

Field trip to Portugal Report

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Organizer: Salomé Maxeiner and Riikka Schenk, Transnational Exchange V

Participants: Noelle van Bodegom (Goedwerk Foundation, The Netherlands), Vasiliki Papageorgiou (International Organization for Migration Athens), Paul Barkam (Workers' Welfare Association Bremen, Germany), Dina Murad (Danish Refugee Council), Josefin Zeolla (Swedish Red Cross), Shahin Shafiullah (Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Austria)



Photo 1, from left to right: Salomé Maxeiner, Marina Portugal (SEF), Josefin Zeolla, Paul Barkam, Riikka Schenk, Vasiliki Papageorgiou, Noelle van Bodegom, Shahin Shafiullah and Dina Murad

The aim of the trip

Transnational Exchange V project organised the third field trip to Portugal from the 12th until the 15th of July, with six European return counsellors from Greece, Sweden, Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and Austria. The aim of the trip was to get a good overview of the Portuguese immigration and assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) counselling system and to compare it with other European systems. The host for the Transnational Exchange V delegation was IOM Portugal.

The asylum system in Portugal

The first day started with a visit to the Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service (SEF). Marina Portugal, Head of the Asylum and Refugees Department, gave a presentation about the services and role of the SEF in Portuguese asylum system. The Asylum and Refugees Department has 23 staff members and is responsible for checking the asylum applications as well as issuing residence permits and travel documents for refugees. Before 2015, the department received around 30 applications a month. After 2015, the amount of asylum applications grew to around 30 applications per day, according to Mrs. Portugal.

Any individual who enters the Portuguese territory irregularly, or is refused at the border of the Portuguese territory, is presented before SEF. An asylum case in Portugal can be registered to any police authority, but the main responsibility lies with SEF. If another police authority reports an asylum case it must be referred to SEF within 48 hours maximum. More specifically a subdivision of SEF, called GAR (Asylum and Refugee Department) is responsible for this.

There are two types of procedures which can be applicable to asylum seekers: the normal admissibility procedure that lasts thirty days and a border procedure that lasts seven days. In general, it is preferred to apply the border procedure as this leads to a faster process both for the Portuguese asylum system, as well as for asylum seekers. The border procedure is mostly applicable in cases, when people are identified as asylum seekers at the border, as the name implies. If either the normal admissibility procedure or border procedure is started, SEF is required to officially register the asylum case within three days.

Once the asylum process has started, it consists of two phases: the “admissibility phase”, which takes thirty days and the “merits phase”, which can take up to 6-9 months and during which SEF evaluates all relevant facts to prepare a reasoned decision. Throughout the whole process the main goal of SEF is to analyse whether someone is entitled to subsidiary protection or refugee status.

After both the admissibility phase and the merits phase have been completed, a decision will be taken by SEF. This can be either positive or negative. A positive decision entails that the individual obtains a refugee status for five years or a subsidiary protection status for three years. A negative decision entails that the applicant receives a notification, which states that they have to leave the country within twenty days (or in four days in case of border procedure). In some cases, this means forced return by coercive removal by SEF, which is pursuant to General Foreigners Act. Marina Portugal from SEF explained, however, that in practice forced return practically does not occur.

During the entire asylum process, both in the admissibility phase as well as in the merits phase, a migrant has applicant’s rights. One of the most important right is that if an applicant has been denied asylum status, she or he is allowed to appeal. During this appeal stage, the applicant’s rights are still applicable. The social services an applicant has access to are the same for refugees as for applicants for a regular residence permit. The applicant has the following rights:

- Right to legal advice at any and all stages by the Portuguese Council for Refugees
- Right on information on the situation of proceeding
- Right to legal support, in similar fashion as the right to legal support a Portuguese National can depend on.

An interesting fact about the Portuguese asylum system and routes to obtain residence permits is the possibility to obtain a work permit. The swift from tourist visa or asylum applicant status to work permit stay is made easy: If an immigrant has worked for six months with a working contract and has paid taxes with Portuguese tax number, she or he has a right to a residence permit. Someone can even obtain such a “workers permit” if there is still an open Dublin claim. SEF was very transparent about this option and explained this often occurs. The benefits are obvious; direct work opportunities can be obtained by possessing a single tax number. The problematic side of this option is that it is a gateway to security issues, and can lead to human trafficking. The access to other social services might also be restricted.

The Portuguese government has been working with a unique approach and a more open legislation to immigration compared to other European countries. Marina Portugal ascribes this to the Portuguese heritage. Portugal has always been “a melting pot” for different cultures and nationalities. The colonial history has played a big role in immigration, as a big majority of immigrants come from Portuguese speaking Brazil. There is also a more practical reason for the politics of openness when it comes to immigration: Portugal is in the need of workforce.

Bobadela Refugee Reception Center

The Refugee Reception Center (CAR) in Bobadela is hosted by the Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR) and funded by the SEF. It was established in 2006 and acts as a community center and living place which provides asylum seekers with temporary accommodation, pocket money of 150 Euros per month, administrative support, legal advice and counselling regarding the immigration procedure. It includes a library and an auditorium for the community and collective kitchens.

The Bobadela Reception Center was planned for 50 people but before the start of the pandemic there were up to 70 people from 47 different nationalities living in its rooms. Because of Covid-19 many residents were transferred to hostels and hotels. There is a second house for more stable cases with 12 rooms nearby. Additionally the CPR hosts a center for unaccompanied minors with 20 places and another center for reinstallation and relocation with 60 places which is mainly thought for families and short-term stays. Since 2020, there is also an outsourced place to stay during the pre-arrival Covid-19-test. In general, the official number of reception places is much smaller than the actual number of arriving asylum seekers.

In theory, an immigrant should live in the CAR for up to 30 days until the completion of the first phase. In reality, some stay for 2 or 3 months due to the growing number of migrants in Portugal. Normally their stay ends with the first phase. Social security takes over and offers lodgement and financial support. As the social security in Lisbon is exceeding its capacity, many former inhabitants are sent to other regions of Portugal. This fact can also lead them staying longer in the CAR before an alternative solution is found.



Photo 2: Transnational Exchange V delegation visiting Bobadela Reception Center

Portuguese Red Cross

The Portuguese Red Cross (PRC) Head Quarter is located in central Lisbon facing the marina and accommodated in the spectacular Palace Conde d 'Obidos, parts of it dating back to the 17th century.

Carla Vieira from the Portuguese Red Cross hosted the Transnational Exchange V group and explained that it is only until recently the PRC are dealing with issues concerning refugees. Prior to 2015, the number of refugees entering Portugal was very low. However, due to the events of 2015 where a large number of refugees entered Europe, mainly from the Middle East and North Africa, the situation changed and the country saw an influx of people claiming asylum. This new category of vulnerable people meant that PRC had to adjust its focus of protection and emergencies and meet the specific needs of refugees. There was a need for the organization to “stand up”.

In 2015, the Portuguese government decided to raise the quota of the number of people granted resettlement in Portugal for protections reasons. In connection to this, the PRC was appointed host organization for several relocation programs. The PCR points out that they do not provide legal advice on asylum or return but focus is on reintegration support.

Since the start in 2015, the PRC has hosted approximately 500 refugees as part of resettlement programs and the support has been provided by 30 regional Red Cross branches across the country. In administering reception, hosting and integration support the organization has adopted a decentralized methodology. The key elements of the hosting, however, consist of providing psychosocial support (PSS) in the process of settling in the country, accommodation and finding adequate housing. Individual support extends to eg. informing and accessing social services and right

to employment and schooling. The PRC likes to stress that the focus often needs to be on PSS, not only finding a job.

The programs are designed with the intention that the beneficiary can provide for themselves after 18 months. During the 18 months the hosting branch aims to get to know the person and thereby their skills, capacities and ambitions which in turn will aid them to coach the individual into adjusting into a new lifestyle. However, this often takes longer for the person and more support is needed. The reasons for this vary; It is frequently personal circumstances such as unstable life, poor health or other vulnerabilities which unable the person to start a new life independently. Further funds can then be applied for and the support can be extended. Approximately 30% of the resettled refugees need extended support.

The PRC are currently hosting 226 individuals. The most common nationalities have been Afghans, Syrians and Eritreans. In recent months people fleeing the war in Ukraine has seen a sharp rise and a special program for them has been established. Beneficiaries here include not only Ukrainian nationals but people previously living and working in Ukraine such as Bangladeshi nationals. This program provides the individual with €150 per month.

IOM Portugal

The second day of the field trip was hosted by IOM Portugal. There is only one IOM office in Portugal, namely in Lisbon, where Luís Carrasquinho introduced the Transnational Exchange V visitors to the Portuguese AVRR counselling system. IOM Portugal signed the first protocol with the Portuguese government in 1997 and started working with AVRR in 2007. IOM Portugal is financed by EU funds and most recently by AMIF funds. This funding will expire on 31 December 2022.



Photo 3: Transnational Exchange V group at IOM Portugal premises. From left: Dina Murad, Shahin Shafiullah, Patricia Cunha (IOM Portugal), Vasiliki Papageorgiou, Paul Barkam, Noelle van Bodegom, Riikka Schenk, Josefin Zeolla and Salomé Maxeiner

ARVoRE VIII project

In the period January 2021 to 31 December 2022, IOM Portugal runs the project ARVoRE VIII, which is co-funded by AMIF and SEF. IOM has calculated that the total amount, which is 1,380,673 Euros, can cover 550 returnees (250 have already been assisted by middle of July 2022) and 70 reintegration cases (50 have already been assisted). 82 % of the already assisted cases returned to Brazil.

The support that IOM Portugal offers the returnees:

- Counselling and information
- Possibility of psychosocial support before and after return
- Flight ticket
- Pocket money
- Reintegration support

Reintegration support

All returnees have the opportunity to apply for reintegration support. All reintegration plans must be reviewed and analysed before the returnee is approved to receive reintegration support. There may be cases where it is relevant to discuss business ideas based on the returnee's competencies and the market for the specific type of business – in which the returnee could be interested.

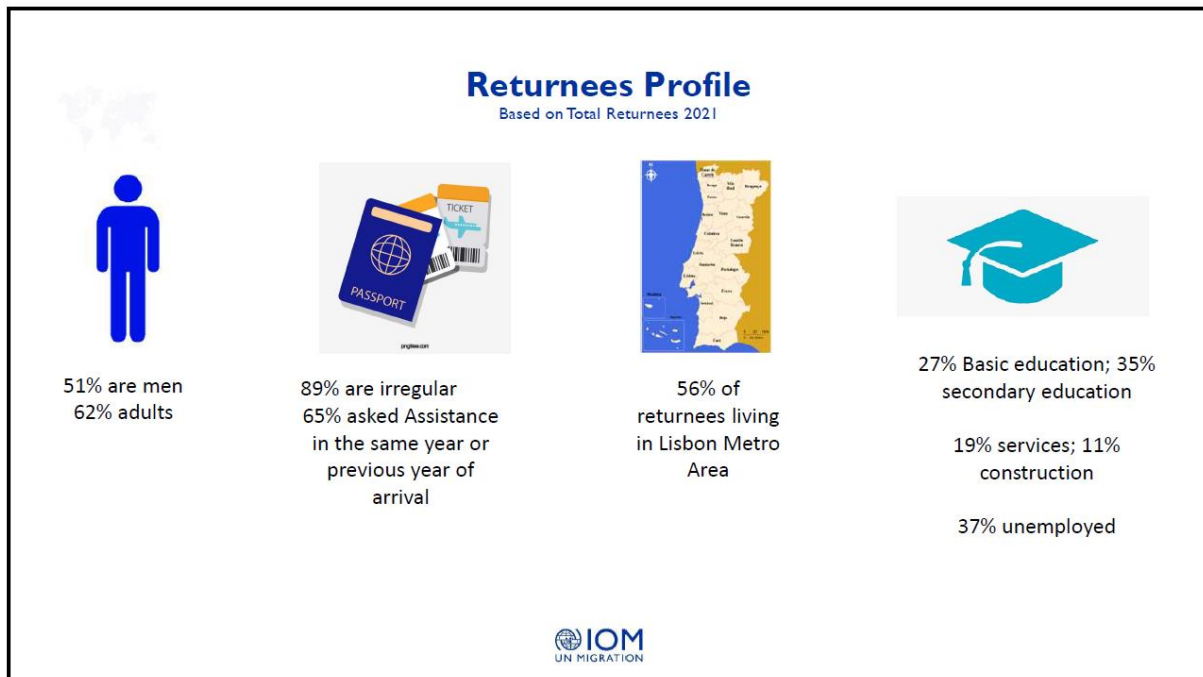
In 2007, the reintegration amount was €400 per case. In 2009-2015, the reintegration amount increased to €1500 per case. Then in 2016, the reintegration amount increased further to €2000 per case and became more flexible. In 2021, the reintegration amount is still €2000 per case, but it is now possible to apply for extra support, for health-related problems, of €1000 per case. In addition to the amounts mentioned above, each person is entitled to €70 in travel money in cash – for unforeseen expenses.

The reintegration support and the health support are paid, over two instalments, in cash in the country of return. Only the €70 that the returnee receives in travel money is disbursed in Portugal.

Summary of the reintegration amounts:

- €2000 per case (paid in cash in the country of return over two instalments)
- €1000 per case for health-related problems (paid in the country of return)
- €70 per person in travel money (paid in Portugal prior to return)

Despite the fact that the reintegration support is paid in cash in the country of return, the returnees must use the funds in a sustainable manner and present receipts to IOM in the country of return.



Why people are returning

Some of the pull factors that make people migrate to Portugal are better working conditions and facilities, employment opportunities and a higher income. Some have left their home countries and paid a lot of money with the guarantee of a contract and a job waiting for them. Unfortunately, many migrants find that their contracts are fake, and some people are making money from their misfortune.

Most migrants from Brazil stay for a very short time in Portugal before returning to Brazil. 65% of the returnees apply for reintegration support the same year or previous year of arrival in Portugal (IOM Portugal).

The primary needs and vulnerabilities of the returnees (when they apply for reintegration support) are: the family situation, social challenges, financial challenges, homelessness and children not attending school.

Partners of IOM Portugal

The cooperation between different partners is the key for successful return and reintegration services. There are more than 30 stakeholders in the information and counselling network of IOM Portugal distributed along the Portuguese territory. Orquidea Polónia introduced the services of the National Immigrant Support Center (CNAIM) which is part of the counselling network. CNAIM typically supports immigrants to find a solution after they have received a negative decision after phase two. The immigrants have officially 20 days time to either find a job or return to their country of origin. In the latter case, the registration and application for AVRR counselling from IOM is done together with a CNAIM counsellor. Joana Henriques from Caritas Lisbon also gave a presentation about their services. Similar to CNAIM, Caritas Lisbon can refer interested clients to IOM Portugal.

One of the highlights of the trip was meeting Andreia Dickinson, a psychologist working for the Transcultural Psychology Office in Clinical Ethnopsychology Center. Psychosocial counselling for potential returnees is offered by her complementing the AVRR counselling services by IOM. If clients

want psychosocial support, the migrants receive on average eight sessions paid by the ARVoRe VIII project, which empowers them to make well-founded decisions about their future. Especially citizens of Latin American countries show a great openness and desire to receive psychosocial counselling and/or therapy according to Mrs. Dickinson.

Casa do Brasil – a community project

In order to learn more about the target group of returnees from Portugal, the Transnational Exchange V visitors had a meeting with Casa do Brasil. It is a community project, “a living room” for Brazilians living in Lisbon. Speaking to the Casa do Brasil staff gave a good overview about the practical issues and problems which the immigrants often face. One of the biggest problems are the prolonged processes and waiting times for receiving a residence permit during which the Brazilians cannot travel home. Even though the process of applying is easy, the long waiting times create problems for many Brazilian labor migrants who arrived in Portugal just with a tourist visa for three months and who were hoping to find a tax-paying job quickly when then opens the opportunity to apply for a residence permit. Immigrants are often exploited by employers by for example being asked to work for free when they don't have a residence permit or Portuguese identification card just to be able to later have proof of employment. Again, if a migrant at Casa do Brasil raises the question of returning to his or her country of origin, employees at the house refer them to IOM.



Photo 4: Visiting Casa do Brasil – a community house for Brazilian immigrants

Reintegration support

The field trip ended with a presentation about IOM reintegration services. Ana Teresa Fernandes from IOM Portugal introduced the reintegration partner in Brazil providing individual reintegration support mainly for creating small businesses, first needs and psychosocial support. The support grant is up to €2000 cash which however is to be spent under the same scrutiny and supervision as with in-kind support. Guilherme Otero from IOM Brazil attended the meeting online and told about the monitoring of the use of the cash payments and the structures of local networks. IOM Brazil cooperates with seven local NGOs in seven out of 26 states regarding reintegration assistance.

The field trip ended with lessons learned about advantages and disadvantages of a country with easy immigration rules and its effects on voluntary return. The participating European AVRR counsellors also shared a lot of information about their work during the breaks and allotted times in the agenda. In total, the participants called the field trip “inspiring” and “eye-opening”.