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Assisted Voluntary Returns: A Distorted Narrative

Assisted Voluntary Returns (AVR) are presented as an opportunity for migrants to return to their country of origin with logistical and financial support. However, these programs often function as disguised deportations, carried out under conditions that do not allow for a truly free and informed choice.

Over the past decade, AVR has become central to migration management policies, both in destination countries such as those in Europe and in so-called transit countries. These programs are heavily promoted and extensively funded by European governments and primarily implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which defines them as "logistical assistance or financial support, including reintegration assistance, for migrants who cannot or do not wish to remain in the destination or transit country and decide to return to their country of origin."

What should differentiate them from forced returns is voluntariness—the person's genuine desire to return to their country, supported by logistical and financial assistance for the journey. However, the concept of "voluntariness" is often distorted, turning into a forced choice due to restrictive policies that deny dignified residence alternatives and protection.

The Role of AVR in Mobility Containment Policies

In transit countries, AVR serves as an instrumental tool for border externalization policies. As increasing mobility restrictions—often funded by destination countries—make leaving transit states more difficult, AVR is presented as a "humanitarian measure" to ensure migrants' safety and reduce "migration pressure" on transit countries.

The AVR programs funded by Italy and the European Union in Libya and Tunisia exemplify how this tool is used to mask policies aimed at containing mobility. Migrants in these countries systematically face persecution, torture, and other human rights violations. Under such conditions, return becomes the only possible way out—clearly not a free choice but one forced by unbearable circumstances.

At the same time, Italy and the EU heavily fund the Libyan and Tunisian governments to prevent migrants from reaching Europe. Within this system, AVR provides a humanitarian cover for pushback policies that openly violate the principle of non-refoulement.

Italy has financed AVR programs from Tunisia and Libya for several years through funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as the so-called Migration Fund and the Incentive Fund for Return Policies. But behind the rhetoric of "helping people return," there is a system that forces migrants back to the very conditions they fled from, with no real prospects for safety or a future.

The link between border externalization policies, mobility restrictions, and the use of so-called voluntary return measures is explicitly stated in the Italian government's own narrative: in 2024, the 60% decrease in arrivals to Italy compared to the previous year was achieved through "successful" cooperation with Tunisian and Libyan border authorities, which reportedly blocked the departure of over 192,000 people, along with the execution of more than 21,000 AVR operations in these two countries in 2024.

Why Are Italy's AVR Programs in Libya and Tunisia Illegitimate?

n transit countries like Libya and Tunisia, return is often the only escape from arbitrary detention, torture, and violence. Without protection alternatives, return is not a choice—it is forced surrender.

When Can a Return Be Considered Truly Voluntary?

As widely reaffirmed by UN bodies such as the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), AVR can only be considered legitimate when:

a) The decision is free and informed
b) There is no physical or psychological coercion
c) There are real alternatives to return, such as access to protection and legal migration pathways

However, the IOM—the primary implementer of AVR—does not require the existence of alternatives for a return to be considered voluntary. In a note on AVR published in its glossary, the IOM states that voluntary return is defined by only two criteria:

1. "Freedom of choice, defined as the absence of physical or psychological pressure to enroll in an assisted voluntary return and reintegration program," and
2. "An informed decision, requiring the availability of timely, impartial, and reliable information on which to base the decision."

The existence of viable alternatives to return is not a criterion that the IOM considers fundamental to the legitimacy of return, despite the UN bodies' stance on the matter. As a result, AVR programs are also applied to vulnerable individuals, unaccompanied minors, and trafficking survivors—people who have the right to protection but, when stranded in transit countries, have no real access to alternatives other than return.

Reasons Why Assisted Voluntary Returns Are Illegitimate

- In transit countries such as Libya and Tunisia, AVR is often the only escape from widespread detention, torture, and severe human rights violations.

Given the impossibility of obtaining effective protection or accessing regular migration channels, the conditions for expressing a genuinely free and informed choice do not exist —meaning a return cannot be considered voluntary.

- Return exposes individuals to the grave risk of being sent back into unbearable conditions in their country of origin, returning them to the very systemic dangers they fled, such as conflict, persecution, and trafficking.

- These measures, presented as humanitarian, risk becoming disguised deportations in violation of fundamental principles of international law, such as the principle of non-refoulement, as well as obligations to protect minors and victims of trafficking, torture, or gender-based violence.

These measures, presented as humanitarian, risk turning into disguised expulsions in violation of fundamental principles of international law, such as the principle of non-refoulement, as well as protection obligations for minors and people subjected to trafficking, torture, or gender-based violence.

In 2022, the OHCHR explicitly recommended that EU states refrain from funding these measures in the absence of adequate safeguards and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with the principle of free and informed consent and human rights. Nevertheless, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI) has continued to finance these measures over the years without providing the necessary guarantees and without conducting proper investigations into the risks of human rights violations.

The impact of RVA on self-determination and escaping gender-based violence

For women and people persecuted or discriminated against based on gender, migration is often a means of self-determination to escape violence, social and economic marginalization, and persecution. Even when accompanied by reintegration programs, repatriation exposes these individuals to the risk of being returned to the same context of violence and discrimination they were trying to flee.

When arbitrary detention, torture, and exploitation make repatriation the “best option,” can we really talk about choice? What room for negotiation is left for people, and what access to protection is guaranteed? It is even more urgent to ask these questions when the conditions that make migrants’ lives in Libya and Tunisia unbearable are supported—and often determined—by the political and financial actions of Italy and the EU.

In this sense, putting people in a position where they have no choice but to return to the situation they fled from is not a form of protection but a blatant violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

“The Cost of Inaction”: A Distorted Narrative

According to the narrative promoted by government authorities and the IOM, voluntary return is the only solution to escape violence and detention, and from a humanitarian perspective, the cost of inaction would be extremely high. However, this perspective turns reality upside down. People fleeing gender-based violence and other forms of persecution are being offered the option to escape immediate danger only to be exposed once again, in their country of origin, to the same violence they initially fled—less visible from a European perspective but no less severe. This solution cannot be considered a form of protection and does not fulfill the protection obligations set out in international conventions.

What Happens After Repatriation?

The Story of G.

“I arrived in Libya from Nigeria at 16. A neighbor, U., convinced me to leave. I needed to earn some money to help my family. They took us to Agadez, to a ghetto. To get food and water, we had to have sex with the people managing the place.

During the journey through the desert towards Libya, we suffered from hunger and thirst. All the women were sexually abused—by the truck drivers, at checkpoints by soldiers demanding money. Those who had no money paid with their bodies. […]

Once we arrived in Sabah, they took us to a house where, like the other girls, I suffered sexual violence at the hands of the ghetto managers. I was sexually exploited, meaning men from outside would come to have sex with the women in the house.

I spent a week in Sabah. From there, we left in a Toyota truck for Tripoli. During the journey, we were left overnight in a farm. They made us sleep in a stable. That night, I and the others were sexually assaulted by the men running the house. The next day, another truck arrived to pick us up and continue the journey […] until we reached Tripoli.

There, several cars arrived to take some of us away. I was taken by a man who arrived in a taxi and brought me to a house, taking me away from U.’s control. In that house, I was held captive for two days by different men, who only released me after U. paid a ransom. During those two days, I was raped by the four men who had kidnapped me. […]

At U.’s house, I discovered I was pregnant. U. took me to several places for an abortion […]. The abortion attempts didn’t work. He insisted that I had to start working because I had debts to pay, and he grew increasingly angry as I failed to terminate the pregnancy. He held me captive in his house, where he raped me for two weeks. He decided he would sell me to a connection house, but I managed to escape and reach an acquaintance in Janzour.

In the meantime, the conflict in Libya had intensified, I was pregnant, and I didn't know what to do. I turned to the International Organization for Migration. I was terrified of returning to Nigeria—I feared discrimination, insults, and rejection because I was pregnant and unmarried. Moreover, U. kept threatening me over the unpaid debt. At the same time, I was also terrified of the situation in Libya—not only the widespread violence but also the impossibility of imagining a future for myself and my child. How would I find a home and the money to survive?

At the IOM office, they asked me to explain how I had arrived in Libya and what had happened during the journey. I told them everything, including U.'s role in organizing my trip and his deceptions. At that point, the IOM started arranging my return to Nigeria. They didn't offer me any other option, no one suggested any alternative.

They asked if I would be at risk upon returning to my country, and I said yes. I told the IOM I was an adult, giving them a false birth date. They didn't ask for any documents or investigate my real age. They also asked if I had problems with the debt I had accumulated for the journey, and I confirmed that I had no means to repay it. They told me that the IOM does not take people to Europe but only to their country of origin, so my only choice was either to stay in Libya in the middle of a war or to return…"

. In the interviews I had with the IOM, they promised me shelter in Nigeria and assistance even after giving birth, providing me with the necessary goods to raise my child. However, none of this happened. I took the flight to Nigeria, arrived in Lagos, and then, along with other girls, I was taken to Benin City, where we were accommodated in a hotel for two days. There, they gave me a prepaid card with 30,000 naira (approximately 18 euros) and 6,000 naira (4 euros) in cash to pay for a taxi home. They did not give me any other money, nor did they allow me to go to a shelter as they had promised.

That day, they made me sign some documents without explaining what they were.

At some point, after a few months, I was contacted by the IOM to attend a training course, which I completed. They offered me a job, and I chose to start a small food business. The IOM asked me to find goods to sell, which they would purchase for me. I contacted a man who agreed, and the IOM paid him 600,000 naira to provide me with the merchandise to start my business, but it never took off. I did not receive any medical or psychological assistance.

H.'s Story

I arrived in Libya in 2016, having been brought there under false pretenses. During the journey to Libya, in Agadez, I realized what I was expected to do, but I could not turn back. Even during the journey, they started abusing me.

In Libya, I started working to repay my debt, and I had to keep working to send money home to the person taking care of my daughter, whom I had left behind. The work was terrible, and in 2017, I tried for the first time to cross the Mediterranean. I attempted to cross the sea three times, but each time, they sent me back. After stopping me at sea, they would detain me, and I had to pay a ransom to be released, so I kept accumulating debts and being bought and sold.

In January 2018, soldiers raided the connection house where I was working. They took me to a detention center called Tarik Al Mattar. There, I tried to register with UNHCR to seek protection. I told them about the connection house and the exploitation I had suffered. They told me that my nationality was not among those eligible for protection. After five months, the head of the detention center sold me to a Moroccan woman, who made me work in her house doing domestic chores. She didn't pay me and never let me go out. One day, the woman sent me to fetch water because there was no more running in the house, and I took the opportunity to escape. I sought help from a man from Ghana, but he mistreated me, wouldn't let me go out, and abused me. I became pregnant. I tried again to cross the sea, but we were intercepted. I was six months pregnant when they detained me again for a month and a half, until the Ghanaian man paid for my release. But he continued to mistreat me, so I went to the IOM, and after several months, I finally left. By then, my baby had been born.

They gave me 14,000 naira (€8) and later 80,000 naira (€50) on a debit card. I had to beg on the streets to feed my daughters.

After several months, I received more money, but the situation in Nigeria is unbearable. Now I am sick, I don't have enough money for treatment, and I can't access free healthcare. I don't have enough money to send my daughters to school, and my frequent hospitalizations prevent me from working regularly. Here, I see no future for myself and my children.

Cooperation and Deterrence

Migration containment policies, aimed at limiting migration flows, have historically relied heavily on resources provided by development cooperation. On the one hand, this is because development cooperation represents the main tool for intervening in low-income countries, which are the primary source of so-called irregular migration flows. On the other hand, migration has traditionally been analyzed and framed as a consequence of underdevelopment.

According to this view, if development aid aims to promote the growth and well-being of the poorest communities and countries, it should, in this way, help reduce migratory pressure. However, the link between migration and development is more complex and less linear than we are accustomed to believing. Especially in the short and medium term, an increase in individual income levels can lead to higher migration, as migration is a project that requires significant financial resources, also, and especially, due to the criminalization of migratory flows.

Since the so-called refugee crisis of 2014-2015, we have seen a further and significant increase in the use of official development assistance to fund external action on migration, contributing to its main goal: the deterrence of migration flows. This has happened both at the European level, with the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and later, with the specific budget allocation within the European budget NDICI-Global Europe, and at the Italian level, with the Africa Fund (later the Migration Fund) and the more recent Premium Fund for return policies.

The use of development cooperation funds in external migration action raises two main issues.

The first concerns the fact that these funds, which should be exclusively allocated to the socio-economic development of the beneficiary countries, end up financing programs whose purpose, more or less explicitly, is to prevent migration. Even in cases where the intervention is presented as humanitarian and developmental, such as in return and reintegration programs, the main objective remains deterrence.

The second issue is related to the growing link between development cooperation funds and the commitment of beneficiary countries to stop departures and accept the return of their citizens. A positive conditionality (more for more) is explicitly provided by both European and Italian funds.

Data:

Between September 2017 and December 2024, 11,415 people were repatriated from Libya with funding allocated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) under the so-called Migration Fund (formerly the Africa Fund), within the projects of the IOM Comprehensive and Multi-sectoral Action Plan in Response to the Migration Crisis in Libya; Multi-sectoral support for vulnerable populations and communities in Libya; Multisectoral support for vulnerable migrants in Libya.

The amount of funding for voluntary return and reintegration programs:
→ €2,450,000, of which €970,000 for VHR, under the IOM project Multisectoral support for vulnerable migrants in Libya (July 2024 - June 2026);
→ €5,150,910, under the IOM project Multi-sectoral support for vulnerable populations and communities in Libya (September 2021 - January 2025);
→ €11 million, under the IOM project Comprehensive and Multi-sectoral Action Plan in Response to the Migration Crisis in Libya (September 2017 - April 2021).

Sources and useful documentation:
Data analysis

https://www.asgi.it/sciabaca-oruka/rimpatri-volontari-dalla-libia-i-finanziamenti-italiani/
https://www.thebigwall.org/

RVA from Tunisia with Italian Funding

Between March 2022 and February 2024, 1,441 people were repatriated from Tunisia with funding allocated by the MAECI under the so-called Premium Fund, within the IOM project Enhancing Response Mechanisms and Assistance to Vulnerable Migrants in Tunisia, which was again funded by the MAECI in November 2024.
A new funding of €3 million, granted by the MAECI in November 2024, has increased the total funding to over €9 million, extending the number of people to be repatriated by February 28, 2027, to 2,050.

In the different phases of the project, economic resources were progressively allocated to voluntary return and reintegration programs (RVA&R), at the expense of assistance measures for migrants in Tunisia, amounting to nearly €5 million, which represents more than 80% of the project's operational costs, excluding expenses.

What have we done so far?

- Requests for Civic Access
- We have submitted numerous requests for general civic access (so-called FOIA) to obtain information and documentation related to the voluntary assisted return programs funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI) in transit countries.
- Legal Disputes
- We have filed several appeals before the TAR of Lazio to challenge the legitimacy of Italian funding for voluntary return measures from Libya and Tunisia.
- In January 2020, the organizations ASGI, Spazi Circolari, and Differenza Donna challenged the acts through which the MAECI funded voluntary return measures under the IOM project Comprehensive and Multi-sectoral Action Plan in Response to the Migration Crisis in Libya.
- In September 2023, the organizations ASGI and Spazi Circolari challenged the acts through which the MAECI funded voluntary return measures under the IOM project Enhancing Response Mechanisms and Assistance to Vulnerable Migrants in Tunisia.
- In November 2024, the organizations ASGI, Action Aid, A Buon Diritto, Lucha y Siesta, Differenza Donna, Spazi Circolari, and Le Carbet challenged the acts through which the MAECI funded voluntary return measures related to the IOM project Multisectoral support for vulnerable migrants in Libya.

Communications to International Bodies
We have sent communications regarding the critical issues of Italian funding to so-called voluntary return programs from Libya and Tunisia, and the legal actions undertaken, to the following UN bodies:

• United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
• Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
• Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants
• Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children
• Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, its Causes and Consequences

Research Activities

The promoting organizations have conducted field research, interviewing returned persons and actors – both institutional and non-governmental – to investigate migration policies, with a particular focus on voluntary assisted return and reintegration programs, in the following countries: Gambia (ActionAid), Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, and Ivory Coast (ASGI).

What we are asking for:

1) Stop to Funding for "Voluntary" Returns from Transit Countries

We are calling for the immediate cessation of funding for voluntary assisted return programs from countries such as Libya and Tunisia, where return becomes an enforced choice, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

2) Freedom of Movement and Protection Policies, Not Externalization

We call for the end of cooperation based on deterrence and blocking mobility strategies, in order to allow free movement and the genuine exercise of the right to leave one's country in search of protection, in full respect of the right to asylum.

- We demand the immediate cessation of agreements and funding aimed at preventing migrants from reaching Europe, blocking mobility in transit countries, or rerouting migration to countries of origin.
- We call for the adoption of active protection policies that ensure the possibility of entering Europe for people fleeing violence and persecution in Libya, Tunisia, and their countries of origin.

3)Greater Transparency, Guarantees, and Human Rights Monitoring

We call for greater transparency in projects funded with public funds, the establishment of independent control mechanisms, and guarantees regarding the respect for human rights, starting with the principle of free and informed consent.

Quotes:

Lorenzo Trucco, President of ASGI

"When the only alternative is being trapped in inhumane conditions, talking about 'voluntariness' is a fiction that conceals a serious violation of the principle of non-refoulement. In parallel with legal actions against Italian funding for voluntary returns from transit countries, with this campaign, we call for the adoption of policies that genuinely respect the right to asylum and freedom of movement."

Luigi Manconi, President of A Buon Diritto
"The requirements set by the United Nations and other international bodies for voluntary assisted return are not respected in the return policies adopted by countries like Libya and Tunisia. A radically different approach is needed, one that guarantees legal and safe entry channels and respects fundamental human rights."

Federica Remiddi, President of Spazi Circolari
"Free movement, as the possibility to exercise the right to flee in search of protection, is systematically violated by blocking policies that have also developed through the improper and unlawful use of international organizations' activities. The campaign against the illegal funding of voluntary returns aims to raise awareness about the need for civil society to demand that instruments presented as humanitarian do not become systematic expulsions of people who, if they could reach European territory, would be entitled to protection."

Elisa Ercoli, President of Differenza Donna
"The relocation of borders amplifies the effects of the border as a device of exclusion and violence, where legal protection categories are emptied, even overturning their meaning. Voluntary return, a key part of this process, is a clear example, where consent loses its meaning when extracted from context and the term 'humanitarian' masks systematic violations of protection obligations."

Associazione Casa delle Donne Lucha y Siesta
"Migration, for women and gender-discriminated individuals, can be a fundamental strategy for escaping violence and achieving liberation. Migration blocking policies and returns nullify these efforts and expose individuals to the same violence they fled. In these situations, reintegration projects that focus primarily on individual economic support have a very limited impact because they do not address the complex mechanisms of subjugation and systemic discrimination. Protection should be guaranteed for those fleeing such situations, not sending them back."

Katia Scannavini, Co-Secretary General of ActionAid Italy
"In voluntary assisted returns, the absence of real choice undermines the possibility of a sustainable return. In this context, managing returns in a humanitarian framework proves functional to a strategy of containing migration flows. This approach reflects the broader logic of deterrence, which has ended up redefining development and international cooperation policies in the migration field, emptying them of their capacity to promote migration as an opportunity for growth and reducing inequalities, instead turning them into control tools."

Nicola Datena, President of Le Carbet Association
"So-called 'humanitarian voluntary returns' are yet another attempt to make acceptable what is unacceptable: the denial of freedom of movement. While European governments externalize borders and finance regimes that violate human rights,

we reaffirm that no border is legitimate when it separates people from the possibility of a dignified life. There are no 'humanitarian' returns in a system that criminalizes migration: there are only forms of deportation disguised as aid. Our struggle is for a world where the right to mobility is not a privilege, but a reality for all."

The campaign and the Manifesto have already been endorsed by:
Associazione Alzaia Onlus Ets, Baobab Experience, borderline-europe - Human Rights, Without Borders e.V., Casa delle Donne contro la violenza ODV, Centro Antiviolenza EOS, Clinica del diritto dell'immigrazione Roma Tre, EOS Centro Ascolto Donna o.d.v., Europasilo,, International Rescue Committee Italia, Italiani Senza Cittadinanza, Maldusa Project, Melting Pot Europa, Nazione Umana, Sea Punks e.V., Sea-Watch e.V., SOS Humanity e.V., Sportello Sans Papiers di Arci Porco Rosso, The Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic, Rights FTDES

By clicking here, you will find useful photographs for the campaign.

The list continues here.

To stay updated on the campaign: link to the Instagram page.