

6 *Return, Inc.*

It was a sunny summer afternoon, and the heat was almost unbearable. Maria Hagan and I were sitting with Patrick, a Cameroonian asylum-seeking man, in a shady spot in a quiet neighbourhood of Agadir, at walking distance from the seaside. From where we were, we could hear the honking of taxis and chatter of people on the promenade that runs along the beach. Patrick had joined us after Sunday service at the Protestant church, services very well attended by migrant people from various African countries. Some of them, like the pastor, had been living in Agadir for years. Many others found themselves in the city after being forcefully displaced from the North of the country during arrest-and-disperse campaigns. Patrick belonged to this second group of people. At the time of interview, Patrick had been in Morocco for almost two years, and had attempted to cross the border to Spain several times. A few months earlier, the police had arbitrarily arrested him in Tangier and displaced him to Agadir. After sleeping at the bus station for a few months, Patrick had managed to find a job in a factory that paid him 70 MAD (€6.40) per day, each working day stretching from 8 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. Although the working conditions and pay were not good, Patrick did not feel like there were too many other options open to him. “Because now, in Cameroon, there are two crises,” he explained. “The English-speaking crisis and . . . the effects of Boko Haram”. He gave us a questioning look and asked, “Do you know Boko Haram?” We nodded. “This is Cameroon now. This is what made me leave Cameroon”. Patrick picked a stone up off the ground and started playing with it, then continued: “If things improve, if the situation gets quieter, it’s ok, I can sign my deportation, I can go back to my sister, it’s ok. This is what I want now”. He then raised his eyebrows. “It is not because we are in Morocco that we are ok. Things for us are really bad”.

By “signing his deportation”, Patrick did not mean being forcefully deported back to Cameroon by Moroccan authorities. “Signing one’s

deportation” is an expression recurrently used by migrants in Morocco to refer to the AVRR programme run by the IOM (Maâ 2019). Contrary to deportation, AVRR is a form of removal based on migrants’ will to leave the territory of the host country ‘voluntarily’ (signing one’s deportation) (Koch 2014; Webber 2011). First implemented in 2005, AVRR is the longest-running IOM programme in Morocco. With 1,399 returns carried out in 2015 alone, Morocco was the IOM’s “eighth largest return mission in the world in 2015” (International Organisation for Migration 2017, 28).

The AVRR is often depicted as the quintessential border externalisation instrument, that allows states in the Global North to push their borders South (Alioua and Rachidi 2017; Caillault 2012). However, a closer look at the functioning of the AVRR in Morocco reveals that the balance of power in the governance of migrants’ return is more complex than it seems (Maâ 2019, 2020b). For one, contrary to what some existing academic work implies (Bartels 2017), the AVRR started not as a result of the imposition of the EU, but at the demand of the Moroccan government itself in the early 2000s. Donors do not demonstrate unwavering support of how the programme functions: on several occasions, funding shortages have pushed the IOM to shut the AVRR down, a measure which has led migrants to organise protests and sit-ins to demand it back. The actual implementation of the Voluntary Return programme therefore seems to rely on a number of factors that contradict the alleged normative power of the EU and the IOM: donors’ interest in the programme is discontinuous, the commitment of the Moroccan government is very high, and migrants organise protests when the IOM is not able to provide their voluntary repatriation.

This chapter shows how aid elusively expands the deportation capacity of ‘transit’ countries. I conceptualise the role that aid plays as ‘elusive’ because the AVRR is not coercively imposed on Moroccan authorities, embassies of countries of origin, or migrants themselves by Northern donors or the IOM. AVRR leverages structural power dynamics that push these different actors to converge towards a specific migration control device, and to cooperate in its implementation. For Moroccan authorities, Voluntary Return constitutes a way to remove undesirable foreigners from the country in a cheaper and diplomatically more acceptable way. For embassies of countries of origin, it is an instrument to externalise the financial costs of diplomatic assistance for a category of citizens that they consider “problematic”.

For migrants, it is a way of accessing a last-resort way out of the country in conditions of exhaustion – or so is depicted by IOM officers. In the Moroccan context, Voluntary Return cannot be easily understood as a way through which aid ‘buys’ the collaboration of states in countries of ‘origin’ and ‘transit’ (Korvensyrjä 2017). Rather, different local actors cooperate in the implementation of aid-funded projects *if* these initiatives suit their political agendas or situated needs.

This chapter falls into five sections. I first explain how the Voluntary Return programme functions, and I clarify the role that each actor (the IOM, donors, the Moroccan government, embassies of countries of origin, and migrant themselves) is called to play in its implementation. The following three sections look at the counterintuitive attitude of the Moroccan government, embassies of countries of origin, and migrants themselves vis-à-vis the AVRR. By scrutinising the reasons that push these actors to collaborate in the implementation of the programme, I rescale the alleged normative power of both the IOM and European donors in border externalisation. The last section questions the political use of the category “Voluntary Return” in the Moroccan context. I open the pathway to new research about the social life of the label, and prompt doubts about what it may conceal.

How Voluntary Return Works

The IOM’s AVRR programme can be easily classified as the most controversial activity run by the agency, in Morocco and beyond (Webber 2011). As the programme title suggests, the distinctive feature of the Voluntary Return programme is that the return of a given person to their country of origin is voluntary. Migrants must go to the agency’s headquarters in Rabat to register their interest in returning to their country of origin. They also have the right to change their mind about return at any moment before departing. Many question how genuine migrants’ ‘voluntariness’ is: the dire living conditions of migrants in Morocco and the possibility of accessing economic resources as part of the reintegration package, in fact, seem to leave many migrants without much option than to plead for Voluntary Return (Caillaud 2012; see FTDES and Migreurop 2020, for the case of Tunisia). Likely aware of this critical environment, the IOM is particularly zealous in stressing the voluntary quality of the programme, both in publicly available documents and in interviews. The 2019 Edition of the IOM Morocco

activity report lists “return based on the voluntary decision of the beneficiary” as the first of seven essential principles that “transform migrants into the main actors of their return” (International Organisation for Migration 2019b, 19, translation by author). During the interview that I conducted with IOM officers in 2019, the two respondents proactively took the chance to highlight the agency’s view on voluntariness in Voluntary Return:

Interviewee 1: [...] There are two things: first, here we do not do any publicity on Voluntary Return, we do not have posters or mass sensibilisation, the people are referred to us by partners. Second: the response is really axed on the migrant. We highlight that it is really voluntary and that the person can always change his mind.

Interviewee 2: [...] The people come here by themselves and it is one of the solutions that we offer them, and the government here perfectly understands the question of voluntariness – sometimes there are flight cancellations, people that change their minds, and they [the government] perfectly understand this.¹

Compared to other projects run by the agency, the AVRR is the only direct assistance programme directly managed by the IOM. It is also the most pervasively visible to those visiting the agency’s headquarters in Rabat. During an interview in summer 2016, Richard, the IOM officer that I cited in Chapter 4 and 5, pointed at the building next door, 13 rue Ait Ourir. He then told me “the villa next door, number 13 ... they exclusively work on return towards Morocco and also from Morocco, as you can see our beneficiaries are at our doorstep”, referring to the people queuing in front of the agency’s external door to register for return. At each visit I paid to the IOM for interviews (summer 2016, autumn 2017, summer 2019), a few migrant people were standing on the pavement outside the front door of the villa at number 11 rue Ait Ourir, likely on a break from sitting in the waiting room for AVRR applicants. A sign was attached to the agency’s front door and read “The Assistance to Voluntary Return and Reintegration is a service that the IOM provides FREE OF CHARGE. THE IOM DOES NOT USE ANY INTERMEDIARY”. During my first visits, the waiting room for migrants waiting to apply for AVRR consisted of a small, dark space behind the security counter. By my last visit in 2019,

¹ Interview with two IOM officers, Rabat, July 2019.

another, brand new waiting room had been built on the other side of the courtyard. Contrary to the other small, dark spot, the new room was covered in transparent panels that let the light filter in. A few posters outlining the different phases of the AVRRR programme were hung on the walls of the waiting room, where some migrant people sat, some with their luggage, others without.

The way that AVRRR operates is more complex than other development cooperation programmes. The first element of complexity is the high number of actors that, directly or indirectly, are involved in its functioning. The IOM directly manages both the financial and the logistical aspects of the projects. Financially, it fundraises for the project and channels donors' funding into support for specific components of AVRRR. Logistically, the organisation registers, interviews, and selects its beneficiaries (see Chapter 4). It contacts embassies of origin countries to recognise their citizens and to deliver a travel document to them if they are undocumented (or if they have documents but choose not to use them) (Maâ 2019). It mediates with the Moroccan Ministry of Interior to obtain travel authorisations. It arranges ticket purchase, transfer to the airport, and post-arrival assistance in the country of origin – which is mostly managed by IOM agencies in countries of origin (OIM Maroc n.d.b). Donors, Moroccan authorities, embassies of countries of origin, and civil society organisations all need to be involved in the programme for it to operate. Donors ensure funding. Moroccan authorities allow the IOM to operate in the country, grant travel authorisations for irregular migrants and, most recently, also fund flight tickets. The embassies of countries of origin provide travel documents. Civil society organisations ensure the implementation of assistance activities that are complementary to the exclusive return component of the project: referrals (Institute for Studies on International Politics (ISPI) 2010), provision of emergency healthcare and accommodation (Maâ 2019), as well as pre-departure training. Paradoxically, beneficiary recruitment is the part that requires the least direct involvement of the agency. As the IOM has a very discrete communication policy on the topic, migrants are either referred to the agency by other NGOs or, more frequently, self-refer after having learnt about the programme through word of mouth (Institute for Studies on International Politics (ISPI) 2010; Maâ 2020b).

The second element of complexity is funding. As for most other programmes run by the IOM, the AVRRR does not count on continuous

contributions from IOM's member states. It rather depends on project-based funding (see Chapter 1). However, where other projects are limited in time, the AVRRR has been running since 2005. Formally, the AVRRR is still composed of discrete projects, all contributing to the main backbone of the programme (the funding of return), to the reintegration-related activities (pre-departure orientation, professional training courses, and post-arrival assistance package) and the provision of humanitarian assistance in the pre-departure phase² (OIM Maroc n.d.a). As the programme is composed of discrete projects, the donors funding the AVRRR constantly change. In 2010, the IOM listed Germany, the UK, Belgium, Spain, Italy Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the EU as funders of the AVRRR (International Organisation for Migration 2010). In 2018, instead, it was funded by Morocco, Germany, Spain, Italy, Norway, and the Netherlands (International Organisation for Migration 2018). Funding for the programme is thus discontinuous, and the type of assistance that the IOM can grant to its beneficiaries is not homogenous. Since 2005, the Voluntary Return programme has had to be interrupted in 2010, 2012, and 2016 due to funding shortages (International Organisation for Migration 2010).³ The level of pre-departure and reintegration assistance provision also varies, depending on the specific conjuncture of AVRRR-related projects funded at any specific moments in time⁴ and on the beneficiary's country of origin.⁵

Voluntary Return as Moroccan Migration Policy

Moroccan authorities have been central to the establishment, continuation, and everyday operation of the Voluntary Return programme.

² Interview with two IOM officers, Rabat, July 2019

³ Interview with Richard, IOM officer, Rabat, August 2016.

⁴ Maâ, for example, explains that after the interruption of the programme in 2016, the IOM Morocco resumed registrations for those applicants that accepted to be returned even with the condition that only the flight will be paid for, but not the reintegration package (Maâ 2019).

⁵ For example, the FORAS – Enhancing Reintegration Opportunities project provides pre-departure training only to migrants that are voluntarily returning to Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal (International Organisation for Migration 2019a; OIM Maroc n.d.a). The second phase of the project (FORAS II) expanded eligibility to migrant people from three more countries (Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Togo) (OIM Maroc 2020).

The Moroccan government, in fact, gave the decisive push to launch the programme in 2005. In October of that year, the IOM freighted a charter flight for 220 Malian voluntary returnees, at the request of both Moroccan and Malian authorities (International Organisation for Migration 2005, 16). At that time, the IOM did not have an office nor solid project portfolio in the country, and the agency's presence was physically reduced to a member of staff operating out of the offices of Mutual Aid. In those first few years, the AVRRO operated on a case-by-case approach, being deployed to provide repatriation for specific cases.⁶

Moroccan authorities, however, considered IOM spot assistance to be gravely insufficient. In a conversation with American diplomats, Khalid Zerouali, director of Migration and Border Surveillance in Morocco's Interior Ministry, argued that IOM support was not enough to complement the substantial economic effort that Morocco was making to repatriate irregular migrants (American Embassy of Rabat 2006c). The economic pressure that Morocco sustained was particularly strong because, at the time, the authorities adopted an aggressive deportation policy. The state did not seem keen to allow people who were not in need of international protection to remain in the country. It insisted that "once assessed, those who are economic migrants must then be repatriated to their countries of origin, which Morocco has done in cooperation with the International Organisation of Migration (IOM)" (American Embassy of Rabat 2006c). In 2004 and 2005, Moroccan authorities "voluntarily" returned 2,480 and 4,485 people respectively (MCMREAM 2016, 86), with the IOM stepping in for the repatriation of just 295 migrants in 2005 (OIM Maroc 2019, 4). The first AVRRO operation run by the IOM happened weeks after the Ceuta and Melilla events, in a militarised context where Moroccan authorities had escalated arrests of migrant people in the North of the country, their displacement to the desert, and their return to origin countries. It is not surprising that the first group of migrants who the IOM 'voluntarily returned' were Malian: in 2005 alone, Morocco returned 1,289 Malian citizens, and Malian authorities had themselves set up air bridges to repatriate their nationals (Chappart 2015).

As mentioned before, until 2014 the AVRRO functioned intermittently, mainly due to funding instability. The IOM faced resistance to

⁶ Interview with two IOM officers, Rabat, July 2019.

securing funding because donors questioned the efficiency of the AVRR as a border control method (Bartels 2017). Furthermore, European countries felt that funding the programme could potentially jeopardise EU attempts to convince Morocco to sign the readmission agreement (Maâ 2020b). Once again, Moroccan authorities significantly bolstered the implementation of AVRR by integrating it within the country's own migration management strategy. The new migration policy announced in 2013 explicitly incorporates voluntary return as part of the transversal programme named "Management of migration flows and fight against trafficking in human beings", which constitutes one of the eleven programmes structuring the implementation of the SNIA. More specifically, the AVRR contributes to meeting the fifteenth specific objective of the SNIA, namely "mastering immigration flows according to an approach that is humane and respectful of human rights" (MDMCMREAM 2018, 18–19, translation by author).⁷

The financial investment that Morocco has made in the programme reflects the central role that Voluntary Return plays in the government's new policy. Through three successive amendments to the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between the IOM and the Government of Morocco, Moroccan authorities have agreed to subsidise the return of 1,000 people in 2014, 1,500 people in 2015, and 3,000 people in 2016 (MDMCMREAM 2017, 97), mainly through the purchase of flight tickets. Over those three years, Moroccan authorities contributed 38.5 million MAD (€3.5 million) to the functioning of the AVRR (MCMCREAM 2016, 87). Publicly, Morocco explains its involvement in funding AVRR by showcasing an argument that sits between the humanitarian and the pragmatic. As a respondent from the MDMCREAM put it:

The Voluntary Return programme – we do it since 2004, since when there is a Memorandum of Understanding between the Moroccan Ministry of Interior and the IOM that stipulates that the Moroccan state funds the [plane] tickets and the IOM funds reintegration. Now there is even a pre-departure orientation phase, and it is a programme that has a lot of success

⁷ The other activities included in the programme are: the "reinforcement of integrated border management"; the "implementation of the exceptional operation of regularization"; and the "fight against human trafficking and reinforcement of knowledge of the Moroccan security services" (MDMCMCREAM 2018, 71–77, translation by author).

among irregular migrants, because traffickers sell them Eldorado and then when they realise that crossing is difficult ... we give the possibility of regularization to those who want to stay here, and for those who want to go home there is voluntary return.⁸

The Voluntary Return programme therefore meets two objectives of the new Moroccan migration policy. On the one hand, it allows Moroccan authorities, domestically and internationally, to be seen as offering a “humane” solution to migrants stranded in the country due to the closure of European borders and at risk of becoming easy prey for traffickers. On the other hand, it allows authorities to work towards their own objective of controlling the number of irregular migrants in the country [“we give the possibility of regularisation to those who want to stay here, and for those who want to go home there is the voluntary return”]. This second function is central as Morocco seems to display Voluntary Return as a substitute for deportation. As the Moroccan NGO GADEM highlighted in a 2018 report, the SNIA does not acknowledge any of the administrative measures foreseen by Law 02–03 as possible mechanisms to deport a foreigner from the Moroccan territory,⁹ and exclusively apprehends the AVRR as a possible return measure (GADEM 2018a). Fabrice, a development consultant working for a European donor, similarly explained that:

First, Morocco doesn’t expel any foreigner. [...] They have what they call the *refoulement interne*, [...] but they don’t send them to the border anymore as they used to do. So, the reason why they are interested in voluntary return is political; they can’t do forced returns, so they prefer paying for voluntary return rather than having irregular migrants more or less settled in Morocco ... so that is basically the idea and what they say is “well, we are ready to co-fund, this is a European problem, so Europe has to pay as well”.¹⁰

Placing Voluntary Return at the heart of the migration policy would therefore not only allow Morocco to avoid the legal constraints and

⁸ Interview with officer of the MDMCMREAM, Rabat, June 2019.

⁹ Law 02–03 distinguishes between *réconduite à la frontière* (return to the border) and *expulsion* (expulsion) as return measures that Moroccan authorities can take against foreigners. The *return to the border* is a measure addressing foreigners that have been residing irregularly in Morocco, and that are returned in virtue of their irregular status. *Expulsion*, instead, is a measure tackling foreigners that are returned to their country of origin because they constitute a “severe threat to public safety” (GADEM 2018b, 7).

¹⁰ Interview with Fabrice, development consultant, place withdrawn, July 2016.

costs imposed by the Moroccan migration act concerning the deportation of a foreigner. It also allows the country to more easily mobilise the financial support of European donors. Morocco's financial investment in the AVRR, however, could also be read as part of the country's strategy to utilise its migration policy to further its African diplomatic agenda (see Chapter 1). By offering citizens of African countries two 'humane' solutions to the suffering of irregular mobility (regularisation or voluntary return), Morocco would show its commitment to establishing fair relations with its African partners, especially after a decade marked by deportations and the systematic abuse of migrant people.

Morocco's transformation into a donor greatly contributed to stabilising the AVRR. In an interview granted to online Moroccan newspaper *Yabiladi* in 2014, the then IOM Chief of Mission for Morocco, Anke Strauss, declared that the IOM was having a hard time raising the €1.5 million necessary to run the programme, which costs €2,600 per returned migrant. Strauss welcomed Morocco's contribution as a fortunate trend inversion: "Up to now, Morocco was offering us the necessary administrative support on issues of return visa, help at the airport . . . this time, it contributes towards a quarter of the sum that we need [to run the programme]" (Chaudier 2014). The increase of incoming funds has expanded the operational capacity of the AVRR. Between 2005 and 2013, the IOM had managed to support the voluntary return of 4,230 people, with an average of 539 migrants per year. Between 2014 and 2019, the number of people returned increased to 8,668 (OIM Maroc 2019) (see Figure 5).

The direct involvement of the Moroccan government in funding the programme is widely regarded by the international community as a sign of Morocco's commitment to border control cooperation. Such a level of involvement in AVRR operations is, in fact, unusual for a 'transit' country. The EU qualifies the specific arrangement for Voluntary Return in Morocco as "without precedent in the region [North Africa]" (European Commission 2016, 7, translation by author). Richard, the IOM officer I interviewed in 2016,¹¹ pointed out that: "Here we have a privilege that is very rare: that Morocco itself is a donor".¹² The EU Commission supports the

¹¹ Interview with Richard, IOM officer, Rabat, August 2016.

¹² IOM's narrative about "Morocco's exceptionalism" is in stark contrast with the agency's early portrait of the country's involvement in AVRR funding: back in 2006, Brunson McKinley, general director of the IOM, declared that it was

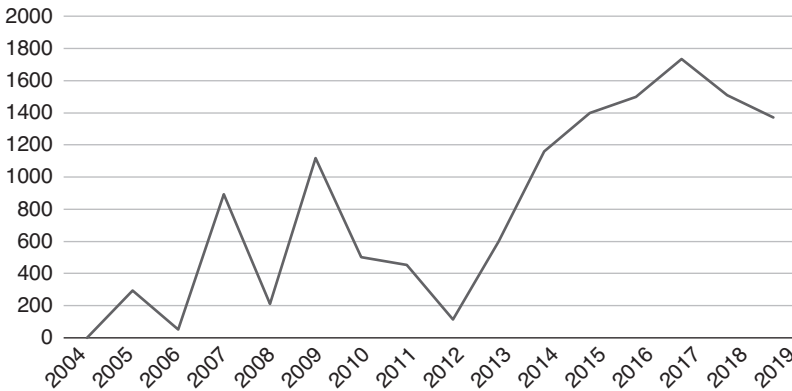


Figure 5 Number of ‘Voluntary Returns’ from Morocco organised by the IOM, 2005–19. Source: OIM Maroc 2019.

institutionalisation of the AVRR, its expansion and larger ownership by the Moroccan state. The budget support that the EU granted to Morocco for the implementation of the SNIA includes €1.2 million specifically for the AVRR. The programme, managed by the AECID, includes €200,000 for training Moroccan authorities about the management of the AVRR programme and €1 million for upgrading two training centres managed by Mutual Aid in Agadir and Khemisset, cities in the South and Centre of Morocco respectively. These centres should function both as structures providing professional training sessions, and as accommodation centres for migrants waiting to be voluntarily returned to their origin countries (European Commission 2016).

Contrary to mainstream understandings of the IOM’s influence in Morocco, country’s authorities have been central to the survival of Voluntary Return in the country. Over the years, the Moroccan government has provided the political and financial incentives necessary

“scandalous” that Morocco had to be alone in funding the AVRR for migrants on their territory, as Europe was equally concerned by the fate of these people. The IOM used the argument of the political responsibility of European states to support its own fundraising strategy: McKinley, in fact, complained that the IOM had launched multiple fundraising appeals to European countries, without managing to attract the desired budget (*Le Matin* 2006).

for the IOM to set up and institutionalise the AVRR, first as a punctual addition to the country's border security strategy, then as a component of the SNIA. In both phases, the IOM's Voluntary Return programme appears as an instrument to complement and externalise the country's deportation strategy. This allows the authorities to both share the financial burden of border security with donors and to gain the esteem of the international community on migration management.

Migrants' Suffering as the IOM Politics

Migrants' pressing demand for Voluntary Return is one of the main arguments put forward both by Moroccan authorities and by the IOM to justify the importance of the programme. As mentioned earlier, representative from the MDMCMREAM highlighted that "Voluntary Return has a lot of success among irregular migrants".¹³ an IOM member of staff highlighted that the number of migrants applying for voluntary return has always outnumbered the agency's financial capacity. At the time of interview with the Voluntary Return team (July 2019), 2,500 people were registered on a "waiting list" for the programme, in contrast with a total of 400 people voluntarily repatriated since the beginning of the year.¹⁴

Migrants' pressing demand for Voluntary Return becomes particularly visible at moments of funding shortage, and consequent interruptions of the programme. In 2012 and 2016, migrants organised protests in front of the IOM office in Rabat to pressure the agency to resume registrations (Maâ 2019, 2020b). On both occasions, the stalemate ceased through the proactive intervention of the IOM. The agency, in fact, solicited donors to contribute the funding necessary to resume the programme.¹⁵ Richard recalled that:

In 2012 there was almost no money left [for Voluntary Return], there were protests in front of our door, even this year [2016] ... as soon as there is no more money, we can feel it, and this is also how we raise the issue with the donors, we tell them "come and see in front of our door, when you have 200 migrants that are rebelling ...". We had it this year, and in 2012 as well.¹⁶

¹³ Interview with officer of the MDMCMREAM, Rabat, June 2019.

¹⁴ Interview with two IOM officers, Rabat, July 2019. ¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with Richard, IOM officer, Rabat, August 2016.

Migrants' visible and persistent physical presence in front of IOM doors is mobilised by the agency as a compelling evidence of the vulnerability of AVRRE beneficiaries. IOM staff tends to depict Voluntary Return beneficiaries as "desperate" and claim Voluntary Return as a last-resort solution:

These are people for whom there is no other hope, they are ready to do anything, they really tell us "it is a question of life or death" [...] people do not have any other option, so they start camping in front of our office, they hold demonstrations.¹⁷

The same agency tends to use the 'vulnerability' label to draw a line between 'good' migrants (categorised as passive, desperate actors, who are deemed eligible for Voluntary Return) and 'bad' migrants (depicted instead as more active agents able to instrumentalise the Voluntary Return programme and its eligibility criteria to fit their own mobility strategy) (Maâ 2019). During the interview, IOM officer Richard emphasised the need to thoroughly assess migrants' vulnerability to avoid people from using the programme as a "travel agency", which means, to have people registering for the programme multiple times during subsequent journeys to and from Morocco.¹⁸

The IOM particularly leveraged the vulnerability argument in 2012, as the funding shortage coincided with a period of increased violence at the border. In a public fundraising appeal, the IOM invited donors to contribute €620,000 towards the Voluntary Return programme. This sum was needed to ensure migrants access to one of the only short-term "humanitarian" solutions available in a context of emergency (de Haas 2012; see also Bartels 2017). This unusual publicity for the Voluntary Return programme made the IOM the target of criticism. A few days after the launch of the appeal, Dutch academic Hein de Haas, in fact, published an entry on his blog titled "IOM's dubious mission in Morocco". In the blogpost, de Haas highlighted that the wording of the appeal suggested that "the IOM tries to make money out of the violations of migrants' rights by the Moroccan authorities", as "[...] these human rights abuses are now being instrumentalized [by the IOM] to justify a costly repatriation scheme" (de Haas 2012). Ten days after the publication of this blogpost, the then IOM Morocco

¹⁷ Interview with two IOM officers, Rabat, July 2019.

¹⁸ Interview with Richard, IOM officer, Rabat, August 2016.

mission chief Anke Strauss posted a comment under de Haas' blog post. In the comment, she clarified that the Voluntary Return programme "has to be seen as a complementary measure to the policy and advocacy response described above, which is implemented to provide a humanitarian response to the migrants' immediate needs in the short run". To further validate the IOM's position, Strauss concluded that "this IOM's response is seen by the UN Country Team and civil society partners as being the best solution to the challenge of many migrants wanting to return home" (de Haas 2012). Despite the criticism, the IOM managed to resume the Voluntary Return operations through the intervention of Switzerland, that accepted to fund the programme "as a 'durable solution' to save migrants from the increasing repression they suffered in Morocco" (Bartels 2017, 324).¹⁹

In the discourse and practice of the IOM, migrants are not subjects on whom the Voluntary Return programme is imposed. Rather, they are actors through which the Voluntary Return programme is produced and reproduced. Migrants' critical mass (both numerical, as names on the AVRR waiting list, and physical, as protestors in front of the agency's doors) and vulnerability transform are bargaining elements that the IOM uses to plead further aid from donors (Bartels 2017). Migrants' 'worthiness' within the AVRR economy, however, is directly linked to their vulnerability potential. In fact, migrants' capacity to sidestep and appropriate the rules of Voluntary Return to their own advantage is not welcomed by the IOM, whose officers consider these signs of noisy, unruly, and unwelcome agency.

Voluntary Return as the Outsourcing of Diplomatic Assistance

Embassies of countries of origin are key actors in the functioning of the Voluntary Return programme. Many migrants who request the IOM's assistance for voluntary return do not have papers. The collaboration of West and Central African embassies and consular authorities is thus

¹⁹ In the following years, the protests and situations of tension during moments of funding shortage pushed the IOM to review its strategy and opt for a more discrete fundraising approach to Voluntary Return, based on funding cycles. The "cyclical funding" strategy structures resources for Voluntary Return "in cycles lasting just over 24 months [that] enables the IOM mission office to plan the available funds and arrange support from different donors for the different aspects of the programme" (International Organisation for Migration 2017, 42).

necessary to allow candidates to obtain the necessary travel documents. A diplomat from Guinea Conakry explained:

We have an identification role because those [the migrants] who come do not have documents. In Guinea there are more than 300 dialects and we identify them through a language test. After the identification, the IOM sends us a document and we produce a travel document, that they call a laissez-passer, but actually it is a travel document.²⁰

A Senegalese diplomat explained that the identification role embassies are required to perform in the case of Voluntary Return is actually the same as that which is put in place in the case of forced returns. “When there are detainees, there is an agent of the [Senegalese] consulate who goes to the Ministry of Interior . . . and the other embassies do the same thing”.²¹

During interviews, diplomats working in embassies and consulates of countries of origin did not portray their collaboration with the IOM as a burden on their everyday duties. Rather, they depicted the AVRR programme as a way to financially outsource the diplomatic assistance to their citizens in distress. The same Senegalese diplomat commented:

[...] we collaborate [with the IOM] without problems because this is convenient for us as well: [...] we do not have the means to assist them [stranded Senegalese migrants], while the IOM can participate to covering the medical expenses, sometimes even the accommodation during the period while they wait [to go back to their country] . . . *Honestly, if there was not the IOM, I do not know what the consulates of African countries would do*, especially when you have 5, 6, or 7 people every day arriving. The flight tickets for Senegal are very expensive . . . and the IOM can pay for that. [emphasis added]

This interviewee describes collaboration with the IOM as “convenient” because it allows the Senegalese embassy to externalise a number of different costs: flight tickets, accommodation, and medical expenses for Senegalese citizens that want to go back home. The financial advantage represented by the collaboration with the IOM seems to be particularly high because Morocco represents a context where mobilising

²⁰ Interview with officer of the Embassy of Guinea Conakry, Rabat, June 2019.

²¹ Interview with officer of the Senegalese consulate, Casablanca, June 2019. Maã, however, has highlighted elsewhere that the procedure of Voluntary Return is often obstructed by the unhelpful and dismissive behaviour of embassies of countries of origin (Maã 2020a).

alternative channels of relief is particularly pricy. An Ivorian diplomat explained that:

We do not have the budget to assist them [stranded migrants] so these people, when they arrive, we send them to the IOM. Normally, if they are in need, we try to call their family, but sometimes even the family does not have the means [...] The tickets for African countries are expensive. There is just the RAM [Royal Air Maroc] [operating here], if there was Air Ivoire we would be able to negotiate . . . but there is just the RAM, Air Ivoire does not operate here.²²

The diplomats surveyed seemed to agree in considering the AVRR as a financially convenient option to outsource assistance to their fellow citizens in distress, in a context of resource scarcity. This discursive commitment in providing assistance to members of their diaspora, however, somehow clashed with the fact that interviewees seemed to share a negative view of the kind of people that had to be assisted through Voluntary Return. The diplomat from Senegal, for example, told me that the number of Senegalese migrants who were voluntarily returned was not very significant before 2018. At the time of the interview (summer 2019), however, the consulate was seeing many more people pleading to return home voluntarily. He specified that voluntary returnees are “people who arrived here because they wanted to cross to Europe, but they did not manage to cross and now they come back towards the cities. They are tired, they are ill and everything . . . and we refer them to the IOM”. Later in the interview, he stated that “this population [people that apply for Voluntary Return] is very difficult”. He then started listing “they do not have a job, they do not have resources, they sometimes have a lot of illnesses like tuberculosis, if they come to the consulate it is just to ask us for help”. The representative from the Ivorian embassy concurred and drew a more precise line between “the people who apply for Voluntary Return” and “the students”. “Because with them [people that are referred to the IOM’s AVRR] it is not like with the students” he explained. “The students, all is well, but these people [those who apply for Voluntary Return] are those who tried to leave but did not manage. Because in Africa, you see, we are scared of going back home because we did not manage”. Both interviewees depicted a similar image of AVRR applicants as

²² Interview with an officer of the Embassy of Ivory Coast, Rabat, June 2019.

“problematic”, essentially because they are seen (and devalued) as poor and resourceless after an unsuccessful migration project.

Beside negatively judging AVRR applicants for having financial and health troubles, interviewees also expressed disapproval because these migrants tend not to make themselves legible to the state apparatus. The diplomat from Guinea Conakry qualified candidates to Voluntary Return as “people who do not register with the embassy because they want to go directly to the North [of Morocco]”. The Ivorian diplomat instead highlighted that the illegible presence of these migrants hinders the ability of consular authorities to facilitate repatriation assistance. As he put it:

These people do not register themselves [with consular authorities], they come here only when there are problems [...] there is an office of Ivorians abroad, if we had a list of people that want to return, they could make funding available ... but we do not have [a list of candidates to return]. We even asked migrant-led organisations to give us a list, to do a census of people but they did not give us any [list].

The dismissive attitude that diplomats interviewed showed vis-à-vis voluntary returnees echoes broader findings foregrounded by the literature on mobility in North Africa. Research, in fact, argues that the relationship between West and Central African migrants and their consular authorities are often quite tense. In his work on illegality in Rabat, Bachelet highlights that African embassies and consulates often behave quite obliviously vis-à-vis the needs of their citizens in Morocco, especially of those that are more exposed to violent border control practices (Bachelet 2016). Similarly, research conducted with returnees in Senegal and Mali shows that people who have been voluntarily or forcibly returned see the authorities of their countries of origin as uninterested in providing them with the necessary assistance needed to reintegrate back home (Chappart 2015; Lecadet 2016b; Rodriguez 2019).

The IOM’s Voluntary Return programme can count on the collaboration of embassies of migrants’ countries of origin. These consider the AVRR as a way to outsource the cost of assisting their citizens in distress abroad. The economic convenience of externalising return to the IOM seems particularly high given the negative description that the interviewees gave of AVRR applicants as a ‘problematic’ group, who defies state legibility, claims assistance from a situation of

distress, and is qualified as unworthy – or at least, not as worthy as ‘the students’.

Who Is Conducting ‘Voluntary’ Returns?

The Voluntary Return programme is an area of operation where the IOM seems to devote particular attention to issues of transparency. At the time of writing (December 2019), the IOM had published two quarterly reports on its website (April–June and July–September) as well as an annual report on Voluntary Return for 2018. The latter document provided figures about the number of migrants repatriated, and trends about nationality, age and gender, attempts to cross the border to Europe prior to applying for Voluntary Return, the reasons for returning, the period of time spent in Morocco, their vulnerabilities, and information about the reintegration component of the programme (International Organisation for Migration 2018). These publications supplemented the annual report that the IOM published in early 2019. This level and frequency of implementation details is not easily available for other projects: generally, the IOM only published a project leaflet, as well as a summary of the year’s activity in the annual report. After the announcement of the new migration policy, in particular since 2016, the MDMCMREAM has also been particularly proactive in publishing data and statistics about the implementation of the new migration policy. In particular, the Ministry has published three reports covering the periods 2013–16, 2017, and 2018 respectively (MCMREAM 2016; MDMCMREAM 2017, 2018) which report figures about the various programmes composing the SNIA, including the Voluntary Return programme.

A closer look at this unusual abundance of details reveals that the figures shared by the IOM and the Moroccan authorities on Voluntary Return do not coincide. As the graph and table below show (see Figure 6 and Table 2), government’s statistics report a significantly higher number of voluntary returns conducted from Morocco since 2004, in comparison to the figures published by the IOM.

The 2017 annual report on the implementation of the SNIA does not provide precise figures on the implementation of the programme in 2016 and 2017. However, it does specify that “1,554 voluntary returns have been facilitated [by the Ministry of Interior] between the 1st of January and the 9th of August 2017, bringing the number of voluntary returns

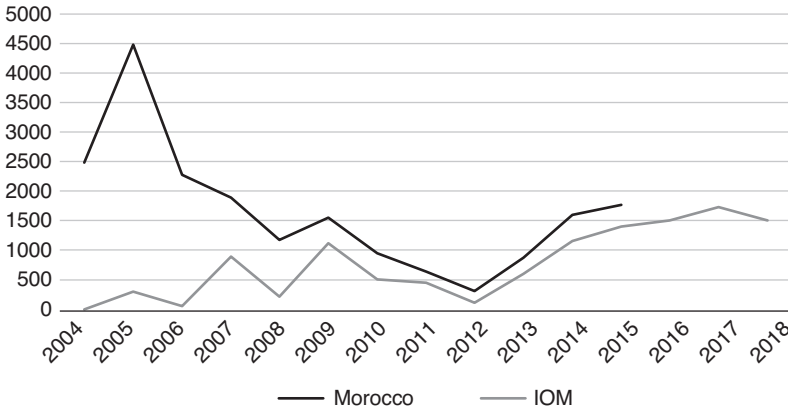


Figure 6 Number of 'Voluntary Returns' conducted by Moroccan authorities and the IOM in comparison. Source: MCMREAM 2016 and IOM 2018.

from Morocco up to 23,000 since 2014" (MDMCMREAM 2017, 98, translation by author). This last figure is quite surprising: the data shared by the IOM states that during the 2014–17 period, the number of people voluntarily returned by the agency was only 5,790 (OIM Maroc 2019). The government, in other words, declares that the number of people voluntarily returned from Morocco between 2014 and 2017 is four times higher than IOM's statistics suggest. Interestingly, the 2018 annual report on the implementation of the SNIA only quotes the statistics shared by the IOM in relation to voluntary returns, and reports that 11,175 individuals have been voluntarily returned from Morocco to their countries of origin since 2005 (MDMCMREAM 2018).

The date of inception of the programme also differs between the two sources. Whereas the IOM takes 2005 as the starting point for the agency's engagement in voluntary returns, Moroccan authorities state 2004 as the inception date for the AVR. As the 2016 report on the implementation of the SNIA outlines, the programme was initially launched to manage the "return of irregular migrants originating from Nigeria". The episode "constituted a great experience that encouraged the IOM to get inspired from Morocco and to cooperate on this matter" (MCMREAM 2016, 85, translation by author).

Table 2 *Number of ‘Voluntary Returns’ conducted by Moroccan authorities and the IOM in comparison*

Year	Number of voluntary returned migrants	
	Morocco	IOM
2004	2,480	0
2005	4,485	295
2006	2,280	51
2007	1,890	892
2008	1,170	210
2009	1,550	1,119
2010	950	501
2011	640	453
2012	310	112
2013	874	597
2014	1,594	1,158
2015	1,772	1,399
2016	n/a	1,500
2017	n/a	1,733
2018	n/a	1,508

Source: MCMREAM 2016 and IOM 2018.

What are these discrepancies due to? The first and most straightforward explanation emerging from interviews is that the Moroccan government does not completely outsource Voluntary Return to the IOM. “The data from the Ministry of the Interior include the whole of the assistance to voluntary return” two IOM officers explained to me. “The returns organized by the IOM are just a percentage of this figure. There are some returns that are organized by the Ministry of Interior and the IOM is not involved”²³. During an interview, a respondent of the MDMCMREAM was clearly uneasy talking about this point. “In the Memorandum of Understanding between the IOM and Morocco there are annual objectives” he explained to me. “However, the waiting lists [for voluntary return] are always very long, so in cases of urgency, Morocco can decide to go [to proceed with voluntary return] without the IOM”²⁴. The respondent did not qualify what counted as an

²³ Interview with two officers from the IOM, Rabat, July 2019.

²⁴ Interview with an officer of the MDMCMREAM, Rabat, July 2019.

urgency for Moroccan authorities. The “emergency” and “humanitarian” argument is one that the authorities had already used to frame their sustained efforts at repatriation. In conversation with American diplomats in 2006, Khalid Zerouali, director of Migration and Border Surveillance in Morocco’s Interior Ministry, stated that “the GOM [Government of Morocco] would continue to repatriate migrants primarily to send a message to the ‘mafia’ of traffickers that their activities will not be tolerated in Morocco”. He then reassured his counterparts that “the repatriation procedures are always performed in accordance with international standards” (American Embassy of Rabat 2006c).

It seems clear that the Moroccan Ministry of Interior has been conducting returns qualified as ‘voluntary’ even without the IO. However, these returns are not clearly publicised by the authorities, nor by the IOM. In its 2016 report, the MDMCMREAM clearly points to the IOM as the body to which migrants must address themselves for voluntary return, and as the organisation which manages the entire voluntary repatriation process. The report includes a section specifying the “main activities of Moroccan authorities in the framework of assistance to voluntary return and durable reintegration”. The list of activities suggests that Morocco plays only a support role in the AVRR programme run by the IOM, not that the authorities are directly involved as initiators and managers of voluntary returns (MCMREAM 2016, 87–88).

The voluntary nature of the returns conducted by the Moroccan authorities is a source of debate. In August 2018, Spain summarily sent back to Morocco 116 undocumented people who had irregularly crossed the border to Ceuta. In a report published in the summer 2018, the NGO GADEM argued that, once deported to Morocco, 43 of these people had been sent back to Cameroon and Guinea, their respective origin countries. These returns, however, seemed to have been classified as “voluntary returns”, rather than as a “deportations”. Quoting a “reliable source”, the NGO reports that “consular authorities present would have pressured the people into signing a document mentioning their will to return to their origin country.” This procedure would facilitate and expedite voluntary returns, because “the existence of such a document would allow them to justify the voluntary return and proceed to expulsion without having to present them [the candidates to deportation] in front of a judge because they would have ‘given their written consent’”.

These circumstances suggest that the label of “voluntary return” is used in Morocco to clear and expedite the number of deportations conducted by the authorities, without ensuring the respect of the will of the returnee. As GADEM highlighted, “it is difficult to conceive of a real consent for people detained by security forces and for whom the consent has been extracted by consular authorities” (GADEM 2018a, 44, translation by author). The concern that the voluntary returns conducted by the Moroccan authorities might not really be “voluntary” was evoked by two respondents whom I jointly interviewed in June 2019. They explained to me that “Morocco has been doing voluntary returns for years, with or without the IOM Because with the IOM you need to follow certain standards, without the IOM they are [voluntary returns] *à la marocaine* [Moroccan-style]” they said, raising their hands towards their chest, as to indicate their scepticism vis-à-vis the conditions of implementation of such returns. At the end of the interview, both interviewees explicitly asked to be completely deidentified.²⁵

The differences between the figures communicated by the IOM and Moroccan authorities in relation to Voluntary Returns, the unclear communication policy carried out by Rabat on the topic, and the anecdotes about the questionable “voluntariness” of returns, suggest that the IOM does not actually hold the monopoly over “voluntary” returns in Morocco. If this is the case, the label and publicity surrounding the IOM-run AVRR programme might be displacing attention away from state-run “voluntary” returns, which have therefore not undergone public scrutiny despite the existence of disturbing rumours surrounding them.

Conclusion

The Voluntary Return programme is emblematic of the complex power geometries characterising the workings of aid as an instrument of border control. AVRR is usually depicted as a quintessential European border externalisation tool. However, a closer analysis warrants the need to de-essentialise claims about the capacity of countries in the Global North to ‘buy’ the cooperation of their Southern neighbours through the promise of aid.

The implementation of the AVRR, in fact, relies on the active support of multiple actors, whose interests lie in completely different ends

²⁵ Interview with two deidentified individuals, Rabat, June 2019.

of the border control spectrum. The programme, however, is not explicitly imposed on African state partners by the IOM or European donors. Both Moroccan authorities and embassies of countries of origin cooperate with the IOM because they see the AVRR as a way to externalise the political and financial costs of dealing with a population deemed ‘problematic’ – for Morocco, ‘irregular migrants’; for embassies of countries of origin, ‘class B diaspora’. Morocco, over the years, has also sophisticated its way of strategising Voluntary Return for domestic interest. On the one hand, it has embraced AVRR as an alternative instrument to manage the number of irregular migrants in the country. On the other hand, the commitment to the running the AVRR has earned Moroccan authorities further esteem among the international community. Countries of ‘origin’ and ‘transit’ thus do not really seem to see the aid channelled by Northern donors through the AVRR programme as a sort of economic incentive for their cooperation into border control. Rather, they seem to conceptualise it merely as a way to level off the enormous social and economic costs that migration surveillance entails.

Migrants themselves, with their numerical and physical presence, also become a driving force in furthering and institutionalising the AVRR. Showcasing their ‘interest’ and ‘vulnerability’ by the IOM moves market and humanitarian arguments that have historically, although not consistently, contributed to the IOM’s capacity to reproduce the AVRR. Voluntary Return thus works and expands its reach through migrants’ participation to the programme, and by leveraging their demonstrations of dissent to advocate for more funding from donors.