

Conceptual Complexity About Return Migration of Refugees/Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

Return migration is one of the complex categories of migration, which becomes even more complicated in the context of refugees' return to their country of origin. A plethora of terms is used to describe the return of refugees/asylum seekers, having strong political and policy relevance. To unpack the features and drivers of conceptual complexity, I propose three interrelated arguments. The first is that labelling – the choice of one concept over another – in return migration often depends on who uses the term (e.g. scholars, policymakers, practitioners, migrants) and in which part of the world. The second argument is that return, similar to binaries in other areas of migration, is often associated with binaries, such as voluntary and forced return. Despite policy categories that reiterate the 'voluntary' character of return, the actual practices rarely confirm that return is voluntary and often remain in grey areas, as the emerging literature on bordering practices shows. The third argument is that there are multiple levels at which labelling and binaries are constructed in relation to each other. The identifiable scales include the academic level, the policy level and the migrants themselves.

Keywords

Refugees, displacement, migration categories, return migration, bordering practices

Introduction

The concept of labels and categories has been widely discussed in migration and refugee studies (Crawley and Jones, 2021; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Snel et al., 2021). However, there has been relatively little examination of the significance of such categories in return migration (Gemi and Triandafyllidou, 2021), despite the fact that the return of refugees, rejected asylum seekers and 'irregular' migrants to their countries of origin or transit appears to be a key way to address displacement (Cassarino, 2004). At the international level, the United Nations (UN) considers voluntary return as one of the durable solutions, alongside resettlement and local integration

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(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2003). The UN Global Refugee Compact suggests creating conditions for the expedited return of irregular migrants (UN, 2018). As Jean Pierre Cassarino (2008) has rightly pointed out,

‘Return’ stands high in the hierarchy of priorities that have been identified in the current top-down management of international migration. However, this is not because return is viewed as a stage in the migration cycle. It is because return has been narrowly defined in the current lexicon of governmental and intergovernmental agencies as the fact of leaving the territory of a destination country. (p. 97)

This approach has been integrated at both regional and national levels, regardless of normative stances and regime type (Cassarino, 2008: 98). The European Union (EU) provides the most prominent example, where the return of migrants is considered essential for maintaining the credibility of its asylum system and for managing and deterring irregular migration. The EU calls for shared responsibility for ‘swift and effective returns’ and an ‘EU-coordinated approach to returns’ of irregular migrants, including rejected asylum seekers (EC, 2020). At the national level, many countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark, Turkey and Lebanon, have recently offered controversial programmes and deals to speed up the return of rejected asylum seekers, ‘irregular’ migrants and refugees. These programmes are controversial because, according to international human rights law and refugee law, return has to be voluntary and in conditions of safety and dignity. The right of return is both a legal, political and moral claim (Bradley, 2023). However, there is a significant difference between the principles and the practices regarding the return of ‘unwanted’ migrants (Crisp and Long, 2016). The practice of forced return violates key norms of the refugee regime, such as the right to seek asylum (Orchard, 2014) and non-refoulement (Pirjola, 2007). From the perspective of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), return migration refers to ‘the movement of a person going from a host country back to a country of origin, country of nationality or habitual residence usually after spending a significant period of time in the host country’ (IOM Dictionary, 2019). The term ‘return’ is used in scholarly discussions to refer to migrants who resettle in their former homes, those who return to their countries of origin but live elsewhere within those countries and those who are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and return to their former residency. The perspective of migrants is that return is not the end of the migratory journey or a return ‘home’, as assumed by policymakers and implementers. Instead, return is just one part of the migration cycle and a point on the mobility continuum. Reflecting this reality, migration scholars conceptualise return more broadly, stating that return is ‘a part of the wider mobility process in which the migrants engage’ ‘as one point in a non-linear trajectory that may include multiple emigrations and returns as well as remigration (whether to the same destination country or to third countries)’ (Gemi and Triandafyllidou, 2021: 3).

As Cassarino rightly notes, ‘there are several definitional approaches to return migration, and returnees’, as these concepts are ‘a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon’. These definitions play a ‘crucial role in orienting, if not shaping, the perceptions, taxonomies and policies adopted by governmental and intergovernmental agencies’ (Cassarino, 2004: 254). The portfolio of labels and categories becomes more complex when dealing with the return of ‘irregular’ migrants, refugees and rejected asylum seekers. Policymakers and scholars often use various legal, technical and policy terms interchangeably, including refoulement, repatriation, deportation, removal, readmission and others. In addition, adjectives are used to indicate the form of returns such as assisted voluntary return, state-induced return and voluntary repatriation. The terms used in discussions about return migration hold significant political and policy implications. I draw from critical migration scholars to question the labels associated with ‘voluntary return’, as many rejected asylum seekers, refugees and irregularised migrants face coercion, structural violence and abuse

during the return process (see Kalir, 2017; Rosenberger and Koppes, 2018; Spathopoulou et al., 2022). Elsewhere, we propose a novel typology of returns by considering the degree of coercion embedded in voluntary and involuntary returns and the entanglement of formal policies and informal practices in the governance of returns (Şahin-Mencütek and Triandafyllidou, 2024).

This article explores how concepts and dichotomies are used in relation to the return of refugees, asylum seekers and ‘irregular’ migrants. It draws upon a diverse range of data sources, including academic sources such as books and journal articles, to provide both empirical and theoretical insights. In addition, it examines the use of return-related labels in policy documents from the UNHCR, the IOM and the EU, which are the main international bodies handling returns. The results of empirical research on returns, form the foundation for discussing the concepts, categories and divisions related to the return policies of countries that receive migrants, as well as the real experiences of individuals returning to their home countries. These findings contribute to an analysis of how labels and categories associated with returning are created in policy documents and academic literature and explore their strengths and limitations. I propose three interrelated arguments. The first is that labelling – the choice of one concept over another – in return migration often depends on who uses the term (e.g. scholars, policymakers, practitioners, migrants) and in which part of the world. Categorisations and conceptualisations are context-specific and geographically fragmented. For example, suppose an Afghan asylum seeker from Germany is sent back to his country by accepting a small financial grant to cover his airfare. In this case, German policymakers and implementers call the process ‘voluntary return’, while critical migration scholars and migrants themselves call this exact occurrence ‘deportation’ (Kalir, 2017; Sökefeld, 2019). When an Afghan asylum seeker is sent back from Pakistan to Afghanistan, policy and academic studies identify this as ‘repatriation’ (Mielke, 2023a). If the same person were returned to Afghanistan from Turkey, the process would officially be called ‘removal’ because the Turkish state identified him as an ‘irregular migrant’.

The second argument is that return, like in other aspects of migration, is often categorised into voluntary and forced return. Although policies emphasise the ‘voluntary’ nature of return, actual practices often do not confirm this and remain in ambiguous areas, as seen in emerging literature on bordering practices. Migrants themselves do not perceive the return process as voluntary; they consider it as return because they have no other choice. They view it as just one part of their mobility, often intending to leave their home country when conditions improve. The third argument is that labelling and categorisation occur at multiple levels, including the academic level, policy level and among the migrants themselves. These levels may interact, overlap, clash or differ in the context of refugee return migration, similar to other categorisations and conceptualisations in the field of migration.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with a general overview of the dichotomies, discourses and actors in migration policy. It then moves to a discussion of the different concepts related to return migration. The next section discusses the binaries and the assumptions behind these binaries. I then provide some empirical examples to illustrate the discrepancy between the expectations imagined in policy categories, the findings of scholars and the realities of mobility processes when it comes to return.

The dichotomies and discourses of migration policy

Public and scholarly discourses and legislation play a role in categorising mobile people by framing concepts such as legal, illegal, irregular, clandestine, refugee, asylum seeker or other terminology. These categories are often accompanied by dichotomies such as legal/illegal, regular/irregular, forced/voluntary, deserving/non-deserving, mobile/immobile and refugee/citizen.

In policy circles and academic debates, mobile people and mobilities are labelled through dichotomies because these categories seem to reduce the complexity and messiness, making it more ‘manageable’. It also gives a sense of containment of the ambivalent processes that appear risky or crisis-prone in the eyes of the media, the general public or policymakers (anonymous reference). However, the dichotomies tend to be essentialised by framing categories as discrete and static entities.

As noted in the literature, ‘although migration research by definition studies people on the move, it nevertheless often uses a “sedentary” approach by focusing on “fixed locations”’, such as the origin countries, transit one or receiving countries (Snel et al., 2021: 3209). Although some earlier scholars (Gmelch, 1980) believed that those who emigrated, such as migrants from the Old World to the New World, did not return, empirical studies showed that some did return for several reasons, such as the unsuccessful search for economic success or the failure to achieve prevailing cultural goals (Cerese, 1974). Current academic scholarship consistently draws attention to the spatial and temporal aspects embedded in these dichotomies (Crawley and Jones, 2021; Schapendonk and Steel, 2014). They also provide rich empirical evidence to challenge the policy categories/dichotomies, for example, by showing that voluntary and forced mobilities are a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Carling and Schewel, 2018; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Erdal and Oeppen, 2017) or that migration journeys are ‘fragmented, non-linear, including different intermediate stops and multiple returns and new departures’ (Triandafyllidou, 2022: 1).

Like other policy areas, categorising and labelling people on the move has political and societal implications and carries human costs (Boswell et al., 2011; Boucher, 2008). For example, defining mobility as ‘illegal’ leads to policies designed to combat or stop this ‘illegality’. If the term ‘irregularity’ is used to describe border crossings, this calls for policies based on regulation and control. Bordering allows to ‘rhetorically and psychologically identify and control mobility and to renegotiate the boundaries of “our communities of belonging”’ (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017: 615). Labels and binaries help to ‘simplify’ the issue of migration. As Sarah Scuzzarello (2015) argues,

through processes of selective appropriation of a few salient features and relations of an otherwise complex reality, actors in a policy community describe what is wrong with the present situation in a way that shapes its future transformation. Policy solutions are affected by how actors specify a set of claims about a policy problem that needs addressing. (p. 58)

International organisations (IOs) dealing with migration, such as UNHCR and IOM, play an important role in the conceptualisation and dissemination of migration discourses. Compared with states, they use relatively more sophisticated concepts and discourses. They show a positive appreciation of migration as a normal process that should benefit sending and receiving societies as well as migrants. Nevertheless, the conceptualisations and actions of IOs are thus not free from politics and organisational interests. They are often strategically ambiguous to allow room for manoeuvre or compromise between state interests and human rights or normative concerns. Analysing the role UNHCR and IOM play in the context of asylum seekers’ returns, Anne Koch (2014) illustrates how practices of both ‘legitimise each other’s engagement as well as the overarching return objectives of governments, and are, therefore, involved in norm-building regarding the acceptability of state-induced returns’ (p. 905). Other studies also show how IOM’s return programmes or awareness-raising campaigns to discourage irregular migration are more in line with the interests of EU and donor countries than those of origin countries or migrants (Gärtner, 2020; Pécoud, 2018). This is not surprising given that ‘the IOM serves distinct political and operational purposes, sustained by a highly earmarked and projectised funding model that distinguishes it from the UNHCR and other IOs’ (Patz and Thorvaldsdottir, 2020: 75).

As critical migration and border studies show, migrants also engage in contested negotiations over definitions and categories (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Through their practices, migrants negotiate imposed categories with multiple intermediaries, including border guards, immigration officials, lawyers, non-governmental organisation (NGOs), social workers, migrant communities (or co-ethnic, co-religious communities) and families. Their agency is engaged through practices of contestation (e.g. manoeuvring, resisting, appealing) and compliance (e.g. appropriation, acceptance) practices. Contrary to the simplifications of national policymakers or the idealism of IOs, migrants provide insights into the diverse experiences within a social context and a nuanced understanding of complex social processes and power relations. For example, challenging the idea of voluntary and forced migration, migrants' stories illustrate the multiple and intertwined factors behind the decision to migrate (Eastmond, 2007; Vandsemb, 1995), the impact of migration on the construction of migrants' and non-migrants' identities, their roles, family ties, localities and others (Ritivoi, 2009). On one hand, as Lawson (2000) notes, migrants' stories 'can reveal the empirical disjuncture between expectations of migration . . . and the actual experiences of migrants' (p. 174). On the other, they provide clues to migrants' complex trajectories and conceptions of time and space, 'the coexistence of futures (which can never be more than a possibility), the past (not under a person's control but constitutive of their being) and present (the context of existence) and challenge' (Shubin, 2015: 353). Moreover, the narratives provide evidence of human rights violations at different stages of the journey, such as those experienced by African migrants in Libya or during the stay of migrant sex workers in South Africa (Schuler, 2017) or elsewhere.

These conceptualisations, dichotomies and their drivers (e.g. politics and organisational interests) are relevant to understanding the more specific area of return migration and returning migrants. Discussions on return migration can also provide a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and limitations of categorisations for several reasons: (1) the increasing political attention receiving countries and IOs give to return; (2) the direct impact of the framing of other categories (irregular, illegal, rejected asylum seekers) on the objectives of return policies and (3) legal and moral concerns about returning people. It is important to ask which conceptualisations and representations are included in the meaning of return migration, who is presenting them, at what scale and what is left out of these conceptualisations.

Multiple concepts of return migration

The IOM's return migration definition implicitly draws on the experience of labour migrants, who often fulfil their migration projects and decide to return to their origin country. However, labelling return is more complicated when it comes to people on the move who fall into the category of 'irregular migrants', refugees and asylum seekers. Because of their origin, state officials and receiving communities often label these people 'unwanted migrants'. The international community also perceives them as challenging agents for 'safe and orderly' migration. In this context, a dominant policy approach is to find a 'solution' to this abnormal situation, ideally by sending unwanted migrants back to their places of origin. Moreover, policymakers and implementers in destination countries have different imaginaries of countries of origin – as reflected in the safe country concept – and this knowledge/narrative plays an important role in determining the credibility of asylum claims or their rejection. It is intertwined with another categorisation, that of deserving or undeserving asylum seekers. Those who fall into the second category are expected to be removed.

States, regional and international organisations use a plethora of policy-oriented categories to describe the removal of 'unwanted' or 'non-authorised' migrants. The terms used range from refoulement to repatriation, deportation, return, expulsion and readmission and are rooted in

legislation and interpretation by law enforcement agencies. Despite nuances, there is no concrete analytical distinction between these terms. For example, ‘the term *refoulement* is also commonly used as a shorthand for any returns or non-admissions that violate the principle of non-refoulement’ (IOM Dictionary, 2019: 170). *Repatriation* is ‘the personal right of a prisoner of war, civil detainee, refugee, or of a civilian to return to his or her country of nationality under specific conditions laid down in various international instruments’ (IOM Dictionary, 2019: 182). *Removal* is

the act following a deportation, expulsion or removal order by which a state physically removes a non-national from its territory to his or her country of origin or a third country after refusal of admission or termination of permission to remain. (IOM Dictionary, 2019: 180)

There is a clear tendency to use the term *expulsion* to refer to the legal order to leave the territory of a state and *removal* or *deportation* to the actual implementation of such order in cases where the person concerned does not follow it voluntarily (IOM Dictionary, 2019). *Deportation* is typically understood as the forcible (often violent) removal by state authorities of a ‘foreigner’, usually a ‘migrant’, from a country in which s/he ‘does not have citizenship’. *Readmission* is an ‘act by a State accepting the re-entry of an individual (own national, national of another State – most commonly a person who had previously transited through the country or a permanent resident – or a stateless person’ (IOM Dictionary, 2019: 169).

The choice of one term over the others mentioned above often depends on who is using it, either a state, an international organisation, human rights advocates, scholars or migrants. States, particularly destination countries, seem to be the main actors who have full authority over returning or not returning people and, therefore, decide on which concept they use. They have full discretion and power to categorise displaced people who have entered their territory as asylum seekers, refugees, irregular migrants or crossed the border illegally or through border control and bureaucratic processes. According to international law,

states of destination have a legitimate interest in returning irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers who do not (or no longer) fulfil the requirements to remain in the territory of the State, and to secure the readmission of these migrants by their countries of origin. (IOM, 2017: 1)

International law also requires the country of origin to accept the return of its nationals (IOM, 2017). States and IOs often prefer to use ‘softer’ terms such as *removal*, *readmission*, *repatriation* and *voluntary return* to appear to be acting within the legal framework and humanitarian ethos. Migrants and human rights advocates tend to use words such as *deportation*, *expulsion* and *forced return* to identify state-induced and IO-coordinated return.

The use of return-related concepts appears to be geographically fragmented. While studies on return cases in the Global North focus on the deportation and readmission of individual rejected asylum seekers, including assisted voluntary returns (Sökefeld, 2019; Walters et al., 2021), studies in the Global South use the term ‘*repatriation*’ (Crisp and Long, 2016; Gerver, 2018). This conceptual difference is also related to the fact that *repatriation* often implies large-scale return operations involving thousands or millions of people. It usually refers to the return of refugees (even with status) from neighbouring destination countries to the origin countries, such as the *repatriation* from Iran or Pakistan to Afghanistan. The term is more commonly used when UNHCR is involved in the return process. By contrast, *deportation* and *readmission* refer to the forced return of migrants as individuals or in smaller groups. Unlike the mass displacement seen in the Global South, European countries and the United States deal with individual returns and therefore rarely use the term *repatriation* due to the small scale of the returns. There is one exception in the Global North’s

use of the term deportation, namely for the forcible return of unwanted irregular migrants coming from Central and South America (Goodman, 2020).

Origin countries also have a broader discursive spectrum and different interests than host countries when it comes to returns. For example, return is a difficult topic for countries like The Gambia, Nigeria, Niger, Senegal and Cameroon in relation to domestic realities (Pelican, 2013; Zanker et al., 2019). There, migrants and returnees, families, communities, the governments and various NGOs approach the developmental impact of migration and return on society at large differently (Serra-Mingot and Rudolf, 2023; Sinatti, 2015), although they might cooperate with the EU-IOM initiated return projects (Marino et al., 2023). It is common to observe conflicting individual, familial and institutional narratives, positionalities and expectations (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider, 2016; Serra-Mingot and Rudolf, 2023). Undoubtedly, the perspectives of and power of return categories for origin countries and sub-national groups require further empirical research.

Binaries in returns: voluntary versus forced return

Like other migration issues, return is often fraught with binaries, the most familiar of which are voluntary and forced returns. ‘Voluntary repatriation’ as a durable solution, which refers to ‘any means by which the situation of refugees can be satisfactorily and permanently resolved to enable them [returnees] to lead normal lives’ (Chimni, 2004: 55; UNHCR, 2006) is one of the earliest and most enduring conceptualisations, originally constructed by UNHCR.¹ The three durable solutions are voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement in third countries. Voluntary repatriation is the most popular of these from the perspective of the host countries. However, its limitations in terms of respecting key principles (e.g. voluntariness, safety, dignity) have been recognised even by those who design and implement it on behalf of states, such as UNHCR. The UNHCR (1997) Chief Sadako Ogata noted on 5 May 1997,

In the absence of political initiatives, UNHCR faces increasing pressures to support repatriation which is neither strictly voluntary nor strictly safe. Either safety in the country of asylum cannot be guaranteed, because of armed conflict or insecurity in the refugee camps, or asylum is being withdrawn by the host government. Although there may still be problems back home, returning in such situations may be better than staying. Return is often ‘the least worst option’ in a ‘no win situation’, both for the refugees and ourselves. (n.d.)

Scholars have often questioned the extent to which the principle of voluntariness is adopted in repatriation operations, given that migrants have rarely been included in the decision-making process for state-induced returns, because ‘those who opt not to repatriate face closure of camps, cessation of aid, and harassment by local security forces’ (Hammond, 1999: 231).

It can be argued that the very idea of voluntary repatriation is embedded in the ‘triple win’ discourse mentioned above, which proposes that return is beneficial for refugees, host- and home countries alike (Sinatti, 2015). For the origin country, returns that take place before conducive conditions are in place and security and access to rights are guaranteed can disrupt fragile stability. From the perspective of refugees, return is rarely a win–win situation. Empirical research on Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon shows that until refugees believe that conditions are fully conducive to a safe and dignified return, repatriation is often the less preferred option, but their approaches to return remain largely unheard in state-led return campaigns (Kayaoğlu et al., 2022).

Despite the obvious shortcomings of the ‘triple win’ assumption/discourse, the policy emphasis on return continues due to the interests of host states. The large-scale repatriation operations of the 1990s were accompanied by a discourse that ‘voluntary repatriation’ was the ideal durable solution

for the refugees and host countries in the Global South and refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Europe. The popularity of voluntary repatriation in the 1990s continued in the host countries such as Pakistan's insistence on the return of Afghans or Tanzania's insistence on the return of people from Burundi (Mielke, 2023a; Schwartz, 2019). In the 2000s, there was again an overemphasis on return and its justification. This time with the concept of voluntary return for individual 'unwanted' migrants arriving mainly in Europe from countries of origin in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. The popular concept for European policymakers and funded international organisations such as IOM (2010) is the voluntary return, which refers to the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another country based on the voluntary decision of the returnee. The return of unwanted migrants became central to the migration and external border control policies of European countries (the EU, the United Kingdom and non-members like Norway). Return policies are expected to stop the migration of asylum seekers, reduce the actual numbers and deter future migration attempts (Rosenberger and Koppes, 2018). The return of as many as possible third-country nationals as possible who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions for entry or stay in a member state is one of the main building blocks of the EU migration policy and a key priority for EU institutions and member states alike (ECRE, 2019).

As an example of contestation over migration concepts and categories, it is important to note that critical migration scholars continue to use the term deportation rather than return when studying returns initiated by European states by using formal and informal mechanisms (Peutz and De Genova, 2010; Gerver, 2018; Goodman, 2020). The field of deportation studies has grown at the intersection of immigration and security studies since the early 2000s (Coutin, 2015; Drotbohm and Hasselberg, 2015; Walters, 2018). It critically examines notions of return and the political agenda behind them. For example, El Qadim (2014) argues that readmission should not be seen as a neutral term but rather as a robust deterrence and control instrument within the EU migration regime. Spathopoulou et al. (2022) contest that EU readmission programmes – as in Greece – are better described as encouraging 'self-deportation'. The voluntariness of 'voluntary assistant returns' is often undermined by a lack of preparation, real alternatives, access to reliable and trustworthy information and effective legal remedies (Crisp and Long, 2016; Erdal and Oeppen, 2017). There is hardly any independent oversight of the implementation of returns, in particular with regard to ethical and procedural standards. Essential ethical considerations, such as obtaining consent, are overlooked or manipulated at the practice level (Gerver, 2018).

Assumptions in the policies and realities of return

I argue, as do many other migration scholars, that there is a discrepancy between the conceptualisation of return policies, their underlying assumptions and their understanding and experience of migrants (Gemi and Triandafyllidou, 2021). Migration policymakers' assumptions about return are based on a sedentary worldview. This assumes a linear process in which migrants return; reintegrate in their origin country, continue what they left at home and do not migrate again. Hammond (1999) notes that the words 'return' and 'returnee' 'imply that by reentering one's native country, a person is necessarily returning to something familiar' (p. 230). This familiarity is assumed to be a 'positive', 'normal', natural order of things. These can also be contextualised within discussions of citizenship. The return of migrants relates to claims to membership, legitimacy, access to the rights and conditions of integration and belonging in the society they had left (Drotbohm, 2011; Lynn-Ee, 2011).

The discrepancy can be discussed by zooming in on a popular policy category: sustainable return and reintegration. One assumption behind the assisted voluntary return programmes mentioned above is their effectiveness and sustainability. However, it is unclear what is meant by effective and sustainable and for whom when it comes to return and reintegration (Cassarino, 2008;

Kuschminder, 2017). Sustainable return is often measured by the absence of remigration, that is ‘the movement of a person who, after having returned to his or her country of origin, emigrates again’ (IOM Dictionary, 2019: 170).

Empirical evidence on the impact of return and reintegration policies challenges sustainable return as a policy category. Migration scholars define ‘sustainable return’ more broadly, namely when ‘the individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon return’ (Kuschminder, 2017: 1). It has been shown that assisted return policies are not the only factor influencing the decision to migrate again, as the sustainability of return is beyond the influence of direct policy interventions. The sustainable return debate can be traced back to economists’ earlier assumptions about return migration as

as a possible dynamic force for the development of migrants’ countries and regions of origin. Returnees, it is postulated, bring in capital in the form of remittances and savings, as well as new ideas and experience of different types of work from their period abroad. (King, 1986: 1)

While this expectation may have been true in some cases, particularly in terms of the impact on local development, it is still conditional on many individual and structural factors (e.g. savings, maintenance of transnational ties, professional careers, grants/incentives available at the returning places) (Cerese, 1974; Saraceno, 1986). Moreover, even historically, a case study on returns from the United States to southern Italy showed that ‘returned migrants cannot function as vehicles of social development’ (Cerese, 1974: 245). More generally, in many cases, the potential impact of refugee returnees on the social or economic development of the origin country is a rarely attainable goal (Mielke, 2023b; Van Houte and Davids, 2008).

Several factors may drive remigration. Besides security and safety-related issues or lack of access to sustainable livelihoods, returnees also experience difficulties adapting to the country of origin, socio-cultural anxieties and feelings of insecurity, which challenge the idea of ‘returning home’ (Harild et al., 2015). In particular, when migrants are forced to return – often not being prepared and unwilling to return – the tendency to remigrate (at least as aspiration is concerned) is particularly pronounced, due to ‘the impossibility of repaying debts incurred by migration, the existence of transnational and local ties, the shame of failure, and the perceptions of “contamination”’ (Schuster and Majidi, 2013: 221).

Empirical studies about the return of African migrants, who were often forced to return before they even reached Europe, illustrate much more complex dynamics, including social and economic components. Many African countries have a long history of emigration and reliance on remittances. Returnees face high expectations, such as gift-giving and from their relatives and communities. As discussed in Ghana, expectations range from gift-giving and generous donations at social events (Setrana and Tonah, 2014). This makes life for returnees quite difficult. Some are stigmatised when their return is forced, as observed in the returns from Libya or European countries to Nigeria (Edeh, 2021). Families and communities often perceive returnees as ‘failures’ and ‘losers’ when they come back to the country empty-handed (Edeh, 2021) or without upward social mobility (Derluyn et al., 2022; Ratia and Notermans, 2012). This narrative stems from the fact that a migration journey to the Global North is too costly for Africans; it often requires high levels of borrowing from family members or the community. Returns can impact the extended family if the returnee is the one who had supported the family while abroad (Anghel et al., 2019). So, the high dependency of the family on the returnee is a crucial factor when considering the perceptions of the communities of origin (Mensah, 2016).

In line with stigmatisation, returnees face rejection, dejection and isolation from their societies, as found among Ethiopian men returning from abroad (Fejerskov and Zeleke, 2020). Stigmatisation and rejection can also be highly gendered, as in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Senegal (Fejerskov and Zeleke, 2020; Strijbosch et al., 2023). Feelings of shame and guilt are not uncommon among returnees, as observed among Senegalese returnees (Strijbosch et al., 2023). This stigmatisation also hinders returnees' reintegration and access to the labour market because employers see them as potential troublemakers (Edeh, 2021).

In general, research tells us that return and reintegration depend on a combination of individual factors with community/family-level dynamics and the wider impact of macroeconomic and political indicators in the host and home country as well as policy packages. There is a stark contrast in the understanding of return and reintegration between migration policymakers, who base their assessment on sedentariness, and migration scholars, who base theirs on mobility. Remigration is unavoidable under these adverse conditions and hardships although policies do not take this into account. Therefore, remigration cannot be a valid indicator to measure sustainable return (Kuschminder, 2017). In this vein, Black and Gent's suggestion that 'the idea that continued mobility after an initial return – including circulation and the development of a "transnational" lifestyle – may be more "sustainable" than a single and definitive return to the refugee's place of origin' (Black and Gent, 2006: 15) is relevant.

Conclusion

The paper has focused on the concepts, policy dichotomies and categories related to migrant return processes. It described how these concepts and categories are similar to those found in other areas of migration policy. Concepts are influenced by the users, geographical and temporal contexts and intended purposes. For example, European destination countries favour certain concepts (e.g. assisted voluntary return; readmission) when discussing the enforcement of return. Meanwhile, actors in countries of origin may adopt some of these concepts, such as voluntary return or reintegration, when there is official cooperation or a funding relationship. However, migrants may not describe their experiences of mobility using the same concepts and categories.

Examining concepts related to the return adds to the discussion on migration categories. The various categories currently in use, such as 'irregular/informal' migrants and deserving/non-deserving asylum seekers, impact how the enforcement of return and the use of coercion for this purpose are justified. Increased focus on readmission policies at regional and national levels necessitates taking return categories seriously, as they significantly impact the lives of people on the move. The intentional ambiguity and multitude of return concepts seem to be deliberate, possibly intended to make it easier to manage such a sensitive area or to allow manoeuvring from the perspective of states and state-related actors. All of these factors together undermine refugee protection norms.

This article also shows that concepts of return, much like to other concepts, are highly contested, inviting us to look beyond the state-centric perspectives. Through their practices, migrants engage in negotiations of binaries and categories. Contestations in the field of return help us to better understand the relevance and power of categories in the migration/mobility debates. However, the scope of migrants' agency in contesting policies and categories is constantly restricted by the tightening of border controls and the rejection of most asylum applications by destination countries.

Further research could help us understand important issues related to the understanding of 'epistemologies of return'. Since this article is centred on policy studies, gaining perspectives from various fields like sociology, anthropology, history and economics could offer valuable insights into

different ways of thinking about ‘return’ and the relevant discussions around it. Moreover, looking at a more detailed level, various stakeholders like civil society or refugee community organisations can offer detailed perspectives on how these concepts are embraced and debated. Finally, considering the geographical context, whether it’s regional, national, or urban, may help us analyse how these concepts spread, face challenges or get replicated across different places.

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As there is no primary data used for the article, no ethical approval was sought.

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Note

1. In this UNHCR definition, terms like ‘satisfactorily and permanently’ and ‘normal lives’ are quite ambiguous.

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