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## The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2003: an evaluation

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The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2003 is designed to assist failed asylum applicants, those awaiting a decision and other groups who wish to return to their countries of origin in an orderly and dignified manner. It includes assistance with travel arrangements and the option for reintegration support in the country of return, which may include assistance with small business development, employment or vocational training. VARRP 2003 is an extension of the Voluntary Assisted Return Programme (VARP) which has been operating since 1999. It is co-funded by the Home Office and European Refugee Fund and implemented by the International Organisation for Migration in collaboration with three partner agencies (Refugee Action, North of England Refugee Service and YMCA Glasgow) and more than 30 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) throughout the UK. VARRP 2003 ran from March 2003 to February 2004. The results of the evaluation of VARRP 2003, carried out jointly by Deloitte MCS Consulting and the Home Office, are summarised here.

### Key points

- There were 2,640 applications for VARRP 2003, representing 3,685 individuals. This is 95% higher than the number of applications for VARRP 2002 which, in turn, was 10% higher than for VARP 2001.
- The most frequent return destinations were Albania, the Czech Republic, Sri Lanka, Iran and Iraq.
- Applicants' friends continued to be the main source of referral to VARRP although their role has declined since 2001. At the same time, the three International Organisation for Migration's (IOM) partner agencies have increased in significance as sources of referral.
- All returnees interviewed rated their satisfaction with VARRP's return aspect highly. They particularly mentioned the helpfulness, knowledge and expertise of IOM's staff. Some suggestions about how the programme could be improved included greater publicity for VARRP and additional funding to help returnees.
- The reintegration aspect continues to be developed – 345 returnees started to receive reintegration support during VARRP 2003. Users, those who work with them and those involved in running the programme suggested improvements such as ensuring the types of support offered in different countries of return are more consistent, including help finding work as an option and formalising a well-known, straightforward method of allocating the budget to individual returnees.

Since its inception in 1999, VARP (and now VARRP) has been independently evaluated annually as part of the funding requirement of the European Refugee Fund. These evaluations enable those involved in programme operation and policy development to assess VARRP's current effectiveness and how to maximise this in the future. The VARRP 2003 evaluation included:

discussions with representatives from IOM and its partner agencies, semi-structured interviews with programme users, analysis of management, marketing and procedural information and a comparison of VARRP with the main alternative return option – enforced removal by the Immigration Service.

## VARRP processes

### Box 1 IOM London VARRP processes

**Enquiry** – applicants are referred by partner agencies and a range of other sources including solicitors and refugee support agencies

**Application for VARRP** – an application form is completed, either at the time of initial enquiry or at a subsequent meeting

**Reintegration assessment** – reintegration assistance is discussed at the time of contact with applicants. If they are keen, there is an initial assessment of their integration needs and if the application is successful a copy is passed to the relevant overseas mission

**Confirmation of eligibility** – eligibility to return through VARRP is confirmed by the Home Office and, where the applicant does not have a valid passport, alternative travel documents are obtained from the UK Immigration Service, relevant national embassy or High Commission

**Travel arrangements** – IOM London obtains preferred travel dates from the applicant, books tickets at special fares with a group of travel agents and confirms arrangements with the Home Office, applicant and overseas mission

**Airport assisted departure** – returnees can choose to be escorted to the airport and accompanied to the departure gate by an IOM London caseworker. They must sign a disclaimer produced by the Home Office, discharging them from their asylum application

**Closure of file** – the file is closed for return but maintained if reintegration assistance has been requested. Currently there is no formal process to inform partner agencies or referral partners that a potential returnee has actually returned to his/her country of origin.

The main stages of the VARRP process in IOM London are shown in Box 1. Following this process, IOM overseas missions (Box 2) receive details of all returnees to their countries and aim to contact those who have requested reintegration assistance. In addition, they have an ongoing role to identify potential sources of reintegration assistance.

### Box 2 Overseas mission VARRP processes

**Initial contact** – contact is made between IOM mission and returnee

**Interview and discussion** – the IOM caseworker gathers more details about the returnees' aspirations and guides them through the available options to assist in their reintegration

**Budget** – once an option has been selected, the IOM mission contacts IOM London for budget approval

**Reintegration assistance facilitated** – IOM overseas mission works with the returnee to organise the assistance agreed, such as enrolment on a course

**Monitoring and evaluation of reintegration provision** – this is begun once these activities are completed.

The three IOM partner agencies – Refugee Action, North of England Refugee Service and YMCA Glasgow – are independent charities dedicated to providing support to asylum seekers in the UK. Their remit is wider than VARRP and their aim is to ensure that asylum seekers make informed decisions about their future, based on knowledge of all available options. IOM holds quarterly management meetings with its partner agencies. Feedback from these organisations suggests that they would appreciate more frequent caseworker level contact and details of real-life success stories to inform their work.

## VARRP applications

### Number of applications

VARRP 2003 attracted 2,640 applications, representing 3,685 individuals. This is 95% higher than the number of applications for VARRP 2002 (1,350 applications) which, in turn, was 10% higher than for VARRP 2001 (1,220 applications).

### Return destinations of applicants

VARRP 2003 has assisted 2,635 applicants to return to their countries of origin – 71% of the number of applicants in this period. However, a number of those returning in 2003 would

have applied in 2002 and many of those who applied under the 2003 programme would be returned in 2004. The most frequent return destinations were Albania (27%), the Czech Republic (13%), Sri Lanka (8%), Iran (8%) and Iraq (6%). Over the years the relative volumes of returns to key destinations have varied (Figure 1). Albania has consistently been the most common return destination, but there has been considerable growth in the number of returnees to the Czech Republic, Sri Lanka and Iraq.

### Timing of applications

Application to VARRP can be made at any point in the asylum process. During the 2003 programme, 16% applied while their initial decision was pending, 27% when their application had been refused, 20% while appealing the refusal, 33% when their appeal had been refused and 3% after being granted Exceptional Leave to Remain.

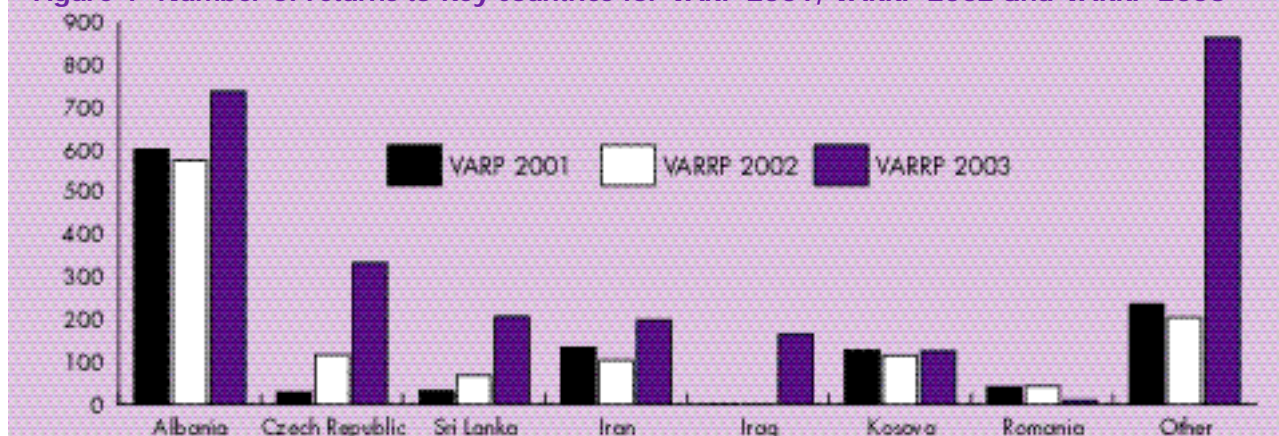
There is significant variation in the stages at which different nationalities apply to VARRP. The largest proportions of returnees to Albania and the Czech Republic applied once their appeal had been refused (41% and 36% respectively). In contrast, the largest proportion of returnees to Iraq (37%) applied while their applications were pending – this may be attributed to the deposition of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

### Sources of referral to and awareness of VARRP

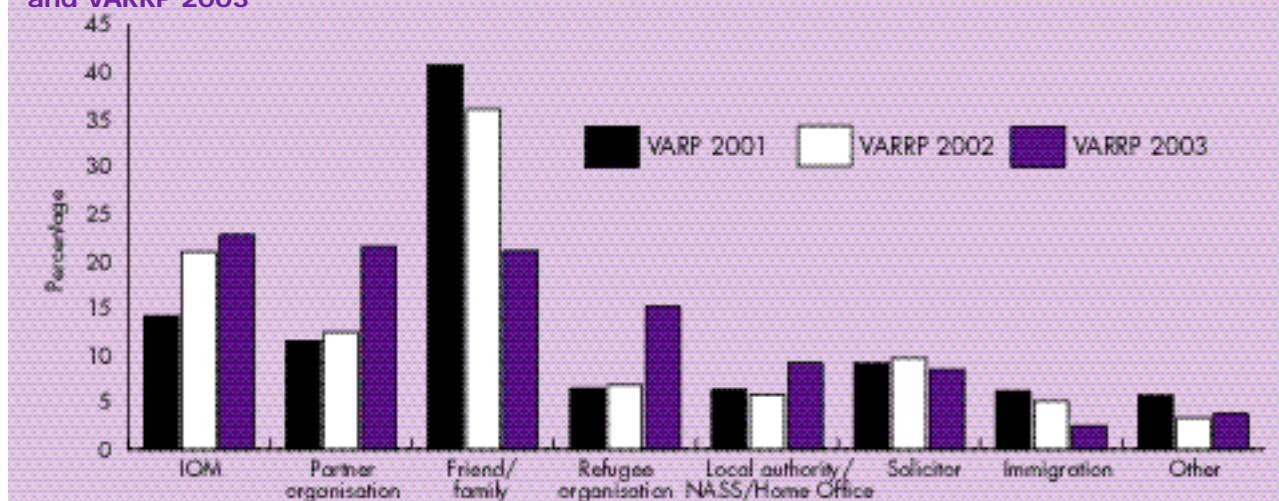
Primary referral sources continued to be IOM (24%), IOM's partner organisations (21%) and family and friends (21%). Other refugee services generated 11% of referrals to VARRP 2003. Local authorities, the Home Office and National Asylum Support Service (NASS) referred 9% of all applicants (Figure 2). This is not representative of individual nationalities, suggesting that the dissemination of VARRP information varies in different communities. Friends were responsible for 60% of Albanian referrals but only 4% to 13% of referrals for return to the Czech Republic, Sri Lanka, Iran and Iraq. Partner agencies were the key point of referral for returnees to Iran and the Czech Republic while, for those returning to Sri Lanka, solicitors were the main source of referral.

The relative importance of IOM and partner agencies as a source of referral has increased since 2001 while the role of friends and relatives has decreased. Of those returning to their countries of origin through VARRP, 41% in 2001

**Figure 1 Number of returns to key countries for VARP 2001, VARRP 2002 and VARRP 2003**



**Figure 2 Sources of referral to VARRP for applicants returning during VARP 2001, VARRP 2002 and VARRP 2003**



and 36% in 2002 were referred by their friends compared with 21% in 2003. Currently IOM's partner agencies cover a limited area of the UK – broader coverage is needed to maximise take-up opportunities.

IOM's ongoing programme to promote awareness of VARRP includes hosting conferences and distributing literature. Interviews with a sample of agencies involved in VARRP confirmed that they have a good understanding of its aims, processes, eligibility criteria and reintegration aspects, and that they have referred and will continue to refer clients. Awareness of VARRP could be increased by greater use of the websites identified as being used by asylum seekers. Some did not contain information on VARRP – the relevant organisations should be informed and appropriate materials disseminated.

### Users' assessment of VARRP processes

In-depth qualitative interviews with VARRP users were undertaken at various points of departure from the UK – a cross-section of flights was selected and returnees were asked in advance by IOM whether they would be prepared to be interviewed about their experiences. Thirteen interviews were held with returnees to Kosovo, Albania and Sri Lanka – most were male, aged between 20 and 40 and without dependants. All the users rated their satisfaction with VARRP as 'excellent' or 'very good'. Most commented positively on the helpfulness of IOM staff and their provision of useful information, the ability to contact staff who spoke their native language and the fact that caseworkers had an in-depth knowledge of the asylum process and the difficulties facing returnees.

Most returnees interviewed could not identify, from their own experience, ways in which the programme could have been improved. A small number suggested there could be greater publicity with more articles in the community press, the inclusion of success stories and greater awareness-raising among Home Office staff. Additional funding to returnees was also identified as a potential improvement, to help with travel costs to the airport.

### Reintegration support

Of the 3,685 individuals who applied to return voluntarily under VARRP 2003, 41% (1,530) also applied for reintegration support. Those wishing to return to European countries were less likely to apply for reintegration support than those returning to Asia, Africa or Latin America.

#### Reintegration support provided

Of the 1,530 applications for reintegration support, 23% were assisted during VARRP 2003. The provision of support to the majority of the remaining applicants was pending their return and establishing of contact with IOM overseas missions.

The nature of the reintegration assistance given to clients differed widely, depending on their needs, options developed by overseas missions and their alliances with NGOs and other organisations. The main categories of help provided were business schemes (55%), vocational training (22%) and education (17%). The type of reintegration assistance provided varied considerably between return destinations. Support received in Albania was mainly in the form of

training, whereas in Sri Lanka the majority of support was in starting up or expanding small businesses.

### Users' assessment of reintegration support

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 21 users of reintegration support in Albania, Sierre Leone and Nigeria. These three countries were selected as they are located in different continents and had either experienced extensive (Albania) or limited (Sierre Leone and Nigeria) uptake of VARRP – differences that might lead to diverse experiences of reintegration provision.

The main difficulties encountered by the returnees were a lack of income and problems associated with obtaining a job and suitable accommodation. While almost half of the returnees were unemployed, others were undertaking training courses, studying or setting up small businesses, with varying degrees of success. Returnees recognised that the importance of reintegration support lay in enabling them to settle initially and lay foundations for their and their families' long term futures. There was some feeling that this positive impact was lessened by the fact that the required amount and types of support were not available. More funding per returnee and the additional provision of assistance with finding a job, through job matching or arranging work placements, were identified as developments that could maximise the impact of reintegration support.

In addition, 33 qualitative interviews were undertaken in four countries of return (Nigeria, Sierre Leone, Senegal and Cameroon) where take-up of reintegration assistance has been low. Interviews were conducted with NGOs, training and employment agencies, education boards, Chambers of Commerce, the British Embassy and the British Council. They considered that:

- the funds currently allocated by the grant are insufficient to cover the cost of higher level vocational and professional training courses
- the small grant hampers the success of reintegration activity when other costs involved in setting up a small business, such as transportation, rent and inflation, are taken into account
- reintegration programmes operating in other countries of origin offer more generous assistance compared with VARRP. This is in the form of 'soft loans' (where the rate of repayment is below the commercial rate) and the inclusion of supplementary income for the initial period of return.

### Cost of VARRP compared with enforced removal

The estimated average cost of VARRP for IOM per returnee in 2003 was £815 (of which £205 is attributable to reintegration aspects). This estimate includes all IOM costs (tickets, IOM escorts, caseworkers, management and office costs) but excludes Immigration and Nationality Directorate costs

associated with the programme. The equivalent average cost of removal by the Immigration Service is estimated to be £12,760 including costs associated with detention and £1,890 excluding such costs. The cost of return via VARRP is significantly lower because IOM is able to secure lower airfares due to its special arrangements with airlines and its lower staff and overhead costs. For those returning voluntarily whilst awaiting an asylum decision, VARRP also secures savings in terms of NASS costs that would be incurred were the applicant to remain.

### Recommendations

IOM should consider:

#### Referral agency communications:

- holding regular meetings between caseworkers from IOM and partner agencies to share experiences, discuss common issues and how to deal with them
- collecting and sharing VARRP success stories to help caseworkers demonstrate what VARRP has achieved for individual returnees
- developing a 'portfolio of opportunities' for each return destination to be used by outreach workers in the UK.

#### Use of websites:

- partner agencies should post up-to-date information on their websites
- IOM could draft and circulate information for inclusion on websites and review these websites regularly.

#### Coverage:

- current partner agencies cover a limited geographical area – IOM should try to identify partner agencies operating in areas such as East Anglia, Wales, the South East (outside London) and South West where VARRP clients are resident.

#### Reintegration assistance:

- IOM should consider formalising a more transparent way of allocating reintegration assistance spend budget to individual returnees, for instance by weighting budgets with the cost of living in the country of return or identifying standard packages of support for particular countries or regions.
- there could be greater consistency in the reintegration assistance provided by IOM across return destinations
- assistance for job seeking could be incorporated, such as the provision of career counsellors or apprenticeships
- an emphasis could be placed on providing practical training in areas where there is a current skills shortage in countries of return.

#### Confirmation that VARRP applicant has returned:

- IOM should consider how partner and referral agencies involved in an applicant's return can be informed of the return of their clients. This would help to reduce the number of open case files and improve the partners' relationship with agencies such as local authorities.

*Elizabeth Clery, Nicholas Daniel and Carlyne Tah are researchers in the Immigration Research and Statistics Service, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. Deloitte MCS Consulting carried out a significant part of the fieldwork and analysis.*