

STORIES OF RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration

IOM Ghana



EU-IOM

Joint Initiative for
Migrant Protection
and Reintegration



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- 1,800+ voluntary returns since 2017
- 800+ returnees successfully concluded their reintegration process
- Over one million people reached through awareness creation online and offline

EU-IOM JOINT INITIATIVE IN GHANA – 4 YEARS ON

The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in Ghana is part of a regional programme covering and closely cooperating with 26 countries in North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel and Lake Chad region.

It aims to improve protection, facilitate voluntary return, provide sustainable reintegration to returning migrants, and to contribute to strengthening migration governance.

The Joint Initiative's inclusive approach involves key stakeholders, such as migrants' associations, community-based organizations and local communities, to ensure that, in the future, Ghanaians will migrate safely as a matter of choice, rather than necessity.

IOM works closely with the Government of Ghana, particularly the Ministry of the Interior, which has the mandate to lead on migration governance in the country.

In Ghana, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative (JI) was inaugurated in May 2017 with the constitution of the Project Steering Committee co-chaired by the Delegation of the European Union to Ghana and the Ministry of the Interior and with representation from other key ministries and IOM serving as the Secretariat.

A Technical Working Group that comprises both government and non-government agencies, was established to provide technical guidance in the implementation of the project to achieve project deliverables while impacting on migrants and their communities.

Over the last four years, over 1,800 returnees with varying degrees of vulnerability have been supported to voluntarily return to Ghana. The majority benefitted from the Voluntary Humanitarian Return from Libya, followed by returns from Niger and Algeria.

Through an innovative and holistic reintegration approach, over 800 returnees have benefitted from various forms of reintegration support. This goes beyond income generating activities.

Collective and community reintegration interventions have been implemented to benefit both returnees, potential migrants and community members in various migration-prone communities.

Next to economic support, returnees may be entitled to receive support with accommodation, training or education for either themselves or their dependents, or medical services.

Most beneficiaries who have received assistance to establish income generating activities opted for micro businesses such as auto mechanic shops, retail trading in assorted items, fashion design shops or welding and fabrication businesses.

Due to the inhumane conditions irregular migrants are often exposed to during their journey, including physical violence, torture and abuse, psychosocial assistance is available for returnees, if indicated. The mental health of returnees is indeed crucial for their successful reintegration into their communities.

To complement IOM efforts in the provision of reintegration support to returnees, partnerships were established with both government and non-governmental organizations. This ensures that, solid structures are established for the reintegration of returnees in the future.

Crucial in this process was the development of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Reintegration of Returnees in Ghana. Thanks to the leadership of the Government of Ghana, the SOPs were launched in September 2020 to ensure a consistent approach to the management of returns to Ghana and the returnees' subsequent reintegration into their communities. Since then, over 80 government and non-government migration stakeholders have been trained across Ghana to enable them to provide holistic reintegration support to returned migrants.

The holistic approach includes a thorough monitoring and evaluation process which indeed led us to the conclusion that the interventions have had positive impacts on the returnees: Returnees who completed their reintegration process have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability and psychosocial well-being making their return sustainable on the longer term.

Targeting especially the youthful population, overall over 300 awareness raising sessions have taken place in communities and schools across the country, while radio and TV broadcasts have reached over one million Ghanaians nationwide. The national multimedia campaign dubbed "Let's Talk Migration" provided a platform for the youth to contribute to and engage in the conversation on safe migration - both online and offline.

Among the innovative youth engagement and community-targeted awareness raising initiatives were: (participatory) street art interventions in Takoradi and Accra, as well as a youth empowerment project called Playground, which leverages the educational power of basketball to equip the youth with life skills and self-resilience. The appointment of a Goodwill Ambassador, musician Kofi Kinaata, in 2019 allowed to reach a wider audience through his fan base.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact worldwide including in Ghana. Despite restrictions imposed by Government, project implementation continued. The JI adapted and for example donated Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the Government-run Prampram Quarantine Centre, Greater Accra region, incorporated prevention messages in our outreach activities, including via street art, and involved returnees in the production of nose masks for distribution in communities.



EBENEZER

From irregular migrant to safe migration youth advocate

“After risking my life in the desert and experiencing exploitation and abuse in Libya, I felt the youth must know, so they do not put themselves in similar difficulties,” says Ebenezer, a returning migrant from Drobo in the Bono region.

Ebenezer Bae, 23, is one of the returnees who have made it their mission to share their migration stories to raise awareness of the dangers of irregular migration among their communities.

In 2015, Ebenezer chose unsafe means to travel to Libya. After a life-changing, traumatic experience he came back to Ghana in 2017. Today, he is leading a youth group and advocates for safe migration in his community in the Bono region, one of the source regions of irregular migration in the country.

“I am fortunate to be alive because many did not survive. More importantly, what I was looking for in Libya, is in abundance in Ghana. I want the youth to understand that it is possible to make it here,” said Ebenezer during the launch of the nationwide “No Place Like Home” campaign in July 2020. “Our successes in life are not defined by where we find ourselves, but rather by our desire and passion. Money is important, but one’s life is more precious. If you want to migrate, use the right channel. This is our campaign message,” he added.

Ebenezer is aware that other young men and women from his community could embark on an irregular journey. Therefore, he took it upon himself to use the lessons he learned the hard way to advocate for safe and regular migration.

From a young age, Ebenezer has dreamt of building his own house. He realised that his meagre income as a carpenter would make it difficult to achieve this. In early 2015, he heard of someone who had returned to the community from Libya, bought a plot of land, and built a house. That is when Ebenezer considered migrating to Libya too.

When he first discussed the idea with his mother, she vehemently opposed. She cautioned that such a journey through the desert was risky as she had heard of people dying. After several appeals, Ebenezer managed to convince her, and she approved of his plans. He made the necessary preparations, and his mother gave him her blessings and savings to support his journey. He had a total of GHS 3,700 for the journey.

“My mother was right after all. The journey was dangerous. People were beaten and kidnapped, and the armed men asked for a ransom for their release. I regretted deeply my decision,” he recounts.

In Libya, Ebenezer worked in different sites as a construction worker. Business and living conditions were difficult so he decided to continue to Italy by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Ebenezer made the attempt three times and was willing to try again until he got arrested.

“After risking my life in the desert and experiencing exploitation and abuse in Libya, I felt the youth must know, so they do not put themselves in similar difficulties.”



“I spent one year in prison. The conditions there were terrible; we were used as labourers and people were dying every day. We were about 140 people in one metal container,” he explains.

When he heard of IOM’s assisted voluntary return programme, Ebenezer didn’t think twice and decided to go back home. He was amongst the first returnees from Libya to Ghana in June 2017 under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration.

After his return, he started his reintegration process. The support provided by IOM to returning migrants and their communities serves as the first stepping-stone in what is often a lengthy process of reintegration which demands dedication and commitment from the returnees.

Considering the investment in terms of time, efforts, emotions and resources that migrants make when embarking on their migratory journey, reintegration assistance is a key factor in minimizing the vulnerability of migrants upon return, protecting their rights, and supporting them to rebuild their lives within their communities.

Ebenezer decided to set up a micro business to sell mobile phones and accessories in his community in Drobo. The hard work of three years has paid off: he has achieved to open three shops and employ two young men.

Rebuilding one’s life is not only an economic challenge. Many returnees face stigmatization from their community and sometimes even family, something which Ebenezer, unfortunately, also experienced first-hand. He recalls how he was treated by some members in the community at first.

“In fact, it was hard for me to reintegrate back into the community and start life all over. Some people saw me as a failure. Luckily, there were also those who were happy to see me alive.”

“I just wish I knew better of the dangers before taking this route. I ignored my mother’s warnings and just prayed my own experience would be different. I believe I would have changed my mind, if I had heard a story from someone who had used irregular means of migration. I want to give that opportunity to my fellow youth, and therefore decided to set up this group – to have open conversations about migration, and to also explore all options at home, before we risk our lives to find greener pastures elsewhere.”

Today, Ebenezer, together with other returnees and community members are working to change the narrative around a so-called “failed migration” and counter stigmatization often experienced upon return. The group recently adapted its activities to the current pandemic to include information on COVID-19 prevention into their interventions.

Ebenezer and his peers have conducted 12 awareness raising interventions in the communities within the Drobo district and are keen to visit more communities.

“I migrated to Libya, where I suffered badly. Luckily, I came back to Ghana safely. Back home, I was able to set up a shop. Today, I’m making a profit selling groceries.”



MONICA



ISSAH



The fourth child in his family, Issah Osei comes from Yelwa, a bustling Muslim community in the Ashanti region of Ghana, where he worked as a businessman. Before migrating, Issah owned a tailoring shop and employed tailors that produced articles of clothing for him to sell. Issah bought the sewing materials from external suppliers. The income from his business supported himself and some of his relatives. Issah was not married and had no children.

With time, his business started to unravel and become unstable. Issah had less money to use to purchase clothing materials. There was also pressure to pay his employees their regular salaries. He borrowed money from people. His financial instability led to his decision to migrate to Libya with the hope that he will make it to Europe.

Within seven days, he prepared to embark on his journey to Libya. He picked a bus from Krofrom to Bawku and slept in Bawku and then picked a car headed to Burkina Faso. From there, he took another car to the border of Niger. It took him another two days to reach Agadez. He was warned of armed robbers on the road but that did not deter him. In Agadez, 35 migrants were packed into the back of one Toyota Hilux headed for Libya. On the road, they were attacked by armed robbers twice. A young Nigerian got missing and a lady got shot and died. They finally got to the city and were put in a safe house.

“The journey through the desert was treacherous. We were thirsty and asked a shepherd nearby and this led him to tip us off to the police,” recounts Issah.

He continues: “Resources in the desert were scarce; once you run out of food and water, and there is a risk to die. Dead bodies and gravestones in the desert are a common sight for travelers and an indication that you could also die. We were saved by grace!”

Before entering Libya, Issah and the other migrants he was travelling with were arrested. The police brought Issah to a detention center in Tripoli. His hopes for survival were dimming with each month, until one day IOM arrived at the center and facilitated his return to Ghana.

It took Issah a long time to recover from his imprisonment in Libya. He often takes medication to relieve joint pain.

Fortunately, today, he is back in business and owns a new tailoring shop. IOM assisted Issah with sewing and knitting machines and some stocks of materials. Thanks to the reintegration assistance, Issah was able to restart his business and plan for future expansion. He has three employees at his shop.

Amid the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana, Issah and his team joined a group of eight beneficiaries to produce a total of 4,000 nose masks with support from IOM and the EU.

Issah suffered abuse and exploitation while in the detention centre. He is happy to be back, enjoying his freedom. “Even if I don’t have money, I can go out, wear good clothes, watch television and come back home and have a roof over my head and that alone is enough for me.”

Many people in the community have sought guidance from Issah in regard to questions about migration to Europe. He believes that, by telling them the truth about the dangers of travelling irregularly to Libya, his story would help even the most desperate to take informed migration decisions.

“I always tell them to look at my damaged body to have a clearer picture of the situation in Libya. I think it’s the best advice I can give anyone.”



MOHAMMED

Mohammed returned to Ghana in 2017 after 18 years in Libya. He was among the returnees on the first charter received in Ghana under the EUTF project. Back in Libya he worked as a fashion designer to support his family back home. He suffered from some physical and mental abuse, and as the situation in Libya worsened, he decided to return home.

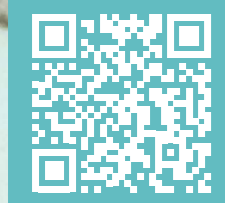
Back home, it took him one year to recover from his health issues. In 2020, through the support of IOM, Mohammed received an industrial sewing and knitting machines to enable him to set up his tailoring shop in Cape Coast. Today, he owns four different types of sewing machines. He designs the clothes himself for various occasions.

Mohammed was one of eight beneficiaries engaged by IOM to produce nose masks to support Government of Ghana in the COVID-19 response. Today, he sews nose masks when customers order them.

"I am grateful. Today, my business is going well, and I have trained two young apprentices to help me fulfill my orders." As the business grows, Mohammed plans to relocate to a more spacious place as the shop, which belongs to his brother, is too small to accommodate him and his apprentices.



FAUSTINA



Faustina decided to leave Ghana for Libya to look for greener pastures. When she got there, it wasn't what she had expected. "Work wasn't easy there. Walking from home to the workplace, you might be arrested," she recounts. Nonetheless, she stayed for four years. Eventually, as things didn't get better, she returned to Ghana in 2017 with the support of IOM.

Back in Ghana, Faustina was assisted to start a chair rental business. People would patronize her service for events, such as weddings, funerals, or birthdays. When COVID-19 hit the country in March 2020, her business suffered since there were restrictions on gatherings. She needed to refocus. When the Government of Ghana introduced measures for the protection of all citizens, including the mandatory wearing of nose masks, she saw an opportunity for herself as a seamstress.

"When COVID-19 started, sometimes, when you went out to the market, you met people on the bus, who didn't wear nose masks. My mother asked me: 'Why don't you make some? When we go to the market, you can sell them.' I thought about it, but I said, no, I'd rather give it out to people [for free]," explains Faustina.

Later, she joined a group of beneficiaries supported to produce nose masks under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration. She produced 500 masks which were then distributed in migration-prone communities across the country.

While this helped her to address the economic challenges the COVID-19 pandemic was posing on her livelihood, she, at the same time, was able to support the Government of Ghana in its national COVID-19 response and help people to protect themselves and others from the virus.

Faustina is a proud mother of one daughter who is studying in university.

Her vision for the future? "I would like to help other people, especially children, who don't have anybody to take care of them. When you set your mind on something that you want to do – you can do it!"





EMMANUEL

After having spent a year and a half and over 8,000 GHC trying to reach Italy, Emmanuel Quarm is grateful to be back in his home in Kumasi.

Emmanuel decided to leave Ghana in 2015 and returned in 2017. Over the course of his journey, he spent a week in the desert, crammed with 29 other people onto a Toyota Hilux, a mid-size pickup truck. He was kidnapped, threatened, beaten, and held for ransom. He was arrested and stayed in inhumane conditions for months in a Libyan detention center. He also survived a shipwreck in the Mediterranean, one of only two survivors out of 142 passengers on a small rubber dinghy headed toward Italy.

The horrors he saw and experienced are still vivid in his memories today. It is only through God's grace, he says, that he was one of those who survived and returned.

Had he known of the dangers, Emmanuel says, he would not have attempted the trip. He not only was unaware of the risks involved, but also trusted the source of his information. He responded to an announcement on the radio. For 2,000 GHC, he was promised, his transportation to Libya and a job paying as much as 2,500 GHC per month waiting for him. He figured, an offer made on the radio, was legitimate.

The promise of a higher income was especially tempting. A reseller of clothing by trade, Emmanuel had recently needed to downsize his business when many of the miners in Obuasi, a mining town in the Ashanti region, who made up his main customer base, were laid off following the collapse of a mine. With an infant son to care for, the loss in his business was particularly concerning. Swayed by visions of a better life for him and his son that a higher income could bring, Emmanuel sold land and some possessions to fund his journey. He then left most of the money, some of his unsold wares, and his son in the care of his son's mother, and purchased his transport to Libya. He did not concern himself with the funds for his return; he felt certain he could earn enough once he reached Libya.

It was only once he arrived in Agadez, Niger, that he realized he had been deceived. He was informed that unless he paid another 2,000 GHC, his journey would end there. Emmanuel had already come so far, and there was no turning back. He requested his son's mother to send the money. The additional payment, however, did nothing to ensure his safety or survival. During the week-long drive through the desert between Agadez and Libya, Emmanuel saw many dead bodies.

In Libya, instead of providing him with a job as promised, he had to pay yet another 2,000 GHC for his release. Those who could not pay were imprisoned with hundreds of others in a single poorly lit, poorly maintained room. Many of those imprisoned were heavily bloodstained from beatings. Seeing the terrible conditions of imprisonment, Emmanuel again requested funds from his son's mother to negotiate his release.

“I spent a year and a half and over 8,000 GHC trying to reach Italy. I survived a shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea. The horrors I experienced are still vivid in my memories. Today, I am optimistic about my future as I focus on rebuilding my life.”



Once freed, Emmanuel took stock of his situation. Contrary to the promises he was given, he did not have a job, and he had by this point spent at least 6,000 GHC. He managed to find housing with fellow Ghanaians. Life in Libya as an irregular migrant, Emmanuel found, was difficult and dangerous, and he constantly felt terrified for his life. There was nothing for him in Libya. The place to be was Italy, he decided, after hearing about opportunities from other migrants. For another 2,000 GHC, a smuggler agreed to transport him to the Libyan coast and then to Italy. While waiting for favorable weather conditions to cross the Mediterranean, Emmanuel spent the next six months in a migrant camp.

After months of waiting, one night, the smuggler packed a small inflatable rubber dinghy with 142 passengers, multiple times beyond the dinghy's capacity. The dinghy sat low in the water. Appointing a captain and a navigator from among the migrants, the smuggler handed off a compass to the navigator and pushed the dinghy off into the dark water. By mid-afternoon the next day, the dinghy was lost and adrift, after having spent over nine hours on the high seas. Eventually, the dinghy, unable to handle the weight of its occupants, sprung a leak and began to sink. Over the next few hours, Emmanuel and the captain clung to a plank of wood and prayed for a miracle as other passengers drowned. They were the only two remaining when four Libyan fishermen happened to sail by and pulled them out of the water.

Thanks to the fishermen, Emmanuel arrived back at the Libyan coast with his life intact. Now aware of his irregular migrant status, Libyan authorities arrested Emmanuel and held him for four months in a migrant detention center.

He then decided to voluntarily return through IOM and with support from the EU Trust Fund.

Today, Emmanuel is cautiously optimistic about his future as he focuses on rebuilding his life. He hopes to start a shoe business. He hopes to move into an apartment with his son, now six years old.

With God, everything is possible, he says, and things will be okay. He left with hopes and came back with nothing but sickness, he says. If he could advise future potential migrants, he strongly recommends that they use regular means of migration. Life is not a race, he says, and the wait for a visa is worth the while.

“My friend told me Libya is good for me to work. I suffered. As I reached there, I was sold. My father sold his cocoa farm to pay for my release. I am happy now that I am back to my country even though I did not bring anything. My life is precious.”



FRANK



GODFREY

Godfrey, a 28-year-old returnee, migrated from Ghana to Libya and finally back to Ghana. Today he agrees that irregular migration is dangerous, and life is precious.

“The situation in Ghana may not be the best. But it is better to use your savings, that you intend to spend to travel to Libya, to rather start a business. It is not worth it to suffer like I did. Travelling irregularly is one of the biggest mistakes anyone can make,” says Godfrey.

Before leaving Ghana, Godfrey lived in Techiman, Bono East region, together with his family. Because of rumors circulating in the community about the possibility of a good life in Libya, he gained an interest in travelling.

He left his job to embark on this uncertain journey. He joined a truck via Tamale and after four days on the road, reached Niger. In Niger, he connected to an agent and paid GHS 1,400 to take him to Libya. He felt he was lucky because he had heard of people who were duped and had to repay the same amount upon arrival in Libya.

On the journey, he met another Ghanaian from Wenchi in the Bono East region who helped him on the road from Niger to Libya. They sat in a bucket of Toyota Hilux together and the man would hold on to him whilst he dozed off so he would not fall off the car.

He finally got to his destination. But life in Libya was unbearable. He took on jobs in plastering and laying of tiles, but he was not paid for some of the work he did. Of course, he could not report any of this because of fear of being arrested by the police.

Life in Libya was dangerous and highly unpredictable. He suffered physical violence and guns were pulled on him. He was beaten up after being accused of theft which resulted in a broken hand and hearing impairment on the right ear.

Godfrey stayed and worked in Libya for about two years and eventually decided to continue to Italy.

One night, he boarded a boat headed for Italy together with 143 passengers. In the middle of the ocean, the engine kept going on and off. After the fourth time, the boat was just floating with no engine and the waves made the boat overturn. Godfrey recounts that some gave up and would just fall into the sea while others hung on to him to stay alive. Eventually, they managed to turn over the boat.

Godfrey started doubting his decision. In the middle of nowhere, without food or water, he could not drink the salty sea water. What saved him was rainwater which he would squeeze from his hair to trickle down his face into his mouth.

In the middle of the night, he heard people screaming “Rescue! Rescue!” which woke him up. He was too weak to climb the rope that was sent down from the vessel, and just hung onto it and he was pulled up. Out of 143 who started the journey, only 41 people were rescued alive.

When the vessel was ashore, the migrants were taken to a detention centre in Libya; almost every day someone died. Godfrey was terrified.

After this experience, “I decided that I would return to Ghana as soon as I was released,” recounts Godfrey.

Eventually, IOM officers arrived, took the details of the migrants, and a few days later, they were taken to the airport.

“I will never advise anyone to go through what I went through. Right now, I am focused and ready to get a job. I am working on my passport to travel the right way but for now, I want to settle, get a job, marry and start a family.”

Today, Godfrey is working to set up a microbusiness in the retail of clothing accessories such as wrist watches, slippers, shoes, belts, jewelries, and others.



LETICIA

"I was considering migrating to Europe by irregular means. But then I joined the National Vocational Training Institute and I learned from the returnees on the programme about the inhumane treatment they faced on their journey," says Leticia from Takoradi.

Leticia was the only woman in a group of 25 beneficiaries under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration who completed technical training at the National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI). Besides learning how to operate heavy machinery, they also improved other skills such as financial literacy.

Thanks to the funding from the European Union, Leticia could start a new chapter of her life and is able to support her mother.

"Today, I am a licensed Forklift Operator and have the opportunity to make a living in Ghana," she says.





LINCOLN

Photo: IOM Ghana/Apag Studios

Photo: IOM Ghana/Francis Kokoroko

“Growing up I learnt my dad lived in the US. He had left us - my mum and I - at a very tender age so I wanted to travel to see if there was a chance to meet my dad,” says Lincoln, a Ghanaian returnee from Takoradi, Western Region.

Lincoln was born and bred in Takoradi. He had his formal education there, and later went to All Nations University in Koforidua. But he dropped out of school to embark on an uncertain journey.

“I have always felt that there might be a better option outside, but looking back now.... It is not easy out there. Not knowing if you are going to make it or not. Being alive is just by the grace of God.”

Lincoln left Ghana for Libya, with the hope of going to Italy, in 2017, and returned to Ghana in 2020.

As part of the reintegration scheme, returnees are entitled to psychosocial assistance, if indicated. Lincoln is one of the beneficiaries of the psychosocial support for returnees.

When Lincoln came back to Ghana, he felt like he had failed and lost hope in life. He felt his family was disappointed and he still felt hurt that his dad did not care. All of this, plus the traumatic experiences of a perilous journey through the desert, during which he saw people die and experienced violence first-hand, affected his mental health.

“I do not receive calls very often and I would usually know who is calling. But one day out of the blue a strange number called. It was IOM!” The IOM reintegration officer explained the reintegration process and he was offered support by IOM’s Psychosocial Project Assistant.

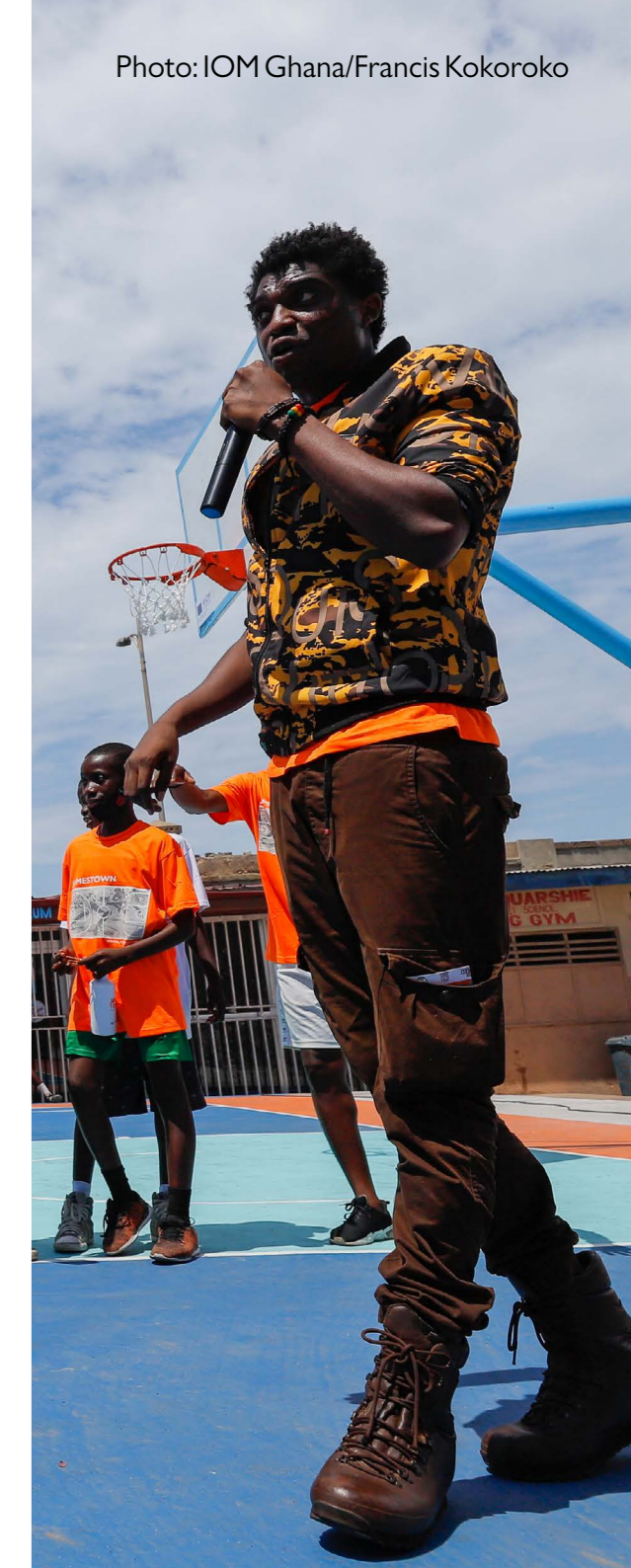
“We spoke about a lot of issues, some of which were really challenging actually. By God’s grace, I am getting better,” reflects Lincoln.

Lincoln is motivated by music. Not only is he using music as a means to heal and process his experiences. He also uses it to spread important messages to his listeners. In one of his songs titled “Guns from Tripoli” for example, he narrates his migration experience. Through his creativity he has become a safe migration advocate.

“The life of an underground musician has its own challenges, including financial constraints. The support of IOM in this process has been very helpful for me to get my equipment which I use to produce my music,” says Lincoln.

Lincoln gets inspired by music and he is hoping that his music will also inspire others. “Just like K’naan, I am a victim of irregular migration. Telling my story is not a shame at all. I have always admired him, and I know, one day, my music would hit like his as well.”

His advice to young people is to find passion in whatever they are doing. “Just look at that one thing that brings you joy and happiness and keep at it. Do not go and risk your life; it’s not safe out there. If you want to travel, use regular means.”





DOTSE

Family Support, A Key Pillar for the Mental Health and Successful Reintegration of Returnees

“I took me a lot of effort to heal when I came back,” recounts Dotse, a returnee who returned to Ghana in 2020, after five years of staying in Libya. “I was disoriented when I arrived and do not remember anything that happened. But thanks to the psychosocial support, I am a better person today and I feel much healthier and happier.”

Robert Ketor, IOM’s Psychosocial Assistant and Clinical Psychologist, who offers psychosocial support services, including virtual counselling, was enthused to meet Dotse for the first time since his arrival at Kotoka International Airport in Accra and after many virtual counselling sessions.

“Remembering the state in which he arrived in Ghana, and looking at him now, I would say, there has been vast improvement in his general health and especially his mental health. I am glad that these sessions are having a positive impact.”

IOM also runs trainings on psychological first aid for community members, introducing participants – doctors, nurses, security personnel and other community leaders – to tools with which they too can provide basic psychological first assistance.

Dotse is lucky that he can count on his family’s support which is not always the case for a returnee.

“Support through the immediate family and the larger community contributes greatly to a successful and sustainable reintegration process,” recounts Robert. “Oftentimes, if there is family support for returnees, there is much improvement in their healing process and sometimes it is quicker because the support system is solid,” he adds.

“As IOM’s Psychosocial Project Assistant and a Clinical Psychologist, I counsel those who need psychosocial therapy. If indicated, I also get in touch with the family with the objective to prevent stigma or refer them to specialized institutions,” explains Robert Ketor.

Dotse’s wife recounts her husband’s arrival: “If not for IOM, I don’t know if my husband would be alive. We were supported with the payment of Dotse’s hospital bills and for that I am eternally grateful. When I first saw him at the airport, I was shaken, and I feared I had lost my husband. If not for the instant support maybe he could have lost his life.”

“I was surprised that people who didn’t know my in-law personally cared this much. After receiving medical treatment for his health, we realized he was also having some mental health issues, and IOM helped him again. Sometimes, the counsellor would call and speak to all of us as well as guide us on how to go about certain issues,” says Dotse’s Brother-in-Law.

While community-support is key, a psychologist might be needed to help migrants cope with their experiences. “I try to equip my patients with strategies to overcome stigma. Depending on the situation, I might encourage them to stand up for themselves, to refrain from self-stigmatisation, to educate others, to be strong and to prove themselves. They can talk to people with whom they feel comfortable or join a support group. I ask them to try to ignore or avoid people who stigmatize them,” explains Robert. “If someone realizes that the experience of stigma is affecting their actions, emotions and thinking, subsequently affecting their daily functioning, they should seek help,” he adds.

Going through therapy can be challenging. “I am a very quiet person, so it was difficult for me in the beginning stages but eventually I warmed up to the counsellor. He was able to see through me and help me,” summarises Dotse his experience. “Today, I am very fit and I am even expecting a baby.”

After much progress, Dotse is optimistic. He is interested to start an agro-chemical business because he comes from a farming community and the supplies of such chemicals is a challenge in his remote village. He is hoping his business venture will also support his and neighboring communities to improve farming yields. As part of his reintegration package, IOM Ghana is supporting him to start up his business which will provide a means of income for him and his family.

His advice to young people is to not rush to travel because he would not want anyone to experience what he went through. He urges young people to make sure they have all appropriate documents should they wish to migrate and do so safely through regular means.



LATIF

Photo: IOM Ghana/Geoffrey Buta

“Life was not easy for me so I decided to go to Libya to look for better opportunities. In Libya life was not easy for me either. IOM helped me return to Ghana. I received financial support which I used to invest into my tricycle business.”



JAMILATU



Jamilatu is from Walewale in the North East Region of Ghana. Before she went to Libya, she was selling secondhand clothes in Accra. When the business faced challenges and a friend told her about an opportunity to travel to Libya for work, she decided to go. One day, while in Libya, she was stopped by the police and was arrested because her passport had expired.

“I spent three months in prison with my infant daughter until I decided to return to Ghana with the help of IOM. It was the biggest relief for me and my daughter,” she recounts.

Jamilatu came back to Ghana in 2018 together with her daughter. In March 2020, as part of her reintegration support under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, Jamilatu re-launched her business in Walewale, retailing secondhand clothing.

The spread of COVID-19 in the country affected her infant business venture. She needed to adapt, and decided to diversify her business and invest into a grains and cereals business. She sells maize, rice, groundnuts and soybeans at the Ganga market in Walewale.

Today, her daughter is going to school, and with the profits of her business Jamilatu is able to take care of her family, including the children of her brother.



KWESI



Photo: IOM Ghana/Geoffrey Buta

Kwesi, who lives in Tamale, left Ghana for Libya in 2016 because life was difficult for him, and he had no means of continuing his education. He joined a group of friends who sought for greener pastures in Libya. Before leaving Ghana, Kwesi was a petty trader. “I did small jobs here and there to support myself,” he recounts.

“Migration is not easy! The journey was difficult for me! I was advised not to go but I did not listen. If you do not travel, you will not see how tough life is in other places,” Kwesi says. Already his journey came with challenges: he lost some of his colleagues on the way. Even though he knows that “there is a lot to gain from migration” he advises the youth not to travel under such circumstances.

Back in Tamale, in the northern region of Ghana, he established a business; selling shoes to support himself and his brother.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, IOM Ghana supported returnees to cope with the difficulties the pandemic posed on them and their livelihoods.

“In fact, things were difficult for me at that moment. Even before COVID-19, if not for the support of IOM, I would not know where my family and I would be today. The support came at a time we needed it most,” says Kwesi.

Today, Kwesi is able to send his siblings to school, which eases the pressure on him. He is optimistic: “Things are getting much better and moving in a positive direction.”



Photo: IOM Ghana/Geoffrey Buta



PROSPER



Prosper, now an undergrad student of the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), has a migration story to tell and ambitions for the future.

Prosper left Ghana to Morocco on a Government scholarship to study electrical engineering. He had challenges in adapting to the educational system as well as living in Morocco and learning the language. After two years, he decided to change schools and courses, though still in the engineering field.

Unhappy with his course, he eventually quit his studies. When nothing was going as planned anymore, he decided to come back to Ghana.

“I felt that to put my life back on track I couldn’t continue to stay in Morocco, I needed to come back home to Ghana.”

He reached out to the scholarship secretariat, but help was not available since his scholarship was terminated and he had overstayed his student visa in Morocco. Prosper is an example of how a regular migrant can turn into an irregular one.

He was stranded in Casablanca; his family could not support his return back to Ghana. It was difficult for Prosper to break the news to his family but with time, they understood his situation.

He met some Congolese friends who housed him for about six months. After some research, he got in touch with the IOM office in Morocco and explained his situation. His case was accepted, and he was supported in his request to voluntarily return to Ghana.

“On the day of return, I met another migrant who told me his story of how he crossed the Sahara Desert. The story was terrifying. I realised how much young people struggle in an effort of seeking greener pastures.”

“When I got to Ghana, I contacted the IOM office and had a conversation with one of the reintegration officers. She counseled me and asked about my next steps. I told her that I wanted to go back to school.”

He eventually found a course that fit better his dreams and ambitions. “I picked a form at GIJ because I am interested in current affairs and political issues. I hope to finish GIJ and further my education with a master’s degree in international relations and get a job. I see myself working in the field of international relations and diplomacy. It is my dream to be a diplomat.”

“Most people do not know my story but anytime I share my story, I get backlash. People ask ‘you had the opportunity to go outside and you came back? You couldn’t continue to Spain?’ I find it difficult to explain my situation but going to a country with no plan can be very frustrating.”

His word of advice to young people is that if they want to travel, they should do so the right way because going through irregular routes and risking your life, is not worth it.



ADWOA



Photo: IOM Ghana/Geoffrey Buta

“The Gari factory has helped us a lot to support our husbands and to provide for our children.”

Youth of Jamestown shooting basketball hoops to achieve their life goals

On 2 July 2021, 200 young adults and children came out to Jamestown, Accra to play basketball on a completely refurbished outdoor court, made possible with the support of IOM and the European Union. The court renovation is part of the Playground project which seeks to empower young people to create viable alternatives to irregular migration, in the heart of their own communities.

The returnees who have come back to their home counties with support from the EU-IOM Joint Initiative have mostly been young people. In Ghana, over 60% are between 18 and 35 years old. Among the drivers of migration, a move for better employment opportunities is often cited.

Sports can be a vector for social change and help young people achieve their dreams while building viable alternatives to irregular migration. Together with local partners, Playground builds a culture of self-development and pride on and beyond the court.

“In 2018, I heard about a place where boys and girls could play and learn without being discriminated against. Then I joined the girls’ basketball team, and I became the captain of the team in Jamestown in 2019. Due to the life skills training I received, I have increased my self-esteem and improved my leadership skills,” says Genevieve, captain of the girls’ team in the Jamestown community who regularly trains at the now renewed grounds.

“I can now boast that we have the most beautiful basketball court in Accra, and this I know will encourage more at-risk girls to come to play and learn in this safe environment.”

IOM partnered with the Sports for Education and Economic Development (SEED) project for this initiative, leveraging the educational power of basketball to equip African youth with life skills and self-resilience.



GENEVIEVE



ISSAKA

“I decided to establish my fashion school here in Zabrama to share my talent with potential migrants and to provide opportunities for my fellow community members, especially the women.”

Photo: IOM Ghana/Geoffrey Buta



MOHAMMED & SHAMSU

Mohammed and Shamsu have been friends for a long time. They decided to go to Libya together to make money to support their families back home. In Libya they suffered a lot of physical and mental abuse. They spent several months in prison. The scars can still be seen today.

“You cannot describe with words what we experienced in Libya.”

Back in Takoradi following their return in 2017, they decided to start a mechanic business together. IOM supported them with a tricycle and tools to offer mechanic services.

Mohammed and Shamsu are ambitious. They aspire to get their own space to run their mechanic business and to purchase scooters and motorbikes for sale. They continue to do repairs and offer transportation services to support the expansion of their business and their families.



EFIA

Efia is a young Ghanaian lady who grew up in Accra. She left Ghana for Tripoli, Libya in 2009. All her travel documents and papers were in place.

“After school, the economic situation was not very favorable at home, and I thought leaving Ghana to find something to do elsewhere would be better to enable me to provide for my family. That was what led me to go on this journey,” Efia remembers.

At the time, she had nowhere in particular to go to, but she knew someone in Tripoli who convinced her to go there. “He mentioned the good standard of living in Tripoli and how money was calculated in dollars, hence I felt I could get a few extra dollars to send home as well.” She convinced her parents to allow her to travel. She travelled by air.

“When I got there, the situation was different than I had expected. I regretted my decision! But I was there already and thus was forced to stay.”

She was disappointed but needed to make the best out of her situation. The main challenges she encountered included the language barrier (she didn’t speak Arabic) and racism. One day, a taxi driver demanded more money than agreed, and eventually threw her out of the car and took all her belongings. “Many people did illegal jobs and worked as prostitutes, so people assumed that was what I was doing too and that was why he treated me like that. That day really made me regret going there,” she says. Efia was mostly working as a cleaner. “The money was not much but it was enough to survive, so I managed,” Efia recounts.

“Being a foreign woman in Tripoli, was very scary. People can do anything to you at any time and harass you. You might work for one or two months, and you would not get paid. There is no one to tell. You can’t go to the police to report, especially if you are black,” she says.

She could not disclose her situation to anyone, not even her parents back home, because of fear. “I didn’t want them to get worried because the goal was to bring some money home so I couldn’t inform my parents. But I was still hopeful,” Efia adds.

“I stayed in Tripoli for about nine to ten years and gave birth to three children there. You get used to things; situations don’t surprise you anymore,” Efia says.

Her children were not going to school, and “they were seeing things that they were not supposed to,” she remembers. “I felt I was doing harm to my children. I spoke to some friends back at home, and seeing how well they were doing, I thought about going back home.”

One day at church, she heard about IOM. She was told to visit the Ghanaian Embassy and register if she wanted to go back home. “I went to the Embassy and registered myself and my children, and in less than one week, I was on a flight back to Ghana,” says Efia.

“There was someone from IOM on board with us who talked to us, and before I got to Ghana, my mind was already at ease,” Efia says.

When she arrived in Ghana, she received immediate assistance upon arrival, and subsequently she discussed her reintegration process with an IOM officer.

“They asked me to find a school for my kids and I was supported with the fees for all three for about one year. I also received support with my accommodation for two years and with the establishment of my business. I set up a cold store just in front of my house. They come back regularly to check up on us and my business as well,” Efia remembers. “All this has helped me rebuild my life back in Ghana.”

Coming back was not easy though. Some of her friends in Tripoli tried to discourage her, saying it would be difficult for her to start all over. “After a while, I got in touch with my friends back there and advised them to try and come back too, because it’s not all bad back here.”

Today, she is looking at various options for her future: she hopes to go back to school and possibly add a second stream of income through working as a seamstress. But her passion is in photography.

Her advice to young people is: “Be patient in life! Patience is everything! When you are patient, it makes life easier. And if you want to travel, you need to make enquiries and ask questions to confirm the information you are receiving about a possible opportunity abroad.”

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Photo: IOM Ghana/Francis Kokoroko



FUSEINI

“I missed many things about Ghana. Because here, you are free. I don’t want to travel again. I’m free, and I’m happy that I came back to my family. I didn’t lose my life.”



ABDUL

In November 2017, Abdul returned to Ghana. He is a skilled blacksmith with over 20 years of experience. He is married and has four children. He comes originally from the Northern region, and is currently living and working in the Ashanti region.

Before his departure to Libya, Abdul owned a small wooden house in Kumasi for the blacksmith work. After his return, he has renovated his shop and resumed the work as a blacksmith. He bought aluminum metal scraps and other raw materials to restart the business.

Today, Abdul works together with his three friends. They make pots and bowls which they sell in the market. The profits depend on the price difference between raw materials and final products and are also based on the need of customers. When the orders are steady, he can earn more than 50 GHC per day. He uses part of the profits to pay his co-workers, and also supports his brother to pay his medical bills.

Friends working with Abdul are also grateful about the new business developments. Kwame, who is also a returned migrant working with Abdul, says: "We are also benefitting from Abdul's progress. It has reduced the financial burden on us to some extent – at least our daily 'chop money' is assured."

"I migrated to Libya because of financial difficulties. Sadly, I faced a more depressing situation there than in Ghana. Today, I am working to develop my business, and with the sales I hope to support my family and brother."





MIGRANTS DAYS



STREET ART FOR ALL DURING COVID-19



PLAYGROUND - TO EMPOWER YOUTH THROUGH BASKETBALL

THANKS TO THE IOM TEAM FOR ITS DEDICATION
AND COMMITMENT TO RETURNEES





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