

RETURN COUNSELLING

in a European asylum context



Images from DRC's information materials used in counselling.

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has for many years been providing counselling on return and reintegration to rejected asylum seekers in Denmark. Based on DRC's expertise, this policy brief aims to present concrete operational recommendations which can ensure quality return counselling as part of a safe and dignified return procedure, especially for EU Member States with little experience in return counselling.

European policy discussions on return

Political discussions about migration and asylum in the EU often tend to focus on how to increase returns instead of looking at the quality and capacity of the asylum and return systems. With the current agreement on the Return Regulation¹, there is a worrying emphasis on punitive measures and forced removal. In line with many other CSOs, DRC is thus utmost concerned that the Return Regulation will have severe consequences for rejected asylum seekers by preventing safe and dignified return.²

However, art. 46 of the Return Regulation introduces support for return and reintegration as part of a return procedure, which DRC finds positive if implemented with the purpose to support dignified return processes. DRC finds it concerning that there is no right to access impartial return counselling and that return and reintegration assistance can be limited based on the level of cooperation and compliance during the return procedure.³

Restricting access to return counselling undermines voluntary return

In DRC's view, the return procedure should focus on creating the widest possible opportunities for voluntary or accepted return, where rejected asylum seekers are given the necessary time and conditions to meaningfully prepare, build trust, and influence their own return process. A key element in this is access to impartial counselling.

In Denmark, the authorities regularly refer rejected asylum seekers to counselling with DRC because this independent and impartial counselling supports people in making informed decisions about their future, including whether to return. Such impartial counselling is a key component of a dignified return process and also contributes to strengthening the prospects for sustainable reintegration.

At its core, voluntary return begins with a person accepting and deciding to return. However, to reach such a decision is rarely a simple or linear process. Rejected asylum seekers often feel pressured by return decisions and may need support to discuss their thoughts, understand their options and prepare both practically and emotionally – for example by contacting family and friends, finding a place to live, and preparing for work opportunities. Flexibility, time and a safe, competent environment for counselling and reflection are therefore essential, so people can engage in the process, without fear of sanctions, and make informed decisions about their future, including return.

¹ Council, [Council and Parliament reach deal on returns of illegally staying third-country nationals](#), 1 June 2026.

² DRC, [DRC recommendations on the proposed Return Regulation](#), June 2025 and Joint statement, [Joint civil society statement on the Council's position on the Return Regulation Proposal](#), December 2025.

³ DRC, [DRC recommendations on the proposed Return Regulation](#), June 2025.

DRC's recommendations for quality return counselling

DIALOGUE

Return counselling should provide a safe and confidential space for dialogue. Counselling should go beyond just information-giving and instead facilitate meaningful dialogue that allows the individual to reflect on their situation and explore their options. It should create an environment where individuals can openly discuss concerns, fears, and their different strategies and questions related to their situation and possible future without fear of sanctions.

IMPARTIALITY

Return counselling should be impartial and centred on the individual's situation. Counselling should avoid pressuring individuals towards specific choices and instead support them in exploring their thoughts and options in a neutral manner. The aim is not to direct a person towards a particular decision, but to provide non-directive counselling that respects the person's autonomy and supports informed decision-making, recognising the individual as the expert in their own life.

TRUST

Return counselling should create conditions for trust to develop. It is often a complex process to move away from a state of indecision or uncertainty towards motivation and an informed decision. Many may not be ready to decide about their future when they are given a return decision, and the process may require time and gradual development of trust in the counselling process. Recognizing the complexity and the many "winding roads" towards clarification is therefore essential. Counselling should be flexible, allowing for both single sessions and repeated sessions over time when needed. Counsellors should also have strong knowledge of relevant procedures and options and provide accurate information in a neutral and person-centred manner.

AGENCY

Return counselling should support clarification and agency. Individuals in a return procedure are in a vulnerable situation and may experience feelings of lost hope, frustration, and at times apathy, alongside a sense of detachment from the legal process they have gone through. These experiences can make it challenging for them to consider their options and take informed action. Return counselling should provide space for them to reflect on their strengths and capacities and support their sense of agency. By supporting reflection and providing accurate information where relevant, as well as offering possible referral to impartial legal counselling, return counselling should enable individuals to make their own informed decisions and act on them.

DRC's approach to return counselling

DRC's approach to return counselling builds on extensive experience working directly with people throughout the return process in Denmark. Since the early 1980s, DRC has been offering legal counselling to asylum seekers in Denmark, including support after a final rejection. Return and reintegration projects have been an integral part of DRC's work in Denmark since 2004, and DRC has consistently offered impartial return and reintegration counselling since 2014, reaching a significant number of rejected asylum seekers.

The purpose of DRC's return counselling

- To ensure that asylum seekers have access to impartial, and independent counselling from an organization with a humanitarian mandate.
- To promote sustainable and dignified solutions for rejected asylum seekers – including dignified return.
- To ensure that rejected asylum seekers have access to accurate, up-to-date knowledge and information about their situation and about the different choices and possibilities they may have.
- To support rejected asylum seekers in making informed decisions for their future.
- To protect rights of asylum seekers in the return procedure and identify and react to problems.

Supporting informed decisions through person-centered return counselling

Within Europe, approaches to return counselling are often described as falling into three categories: a person(migrant)-centered approach, a compliance approach, or a mixed approach combining elements of the two.⁴ From DRC's perspective, a compliance approach, which is primarily focused on persuading individuals to adhere to a return decision, does not constitute counselling in a meaningful sense. Attempts to combine empathetic and person-centered counselling methods with a compliance-driven objective (described as a "mixed approach") are inherently contradictory and tend to default to a compliance focus.

Return counselling should be based on a nuanced understanding of the complexity of human decision-making. It should be open-ended, person-centered, and guided by the individual's needs, going beyond case management or the mere provision of information. It should also be part of a broader support framework, including access to impartial legal counselling and reintegration assistance, aimed at empowering individuals to navigate the return process and contribute to a more dignified process.

DRC's work with impartial and non-directive return and reintegration counselling has a clear humanitarian mandate: to support individuals in return procedures by offering a qualified and respectful space for dialogue, reflection, and informed decision-making. This empowerment-based approach places the individual – their needs, strengths, and perspectives – at the center.

Return counselling, as practiced by DRC, is a professional discipline that combines specialized knowledge of asylum and return procedures, insight into reintegration programs, as well as skilled engagement and communication with people in vulnerable situations. Its focus is not on persuading individuals to return, but on enabling them to make decisions based on knowledge and a clear understanding of their own circumstances.

⁴ E.g. European Commission, [The EU Framework on Return Counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool - SWD\(2021\) 121 final](#), 27 April 2021; Frontex, [Quick View Manual for Return and Reintegration Counsellors. Hands on Information for European Return and Reintegration Counsellors](#), June 2025; MPI Europe, [To Leave or Stay? Examining the role of counselling and reintegration assistance in the return decision-making of migrants ordered to leave the Netherlands](#), December 2025.

Return counselling as a key step towards sustainable reintegration

The process of reintegration begins long before the actual arrival in the country of return and a good basis for starting a reintegration process is feeling prepared and motivated. DRC's experience from return counselling, as well as insights from returnees in DRC's Voices of returnees series, show that a sense of preparedness and agency in the decision to return is closely linked to more positive reintegration experiences.

Interviews with returnees in Iraq, for example, indicate that there was a difference in experiences between those who actively accepted to return and those who felt more pressured (e.g. by being detained during the return procedure). Those who made more of an active choice reported less frustration and a stronger sense of resources during their initial period back.

Return counselling – when based on a nuanced understanding of the complexity of human decision-making and guided by the four core principles underpinning DRC's recommendations for quality return counselling: *dialogue, impartiality, trust, and agency* – plays a key role in supporting more sustainable reintegration processes.

When rejected asylum seekers are given sufficient time and space to adjust, reflect on their options, and meaningfully engage in the return process, reintegration outcomes can be strengthened. This includes the opportunity to maintain contact with family and friends in the country of return, as well as to explore practical arrangements such as housing and employment prior to return.



Voices of returnees

New series by DRC Asylum The series aims to shed light on what it means to return, not through statistics or policy analysis, but through the personal stories of people who have returned from Denmark to different countries. The publications are not evaluations of specific reintegration programs or academic studies. Instead, the purpose is simply to share firsthand insights into the return and reintegration process; insights that are personal, complex, and rarely heard in public debates.

The first two reports in the series, focusing on returnees to Iraq and Thailand, are available on DRC's website, www.asyl.drc.ngo.

DRC's recommendations to ensure safe and dignified return procedures

- 1. FAIR AND EFFICIENT ASYLUM PROCEDURE.** Access to a fair and efficient asylum procedure is a precondition for safe and dignified return. Applications for asylum must be processed in accordance with international refugee law and/or equivalent national legislation through transparent, effective, and fair procedures with safeguards and appeal options that protect the individual from arbitrary treatment and refoulement.
- 2. ACCEPTED RETURN.** Forced return undermines human dignity and should be avoided. Prevalence should be given to voluntary or rather accepted return. Efforts should focus on creating the widest possible opportunities for accepted or voluntary return, where rejected asylum seekers are given the time and conditions necessary to meaningfully prepare, build trust, and influence their return process. Many may have held onto to the hope of building a new life for a long time, making it a complex process to adjust and make informed decisions about their future. Threats of forced return and sanctions rarely provide clarity or lead to sustainable solutions. Instead, it often makes it harder to prepare meaningfully for the future. A dignified return process is more likely to improve the chances for sustainable reintegration.
- 3. IMPARTIAL COUNSELLING.** Rejected asylum seekers should have access to impartial, high-quality counselling on both the legal matters of their case and return. If rejected asylum seekers wish to explore pathways for legal stay, they should have access to independent legal counselling. Similarly, access to return counselling should be ensured. Return counselling is not just information-giving and guidance about the actual return procedure; it should create a confidential space for rejected asylum seekers where worries, questions, and strategies can be shared and discussed freely. It is best done in a safe atmosphere by non-governmental counsellors with excellent, empathetic communication skills. The goal of return counselling should be to enhance empowerment and support individuals in making their own informed decision about their future.
- 4. DIGNIFIED STANDARDS OF LIVING.** The use of sanctions and detention to “motivate” return must be avoided, as it undermines human dignity and is ineffective as a motivational tool. Instead, rejected asylum seekers should be offered dignified and adequate living conditions to safeguard their mental and physical health. Additionally, they should receive adequate support to enhance empowerment and maintain their skills and sense of agency.
- 5. MEANINGFUL REINTEGRATION SUPPORT.** Access to meaningful and sufficient support to ensure sustainable reintegration should be a part of the return process. As a reintegration process begins prior to departure, it is important to have access to pre-departure counselling, receive guidance on reintegration activities, and have opportunities for skill development. Sustainable reintegration involves more than economic self-sufficiency; it is shaped by the returnees' experiences throughout the entire migration cycle and influenced by both individual, social, and contextual factors. Support should thus be holistic, tailored to individual needs, and addressing economic, social, and psychosocial elements.

DRC, [Ensuring safe and dignified return of rejected asylum seekers](#), January 2025.



Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in around 28 countries and employs 6,000 staff globally.

DRC advocates for the rights of and solutions for displacement-affected communities and provides assistance during all stages of displacement: In acute crisis, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. DRC supports displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies. DRC works with civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and inclusion.

Our 4,000 volunteers in Denmark make an invaluable difference in integration activities throughout the country.

DRC's code of conduct sits at the core of our organizational mission, and DRC aims at the highest ethical and professional standards. DRC has been certified as meeting the highest quality standards according to the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

HM Queen Mary is DRC's patron.

To read more about what we do, see: www.drc.ngo

DRC DANISH
REFUGEE
COUNCIL
• We are there