

# REACH OUT

*A blueprint for cities incorporating five conclusions on Voluntary Return when reaching out to undocumented migrants in an urban context*

## Context

This blueprint is an outcome of the pilot project Reach Out, an initiative of **Fedasil** in collaboration with **OFII** and with the support of **ERRIN** and **EUROCITIES**.

The Reach Out project looks at ways of improving outreach to **undocumented migrants** living in urban settings. The challenge is to establish contact with these hard-to-reach groups of migrants and to initiate primary basic counselling on the spot. This has a dual objective: by referring them to services that attend to their pressing basic needs, the necessary space is created to inform them about their future-oriented options. The aim is to assist them in making a well-informed decision on their options by providing correct information. While doing so, the project wants to **increase knowledge about assisted voluntary return** as a proper option.

Living outside official reception structures in an irregular and often precarious situation not only comes at a high personal cost in terms of an individual's wellbeing but is simultaneously a burden on the social fabric of local societies. The principle underlying this project is that **outreach is an indispensable first step** to exit these conditions. The assumption of this project is that local government, which is closest to the migrant, is a very relevant actor in this outreach and counselling strategy.

The project initiated an exchange between European cities to test this assumption in a Community of Practice. The six municipalities participating in the Reach Out project are:



**Amsterdam (NL), Antwerp (BE), Ghent (BE), Milan (IT), Newcastle (UK) and Utrecht (NL).** In the Community of Practice, these cities **shared information about best practices, methodology and the primary role of local stakeholders in reaching out to undocumented migrants.**

Their activities and organisations on outreach and voluntary return were mapped and collective study visits of these cities were planned.

- In November 2019, a kick-off was organised in **Amsterdam**
- In March 2020, a study visit was organised back to back in **Antwerp and Ghent**
- In October 2020, **Milan and Newcastle** each hosted an online study visit
- In November 2020, a study visit was hosted online by **Utrecht**

## Premise

Why involve municipalities in a national voluntary return programme? Undocumented migrants – whether they are stranded or in transit – arrive in cities where they often live a hidden life. This makes **municipalities the allies of national authorities, as they have to come up with pragmatic and, effective solutions to deal with these situations on their territory.** As municipalities are the closest level of governance to citizens, they are able to reach the target group more easily. They have a better knowledge and understanding of the social environment. By offering (or coordinating the provision of) social services in their cities, city administrations are in direct contact with the target group and often have very detailed information on the persons concerned. They also have a better understanding of the network of actors involved in the provision of services to undocumented migrants.

This blueprint brings together all the evidence, good practices and experiences from the exchange, mapping exercises and study visits in the form of five conclusions. These are conclusions that may be helpful for municipalities that want to start a well embedded, broadly engaged outreach and counselling activity in their city. These are simple recommendations, **that do not require major organisational changes nor enormous resources to implement and can be implemented in every urban context.** They do, however, bring about substantial gains with regard to a qualitative implementation of outreach and counselling to this hard-to-reach target group, as well as with regard to raising awareness about return.



## Five conclusions

### 1. Embed voluntary return in a broader perspective

Voluntary return can only be a plausible option when presented **within a set of options** and when presented as an option **from the beginning**. This means that it must be presented at the starting point of the counselling process, not as a last resort after all other options have been dismissed.

The **initial goal and driving force** of the target group is to migrate to and settle in the destination country, **not to return** to their country of origin. When this has failed, often after procedures for applying for asylum or residence that are lengthy, burdensome and often regarded as unfair, these persons have developed a deeply rooted **distrust** in authorities and government administrations. Even though the voluntary nature of return is preserved and operations are ensured by non-governmental actors, return is sometimes regarded the outcome of a rigged process, in which return was the only desired result from the outset. In this context, participating municipalities considered it unwise to present voluntary return as an isolated option, after all other options have depleted. Building **trust and support** are **necessary** prerequisites in order to pursue an **autonomous and conscious decision** by the individual towards voluntary return, and to preserve its truly **voluntary nature**.

People will not actively engage with their future challenges if they cannot rely on the fact that the **information provided is reliable**. Every possible option, including, but not only voluntary return, needs to be addressed and explored with transparency and supportiveness. Even the risks and disadvantages of illegal residence should be clearly addressed. Voluntary return has to be simultaneously deployed in conjunction with awareness, a prepared mind-set and a right to receive full information.

If we look at the majority of the initiatives present in the municipalities that contributed to the mapping exercise, voluntary return can be found as an equally valuable option as a legal residence permit during counselling. The reason for adopting this **twin-track approach** in counselling was that some undocumented migrants do have a prospect of obtaining lawful status in the country of arrival (e.g. a request for international protection, a residence permit for victims of human trafficking, family reunification, or a residence permit for humanitarian or medical reasons). **Identifying who does, and who does not, have a prospect of obtaining**



**lawful status in the country of arrival was a shared task of most initiatives in the cities** involved of providing counselling to undocumented migrants. By providing this twin-track approach, the support base when it comes to entering into a dialogue with the target group becomes much stronger and more trustworthy.

This approach is the most explicitly embedded as a policy in the **'BBB+' program** in the Netherlands: **Amsterdam, Utrecht** and 3 other cities are running pilot projects that have grown significantly as a result of practical experience gained over a period of more than 15 years. BBB stands for 'Bed, Bath, Bread' and the '+' stands for an **intensive process of assistance, counselling, orientation towards valid prospects with regard to the undocumented migrants' future.**

## 2. Tap into an existing network of local stakeholders

Undocumented migrants identify stakeholders that may be able to help identify their prospects of obtaining lawful status and those stakeholders include voluntary return in their counselling, not the other way around. This process of bottom-up **self-identification** is the engine. Every analysis and process set up should ideally take this into account.

In many cases, the target group is living in such precarious and vulnerable conditions that they will only reach out to aid organisations that are able to address their basic needs such as medical care, food distribution, night and winter shelters... If they are seeking to identify their prospects of obtaining lawful status, they will first and foremost resort to people and organisations they trust. These actors can either advise them on their prospect of choice (such as in cases where the migrant has tunnel vision or the options are non-negotiable) or provide them with neutral, but truthful information.

It can be **useful to identify these local stakeholders** that have high-frequency and intensive contacts with the target group. By identifying the existing local network of stakeholders, it can be easier **to embed voluntary return within their operations.**

The city of **Milan, for example, installed a first access point to basic services in the Help Centre in the central station of Milan (CASC).** This access point served as a **gauge** where the target group is profiled, an initial case history is taken and they are referred to specialised



services who will support them in making proper decisions about their future, such as voluntary return. In Amsterdam and Utrecht, many **non-profit organisations** also provide humanitarian services to undocumented migrants. Foundations such as Goedwerk and Bridge to Better in Amsterdam and Company of Friends in Utrecht **provided information, advice and counselling** both to undocumented migrants and local **organisations** present in their city.

In total, the municipalities that took part in the project had frequent contacts or formal cooperation with a total of more than 40 local stakeholders that periodically provided information about return or were formally involved in providing counselling to undocumented migrants. The cities of Ghent and Antwerp, for example, regularly organise **Urban Meetings on Voluntary Return** to provide numerous local stakeholders active in their city with the most up-to-date information about counselling and the return of undocumented migrants in their cities.

### 3. Provide an overview of information on activities concerning counselling and return through a website

In most cities, many local stakeholders are in contact with undocumented migrants. **Some local stakeholders** operating in the territory of a city are more frequently in contact with undocumented migrants than others. For some of the stakeholders, undocumented migrants are their main target group. Others only sporadically come into contact with undocumented migrants. Some of these stakeholders have frequent contacts with the target group and are **formally providing counselling towards a prospect of lawful status and voluntary return**. Identifying and providing accessible **information about these stakeholders that are most intensely involved** in counselling and voluntary return **through an overview on a publicly accessible website** can be considered. In this way, both stakeholders with a small number of contacts with undocumented migrants and stakeholders with many and intense contacts can have good knowledge about each other's initiative and intent.

**Many examples of stakeholders involved in a formal capacity were present** in all cities involved in the project. To mention a few: the Landelijke Vreemdelingenvoorziening (LVV) in Amsterdam provides a stable place to stay and professional counselling to undocumented migrants, the stichting Barka Antwerp and Utrecht reaches out to Eastern European migrants without a residence permit, De Tussenverdieping in Ghent provides shelter to migrants waiting until their voluntary return has been organised, the multidisciplinary Crinali



cooperative in Milan offers services such as psycho-social and administrative support to undocumented migrants, assistance with voluntary return and advice on residence, and the charities Action Foundation and West End Refugee Service in Newcastle operate within a vision to empower vulnerable asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

**In addition** to these local stakeholders involved in a formal capacity, there is a **large number of local stakeholders who only have contact with undocumented migrants and voluntary return once in a while**. Antwerp, for example, identified more than 50 organisations and departments of that type, and found that the task of constantly keeping all these services informed about counselling and return by means of information sessions was an almost repetitive one. Staff turnover and being out of sight and therefore out of mind were presented as explanations as to why providing information continuously had to be repeated.

For a smooth referral however, it does seem important that **all stakeholders in a city** that are in contact with undocumented migrants **know about specific stakeholders and projects that are involved in the counselling of undocumented migrants** towards the prospect of obtaining lawful status or seeking voluntary return. This can be obtained by hosting a website comprising of accessible information about the work of these involved stakeholders, their contact details and a link to their own websites if applicable. The information can be published in places such as the already existing website of the municipality. All municipalities involved in the project did have their own website to address their citizens and organisations who look for information about the city.

**Existing local efforts and projects** towards legal counselling and voluntary return **in a city will be more visible**. This visibility will consolidate the important role of cities when it comes to counselling undocumented migrants and voluntary return. **Referral of undocumented migrants to the correct provider of information about counselling and return will be more effective**. This is especially important when local stakeholders only have occasional or brief contact with undocumented migrants or employ a large workforce.

#### 4. Create and maintain a multi-level dialogue

City authorities are the closest level of governance to citizens but **reaching out for a dialogue should not be limited to undocumented migrants only**. Counselling and return are organised



within a structure of multi-level governance, in which local, national and European policies interlink. To shorten multi-level flows of practical **information concerning counselling and return**, it is advisable **to keep communication open** between civil society, local authorities, national authorities and European authorities.

By consulting each other on a regular basis, knowledge about each other's initiatives towards counselling and return can be mutually enhanced. This knowledge can relate both to initiatives in the country of origin and in the country of destination.

Although nationalities and other characteristics of undocumented migrants present in a city can differ from city to city, most cities share the experience that undocumented migrants are present on their territory. This premise came across very clearly in the first phase of implementation of the Reach Out project: most municipalities **had many points in common, albeit in a different urban context**. They appeared to be a professional peer group.

It seems advisable that information about existing and new European and national initiatives in the field of return and reintegration, is shared with local stakeholders active in the city. Having a good knowledge of matters such as potential reintegration assistance helps to make the counselling of undocumented migrants more tailor-made, reliable and therefore trustworthy. **Periodical consultations about counselling and return between local, national and European levels of governance** involved in counselling and return on a daily basis can play a part in increasing their knowledge of each other's initiatives.

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During the (digital) visits with many local stakeholders in each city taking part in the project, many of the participants had gained on-the-ground experience and therefore hands-on information. When such participants of the civil society and authorities with **on-the-ground experience** are invited to join a multi-level dialogue, they can be a good source of experience with regard to counselling and information about a specific local context in a city. This **dialogue** will illustrate that many cities and local stakeholders experience the same challenges when reaching out to undocumented migrants and that there are many **good and bad practices** on how to tackle those challenges.

Examples of city-to-state dialogue was present in some of the cities. The cities of **Ghent and Antwerp**, for example, are **part of a sustainable network of Belgian cities and civil society**,



**facilitated by the national authority** (Fedasil), aimed at enhancing cooperation and exchanging information regarding voluntary return. **Another example is Utrecht and Amsterdam, which cooperate with their national government when providing shelter and counselling.** Lastly, the city-to-city network of Eurocities proved to be a good partner to invite cities to join the Reach Out project. By facilitating a forum for Reach Out to speak to municipalities interested in counselling and return, the target of five municipalities was easily met.

On the other hand, municipalities benefit from having a direct line to national migration authorities, with whom they can **discuss individual cases**, in their attempt to solve their situation.

#### 5. Allocate resources to embed voluntary return as an explicit responsibility

Undocumented migrants are present in many medium to large-sized European cities. Their number is unknown, is often under- or over-estimated and is constantly changing. Some of the undocumented migrants are there for a short time while in transit, decide to sign up for voluntary return, move to another EU Member State or are granted permission to stay. Others will be stranded in a legal limbo for a longer time. **Many of these undocumented migrants will have contact with local stakeholders who are providing a civil, social, charitable or law enforcement service** to them. Examples of actors in this field are emergency shelters, local police forces, charities, healthcare institutions, food distribution, social and legal services... Contacts between local stakeholders and undocumented migrants can take place on an ad hoc or on a more regular basis, depending on the nature of the provided service.

**Streamlining the provision of information** about voluntary return can be more effective by designating the counselling of undocumented migrants and voluntary return as an explicit mission of the city administration. From the mapping exercise that was carried out, it was found that this approach, which involves identifying a dedicated person within the city administration to be the central point of contact regarding counselling and return, was being applied most explicitly in the city administrations of Milan, Ghent and Antwerp. The city of Antwerp assigned someone in their city administration with the job title 'Program Lead Voluntary Return Antwerp'.



Identifying or assigning a single point of contact within the city administration makes it possible to foster a network of **local stakeholders** who occasionally or frequently are in contact with undocumented migrants. A network of that type **enhances cooperation**. Information about voluntary return and about ways to refer an undocumented migrant to the correct return service **can be streamlined in a more efficient way**. The distance between the target group and information about voluntary return will then decrease, **raising the effectiveness with which the information is disseminated**.

Having a local point of contact for voluntary return and for **reaching out to the above mentioned stakeholders strengthens the support base** that exists as a means of presenting voluntary return as a viable option for the target group. The designated person also **monitors the number of contacts and returnees**. While doing so, he/she will also gain a **clear overview with regard to the potential that exists in the target group**. The impact of counselling and the dissemination of information about return in a city will then become more tangible.

The **success of the assigned SPOC to strive for contacts with local stakeholders, strengthening cooperation and broaden the support base for voluntary return is determined by the willingness to allocate resources to the counselling of undocumented migrants and voluntary return**.



## Final conclusion

This blueprint has been drafted on the basis of an extensive mapping exercise conducted in six European cities. Although the realities in all cities are different, the project has identified several best practices that can potentially be implemented in every city and in every country, regardless of the different realities on the ground. These best practices have been crystallised into five practical recommendations for national and city authorities. These five recommendations could be considered **a blueprint** for the organisation of return counselling within the urban context.

The blueprint centres around key concepts as **multi-level governance, stakeholder cooperation** and **clear communication**. This blueprint should be read as an invitation. It invites national authorities and municipalities to engage in a dialogue on cooperation. It can help by defining each other's roles in such cooperation and offers a way forward in which to create a truly multi-level governance approach towards migration management.

