Thinking about going ‘home’
Engaging with scenarios of return migration

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 20–21 August 2015.
Hausmanns gate 7, Oslo, Norway.

Part I — Summary Session

The first half day is adapted to a broad audience of people who are interested in return migration. We give an overview of key findings from the PREMIG project and present insights into some of the specific studies within this large project. Professor Richard Black will relate the contributions from PREMIG to the broader fields of research and policy on return migration.

Thursday, 20 August

08.45–09.00 Registration and coffee
09.00–09.35 Possibilities and realities of return migration: An overview of insights from the PREMIG project | Jørgen Carling, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)
09.35–09.55 Force and choice in return migration | Ceri Oeppen, University of Sussex (United Kingdom)
09.55–10.15 Exploring how immigrants’ attachment to Norway affects decisions to leave | Silje Vatne Petersen, Statistics Norway (Norway)
10.15–10.30 Coffee break
10.30–10.50 Comparing and contrasting Pakistani and Polish return mobilities | Marta Bivand Erdal, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)
10.50–11.35 Comparative perspectives on return migration | Richard Black, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom)
11.35–12.00 Questions, answers, and discussion
12.00–13.00 Lunch
Part II — Academic presentations

The remaining one and a half days consist of academic presentations of research in progress. Three of these presentations are on PREMIG research, while the remainder are presentations by other researchers. In this way we use the PREMIG project as a platform for scholarly exchange and continued research on themes that we have worked on.

13.00–14.20 Prospects of forced return

Unimaginable returns: Young migrants’ home connections in the face of forced deportation | Shannon Damery, University of Liège (Belgium)

Fear of return: Protracted displacement and integration of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland | Brendan Quail, Queen’s University Belfast (United Kingdom)

Handling uncertain futures: How foreign nationals in the United Kingdom envision and manage the possibility of forced return. | Ines Hasselberg, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

Living the spectre of forced return: Negotiations of identity, belonging, and home in British immigration detention | Sarah Turnbull, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

14.20–14.30 Short break

14.30–15.50 Prospects of forced return (continued)

Returning to where the migrant really ‘belong’? Programs for assisted returns in Norway | Hilde Liden, Institute for Social Research (Norway) & Synnøve Bendixen (Norway)

Positive futures? Preparing young unaccompanied Afghans for return to Afghanistan | Lucy Williams, University of Kent (United Kingdom) & Kim Robinson, Deakin University (Australia)

Voluntary return: enhancing migrant autonomy and protecting their rights or simply an instrument of state control? | Christian Mommers, Leiden University (Netherlands)

Questions, answers, and discussion

15.50–16.10 Coffee break

16.10–17.30 Generation, life course, and return considerations

A new theoretical and empirical insight into return migration in a life course perspective | Marie-Laurence Flahaux, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

Ageing ‘here’ or ‘there’? Narratives of belonging and return aspirations among ageing labour migrants in the Azores | Dora Sampaio, University of Sussex (United Kingdom)
Going back? A preliminary analysis of factors influencing the decision of Chinese migrants in Lesotho to return to China | Sarah Hanisch, University of Vienna (Austria)

Questions, answers, and discussion

19.30 Conference Dinner (speakers and co-authors)

Friday, 21 August

09.00–10.40 Ambivalences of return

Back home: same place, same time? Reframing return migration through subjective constructions of ‘home’ and ‘future’ | Paolo Boccagni, University of Trento (Italy)

Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for mobility: An Afghan return migration case study | Marieke van Houte, University of Oxford (United Kingdom), Melissa Siegel, Maastricht University (Netherlands) & Tine Davids, Radboud University (Netherlands)

The safe haven?': Swiss migrants’ imaginaries of return migration | Aldina Camenisch, University of Basel (Switzerland) & Seraina Müller, University of Basel (Switzerland)

The not-so-liquid lives of intra-European migrants: Return considerations among East-West and South-North migrants | Susanne Bygnes, University of Bergen (Norway) & Marta Bivand Erdal, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

Rumour and migration: theoretical reflections and Burundian experiences | Jørgen Carling, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway) & Tove Heggli Sagmo, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

10.40–11.00 Coffee break

11.00–12.00 Distant dreams of return

The impossibility of returning home: Resettled Bhutanese refugees in the United States | G. Odessa Gonzalez Benson, University of Washington (United States)

Expectations vs. reality: Perceptions of unassisted returns to Somalia | Nassim Majidi, Sciences Po (France)

Romanian 1.5 generation in Italy and the dream of returning home | Roxana Bratu, University of Bucharest (Romania)

12.00–13.00 Lunch
13.00–14.40  Transnationalism and successful return
Transnational arrangements and return decisions of Senegalese, Ghanaians and Congolese migrants | **Amparo González-Ferrer**, Spanish National Research Council (Spain)

Down payment for future return: The case of Ghanaian migrants in the United Kingdom | **Leander Kandilige**, University of Ghana (Ghana)

Migration as aspiration, going home as compulsion: Experiences of return migration among Japanese in New York City | **Olga Sooudi**, University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)

Myth of success, ‘bad death’, and the political lives of returning Zimbabwean migrants’ dead bodies | **Peter Kankonde-Bukasa**, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Germany)

God brought you home: The moral economy of deportation in the lives of Nigerian sex worker migrants | **Sine Plambech**, Danish Institute for International Studies (Denmark)

14.40–15.00  Coffee break

15.00–16.20  Entrepreneurship, charity, and development
Life in the UK or returning to Poland? Considerations and actions of return migration amongst Polish migrant entrepreneurs | **Catherine Harris**, University of Sheffield (United Kingdom)

Back to Corruptistan? Evidence on corruption and return decision-making from Iraqi Kurds in Norway and the United Kingdom | **Erlend Paasche**, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

All selfish altruists? Return intentions of Moldovan migrants and transnational charity practices | **Eveline Odermatt**, University of Sussex, (United Kingdom)

‘I always knew I would return, it was just a matter of when’: anticipated return and the ‘development’ Project | **Rosemary George**, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Switzerland)
Summary session

Presenters

Possibilities and realities of return migration: An overview of insights from the PREMIG project | Jørgen Carling, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

Force and choice in return migration | Ceri Oeppen, University of Sussex (United Kingdom)

Exploring how immigrants’ attachment to Norway affects decisions to leave | Silje Vatne Petersen, Statistics Norway (Norway)

Comparing and contrasting Pakistani and Polish return mobilities | Marta Bivand Erdal, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

Comparative perspectives on return migration | Richard Black, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom)
Academic presentations

Abstracts, in alphabetical order by author

Impossibility of returning home: Elderly monoglot Bhutanese refugees resettled in the US | G. Odessa Gonzalez Benson, University of Washington (United States)

The possibility of returning home is an important phenomenon for migrants. But what if returning home was an impossibility? Even upon resettlement to third countries such as the United State, some refugees will be permanently stateless their whole lives with no possibility of going back to their home country. Such experiences of liminality have largely remained invisible, even as public discourse about deportation, detention, policing and activism of irregular or undocumented migrants take center stage. Political and legal banishment, permanent and certain, from one’s home suggests complex and profound significance for this small group of migrants. The impossibility of return is theoretically useful, as reverse analytic and point of departure, for understanding transnational space; issues of identity, integration and marginalization in places of migration; and political membership and representation. Theories about precarious citizenship, poetics of relation, and bare life come distilled with the limit case, the elderly Bhutanese refugee who cannot pass eligibility requirements for American citizenship and meanwhile banned by the government of Bhutan. Drawing on the case of the resettled Bhutanese refugee, this paper explores theoretical considerations and reviews citizenship, immigration and policies in the United States and in Bhutan to explore the impossibility of returning home.

Back home: same place, same time? Reframing return migration through subjective constructions of ‘home’ and ‘future’ | Paolo Boccagni, University of Trento (Italy)

Return migration is worth revisiting as much more than the outcome of top-down determinants such as unemployment and loss (or lack of) legal status in immigration countries, diaspora-reaching measures, or assisted return programmes. This mainstream framework neglects migrants’ agency, the relative autonomy of their networks and the life-course dimension of their homecomings. Most importantly, it does not appreciate the contribution of home and future studies to explore the critical life transition – both between geographic spaces and between biographic times – which is associated to return migration. This paper invites, instead, to studying the emotional, cognitive and practical significance of whatever migrants construct as “home”, be that home-land, local community, household and/or house. Which of these scales of reference and belonging are assumed as meaningful homes, and how different they are from those of the past, is critical to make sense of migrant transnational relationships, of their intention to return, of their mixed prospects for re-integration. Likewise, more attention should be given to the subjective ways of constructing their own future, while projecting or enacting return. Far from being a mere reflection of external constraints, the attendant cognitive and emotional constellations require emic and situated understandings to make sense of the timing of return, including its postponement or its temporariness. While little generalization can be made on the shifting temporalities (future) and spatialities (home) of return migration, a new conceptual frame of the underlying constructions, as suggested by existing research, is necessary to move beyond ad-hoc or only policy-driven accounts.

Romanian 1.5 generation in Italy and the dream of returning home | Roxana Bratu, University of Bucharest (Romania)

Based on a larger qualitative study conducted in a Romanian village (Vulturu), in the South-East region of the country, the paper sets out to explore the ways Romanian migrants’ children who were born in the country of origin but raised in Italy or the so-called 1.5 Generation (Rumbaut, 2002; 2012) talk about their ties with the home country and the possibility of returning to the homeland. While for some of the youngsters I interviewed, returning to Romania is not an option that they would take it into consideration since their lives are strongly anchored in Italy, for others the “dream of returning home” is practically a family project which they support. Their desire of returning home appears as a solution to the hardships experienced by their parents due to the immigrant status and is fuelled by the feeling of being a stranger, a lack of sense of belonging at destination and a perceived rejection by the wider society. Therefore I argue that the projected return to the homeland is mediated by the subjective assessment of the integration experience into the host country. The ways the interviewees negotiate the meaning of home and belongingness to the country of origin and destination shape to way they relate to the family return plans.

The safe haven? : Swiss migrants’ imaginaries of return migration | Aldina Camenisch, University of Basel (Switzerland) & Seraina Müller, University of Basel (Switzerland)

Switzerland, a small and affluent European country with a high ratio of immigration, has also a longstanding tradition of emigration. In 2014, more than 10% of all Swiss citizens lived abroad. In past centuries, Swiss emigrants were mainly poor farmers or workers who sought to escape economic hardship. Nowadays, the Swiss emigrants and their impetus for emigration are much more diverse. Many are young and well
educated and leave Switzerland for studying or working abroad, to stay with a loved one or simply for gaining more life experience or improving their quality of life. Even though they emigrate voluntarily, eventual return migration remains an option for many of them. Based on ongoing research among Swiss migrants living in Northern Europe and Mainland China, this paper explores the imaginaries and mobilities connected to scenarios of return migration to Switzerland from a comparative angle. It investigates the diverse, often conflicting or ambivalent notions of Switzerland as a place to leave and maybe return to. Return migration is often seen as going back to the “safe haven” in both an emotional and/or practical sense, and it is considered mainly in case of changes in one’s personal situation or financial problems. For others, however, a potential return is imagined as just one possible option in a mobile life course or even accompanied by negative feelings and fears. These transnational dynamics and ongoing mobility patterns play an important role when looking at the different imaginaries of return.

Rumour and migration: Theoretical reflections and Burundian experiences | Jørgen Carling, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway) & Tove Heggl Sagmo, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

Rumours are powerful and widespread elements in the dynamics of migration. Yet, the literatures on migration and on rumour remain largely separate. The concept of rumour allows for a critical examination of the information gaps, hypotheses, collective sense-making and conflicting truth claims that affect migration processes. We develop a framework for exploring the role of rumours in migration processes, seeking to explain their emergence and significance in a variety of settings. We draw upon theoretical approaches to rumour, developed primarily in social psychology, anthropology and sociology, and make connections with prevalent features of migration. Our empirical analysis addresses Burundian migration to Europe and the possibility of returning (or being returned) to Burundi. We draw upon the Burundian material to illustrate the theoretical framework and subsequently examine two specific rumours and their impact on migration dynamics. The essence of the first rumour is that the diaspora and political opposition in Burundi are mobilizing resources, and that once they agree on the modalities, the Hutu lead government will be replaced by force. The second rumour relates to the Norwegian asylum system and in particular the existence of a re-admission agreement between Norway and Burundi. Our analysis of rumour and migration has implications for both migration theory and policy.

Unimaginable returns: young migrants’ home connections in the face of forced deportation | Shannon Damery, University of Liège (Belgium)

This paper comes from a wider project on the ways in which migratory status impacts the home connections made by young migrants. A great deal of work has been done to reimagine the concept of home, and in addition to a physical space the idea of home encompasses feelings, memory, and the imagination. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted over the last year, I have engaged with migrants’ nuanced relationships and desires connected with Belgium and the country of origin. During the course of this research I have engaged with the issues that face migrants who are undocumented and feel it is unsafe to return to the country of origin, and migrants who have permission to stay in Belgium. The undocumented migrants and asylum seekers facing the possibility of deportation do not allow themselves to imagine the possibility to return to the country of origin. The connections they try to create in Belgium are sometimes tenuous, and while these migrants’ focus on remaining in Belgium, their connections still reflect the uncertainty of their situation. On the other hand, the young people who have permission to remain in Belgium allow their imaginations to roam in a wider field of possibilities, and they are less hindered by the uncertainties of their futures. In fact, for these migrants, uncertainty often resembles possibility, and this is the difference that I will attempt to unravel in this paper.

The quest for a normal life: Return considerations among European East-West and South-North migrants | Susanne Bygnes, University of Bergen (Norway) & Marta Bivand Erdal, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

This paper draws on Polish and Spanish migrants’ return considerations to explore how these cases of intra-European migration differ and converge, and the ways in which they may or may not be described as ‘liquid migration’. The 2004 EU extension and the 2008 financial crisis represent the onset of two ‘new’ migration flows in Europe. Analysing migrants’ narratives on return considerations, we find a longing for and ambivalence about return. Family concerns, economic factors, and more specifically, working life conditions in origin countries, are significant in shaping future plans. The quest for a ‘normal life’ is emphasised in migrants’ narratives, underscoring the significance of subjectively assessed economic factors. Migrants’ established lives in Norway and deregulated labour markets in Poland and Spain are articulated as preventing return migration. The Spanish narratives emphasize poor working life conditions more than Polish narratives, which can be understood in light of the combined effects of the strongly deregulated labour market and the economic crisis in Spain. South-North and East-West intra-European migration flows to Norway largely appear to converge, both in becoming longer-term, and in migrants’ shared quest for a ‘normal life’, rendering the label ‘liquid migration’ relevant legally, but raising questions about nature and extent.
A new theoretical and empirical insight into return migration in a life course perspective | Marie-Laurence Flahaux, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

Building upon existing theories, this paper develops a new conceptual framework encompassing three phenomena related to return migration at different stages of the migrant’s life: (a) the initial intention to return, (b) the return and (c) the reintegration process in the origin country after having returned and the question of the new departure. This framework is based on an empirical research, using a mixed methods approach, allowing to study in a life course perspective the question of return for migrants from Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) who migrated to Europe. The data comes from (1) the Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE) project, which collected the life stories of migrants and return migrants in origin and destination countries, and from (2) qualitative interviews conducted with returnees in the regions of Dakar and Kinshasa. The findings show the links between the three different phenomena related to return, and particularly the role of the intention to return for the realisation of return and the reintegration process in the origin countries. Also, the research reveals the negative effect of restrictive migration policies in Europe for return migration to Africa. Finally, the comparative analysis between Senegal and DR Congo also highlights the importance of the context in origin countries for return migration at each stage of the migrant’s life. These elements allow to propose a new theoretical framework to study return migration in a life course perspective.

‘I always knew I would return, it was just a matter of when’: Anticipated return and the ‘development’ Project | Rosemary George, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Switzerland)

This paper looks at the trajectories of return of ‘highly skilled’ Indian migrants who returned to pursue development projects in their countries of origin. Based on 15 ethnographic interviews of returning Indian migrants who have participated in development activities upon their return to India, the paper seeks to uncover their imaginings around development, the migrant experience and the ways in which these influenced their decision to eventually return. Their subject positions as migrants, returnees and eventually ‘transnational development agents’ (Faist, 2008) are privileged as objects of analysis, and these are presented through an analysis of their personal narratives of their life stories. Of particular focus are their varied discourses around their decision to return, integration within host societies, involvement within diaspora networks, learnings from their host countries, and participation in development projects as a member of Indian diaspora, when return is anticipated. The paper suggests that the trajectories which led to them being returnees who participate in development, have been shaped by their experiences as migrants in their host countries. Moreover, their intention to return has also been influenced by their perceptions of what they see and experience as ‘development’ in their host countries. The paper aims to highlight the lived experiences and constructed ideologies of an increasing minority who voluntarily return to their countries of origin in order to contribute to ‘development’.

Transnational arrangements and return decisions of Senegalese, Ghanaians and Congolese migrants | Amparo González-Ferrer, Spanish National Research Council (Spain)

This article examines the role of distance, immigration policies and contacts with the left-behind in shaping the return behavior of Sub-Saharan migrants in Europe. The theory of risk diversification and, more generally, the NELM focused on a particular type of migrant: the short-term, target-oriented worker, who identifies with his family of origin at home, and who expects to return once the saving target is being achieved. However, this theory and most of its empirical test were based on cases of (rural-urban) short-distances between origin and destination, which allow for more frequent trips and repeated migrations. However, we argue, in the context of greater distances and more stringent immigration policies, keeping active ties with those left-behind becomes more difficult and costly, which is likely to: 1) Lengthen the stays abroad and reduce the propensity to return 2) Give visits and remittances a more crucial and different meaning: instead of being indicators of upcoming return as some studies of guest-workers in Europe have suggested, visits and remittances could work as efficient tools to maintain the credibility of the risk pooling agreement between the migrant and non-migrants members of the family and, accordingly, enhance separations and transnational arrangements as a stable and enduring equilibrium. Our analyses utilizing the life history data collected by the MAFE Project in Senegal, Ghana and DR Congo and six European countries, largely confirm both hypotheses and challenge the current approach to manage migration at the EU level.

Going back? A preliminary analysis of factors influencing the decision of Chinese migrants in Lesotho to return to China | Sarah Hanisch, University of Vienna (Austria)

Among Chinese migrants in Lesotho going back to China is a frequently discussed topic. The continuing deterioration of the economic situation and the increase in safety related issues in Lesotho make many migrants reconsider their decision to stay in Lesotho. In fact, many migrants are ready to leave Lesotho anytime, but for the majority this is only a theoretical option. My preliminary findings from eight months of field work in Lesotho in 2014 indicate that the decision of going back reflects a tension between ‘being stuck’ in Lesotho, and being able to take the next plane to China. Migrants feel ‘stuck’ in Lesotho because the financial losses they would incur if they were to sell their assets or terminate their work contracts are unacceptable. Moreover, generational and gender aspects influence migrants’ decision. For the younger generation, going back is a temporary move to see family, undergo medical
treatment or get married. For the older generation, going back is only an option if they are able to profit financially. Gender aspects influence the individual migrant’s decision through socially accepted norms about the timing of important life events such as marriage, having and raising children. For example, it is not uncommon for 17 year old girls to return to China to get married. Among older married couples, it is usually the husband who returns to China while his wife stays in Lesotho. In sum, the question of going back is influenced by economic, generational and gender aspects.

Life in the UK or returning to Poland? Considerations and actions of return migration amongst Polish migrant entrepreneurs | Catherine Harris, University of Sheffield (United Kingdom)

Since EU enlargement in 2004, which enabled the free movement of workers, the UK has seen migration from Eastern Europe on an unprecedented scale, with flows from Poland being arguably and visibly dominant (Harris et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2014). One feature of this is Polish migrant entrepreneurship, with migrants establishing businesses to serve the local migrant populations, but also increasingly the wider market. As such, Polish migrant entrepreneurs have built lives in the UK, not only through establishing businesses but raising families, making friends and buying homes. This raises questions over whether these migrants will remain in the UK or return to Poland. In response, the paper explores considerations and actions of return migration amongst Polish migrant entrepreneurs in the UK. The research is based upon in-depth interviews with Polish migrant entrepreneurs in the West Midlands region of the UK, who migrated around the time of EU enlargement in 2004. The paper pays attention to the ways in which Polish entrepreneurs consider and action the decision to remain in the UK or return to Poland. It particularly focuses upon the motivating factors behind these decisions, such as family-first or business-first perspectives. It also explores whether the intention of Polish migrant entrepreneurs to return to their homeland has changed over time and the reasons behind this change. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates about migrant entrepreneurship and return migration and questions whether such motivating factors are specific to migrant entrepreneurs or applicable to migrants more broadly.

Handling uncertain futures: How foreign nationals in the United Kingdom envision and manage the possibility of forced return. | Ines Hasselberg, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

In this paper I will examine how foreign nationals in the United Kingdom (UK) envisage the possibility of forced return to their countries of origin. I will show how preparations for an eventual return were seldom made by those appealing deportation, even if foreseeing their forced removal and its implications for the family left behind was constantly on their minds. I will discuss how this was construed much as a coping strategy. Whether or not they had plans to return home at a later stage of their lives, at this point none was ready to leave the UK. Not making arrangements for deportation while their appeals were ongoing assisted migrants in coping with their undecided present and uncertain future, enabling them to hope for the best. Generational differences were influential in foreseeing one’s eventual deportation to the country of origin, with first generation migrants focusing on the emotional pain of family separation and financial hardship, while the 1.5 generation centred their narratives on imagined incidents of displacement, ignorance and isolation. Furthermore, participants’ emphasis on finding alternative destinations, reveals how for most long-term migrants deportation is foremost a departure from the UK and not necessarily a return home. I will explore these issues drawing on ethnographic data collected in London among foreign-national offenders appealing their deportation at the Immigration Tribunal.

Down payment for future return: The case of Ghanaian migrants in the United Kingdom | Leander Kandilige, University of Ghana (Ghana)

Research into return migration has explored possible links between return and development of origin countries. In addition, returnee preparedness and resource mobilisation approaches have been examined. However, few studies address how internal socio-economic disparities within origin communities affect the nature of return preparations by migrants. Using a case study methodology, mixed methods and a comparative approach, this paper examines the relationship between origin community conditions and pre-return strategies adopted by Ghanaian migrants in the UK. Ghana is used as a case study to examine this phenomenon both from the perspective of the migrant and that of the origin country. Narratives by migrants are interrogated in order to unearth factors that inform their decision-making and the approaches they adopt to ensure future successful return. In-depth interviews conducted among members of the Kwahuman Association and the Kassena-Nankan Development League in the UK as well as some of their networks in Ghana are used as a basis for the analysis. The Kwahuman Association represents a relatively wealthy region of Ghana, has a membership of over 500 registered members and has operated since the early 1960s. The Kassena-Nankan Development League, however, represents the poorest region in Ghana, has a membership of 35 and has existed only since the late 1990s. Among others, I conclude that migrants from deprived origin communities are more constrained in their return preparations compared with those from wealthier origin communities, due to weaker social networks.
Performance of success, the Durban deep illegal mining tragedy, and Zimbabwean migrants’ culturally induced forced return migration | Peter Kankonde-Bukasa, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Germany)

Migration and the performance of remittance play crucial socio-cultural function of rite of passage and confirmation of adulthood attainment in the current African contexts which offer the youth limited other opportunities. In addition the construction of myth of success through ostentatious remittance and other forms of misrepresentation of social status have become important strategies for avoiding post-migration social death and enhance the reputation of returning migrants. But what happens when “bad death” in migration setting suddenly exposes such myth of success? How do migrants experience and negotiate such a sudden “forced” return home when their own lives depend now on such a return? These are questions this paper explores by analysing the circumstances of death of twenty-three Zimbabwean migrants suffocated to death by an alleged carbon monoxide leak in one of the Johannesburg’s Durban Deep abandoned gold mineshafts. We still know very little about the multidimensional drivers, circumstances, and socio-cultural consequence of return migration. The embryonic existing literature on death in migration setting and return overlooks the accompanying migrants. The paper discusses the politicisation of funeral ceremonies as well as and rituals of return. It shows how the collusion between migrants and state in construction shift from migrants’ success to migrant heroism serves a politics of salvaging destabilised national and individual migration narratives.

Returning to where the migrant really ‘belong’? Programs for assisted returns in Norway | Hilde Liden, Institute for Social Research (Norway) & Synnøve Bendixen, University of Bergen (Norway)

Return policy has the last years been increasingly on the agenda for the Norwegian politicians and immigration authorities. In 2002, a program for assisted returns started up in Norway, covering the returnees’ travel costs and cash money for reintegration (Financial Support Reintegration). In the last five years more than 7,000 persons have returned to their home countries with these programs. The main groups: Iraq, Russia, Kosovo, Afghanistan. The paper will identify key factors that influence how irregular migrants respond to voluntary assisted return programs assisted by IOM. What are the reasons for taking the decision to return by single migrants and by families who have lived as irregular migrants in Norway? We will also discuss the lack of problematizing ‘return’? There is an idea of where the migrant really ‘belong’ in cases where the migrant is not recognized by the nation-state as in need of refugee protection. We therefore ask, what does ‘return’ mean for different actors? How do different perceptions of ‘return’ and what it implies to them personally also shape the individual migrant’s motivations to sign up for AVR? The paper is based on a research project which includes interviews with migrants living in Norway and following up interviews with migrants who have returned. The study is financed by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration. It is a joint project with Christian Michelsens Institute, PRIO, University of Bergen and Institute for Social Research.

Expectations vs. reality: Perceptions of unassisted returns to Somalia | Nassim Majidi, Sciences Po (France)

The Government of Kenya announced in April 2015 its intention to shut down Dadaab refugee camp complex, leading to the potential return of 350,000 refugees. In parallel, UNHCR initiated a pilot program to return Somali refugees back ‘home’ by assisting spontaneous returns. In this context, how do Somali refugees envision return ‘home’? Kenya’s 2012 Urban directive to relocate refugees to camps and the aftermath of the Garissa University attack in April 2015 have led refugees to fear deportation, while others now dream about return to a home they do not know (Somali youth) or to re-unite with their families (Somali women). A research led by Samuel Hall Consulting in 2014/2015 in Kenya and Somalia with 160 Somali refugees highlights uncertainties and expectations of return. This research gives a voice to refugees who have returned and those planning to return: what constitutes a voluntary, dignified and safe return to Somalia? In camps, the most concerning are coping mechanisms of split returns (divide and see) and leaving children behind (return’s educational gap). In urban settings, Somali youth see return as a source of hope: capitalizing on the international community’s investments in Somalia to access skills and jobs that are barred for refugees in Kenya. For Somali youth, return may remain an attractive – albeit temporary – option. Return processes are often seen from a Eurocentric point of view or from a perspective of assistance: this research shows the agency of returnees and their multiple coping strategies. Lessons can be applied to similar contexts.

Voluntary return: enhancing migrant autonomy and protecting their rights or simply an instrument of state control? | Christian Mommers, Leiden University (Netherlands)

European states have adopted a strong policy preference for ‘voluntary’ return over deportation when dealing with undocumented migrants who are not allowed to stay. Voluntary return is underpinned by the idea that it is, first and foremost, the responsibility of the migrant to ensure return happens. The focus on individual responsibility can be a double-edged sword. It empowers migrants by engaging their agency, but can also be used against them. A failure to act ‘responsibly’ in the eyes of the expelling state might serve as a powerful legitimization to take far-reaching coercive measures, such as eviction from shelter, detention and physical force during removal. States may even consider that ‘irresponsible’ migrants do not deserve to have their rights – which are affected by these measures – protected. From this perspective, it is extremely important to have a clear idea of how far the responsibility that is allocated to
undocumented migrants reaches. In contrast to what states often purport, I argue in this paper that undocumented migrants faced with expulsion cannot simply be expected to do whatever is in their power to return. Human rights law, but also the migration laws of expelling states themselves, set clear limits on what undocumented migrants must and are allowed to do in trying to return. I will identify some of these specific limits and show that the existence of these limits mean that expelling states need to be much more nuanced than currently in their approach to undocumented migrants who fail to leave voluntarily.

All selfish altruists? Return intentions of Moldovan migrants and transnational charity practices | Eveline Odermatt, University of Sussex, (United Kingdom)

Moldova is not yet a place to return to. Although the majority of Moldovan migrants anticipate return, they often involuntarily extend their stays abroad for undefined periods due to the country’s difficult development transition and its lack of opportunity structures. This paper deals with the links between the delayed return of Moldovan migrants in Western Europe and forms of their transnational collective charity practices. I disclose how migrants use their transnational aid-practices as a means to planed return, by examining the relationship dynamics between the migrants, the donor-community and their local Moldovan counterparts in concrete development project settings. The main argument brought forward is that the migration characteristic of ‘high return intentionality’ considerably impacts on migrants’ notion of home attachment; and consequently on their collective transnational charity practices. I aim to contribute to the theoretical discussion on the relationship between anticipated and postponed return of Eastern European migrants in Western and South Western Europe and their associational life, particularly migrants’ transnational collective charity practices. The paper is based on a multi-sited ethnography with a transnational approach, drawing on a set of qualitative research methods, mainly on participant observation and in-depth interviews. The data collection took place over a period of one year in the transnational field of Moldovan migrant civil society and in the transnational social field of development organisation across seven European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Moldova, Switzerland and the UK.

Back to Corruptistan? Evidence on corruption and return decisionmaking from Iraqi Kurds in Norway and the United Kingdom | Erlend Paasche, Peace Research Institute Oslo (Norway)

How does corruption affect migrants’ decision to return migrate or stay abroad? Migration from the global South to the global North tends to be migration from high-corruption countries to low-corruption countries. This is likely to have important yet understudied implications for how these migrants think about going back. I explore how corruption affects return decisions through 34 semi-structured interviews with Iraqi Kurds legally resident in Norway and the UK. I find that corruption is a recurrent theme in migrants’ narratives, affecting return decisions in a number of ways that are not identified in the literature. Economically, corruption shapes prospects of post-return employability and the premium on human capital acquired abroad. Politically, disillusion with political elites perceived as corrupt alienates migrants and undermines patriotic identification with the nation-building project. Psychosocially, corruption affects interviewees’ sense of belonging, leading some to question the notion of Iraqi Kurdistan as home. Combined, these mechanisms shape the criteria for return decisions. Firstly, eventual return often requires transnationally maintained social visibility and assistance from non-migrants. Secondly, return is greatly facilitated by ‘linking capital’, linking ties with formal institutions and individuals in positions of power in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thirdly, corruption affects migrants’ perceived need for accumulating money and education in preparation for successful return. Theoretically, corruption cuts across the artificial divide in the literature on return between ‘economic’ and ‘non-economic’ factors in return decision-making. Finally, corruption nuances the common assumption that macroeconomic growth in country of origin leads to return migration, because the type of growth also matters.

God brought you home: The moral economy of deportation in the lives of Nigerian sex worker migrants | Sine Plambech, Danish Institute for International Studies (Denmark)

Set in Nigeria among deported sex worker migrants and the institutions that seek to intervene in their migration, this paper explores the moral economy of deportation. In the current climate of increased deportation from the Global North to the Global South, the deportation of Nigerian sex worker migrants is merely one return flow. While recent conceptualizations of deportation and return-migration has prompted crucial questions on policing, citizenship and sovereignty in migration governance, hitherto it has primarily been analyzed from the perspective of the Global North. Neither has much attention been paid to how deportation, like other forms of migration, is gendered. This renders deportation gender neutral and leaves an image of deportation as simply imposed upon migrants and a passive Global South. Deportation certainly leaves migrants with feelings of powerlessness when orders of removals are imposed upon them, and it certainly creates multiple challenges for deportee receiving countries in the Global South (Sørensen 2011; Barrios and Brotherton 2011). Yet, the ethnographic material presented in this paper illuminates the very active role of the Global South in the process of deportation and return. Among Nigerian anti-trafficking institutions as well as among the deported women, deportation emerges as something more than a mere technology of EU migration control. The analysis shows how invoking the powerful languages of God, morality and nation-building, deportation and reintegration of sex worker migrants emerge as sites for reconfiguring, circumscribing and actively practicing what it means to be a legitimate Nigerian citizen.
Fear of return: Protracted displacement and integration of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland | Brendan Quail, Queen’s University Belfast (United Kingdom)

Life for asylum seekers as they await a decision by their host country’s government on international protection is often filled with restriction, uncertainty and psychological unease. With the looming fear/threat of refusal and deportation weighing heavily on their minds, asylum seekers remain in a state of temporariness which significantly impinges on their quotidian existence. Participation in civic activities and levels of integration, as a result, are therefore affected. Informed by empirical qualitative research from Northern Ireland this paper seeks to draw focus to the lived realities and, indeed, voices of asylum seekers (and refugees) as they attempt to gain control of their lives and identities while navigating liminal space. This paper will provide a window to the experiences of asylum seekers as they endure the possibility of forced return, with specific attention placed on themes of psychosocial capacity, integration and agency. While uncertainty regarding an impending future and a fear of return does significantly impact the lives of asylum seekers, the imposed burden of immigration instability is lessened by a desire to push forward and keep busy, a willingness to expand social networks and the pursuit of civic endeavours. Used also as a coping strategy to “get our minds off the Home Office” such actions simultaneously support the process of integration.

Ageing ‘here’ or ‘there’? Narratives of belonging and return aspirations among ageing labour migrants in the Azores | Dora Sampaio, University of Sussex (United Kingdom)

Although return migration seems to be receiving increasing attention, much less emphasis has been drawn towards ageing migrants and their aspirations for a later-in-life return ‘home’. Often viewed as vulnerable or in decline, older people tend to be regarded as dependent and immobile. Through questioning and problematising migratory trajectories that not always conform to these traditional assumptions of ‘old age’, this paper aims to explore how different types of narratives of belonging to the receiving society – ‘narratives of contentment’, ‘narratives of permanent adaptation’ and ‘narratives of discontent’ – shape migrants’ aspirations of returning to their long left ‘homeland’. The analysis is based on 36 in-depth life narrative interviews and a six-month ethnographic fieldwork in the Azores with later-in-life labour migrants (mostly from Cape Verde and Brazil). Results stress the complex nexus between migrants’ narratives of belonging and their aspirations of returning, highlighting multiple temporalities of anticipating return. Indeed, ‘narratives of contentment’ in the Azores do not necessarily convey a wish to stay while ‘narratives of discontent’ do not always translate into a desire to leave, more often obscuring accounts of an ‘ever postponed return’. The line between ageing in place and returning seems therefore to be blurred and mostly shaped by major life factors (such as family mobility, frequency of contact with the ‘homeland’, health issues or local availability of social support in later-life; thus, in many cases an in-between situation seems to emerge marked by a permanent renegotiation of ‘here’ and ‘there’ and a re-hypothesising of later-in-life (im)mobility.

Migration as aspiration, going home as compulsion: Experiences of return migration among Japanese in New York City | Olga Sooudi, University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)

This paper, based on ethnographic research conducted among Japanese in New York City (NYC) and return migrants in Tokyo, considers return migration among long-term Japanese migrants. NYC has one of the largest Japanese overseas populations in the world. These are middle-class migrants, who go to NYC with the goals of both “making it” professionally in creative fields like art, fashion, design, and music, and eschewing conventional middle-class life trajectories at home. They imagine they will go home eventually, but return can be delayed for anything ranging from several years to four decades. While Japanese migrants experience leaving home in terms of freely-made, individual choices, by contrast, return home, and its contemplation, are characterized by a sense of compulsion. Thus although eventual return is written into migrants’ imagined futures from the outset, there is a dissonance between the conditions under which migrants would like to return home—as successful professionals and self-realized individuals who have integrated into NYC—and the circumstances in which they actually go back. I first outline factors involved in Japanese return migration, including aging parents, illness, and lack of professional success. Next, I consider how these migrants map their trajectories—from home, to NYC, and back—in terms of widely-shared value hierarchies among Japanese abroad. These include notions of migrant success and failure, self-realization, constructions of NYC as an ideal “world stage” for artists, and the related construal of Japan as both inevitable site of return and personally constraining national space transcended through migration.

Living the spectre of forced return: Negotiations of identity, belonging, and home in British immigration detention | Sarah Turnbull, University of Oxford (United Kingdom)

Although not a new phenomenon, the practice of immigration detention is increasingly utilised in many countries as a state response to unwanted migration. Technically administrative rather than punitive in nature, immigration detention is largely justified as a means to ‘hold’ non-citizens to accomplish immigration-related aims, of which a key priority is to facilitate expulsion. At present, the United Kingdom (UK) has one of the largest immigration detention estates, with eleven immigration removal centres (IRCs) having a combined capacity to hold approximately 4,100 individuals at any given time. Drawing on ethnographic data collected across four of these centres, this paper explores detainees’ lived experiences and perceptions of the possibility of ‘going home’, often against their wishes and occasionally by force. It examines how detainees understand and make sense of their pending ‘returns’ (via administrative removal or deportation) in relation to the themes of identity, belonging, and home. In addition, the paper considers the various ways in which detainees resist this particular exercise of state power in the context of extreme un-
certainty, vulnerability, and unpredictability characteristic of life in British IRCs. It shows how those subject to detention and removal negotiate these interconnected practices, acting as best they can within coercive and isolating carceral institutions.

Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for mobility: An Afghan return migration case study | Marieke van Houte, University of Oxford (United Kingdom), Melissa Siegel, Maastricht University (Netherlands) & Tine Davids, Radboud University (Netherlands)

This paper proposes an analytical framework to investigate the meanings of and motivations for return migration. We then use this framework on the life histories of 35 Afghan return migrants to deconstruct return as a complex decision-making process that goes beyond policy-oriented dichotomies of voluntary and involuntary return. The autobiographical narrative proved to be a valuable empirically grounded research methodology to study this. We find that almost no return decision was entirely free, but almost no return decision was entirely forced, either. There is rather a gradual scale, depending on capacities and desires, interacting with structures and leading to different levels of agency over the decision to return. Nevertheless, the analysis also shows there is a strong empirical difference between the post-return experiences of returnees who still have the capacity to be transnationally mobile and the experiences of those who do not. Mobility continues to be an essential desire in the lives of return migrants. We therefore propose to centralize mobility in the analysis of return. Concluding, we challenge the current policy oriented categories, which are based on the use of force, by defining the same categories in a more adequate and meaningful way, based on post-return mobility. Practically, this categorization is based on legal status in the host country: the return of migrants with a legal alternative that would allow them to stay permanently in the country of residence is called voluntary, while return of migrants without such a legal alternative is defined as involuntary.

Positive futures?: Preparing young unaccompanied Afghans for return to Afghanistan | Lucy Williams, University of Kent (United Kingdom) & Kim Robinson, University of Deakin (Australia)

From the 2000’s the UK accepted a significant number of Afghan Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) into the care of Social Services. These young people are now reaching adulthood and are finding that they are no longer entitled to remain in the UK, a place they consider to be their home. Due to a combination of political, legal and social factors Afghans who have not been granted full refugee status are losing support and protection as Looked After Children (for whom the State is ‘corporate parent’) and facing deportation back to Afghanistan. Drawing on an evaluation of a project aiming to prepare these young people for return to countries they left as children, this paper will consider how, it even possible, social services could prepare young people for return to countries they left as children. The empirical data we draw on includes qualitative interviews with young people, with social workers, immigration officials and refugee advocates. The project we evaluated was ultimately unsuccessful in incentivising young people to return and we theorise that only more intensive efforts, embedded in care plans could support young people to feel positive and engaged with their counties of origin. This paper considers how this might be achieved through intensive social work but warns that without political investment in promoting the best interests of children, attempts by social workers to support them to make positive decisions about their future that include Afghanistan will be undermined.