

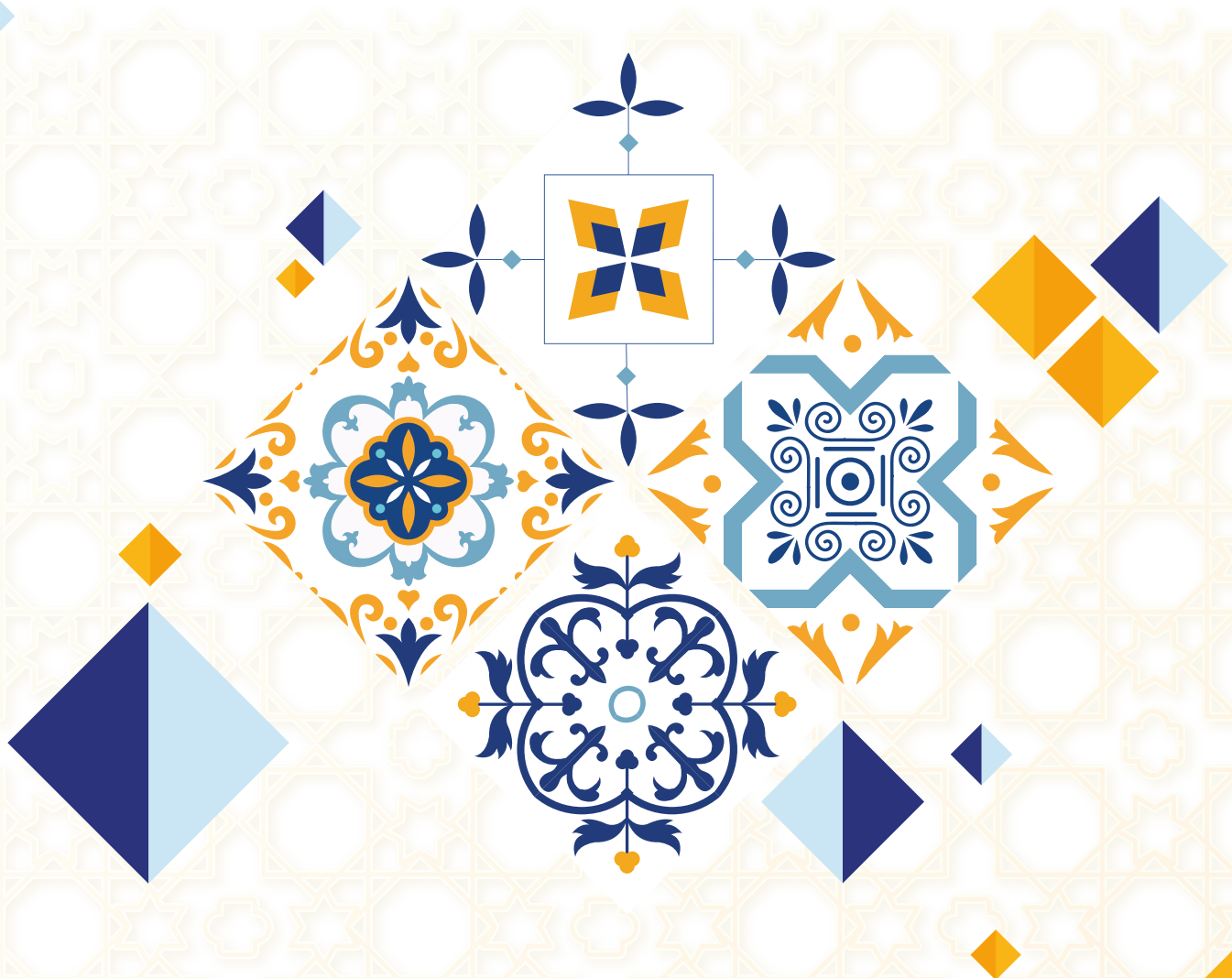
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Communication and Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration

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Executive summary

- Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes have emerged as a migration governance tool used by many national governments and supranational organisations in the 21st century.
- They fund—typically but not only irregular or stranded—migrants to return to their origin countries where after they provide support aimed at “sustainable reintegration”.
- AVRR reintegration support is measured by the International Organization for Migration, which administers around 95% of AVRR programmes globally, as “economic”, “social”, and “psycho-social”.
- The number of individuals being returned by AVRR schemes from EU member states fell in the years following the 2015-16 ‘migration crisis’ and the Covid pandemic and remains a tiny fraction—around 1 per cent—of the total number of individuals found to be illegally present and around 2.5 per cent of those ordered to return.
- However, for migratory, political, policy, economic, and diplomatic reasons it is likely to be increasingly used across the Euro-Mediterranean in coming years.
- AVRR programmes have received several criticisms from academics and activists, outlined in the report.
- The academic literatures on measuring reintegration, identifying the causes of reintegration success, and identifying the causes of AVRR participation are nascent but provide a basis by which policymakers can understand how to improve AVRR outcomes.
- Communication has the potential to contribute to at least three AVRR objectives:
 - I. Increasing participation
 - II. Improving programme outcomes
 - III. Affecting public perceptions
- Indeed, communication forms part of EU, IOM, and national governments’ AVRR strategies.
- Effective communication strategies should follow the logic of “describe”, “explain”, “intervene” regarding the desire object of change.
- Effective strategies can be deduced according to whether the communication objective is to “inform”, “persuade”, or “motivate behaviour”—with the former the stated objective of most AVRR communication aimed at potential participants.
- Previous studies have shown the centrality of “values”, “emotions”, “narratives”, and “impact assessments” to effective migration communication.
- This report considers how each of these strategies can be used for reaching each of the three AVRR objectives. In particular, by showing:
 - I. Which distinct values communicators should appeal to (such as self-direction, stimulation, universalism, tradition, security, conformity) according to which audience is being targeted (would-be participants or public) and which of the three objectives is being pursued.
 - II. Which emotions should be elicited and when (trust, anticipation, optimism, and hope, especially).
- Furthermore, real-world examples are offered of each type.
- Given the sensitivity and criticisms of AVRR, communicators need to prioritise clarity, individual rights and agency, and honesty.
- Further research should robustly test various strategies outlined here and beyond and test real-world AVRR communication in the field to produce quantifiable, bottom-line impact assessments by utilising expertise at the ICMPD and beyond.





1. Introduction and the emergence of AVRR

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes aim to support migrants if they wish to return to their country of origin¹ and to continue to support them thereafter to achieve “sustainable reintegration” via financial and non-financial means. The pre-eminence of such programmes today is reflected by “sustainable reintegration” being Objective 21 of the Global Compact for Migration. Indeed, AVRR programmes theoretically go beyond Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes in that they provide support *after* the migrant has returned. In practice, however, the distinction is more blurred since AVR programmes may also provide assistance after return through reception assistance, accommodation, petty cash, etc. That said, the latter may also be limited to travel (Schuster, 2017). By contrast, AVRR programmes include a large range of measures that are supposed to increase the return migrant’s reintegration. The International Organization for Migration (IOM)—overwhelmingly the largest, though not only, provider of AVRR programmes—lists six objectives of AVRR (IOM, 2018):

1. Migrants can make an informed decision and take ownership of the voluntary return process.
2. Migrants reach their countries of origin in a safe and dignified manner.
3. Returnees are able to overcome individual challenges impacting their reintegration.
4. Communities have the capacity to provide an enabling environment for reintegration.
5. Adequate policies and public services are in place to address the specific needs of returnees and communities alike.
6. Migrant vulnerabilities are addressed throughout the voluntary return and reintegration process.

AVRR reintegration support to the returnee are currently recommended by the IOM (2019) as economic, social, and psychosocial assistance (see Caselli et al, 2022, for examples from France, Germany, Italy, and Spain), as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of AVRR reintegration assistance and facilitation of access

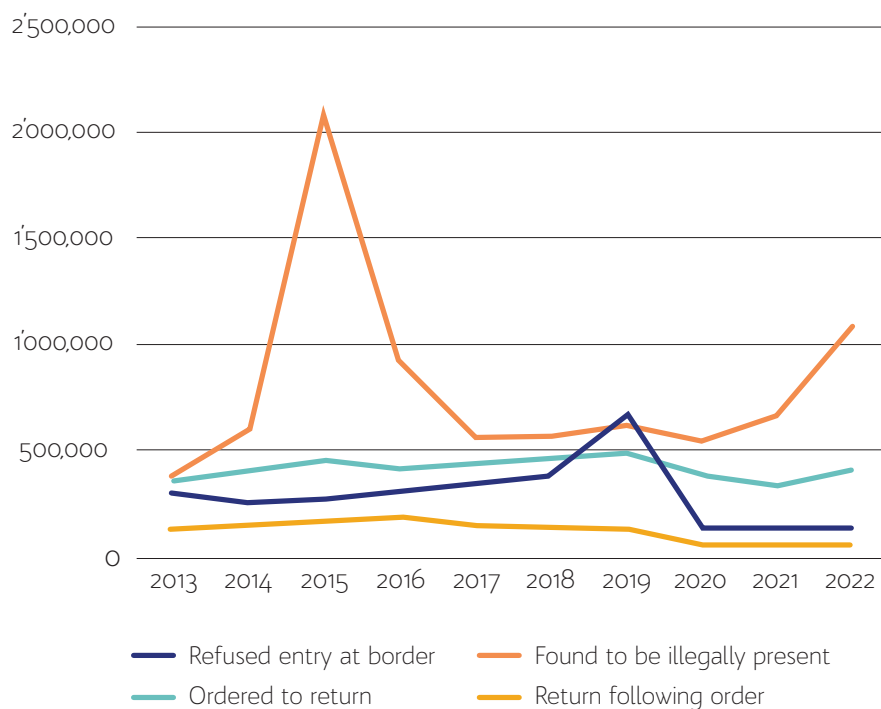
Economic	Social	Psychosocial
skills development and vocational training	housing and accommodation	counselling for psychosocial well-being
job placement	documentation	counselling with returnee and family
business development support	social protection schemes	devising a referral plan for mental and psychosocial support
access to banking and microloans	education and training	
budgeting and financial counselling	health and well-being	
	food and water	
	justice and rights	

¹ In most cases people return to their countries of origin though it may be their previous country of residence, or, in the case of children, it may be a country new to them if they grew up abroad.

During the late 20th century AVRR emerged as a tool of “migration governance”. Since at least 2017 all EU member states have had active AVRR programmes. That said, the number of individuals being assisted via AVRR has recently fell globally. Whereas in 2016 the IOM approximates that 98,403 individuals were assisted by their schemes, by 2021 the figure was 43,322.² These figures do not include the number of AVRR schemes operated by national agencies (e.g. *Office Français de l’Immigration et de l’Intégration*, the UK Home Office) or other organisations (Danish Refugee Council, Caritas). That said, the latter figure is broadly in line with pre- “migration crisis” totals between 2009 and 2014, usually around 40-50,000, and higher than the previous year of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the UN Human Rights Office (2022), ‘In 2016, 83% of all cases of assisted return facilitated by IOM came from the European Economic Area. By 2020, this share had shrunk to 39.4%. At the same time, there has been an exponential growth of assisted returns from West and Central Africa and the MENA regions, which collectively accounted for 43% of all assisted returns facilitated by IOM in 2020.’ Whereas four of the top five (Guinea, Mali, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan) “origin” countries of 2021 IOM-supported AVRR returnees were in sub-Saharan Africa, four of the five most common “host” and “transit” countries (Niger, Germany, Libya, Greece, Morocco) were in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

There are good reasons to expect AVRR programmes to gain further popularity among policymakers as a policy tool, certainly in the Euro-Mediterranean region. First, irregular immigration—measured by those being found to be irregularly present—is steadily increasing again after a large peak and then fall during the so-called 2015-16 so-called “migration crisis”— though it should be noted that this does not necessarily lead to an uptick in AVRR participation. Second, as the Covid pandemic and attendant restrictions have waned, governments are reorienting their migration governance strategies again to pre-pandemic dynamics. Third, prospectively, the creation of a common EU system for returns is one of the key ambitions of the European Commission’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which includes provisions for AVRR (Le Coz, 2021).

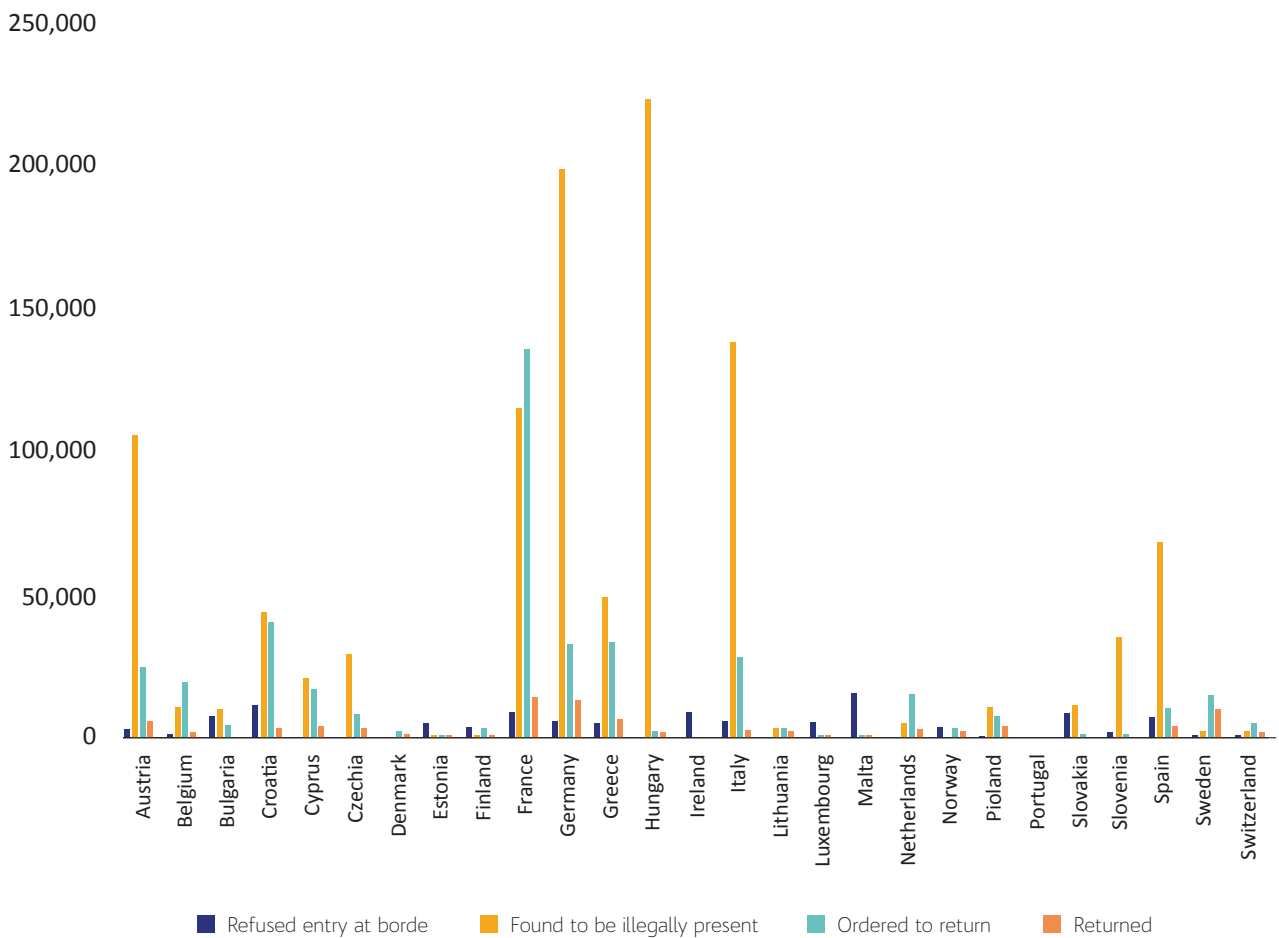
Figure 1. Trends in irregular migration in Europe over time, Eurostat (2023)



² https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd486/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/avrr-2017-key-highlights.pdf; <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/infographic/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-avrr-and-assisted-voluntary-humanitarian>

Figure 1 shows the broader context of irregular migration to Europe using Eurostat data and categories³. First, AVRR-based returns totalled 19,990 in 2022 from Europe. Second, AVRR-based returns are still a small part of the European Union’s overall migration context in comparison to the number of individuals found to be “illegally present”—1,088,345 in 2022—and to those ordered to return—420,345 in the same year. Third, given that AVRR-based returns as reported separately by the IOM—and orders to return generally—follow the numbers of those “found to be present illegally” albeit with a lag and at a far lower rate, we can deduce that the 2022 rate of those “found to be present illegally”—the highest such figure since 2015—is likely to lead to greater use of AVRR programmes should EU member states notwithstanding changes in other factors, such as policies.

Figure 2. Broader irregular migration context by European country in 2022.

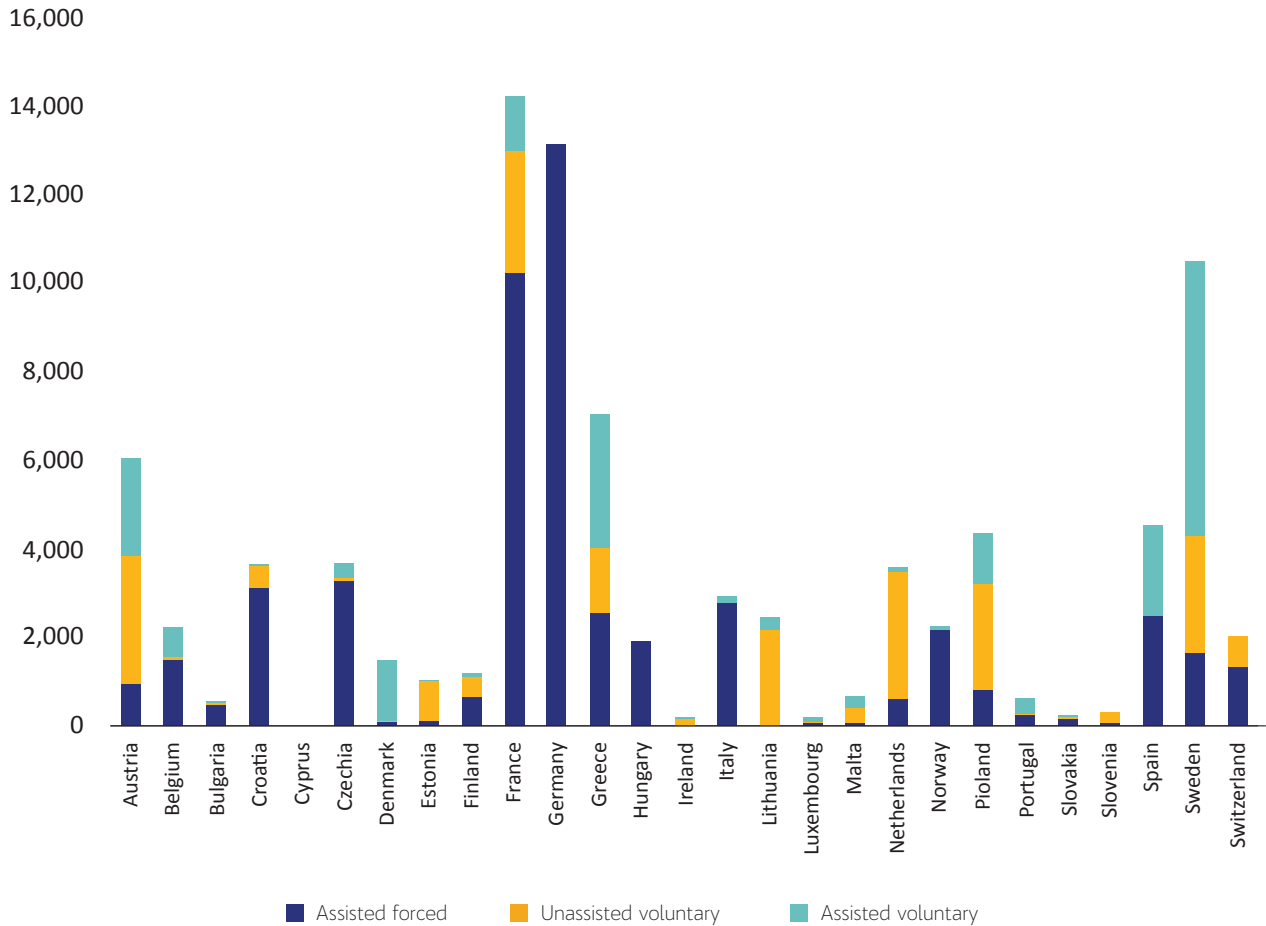


Source: Eurostat, 2022

³ According to Eurostat, Assisted Return refers 'to the situation in which the third-country national was assisted to return. He/she is the beneficiary of a national or EU MS cooperative program to encourage return and to provide reintegration assistance. The TCN received (i) an in-kind assistance prior to departure (eg, purchase of plane tickets) and/or (ii) in-cash allowances at the point of departure/upon arrival and/or (iii) an in-kind or in-cash reintegration assistance.

That said there remain major differences in the broader irregular migration context by country, as shown in Figure 2. Moreover, the relative prevalence of AVRR-based returns compared to “unassisted voluntary” return migration and forced return migration varies sharply by European country, as shown in Figure 3. Whereas AVRR constituted the majority of these three types of return in Denmark and Sweden in 2022, in Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, and Slovenia such data was not shared with Eurostat, though all had AVRR programmes in 2022.

Figure 3. AVRR, “unassisted voluntary”, and forced returns in comparison by country in 2022.



Source: Eurostat, 2022

2. Why have AVRR programmes emerged as a tool of migration governance?

AVRR programmes have grown in popularity for several reasons (Le Coz, 2021; Mananshvili, 2017; Kuschminder, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Caselli et al, 2022), namely:

1. greater numbers of rejected asylum claims.
2. low rates of actual return amongst those ordered to return—around one-third in the EU.
3. larger budgets in host countries to manage migration.
4. policy objectives of higher return rates and official policy preference⁴ for voluntary rather than forced returns.
5. increased political pressure in some destination countries to reduce irregular immigration and the presence of irregular migrants.
6. conversely, increased political pressure to treat migrants—regular or otherwise—with dignity and consideration beyond their legal status, precluding forced returns.
7. a need to incentivise the cooperation of countries of return, particularly in cases in which the migrant's origin country is unclear, disputed or they lack documents to permit entry, or in which forced returns may cause diplomatic problems.
8. lower costs than forced returns due to the latter's high legal, detention, supervision, and transport costs; and
9. the ability of AVRR to contribute to non-migratory goals, in particular development.

IOM (2019: iii) justify the uses of AVR and AVRR thusly: 'For host and transit countries, return is an important means of exercising the sovereign right to determine who can enter and remain on their territory. For countries of origin, return can strain the socioeconomic fabric, especially when high numbers of returnees arrive within a short period of time. At the same time, returnees may struggle to readapt and rebuild their lives once back home because of many of the same economic, social, and psychosocial factors that prompted them to migrate in the first place, particularly if they have been out of the country for a long time.'

4. Directive 2008/115/EC, and the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 27 April 2021: COM (2021) 120 final

3. What are the criticisms of AVRR programmes?

AVRR programmes have received several criticisms.

1. The legitimacy of the “voluntary” component of AVRR programmes has been questioned, particularly by academics and activist who argue that the participants only alternative is “utter destitution” (Webber, 2011: 104; Blitz et al, 2005; Cassarino, 2014). This is particularly highlighted in cases such as detention in Libya (UNHCR, 2022). However, Kuschminder (2017) highlights that such interpretations fail to give the migrants much agency (Van Houte, 2014; also, Kalicki, 2020) and ignore findings on the lack of relationship between AVRR participation and destitution (Smart, 2009).
2. AVRR programmes have been argued to be insufficiently care-giving to migrants (Crane and Lawson, 2020).
3. They have been argued to result in participants returning to dangerous or otherwise vulnerable situations (UNHCR, 2022; Alpes and Majcher, 2020; Schuster and Majidi, 2013; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Strand et al, 2016). That said, AVR programmes are only permitted to countries considered by the host country to be safe (Kuschminder, 2017a).
4. Given the complicated migratory histories of many participants, the extent to which they are “returning” has been questioned (Bendixsen and Lidén, 2017).
5. AVRR programmes have been argued to create perverse incentives to migrate to start with and to encourage re-migration to participate in the programme repeatedly, with evidence that around one-in-ten IOM participants are repeat migrants (IOM, 201).
6. The notion of “sustainable reintegration” has been criticised as underspecified (Kuschminder, 2017c; Marino and Lietaert, 2022)
7. The lack or low quality of impact assessment has been criticised as resulting in poor understanding of the effects of the specific programmes, of their value-for-money, and precluding an ability to produce generalisable lessons and recommendations (Paasche, 2014; for guide on how to produce impact assessment, see Dennison, 2020). Though it might be noted that in the last six years there has been a greater effort to improve impact assessment and generate lessons learned.
8. Relatedly, the extent to which they are monitored or achieve their aims of integration and beyond is relatively unknown (Alpes and Majcher, 2020; Kuschminder, 2015).
9. Some participants had already planned on returning to their origin countries at some point anyway and simply use the scheme for paid transport and support thereafter (Strand et al, 2016).



4. How is sustainable reintegration measured, what causes reintegration success, and what causes people to participate?

Various attempts have been made to measure the extent to which AVRR participants are successfully “sustainably returned” and “reintegrated” (e.g., Alpes and Majcher, 2020; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; Strand et al, 2016; EMN, 2016; see also OECD, 2020 and, as part of a broader “M&E of AVR programmes, IOM, 2022) typically as a factor of multiple dimensions. Most notably, IOM currently uses a so-called Reintegration Sustainability Survey (RSS). This was developed to measure the impact of reintegration programmes generally—and the behemoth EU-IOM Joint Initiative, specifically—and includes a methodology to compute a reintegration score with the data gathered through the survey questionnaire (IOM, 2019). The RSS is composed of 32 Questions feeding into a weighting system measuring reintegration sustainability across economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions of reintegration and overall (IOM, 2019: Annex 4). Perhaps the most alternative approach is that of the ICMPD (2015), which simply measures “sustainable return” according to the individual’s self-report probably of re-migrating (see Kuschminder, 2017c, for criticism). Salgado et al (2022) also provide a review of and comprehensive framework for measurement and evaluation of AVRR programmes.

There have been initial attempts to explain the causes of reintegration success. Identified factors include: sense of belonging and feeling of personal safety before migrating, reason for migrating, and trauma experiences while migrating (Koser and Kuschminder, 2015); strong kinship networks (Strand et al, 2016); mental health (Schuster and Majidi, 2013), and ability to secure a livelihood (ICMPD, 2015), skills and management abilities (Schuster and Majidi, 2013); geopolitical relationship between states involved (Serra-Mingot & Rudolf, 2023).

Relatedly, academic research has made initial attempts to consider what determines whether individuals take part in AVRR programmes. Identified factors include:

1. Conditions in the destination country (identified as the most important by Koser and Kuschminder, 2015; also, Strand et al, 2016). These include: the inability to (find) work, social factors, insecure legal status and threat of removal, and family-related issues.
2. Conditions in the country of origin/return (including those above and often conflict, Leerkes et al, 2014)
3. Individual factors, including a long-standing desire to (eventually) return and desire to reunite with family (Brekke, 2015). Likely to also include personal psychological and socio-demographic factors.
4. Perceptions and information about the AVRR programme (Black et al, 2004; Koser and Kuschminder, 2015).

5. How can communication contribute to AVRR objectives?

Communication can contribute to at least three AVRR public policy objectives:

1. Increasing awareness of AVRR
2. Improving programme outcomes, typically in terms of “sustainable reintegration”
3. Affecting public perceptions of and attitudes towards AVRR

Unsurprisingly then ‘Outreach activities to increase migrants’ awareness of the return and reintegration assistance available’ is part of the new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. That said, In Norway, a 2016 report found that migrants did not believe communications that came from the Norwegian Immigration while inaccurate rumours about AVRR were common (Le Coz, 2021: 12).

As is the case with all attempts to affect change in the world, public communicators should take three steps in turn: describe, explain, and intervene. Description should be of the target population for the desired change and should measure the object of desired change: in this case, participation in AVRR, programme outcomes, and public perceptions of AVRR. How do participation, programme outcomes, and public perceptions vary? Explanation should theoretically consider what is likely to be the cause of that variation: why do some individuals within the target population participate and some not? Why do some individuals have very positive programme outcomes and some not? Why do some individuals see AVRR as positive and some negative, and what other forms of affect may there be? Once the causes of our desired object of change are identified, we can design interventions that are most likely to change the causes and thus the object of change.

The objectives of communication interventions can be classified as at least one of three types: to inform, to persuade, and to motivate behaviour (Dennison, 2023a). The three possible objectives of AVRR communications interventions listed above can be placed into these categories, so that; (1) awareness raising via informing (2) improving AVRR outcomes (also likely via motivating behaviour; (3) affecting public perceptions (primarily about persuasion and information).

Previous ICMPD reports have gone into great detail and provided recommendations on the use of four particular tools for communicators for all three types of communication objectives:

Values

Know the personal values that your audience has. These values both motivate their behaviour in their daily lives and are used to consider the importance of new information. By appealing to the values of our target audience—rather than change them or appeal to our own—we are more likely to increase awareness, persuade and motivate behaviour by making our messages seem relevant to the individuals’ own goals. See Dennison (2020a) for more information.

Dennison (2023a) argues that irregular migrants who had a reasonable choice about migrating are likely to disproportionately highly value two of Schwartz’ (1992) Basic Human Values: “stimulation” and “self-direction”. As such, communicators should show how (1) participation in AVRR programmes and (2) holding attitudes and engaging in behaviour that improves AVRR outcomes are likely to result in the realisation of these two key values. By contrast, the value of “security” (i.e., personal safety) is likely undervalued by irregular migrants in the case of those who had a

reasonable choice about migrating given their willingness to take the risk of doing so. That said, security is likely to be a useful value to appeal to for those whose original motivation for migrating was security-based and had little choice in doing so. This highlights the need to understand in descriptive terms the nature of one's target audience, as well as the correct—in this case psychological—explanations for variation in their behaviour regarding the desired object of change before designing an intervention.

In terms of affecting public perceptions and attitudes, actual measurement of what the target population—in this the public—already thinks of AVRR is necessary. However, we can conceptualise AVRR programmes as—aside from more external reasons for its use (see above)—politically somewhere in between those who favour involuntary unassisted returns, on the one hand, and those who favour no returns, on the other. As such, the values orientations of those most likely to support AVRR are probably balanced in terms of attitudes to immigration. Previous studies (see Dennison, 2020) have shown that attitudes to immigration are highly determined by, on the one hand, valuing “universalism” highly and, on the other hands, valuing “security”, “tradition”, and “conformity” highly. As such, communicators wishing to affect public perceptions of AVRR should (1) show those who oppose AVRR programmes for being overly restrictive to immigration and immigrants how such programmes will lead to the realisation of their value of “universalism” while (2) show those who oppose AVRR programmes for being overly favourable to immigration and immigrants how such programmes will lead to the realisation of their values of “security”, “tradition”, and “conformity”.

The use of values in public communication is subtle, both in terms of identifying them and utilising them. Indeed, it should be so as to maintain narrative flow, the suspension of disbelief, “transportation”, and ‘execute the normative leap in such a way as to make it seem graceful, compelling, even obvious’ (Dudley, 2013: 1142). One recent example of public communication to affect public attitudes to AVRR is that of the ERRIN campaign. Two figures from one of their videos are shown in Figure 4 with the full transcript of the video in the below footnote⁵ showing references to universalistic values of equity and internationalism but also traditional values of family and conformity values of rule-adherence.

Figure 4: ERRIN video using values to affect public perceptions of AVRR.



5. "Ade and his family traveled from their country to Europe seeking better jobs and better schools for their children, but things didn't turn out as they'd hoped. Their claim for a legal stay in a European country was rejected and living conditions were harsh. After seven months they made the decision to return home. Thanks to support from the European return and reintegration network ERRIN they didn't have to start from zero. ERRIN is a network of 15 European partner countries who are joining forces to help migrants who cannot or no longer wish to stay in Europe. They receive assistance before during and after their return. This covers hope to plan a future in their home countries and support from a local partner to relocate and find work. How does it work in practice? Ade and his family talk to their counselor and filed a return application which was checked and approved by the authorities in the European country. The authorities told the family they'd receive assistance from ERRIN's local partner upon their return and arranged their flight back in their country. Ade and his family were welcomed by ERRIN's local partner straight at the airport. Ade's family received a grant and hands on advice on how to use their experience to start a new business. Today Ade and his family jointly run a hair beauty salon the business has proven strong enough to weather the COVID-19 crisis so far. ERRIN works with partner organizations in 34 countries worldwide find out more on returnnetwork.eu"

The IOM has produced numerous similar videos—including values and real-life stories with generalisable narratives—aimed at publics⁶, including in Portugal⁷, and as far back as 2015, in Belgium.⁸ One of the most commonly utilised values is that of homeland and belonging, as shown in a still from one of IOM Germany’s “My Return to Georgia” campaign, shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Still from “My Return to Georgia”, IOM Germany⁹



Emotions

Appeal to emotions as well as facts, values, and identities to make one’s message resonant. Emotions are vital to informing, persuading, and motivating behaviour, not least because attitudes have a cognitive (thinking) component and an emotional (feeling) component. Moreover, eliciting emotions causes involuntary but predictable physiological and behavioural reactions. Emotions can be used in communication to make one’s messages more resonant and impactful on both attitudes and behaviours, supporting policy objectives via persuasion. Dennison (2023b) argues that communicators should choose the desired emotional reaction according to the desired physiological and behavioural reaction using existing psychological schema.

Variation in participation in AVRR programmes has many causes with the main groups of factors outlined above including (1) conditions in the destination country, (2) conditions in the origin country; (3) individual factors, including long-term plans; and (4) perceptions of and information about the AVRR programme. Emotion-based communication can play a role in changing all of these via informing and persuading and, ultimately, directly motivating behaviour.

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFO4OMH_NyE

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXO313CGkAg>

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJPslrM5zKo>

9 <https://germanyiom.int/new-start-returning-georgia>

Anticipation leads individuals to examine so is useful to elicit when attempting to increase information and raise awareness. Given that AVRR remains a relatively unknown form of migration both to migrants and the public, anticipation is likely to be a particularly important emotion to elicit to makes one's message resonant. Its more nuanced "dyad emotions" (combinations of anticipation with other primary emotions) may also be useful to do this depending on the broader communication objectives and contents, including "optimism" (anticipation + joy), "aggressiveness" (anticipation + anger), "hope" (anticipation + trust), "cynicism" (anticipation + disgust), "pessimism" (anticipation + sadness), and "anxiety" (anticipation + fear). The behavioural effects of anticipation—examining, mapping, and exploring—also elide with the above stated values of self-direction and stimulation.

Similarly, trust leads individuals to embrace so is useful to elicit when attempting to persuade (both publics and migrants); its behavioural effects include support, acceptance, and affiliation. Finally, joy leads individuals to connect so is useful to elicit when attempting to motivation behaviour, its behavioural effects include joining, contacting, meeting, and conversing—all key to first participation and second reintegration. Given anticipation's centrality (due to the relatively low levels of awareness of AVRR), its dyads with trust and joy—i.e., optimism and hope—are likely to be the most important dyads for persuading either migrants or the public across all three objectives of AVRR communication.

Indeed, optimism and hope have been explicitly utilised in several AVRR communication campaigns aimed at increasing participation, as shown in Figure 6—stills from a video produced by the IOM's West and Central African Office—and Figure 7—promotional material for a German start-up incubator as part of an AVRR programme.

Figure 6: Video stills of "Lincoln's Story", IOM West and Central Africa¹⁰

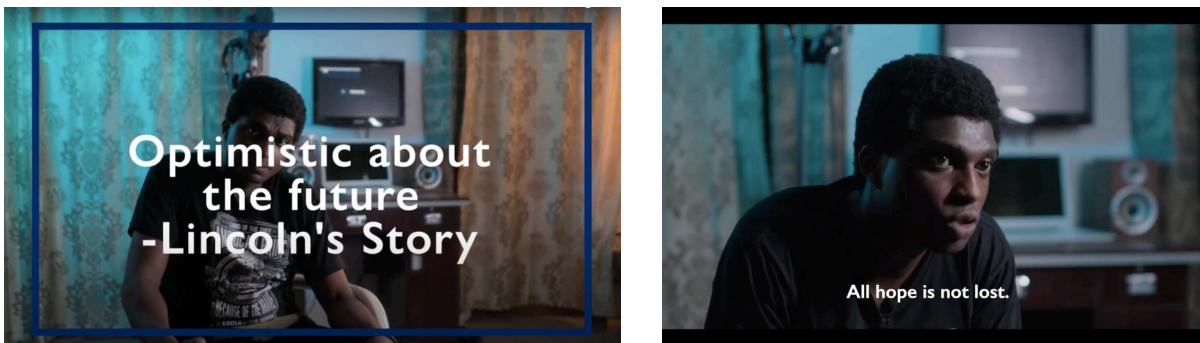


Figure 7: Promotional material for "Start Hope" German start-up incubator¹¹



¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrYiH3mocy0>

¹¹ <https://germanyiom.int/stories/starthopehome-new-perspectives-returnees-through-entrepreneurship-training>

Narratives

Use narratives to make one's message spread. Narratives are essentially stories across at least two points in time with a causal message that is generalisable to other people (see Dennison, 2021, for more information). They are necessary for humans to make sense of our highly complex world by selecting and linking the most important information. For the narrative to become popular depends on several factors, some of which the communicator can control.

In terms of the narrative itself, it should be (1) internally coherent; (2) externally verifiable; (3) delivered by a reliable, relatable communicator. Indeed, on the latter point, Leerkes et al (2014) study an IOM programme whereby hired migrants personally go to relevant neighbourhoods in the Netherlands and speak to the target audience of potential-AVRR participants. In terms of the relationship between the narrative and the target audience, the narrative should (1) activate imagination; (2) maintain consonance with the audience's other beliefs and experiences and values; (3) align with material interests; and (4) be personally relevant.

Personal stories are the most common methods of informing potential participants about AVRR programmes and, as shown from the below, are in some cases presented in generic, narrative form using animation and voiceovers to ensure maximum generalisability.

“Stories of reintegration”¹²

“Being in Germany without papers is tough. I had many informal jobs. None of them held for very long so I decided to go back to Ethiopia but not without learning a new skill. I enrolled in a program that teaches women who want to return how to start a small business. I'm now back and I finally opened my home shop.”

“I had to return to Armenia but didn't have the resources to start over. “My return counselor told me that I'm able to get financial coverage and temporary housing once I'm there. This greatly helped me with the transition.”

“The decision to go back to Nigeria was not easy. Getting in touch with the counseling centre that helped me find a job even before leaving made me feel safe. I feel more prepared moving forward.”

“Stories of return”¹³

“We left everything behind in search for a better life in Europe but living without a job is very challenging. So, we decided to go back to Pakistan. Home is where the heart is.”

“When my asylum application was rejected, I felt helpless. I didn't really see it would help me in this difficult situation. I went to a counseling center. They offered to organize my trip to Kyrgyzstan and get vocational training. I decided to take business courses so that I can expand the family business once I'm back home.”

“The journey to Europe was more dangerous than I thought. The smugglers took all my money. I was stranded for months until I met Nadia from IOM. She and her colleagues helped me consider several options. One of them is the possibility to fund my return back to Egypt. It feels good to be out of a limbo situation.”

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63zc7djJARU>

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_VYQs14gJM

Impact Assessments

Use impact assessments to test communication interventions. This ideally will be of the entire campaign and a pre-roll out test of the effects of the message. In either cases, or both, the impact assessment should be made from the beginning and follow five steps (Dennison (2020b): (1) define the intervention's objective; (2) identify the (least bad) measure of the objective; (3) estimate the counterfactual of what the objective's measure would be if there had been not intervention; (4) perform the intervention; (5) post-intervention and analysis.

Though few examples of publicly available impact assessments exist (though see Kessler et al, 2013 for exception), the IOM's "Impact Study" evaluate how the assistance provided under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration promoted the sustainable reintegration of the returning migrants in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan. The study sought to (1) Obtain robust estimates of the impact of reintegration assistance provided under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative programme in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan; (2) Improve IOM's understanding of Sustainable Reintegration metrics, and (3) Inform the definition of a standard impact evaluation methodology for future reintegration programmes.

Prioritise clarity, individual rights, and honesty.

Given the criticisms of AVRR, honesty, and a focus on voluntariness and rights is vital. "Returning from Germany", an IOM-administered AVRR programme, sought to increase participation via a clear and honest outline of AVRR via several videos.¹⁴ The script is in highly simple terms and reads as follows:

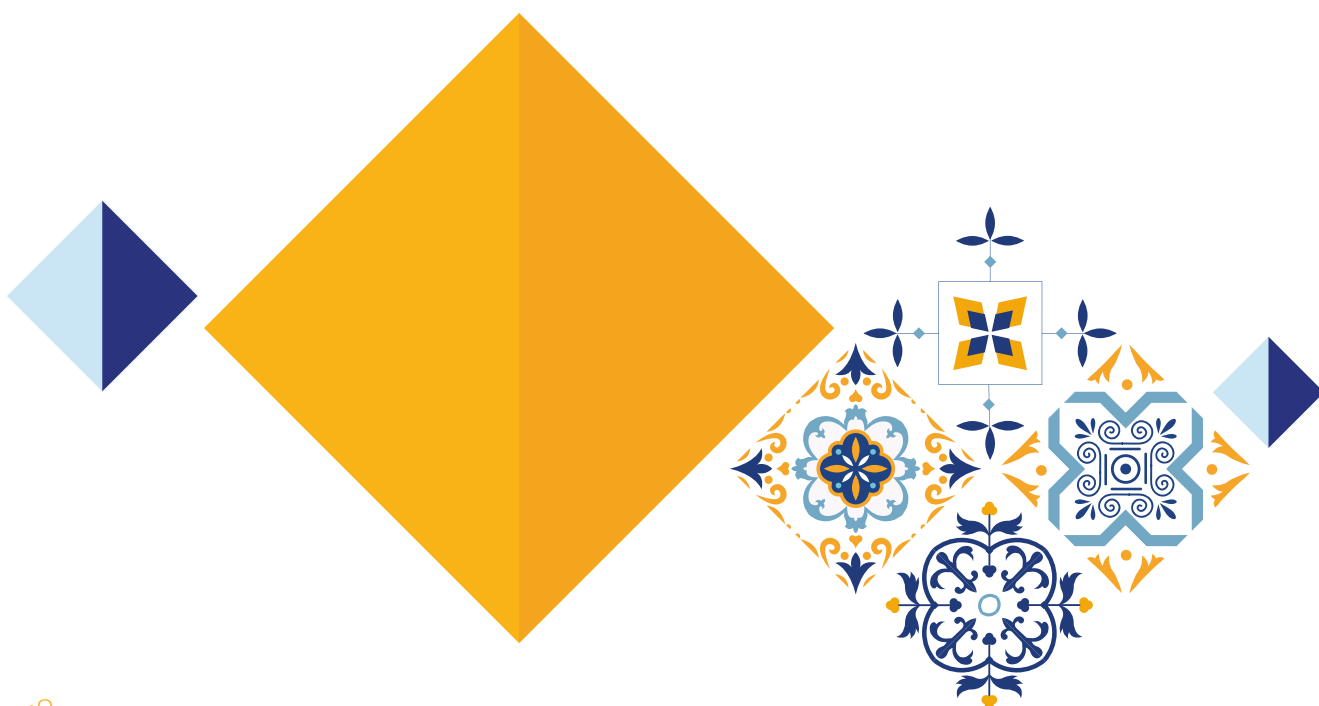
"You are living in Germany as a migrant, and you are considering returning to your country of origin? Get individual counseling. At www.returningfromgermany.de you can find governmental or independent return counseling centers in your area. Return counseling is individual and non-binding. It does not oblige you to leave Germany. It does not affect your asylum procedure. Voluntary return enables you to return in dignity and to plan your new start in your country of origin. The return counselor explains the possibilities of support that are available for you individually. If you decide for a voluntary return and lack the means, your return counseling center submits with you an application for voluntary return at IOM and explains the necessary steps to you. You will receive organizational support. The travel costs will be covered as well. When returning voluntarily you have to sign that you withdraw your asylum application and waive legal means. Depending on your nationality you can also receive financial startup assistance. The return counselor can tell you whether or not there are reintegration programs for returnees available in your country of origin. This kind of support after your return is not possible in every country of origin. If you need medical assistance, you can be accompanied when traveling to your country of origin. Where unaccompanied minors are concerned, the situation is examined carefully, and it is made sure that they will be picked up at their arrival. If you come back to Germany permanently you have to pay back the received assistance. Only nationals of non-EU member states can be assisted by the voluntary return programs. There is no legal entitlement to support when returning voluntarily. This film informs about the possibility of a voluntary return. Return counselling has no influence on the decisions of German authorities."

¹⁴ https://files.returningfromgermany.de/files/IOM_English_WithSubtitles.mp4#t=10

6. Conclusion

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes have emerged as a migration governance tool used by many national governments and supranational organisations in the 21st century. They fund—typically irregular or stranded—migrants to return to their origin countries whereafter they provide support aimed at “sustainable reintegration”. AVRR reintegration support is classified by the International Organization for Migration, which administers around 95% of AVRR programmes globally, as “economic”, “social”, and “psycho-social”. The number of individuals being returned by AVRR schemes from EU member states fell in the years following the 2015-16 ‘migration crisis’ and the Covid pandemic and remains a tiny fraction—around 1 per cent—of the total number of individuals found to be illegally present and around 2.5 per cent of those ordered to return. However, for migratory, political, policy, economic, and diplomatic reasons it is likely to be increasingly used across the Euro-Mediterranean in coming years. AVRR programmes have received several criticisms from academics and activists. The academic literatures on measuring reintegration, identifying the causes of reintegration success, and identifying the causes of AVRR participation are nascent but provide a basis by which policymakers can understand how to improve AVRR outcomes.

Communication has the potential to contribute to at least three AVRR objectives: increasing participation; improving programme outcomes; and affecting public perceptions. Indeed, communication forms part of EU, IOM, and national governments’ AVRR strategies. Effective communication strategies should follow the logic of “describe”, “explain”, “intervene” regarding the desired object of change. Effective strategies can be deduced according to whether the communication objective is to “inform”, “persuade”, or “motivate behaviour”. Previous studies have shown the centrality of “values”, “emotions”, “narratives”, and “impact assessments” to effective migration communication. Each of these strategies can be used for reaching each of the three AVRR objectives. In particular, by showing: (1) which distinct values communicators should appeal to (such as self-direction, stimulation, universalism, tradition, security, conformity) according to which audience is being targeted (would-be participants or public) and which of the three objectives is being pursued and (2) which emotions should be elicited and when (trust, anticipation, optimism, and hope, especially). Furthermore, real-world examples are offered of each type. Given the sensitivity and criticisms of AVRR, communicators need to prioritise clarity, individual rights and agency, and honesty. Further research should robustly test various strategies outlined here and beyond and test real-world AVRR communication in the field to produce quantifiable, bottom-line impact assessments by utilising expertise at the ICMPD and beyond.



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