for the information session.
- If possible, invite external speakers to support your message. These are preferably persons with a neutral background, i.e. a reintegration counsellor from a service provider (i.e. via video conferencing, or visits in the European country). It is not recommended to invite a formal representative from the government from the respective country of return, as some groups of migrants might be very distrustful towards them.
- Be sure that you have a quiet space with internet access where you can sit together at a reasonable distance from where the target group for this session lives, i.e. in a reception structure, or at meeting points where many irregular migrants come together. Alternatively, you can reserve some time slots during other meetings or courses where groups of migrants already come together, i.e. language courses.
- Invite the migrants to the group information session. Be clear in your invitation about the agenda of the meeting so the migrant can know what to expect. In this way, you stay transparent and authentic (trust building).
- If possible, invite migrants in different steps, i.e. via:
 - a written note (to make it *'tangible'*): i.e. about 1 week before the meeting
 - one or more oral (individual) invitations prior to the meeting, i.e. one day before the meeting
 - If applicable, talk a few days before the information session with the informal *'leader'* (or *'spoke person'*) of the group. Be aware that these *'group leaders'* might strongly influence their peers, i.e. whether they will go or not to this information session, or the atmosphere (groups dynamics) during the information session.
- Prepare some tangible communication material (tangible) to disseminate to the target group during or when closing the meeting, i.e. posters, flyers, visit cards, contact details, note books, etc.
- In case you organise this information session in a reception structure, ensure that the other staff in the centre are also aware of this event. This will make *'return and reintegration programmes'* more *'tangible'* towards other staff in the reception structure. Migrants staying in the reception structure often have a different relation with i.e. logistical staff in the facility, and might feel themselves more comfortable talking with them about their future plans or concerns. Other staff (logistical staff, medical staff, etc.) working in the facility should know that this information session is organised, so they can refer the migrant to the appropriate staff member (counsellor).

- In case you give this information session together with a reintegration counsellor from a service provider, give him a briefing prior to the meeting about: (1) the agenda of the session, (2) the purpose of the meeting, and (3) the characteristics of the group. Arrange also a translator if necessary, so that you can understand his interaction with the group and support him if needed.
- Reserve some timeslots in your agenda for individual follow-up counselling meetings during the first days after this information session.

During the group information session

- Plan a timeslot to welcome everybody, and to talk individually with some participants in the session. Also try to talk again individually with the informal *'group leader'* (or *'spokesmen'*) of the target group *'to smell the atmosphere'*.
- Introduce yourself and the other speakers.
- Thank the participants for attending the information session.
- Give an agenda for the information session. For instance: *'First, we will explain to you the asylum procedure again, and afterwards we will talk about what will happen once you receive a decision.'*
- Be clear on your role: on what you can do, and what you cannot.
- Keep the provided information general and do not lose yourself in details. Practical details can be further elaborated during individual counselling meetings in the course of the first days after the information session.
- Stay focussed on the scope of the meeting, keep it practical and avoid talking about sensitive topics such as religion, the political situation in the country of return, etc.
- Try to make real contact/connect with the group, i.e. by also walking around in the group during your intervention.
- Visualise your message and make it concrete, i.e. by showing pictures, movies, etc. Here you can also give examples of similar cases or persons that you've met before (return stories), showing a picture of the staff working at the local service provider in the country of return, etc.
- When talking about reintegration services, be aware that the amounts available for reintegration assistance are limited! Keep expectations realistic and do not automatically make promises about services the person will receive in the country of return. The availability and assignment of these services depends on

various factors, such as the profile of the person, the network and capacities of the service provider, the actual circumstances in the country of return, etc.

- Be aware that some migrants might be suspicious towards their own citizens in their home country, and hence also towards the reintegration counsellor from the service provider. In this case, you can stress that your government authority (in the European country), controls the expenses incurred by the local service provider, i.e. via field visits, reports, etc.
- Support your message by showing the sources where people can find the communicated information.
- Plan for some time for questions and answers (about 15 minutes).
- When closing the meeting, again thank the participants for attending the information session, and give them some (tangible) material, your contact details and office hours.
- If possible, have a short individual talk with some participants just after the meeting to hear their first impressions about the meeting. Try to also talk again with the informal 'group leader'.



In case of severe group dynamics (i.e. verbal aggression/ disputes) during the meeting, close the meeting and have bilateral follow-up meetings with the participants in the first few days after the meeting.

After the group information session

- Try to keep contact with the participants during the first few days after this session, i.e. by inviting them to have an individual dialogue on the topics presented during the information session ('to keep the door open').
- If possible, have also a talk with the informal 'group leader' to hear what the main reactions from the participants were.
- Give an internal report or briefing to the other counsellors working in the reception structure about how the meeting went. This will enable them to refer to, or further build on, the topics discussed during their individual counselling meetings with the migrant.

4. Practical tips and examples of methods to support counsellors in their dialogues on return with migrants

Having a dialogue with migrants on the opportunity to return is not always easy. Counsellors can use certain methods to visualise on a paper the topics discussed during these dialogues.

a. Examples of methods

Visualise the 'options'

This method can for example be used when having a dialogue with persons who received a rejection of their asylum request, or for persons who already stayed for a longer period irregularly in Europe.

Visualise on a sheet of paper the different options the migrant currently has, and talk with him about the consequences (pros/ cons) of each of these options.¹³

¹³ The alternative is to hang some papers with these different options on the wall and to ask the person to stand in front of the option he would opt for (to make persons physically move to these different options).



Example on visualising the options

Option 1



Option 2



Option 3



Option 4



Exercise about how to get out of a 'box'

This method can be used when you have a dialogue with persons who have already been irregular in Europe for a long period of time, and who already made many attempts to obtain a legal stay in Europe.

Draw with a pen on a paper a person standing in a circle or a 'box'. Via this drawing you can visualise how a person can have the feeling of *being stuck* in a certain situation. Then draw some arrows to visualise possible options to get 'out of this box'. You can make this drawing together with the migrant (giving 'ownership' to the migrant). When closing the meeting, give this drawing to the migrant ('tangible') and keep a copy with you so that you can refer to this drawing again at a later moment.

Example about the exercise of 'getting out a box'



Visualise on a 'lifeline'

Another method you can use for this specific target group is the exercise of the 'lifeline'. Draw a lifeline on a piece of paper. Ask the person to indicate (or draw) on this lifeline some important events in their lives: i.e. when and where they were born, where they were raised, when they left their country, how long they have already had a temporary (irregular) stay in Europe, what their expectations are for the future (in the short term, medium term, ...)



Age							
0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	>70

b. Practical tips for interaction techniques for counselling meetings

When having in-depth dialogues with migrants on return or other prospects, counsellors need to have a basic understanding of interaction techniques. In the text below, you can find some generic interaction techniques.¹⁴

→ Ask exploring questions

By asking exploring questions, counsellors can get more insight into how a person sees their future, what their initial goals and plans were, etc.

Important is that these questions do not raise resistance on the side of the migrant, and that the person does not get the feeling of being 'judged'. To avoid this, you can formulate your questions in such a way that they invite the migrant to give a more **precise answer**. This can be done by asking **'open questions'**, starting with words as:

What ...

When...

Where ...

How ...

Who ...

Important herein is that you **avoid using questions that start with 'WHY'**, as they will raise a lot of (underlying) resistance on the side of the person you are talking with.

Examples

Instead of asking:

- *'Why do you not want to think about a return?'*

You can ask: *'What makes you think that you cannot return to your country?'*

- *'Why did you come to country X?'*

Alternatively: *'What makes that you currently live in country X?'*

Or even more precisely: *'What were your plans when you came to country X?'*

- *'Why does your family not want that you go back to them?'*

Alternatively: *'What was the reaction of your family when you talked with them on a possible return?'*

Or even more precisely: *'What did they say, which makes that you have the feeling that they do not support your return?'* *'What was your reaction towards them?'*

Here, you can also start your sentence with a **verb**. By using 'verbs' at the beginning of a question, you will automatically limit the scope of your question and invite a person to give a more descriptive answer.

Examples

- *'Can you clarify what made you decide to ...?'*
- *'Tell me more about ...'*

In addition to these 'open questions, you can also use some **'closed' questions**, to generate a more specific answer.

Examples

- *'Do you agree with this?'*
- *'Do you prefer this option, or the other option?'*
- *'Do you think you would also do this yourself?'*

Further, you can also ask some questions to talk about how a person **feels** about certain issues or decisions that have been taken.

Examples

- *'How was this decision for you?'*
- *'What did you find difficult?'*
- *'How do you feel about this?'*

¹⁴ Source: Inspirerend coachen, Jef Clement (2015)

→ Reformulate and summarise

Another technique for the coaching of persons is **reformulating or summarising** what a person said. By doing this, you will automatically receive a reaction, a correction, or some complementary information from the person.

Examples

- *'We already talked about 3 options: option 1 ..., option 2 ..., option 3.... Is this correct?'*
- *'Do you mean that ...?'*
- *'Do I understand well that?'*
- *'Is it correct that I hear you saying that?'*
- *'You said that you find it difficult that?'*
- *'What you are in doubt about, is?'*

→ Talk about 'feelings'

Talk also about **how a person feels** about what has been said, or about a certain decision that has been taken. By doing this, you will automatically show empathy and establish more trust in your working relations with the migrant. This will encourage them to be more open to you and tell you more details. By adding also a personal note to your questions or comments, you will even create more openness and trust.

Examples

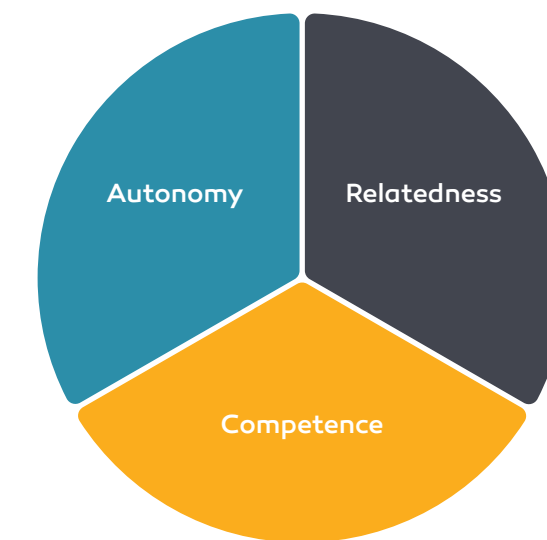
- *'I think it is not easy when'*
- *'This would also make me angry'*
- *'I understand that you are very disappointed about'*
- *'I can imagine that you are worried about'*

Talking about feelings does not mean that a counsellor has to do something with this. Most important is that people have the feeling that someone wants to take the time to listen to their concerns, and that they feel appreciated in how they are. Be aware that some people might be hesitant to talk about their feelings, i.e. because of cultural barriers, characteristics of the person, etc.

c. Practical tips to prevent or reduce aggression towards counsellors

Migrants with no clear prospects in a European country in general have to cope with long periods of high stress, and do often not have clear perspectives on what will happen in their near and mid-term future. This will often create the perception that they have no 'control' over their own situation, which can be expressed in anxiety, frustration or even (verbal) aggression.

Regardless of where people live, they have some fundamental psychological needs¹⁵ that have to be fulfilled for their overall wellbeing and good functioning in society.



→ Autonomy

People need to have the feeling that they can make their own choices, or take their own decisions on, i.e. the organisation of their daily life. This autonomy will give people the **feeling they have 'control' over their own situation**. For example: where they want to go to (i.e. visit a friend), who they want to meet, what they want to do, how they want to organise their living space, how they want to earn an income, what they want to tell/ share with others (i.e. with a counsellor), etc. People who do not perceive they have 'control' over their own situation, will feel frustrated, and will/can translate this into anxiety, nervousness, passiveness, anger, etc.

→ Relatedness

People need to have the feeling of **'being connected' with others**, and being accepted. They need to have people for whom they can care, but also have the feeling that they really matter for them, i.e. with their families, neighbourhood, etc. People who do not have this 'sense of belonging' will feel lonelier, more anxious, etc.

¹⁵ Based on the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

→ Competence

People need to have the perception that they can develop themselves ('self-development'), and that they are effective in dealing with their neighbourhood. For example, via studies, a profession, a business or specific skills they are proud of, or are worthwhile for them. Having the ability to develop themselves will make people more **self-confident** and active. People who do not perceive this possibility of self-development will have less self-confidence and will be less active and more frustrated.

Persons for whom these basic psychological needs and/or other fundamental needs are not sufficient fulfilled for long periods will be more frustrated, have a lower tolerance level and less patience. Small incidents can trigger these persons enough to become (suddenly) very angry, or even (verbal) aggressive towards others, and hence also towards counsellors.

Tips to prevent verbal aggression at a counsellor's office

- Have an adapted environment;
- Have a safety protocol for counsellors;
- Ensure that the person has sufficient autonomy in the daily organisation of his life, and/or in the reception facility;
- Adapt your communication style to the person, and be responsive towards them. This will help you to make a 'connection' with the person, and to build a relationship of trust;
- When having a counselling meeting with the person, ensure that the person always has a clear 'agenda' about the meeting, and always ask the person the permission to talk about certain topics. This will give the person clarity about what they can expect from the meeting, and a feeling of having 'control' ('security') over the situation;
- Give a clear signal to the person that aggressive behaviour towards you as a counsellor (and others) is not welcome, i.e. by hanging a poster at a central place in (or near the door of) the counsellor's office with, i.e. a (ludic) message.

In case you are confronted with verbal aggression from a person:

1. Stay calm

Try to stay calm in the way that you behave and also when you talk to the person. Even though you feel that you also are angry, or anxious, try to not show this towards the aggressor. This will help you avoid the situation escalating very quickly.

People often have the intention to copy (mirror) each other's behaviour, so when you stay calm you have a greater chance that the other person will also calm down.

2. Show empathy towards the person

Show empathy to the aggressor, and show them that you have paid attention to their frustrations. This does not mean that you agree with the persons' behaviour or position, but that you recognise their needs and pay attention to their concerns. Pay attention to the person's feelings about their situation. For example, *'I see that you are angry and disappointed, let us sit together and talk about what makes you so angry.'* This way, you show the person that you have paid attention to his frustrations, but that he does not have to express these feelings anymore via aggressive behaviour.

3. In case previous techniques do not work

In some cases, staying calm and showing empathy will not be sufficient to calm down a person. For these situations, it is important that you clearly indicate your own borders towards the aggressor. You can do this by mentioning shortly and factually:

- What you see from the side of the aggressor, i.e. *'I see that you are very angry, and that you are shouting ...'*;
- What you feel about this, i.e. *'It is not possible for me to talk with you like this.'*;
- By offering an alternative: i.e. *'Either you stop with the shouting, or I have to terminate this conversation'*. By doing this, you again give the choice to the person.

In case the situation really escalates, stop the meeting immediately and tell the person clearly that you terminate the conversation, and will continue this meeting another time.

5. Practical measures to prevent migrants absconding from closed or semi-closed structures

Government institutions often put legal measures in place to minimise possible attempts from the migrant to abscond from closed or semi-closed facilities. Migrants that succeed in absconding from these type of facilities, do not generally have legal permission to work or to benefit from social care. This makes that they do often end in very precarious situations or risks of exploitation. Complementary to legal measures that are already put in place, organisations can take some preventive measures in the organisation of the closed or semi-closed facility to prevent absconding by migrants from these types of structures, and to pay attention to indications of migrants preparing such an absconding.

1. Practical measures

Practical measures for the daily organisation of the facility to minimise possible attempts of migrants to abscond from the facility (supported by legal measures):

By the organisation:

- Install frequent reporting requirements, i.e. daily reporting moments.
- Assign an individual case worker to the resident to build a basic relation of trust.

By the individual case worker/ counsellor:

- Have frequent individual meetings with the resident: in the office (on invitation, or retro-active), and 'house' visits at different moments of the day (pro-active).
- Establish informal contact meetings with the migrant to 'keep in touch'. This can easily be established in environments where people have to closely live together, i.e. in collective centres.
- Talk with migrants in a neutral environment, i.e. in closed settings this is, for instance, outside the cell blocks.
- Give people the feeling of keeping autonomy in their decisions, i.e. in how they organise their daily lives but taking into account the restrictions of the facility in which they live.
- Do not just talk about return, but also on other domains to build a relationship ('connection') with the migrant and to start a dialogue with them. For example, by talking with him about other services in the reception facility (i.e. medical services, logistics, etc.), and about other aspects that are relevant for the migrant (i.e. how it's going in their family, with the children, etc.).

2. Indications of possible attempts to abscond from the structure

Some examples of indications

Individual factors:

- Migrants' current mental state. The risk of absconding is in general lower when people are deprived, or not mentally ready to look for alternatives. But for these cases, the risk of impulsive behaviour might be higher;
- Recent rejection, i.e. of a renewed asylum request, other legal procedure, or other disappointment;
- Recent accusations of wrongdoing, or intimidation by the family or other residents in the facility, distressing visits by friends, etc.;
- Recent disagreement with the conditions in the reception facility;
- Other factors: i.e. composition of the (nuclear) family, age of these family members, health status of the children or adults that does not hinder the family looking for other (irregular) alternative places to stay.

Factors in the direct environment of the person

- Migrant demands, or frequently renews, other legal procedures, i.e. multiple appeals.
- Migrant has a well-established social network (i.e. schools, churches, volunteers, etc.), or is in contact with persons in the neighbourhood who might help with or facilitate their absconding.
- Migrant is in contact with external actors who are promoting the possibility of absconding.
- Migrant is potentially at risk from others in the community: e.g. risk of trafficking, abuse, forced marriage, etc.
- There are 'rumours' from peers with the same nationality about other potential legal prospects in other EU countries (i.e. 'asylum shopping').
- There are signals that the migrant is engaging in illicit activities or is in contact with criminal activities.

Direct or indirect indications of planning or considering an absconding

- The migrant has a past or recent history of absconding.
- Changing behaviour of the family in the facility, in particular in semi-closed facilities:
 - e.g. one member of the family (mostly the husband) is often absent.
 - the family avoids staying together in the facility, i.e. parents separately report themselves in the facility, or at least one child is always out.
- Migrant gives the impression of being 'too cooperative', or does not give any (emotional) reaction when the counsellor informs him about upcoming return.
- Counsellor cannot get into interaction with the migrant, or there is no engagement from the migrant to have a dialogue with the counsellor.
- There are signals of untruth or contradictory information provided by the migrant.
- Migrant received the news that there might be an upcoming repatriation.
- Migrant seems to prepare to abscond, i.e. belongings that disappear.
- Signals of impulsive behaviour, triggered by other factors, i.e. news from the home country, migrants in the facility that have been returned, etc.
- There are attempts from the migrant to injure himself, i.e. hunger strikes, self-mutilation, etc., for which he has to go to a hospital where it is easier to abscond (in particular from a closed reception centre).



6. Minimum competences of a return counsellor

Counsellors often have to work with migrants who do not have many prospects to choose from. This means that they often have to deal with persons who are very frustrated, that show lethargy, resistance, or are even aggressive. They often might feel themselves to be in a dual position in which they have to find a balance between the needs and expectations of the migrant, and the requirements of the organisation or legislation.

This list gives an overview on the basic competencies, skills and attitudes a return counsellor should have to cope with this situation, and to be able to start a dialogue with the migrant on his perspectives.

Knowledge

The counsellor:

- has knowledge on the basic principles of asylum, migration and EU law, and knows where he can find additional information;
- has a basic knowledge on existing projects (return, reintegration, other) to which a migrant can be referred;

- is able to find information on pre-departure procedures, and has more information on applying for post-arrival (reintegration) services provided in countries of return.

Skills

Communication skills

The counsellor:

- is able to make use of communication and interaction styles, adapted to the context:
- works with (external) translation services;
 - makes contact with (connection) and open dialogue with migrants;
 - gets in contact with stakeholders and persons within his own organisation;
 - communicates with the target group on a simple, understandable and focused way;
 - communicates with the migrant in an authentic and respectful way;
 - gives attention to non-verbal communication (body language);
 - gives his communications to the specificities of the target group and the purposes of the process; and
 - takes into account intracultural differences.

Analytical and methodological skills

The counsellor:

- is able to use a systematic and methodological approach, focusing on the orientation of the migrant;
- is able to identify or assess the situation of the migrant, collect and analyse objective (official) information on how this situation can be addressed (future, legal prospects), and use this analysis to inform the migrant on their (legal) prospects and have an interaction on this;
- can negotiate with the migrant, and stimulate or support them in: exploring, recognising the current situation, and their (legal) perspectives and needs, and in making a decision on how to address these needs and to set new goals (i.e. in the country of return);
- is able to detect resistance by the migrant against return, to detect the underlying reasons or obstacles for this (economic, network, psycho-social, other), and to come up with tailored solutions within the framework of available tools (i.e. reintegration packages); and

- is able to make use of supporting tools and provide input for, or contribute to, the development of these tools, i.e. cartoons or web-tools.

Coping skills

The counsellor:

- has sufficient resilience and is able to keep a professional distance from the migrant;
- is able to work in settings where people closely live together, and to find therein a balance between closeness and professional distance;
- can be realistic on their limits, on what they can and what they cannot do;
- is able to cope and stay calm during stressful situations, dilemmas or possible aggressive situations, to look for the support of his team and the organisation, and to make use of the tools and procedures provided by the organisation to deal with these situations; and
- is able to cope with having a 'dual role', i.e. being 'in-between' the migrant and policy instructions or law.

Organisational and reporting skills

The counsellor:

- is able to report (written, oral) on the outcome of the meetings with the migrant, and the future steps to be taken;
- is able to have interactions with migrants in a limited timeframe;
- is able to build a network of, and to work with different stakeholders to refer migrants to, to look together for practical solutions, and to work in a system of chain management; and
- is able to control his workload (time management).

Attitudes

The counsellor:

- can create an environment of trust and confidentiality;
- is flexible and stays reliable on what they can do, and on what they cannot;

- stays consequent, objective and neutral;
- does not make any distinctions based on the migrant's characteristics or ethnical background;
- is aware of his personal versus organisational values; and
- Is eager to learn permanently, as an individual, and as a team.

