



United Nations  
Network on Migration  
*Working Better Together*

# REPORT

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Peer learning exchange with Member States in the  
North and Central America Region on safe and  
dignified return and sustainable reintegration

10-12 October 2023, San Pedro Sula, Honduras



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Real Intercontinental Hotel, 10-12 October 2023, San Pedro Sula, Honduras

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## BACKGROUND

The United Nations system is committed to supporting the implementation, follow-up and review of [the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration \(GCM\)](#). [The United Nations Network on Migration \(UNNM\)](#) was established by the Secretary-General in 2018 to ensure effective, timely and coordinated UN system-wide support, at country, regional and global levels, to Member States in the implementation, follow-up, and review of the GCM. In carrying out its mandate, the UNNM prioritizes the rights and well-being of migrants and their communities and places emphasis on those issues where a common UN system approach would add value and from which results and impact can be readily gauged.

Specific global workstreams have been identified to support the operational rollout of the GCM from a thematic perspective, including the global workstream on [promoting safe, dignified and right-based return, readmission, and sustainable reintegration](#) (RRR Workstream). The RRR Workstream is co-led by IOM, UNICEF, UNHCR and MPI, with a number of members from other UN agencies, CSOs and academia. The overall objective of this workstream is to contribute to strengthening efforts of member states to ensure safe, dignified and right-based return and readmission and sustainable reintegration. Under the Working group on return and reintegration, several tools and resources have been developed, including the [Position Paper on Ensuring safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration](#), [Mapping: Gaps and Positive Practices for](#)



[Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration](#), as well as the [Checklist: For safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration](#). Under [the United Nations Network on Migration's Workplan for 2022 – 2024](#), one of the activities is focused on the roll out and operationalization of the UNNM Checklist for safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration, with particular focus on child protection.

At the regional level, regional networks have been established to ensure effective, timely and coordinated system-wide support to Member States, relevant stakeholders and key partners, one of which is [the United Nations Regional Network on Migration for Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (UNNM-LAC), that provides support across Latin America and the Caribbean throughout the implementation, review, and follow-up of the GCM. UNNM-LAC has identified return and reintegration as one of its key thematic priorities in its Regional Workplan 2023-2024. UNNM-LAC Workplan highlights the need for "cooperating with Member States and relevant stakeholders to strengthen collaboration, peer learning, participation and links at the global, regional, national and local levels" and "providing support to Member States and relevant stakeholders in the implementation of their commitments".

Given the above, the global and regional UNNM agreed on organizing a **peer learning exchange event** with interested member states and stakeholders in North and Central America region, with the aim to strengthen capacities of member states stakeholders, UN staff and CSOs.

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## PEER LEARNING EXCHANGE EVENT

From 10 to 12 October 2023, a Peer learning exchange with member states in the North and Central America Region on safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration was held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in the framework of the GCM implementation. The event was possible thanks to the Honduran Government, as host, and financial contributions of USAID and the Governments of Canada, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

The main **objectives** of the event were:


- To roll out [the Checklist for safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration](#), with particular focus on child protection, by: making participants aware of the utility of a joint UN tool on this topic and of the ways in which it can be used; focusing sessions on different elements of the Checklist and promoting dialogue on the implementation challenges that arise in practice on these topics in the region; sharing examples of promising practices on topics set out in the Checklist;
- To strengthen capacities of member states, UN staff, and CSOs working on relevant topics in the region for ensuring that all returns are safe and dignified and improving the sustainability of reintegration.
- To provide a peer learning opportunity, promote dialogue between key actors in the region, and build a community of practitioners working on safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration.
- To provide support to and encourage synergies with the work of regional processes and/or frameworks that have had a focus on return and reintegration.

## PARTICIPANTS

The event brought together government representatives from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, the US and Canada, UN agencies and civil society organizations from the region. The hybrid participation to the key sessions of the event was ensured to allow civil society organizations that are not based in Honduras to contribute and share their valuable insights during plenary sessions.

## RELEVANCE OF THE EVENT

This event was the UN Migration Network's first regional thematic exchange on safe and dignified return and readmission and sustainable reintegration. The initiative offered a peer-to-peer learning opportunity under the Chatham House Rule, promoting dialogue among key regional actors and the creation of a community of practitioners working on safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration.



During the event, participants discussed the regional migration context and dynamics; the need to protect the rights of children on the move; the gender dimension in the migration cycle; the implementation of the Network's Checklist for a safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration; and upcoming regional and global opportunities on the topic. Participants also exchanged promising practices from the participating countries and visited reception centers providing immediate assistance and support to returned migrants.

The event participants recognized the importance of a holistic, rights-based, and sustainable development-oriented approach to return migration, as outlined in the GCM and IMRF Progress Declaration commitments to strengthen cooperation for safe and dignified return, ensuring due process and individual assessment, facilitating nationals' return in line with human rights, and assisting returning migrants in their sustainable reintegration process with a child-sensitive approach.

***“In all matters related to human mobility, including the return and reintegration of migrants, the keyword is ‘coordination’, both within organizations and within communities, where we must also promote humanity and empathy” - Alice Shackelford, Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Honduras.***

The event exemplified the practical application of what States called for in the IMRF Progress Declaration, emphasizing the UNNM's role in supporting member states and stakeholders in strengthening collaboration, peer-learning, and linkages at global, regional, national, and local levels. The joint efforts of global, regional and country Networks and the UN inter-agency team at global, regional and national levels in organizing the event is a demonstration of the collaborative spirit and added value of the UNNM. The significant participation of Member States in peer learning, including five GCM champion countries, emphasized the essential role of state leadership in the success of the GCM.


## PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The **Session 1 – Setting the Scene** included the participation of experts, who framed the topic in the regional and global context and provided some key information on migration, return and reintegration trends and dynamics in the region, and conceptual foundations that served as a basis for the discussion.

It was highlighted that the number of migrants, including children, irregularly crossing the border through the Darien Gap, has been increased in 2023. The majority are adult men (65%) however children continue to make up a high proportion of the total (21% in September 2023).<sup>1</sup> During January-July 2023, there was a decrease

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<sup>1</sup> Servicio Nacional de Migración de Panamá, [Irregulares en tránsito frontera Panamá-Colombia](#), s.f. [aug 2023].



in returns from northern countries to Central America. A total of 80,480 migrants were returned by apprehensions from Mexico, the United States and other countries, of which 12% were children, 20% women and 68% men.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, IOM assisted 2,469 migrants to return to Central America, North America and the Caribbean, including migrants in vulnerable situations, such as migrants with health needs, unaccompanied children and victims of trafficking. At the same time 1,580 migrants were assisted to return from Central America, North America and the Caribbean, out of which 62% of the cases assisted corresponded to unaccompanied migrant children and 31% to migrants with health needs.<sup>3</sup> The total number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide is 7.32 million, out of which 6.14 million (84% of the world total), lives in Latin America and the Caribbean (May 2023).<sup>4</sup> Between January and July 2023, there was a reduction in the number of cases with unaccompanied irregular migrant children encountered in Mexico (3,472 cases compared to 8,388 identified during the same period in 2022). However, the number of children traveling accompanied (irregular migrants) increased from 24,729 in January-July 2022 to 44,833 in the same period in 2023. The majority of children came from Venezuela (14,153), followed by Ecuador (8,904), Honduras (5,266) and Guatemala (4,594).<sup>5</sup> A large proportion of migrants have needs, including food, shelter, water, sanitation, health, reintegration support (community, family, education), psychosocial support and differentiated approaches.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a more coordinated response addressing their specific needs is needed. Gender and age as key dimensions that needs to be taken into account across return and reintegration process, as well as the importance of empowering women and girls were also highlighted.

A section focused on **returnees' perspectives** was led by representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) with lived experience of return, who presented on their work with returnee communities, including successes in leading advocacy processes at regional, national and local levels. Engagement of CSOs in dialogues about return, readmission and reintegration is recognized as essential, as CSOs have a more in-depth understanding of the needs of migrants and their communities. The CSO representatives highlighted issues facing returnees/deportees, including family separation, difficulties in accessing legal identity documents, difficulties in accessing services including mental health support, stigma, and economic crisis.

Finally, during the first session **the Network's Checklist for safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration** was presented. The Checklist supports GCM implementation by presenting a range of actions against which States, and other stakeholders can assess whether their return and reintegration activities are consistent with the GCM and that they are informed by best practice. In so doing, the Checklist highlights

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<sup>2</sup> Unidad de Información para los países del Norte de Centroamérica, [Retornos a nivel regional](#), 2023

<sup>3</sup> Source: [Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2022](#)

<sup>4</sup> R4V, 2023

<sup>5</sup> UPMRIP (2023). Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias 2023.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. [Niñez en Movimiento en América Latina y el Caribe. Revisión de evidencia.](#)




specific legal obligations to be as well as relevant GCM guiding principles, Objectives and is intended to be a practical resource, based on States' positive practices and drawing on the experience of the Network and Working Group members, across the stages of pre-return, return and post-return and reintegration. The checklist is not intended to be used as a monitoring and evaluation framework, or to grade countries on their current return and reintegration activities but is useful in helping to better understand areas where current return and reintegration procedures or programming could be strengthened. In addition, participants discussed specific needs of children that require extra preparation, safeguards, attention, and resources during the phases of pre-return, return, post-return and reintegration.

The main objective of the **Session 2 – Thematic Focuses** was to foster peer learning and collective reflection and encourage increased cross-regional coordination and cooperation. The space was opened to Member States and civil society organizations to present their promising practices, challenges, progress and experiences regarding safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration. The session provided valuable insights into various governments' initiatives and strategies related to return and reintegration, with a particular focus on gender equality, empowerment, and protection of children and adolescents. The importance of comprehensive, gender-sensitive, and child-focused approaches to return and reintegration was highlighted, as well as the importance of access to legal identity for returnees in order to access other rights. Collaboration among various stakeholders, including governments, CSOs, and international organizations, was highlighted as crucial to ensure the safe, dignified, and rights-based return and sustainable reintegration of returnees and the protection of their rights.

On the second half of the first day, participants were divided into three thematic groups based on their thematic expertise, with purpose to generate a space for discussion with the participating delegations to identify challenges, opportunities, and experiences in the field of return and reintegration, and collectively identify promising practices that could be of inspiration or that could be replicated in other countries. Each breakout group addressed one of the following topics: child- (and family-) sensitive return and reintegration, including child protection; consular support, legal identity and access to personal documentation, as well as identification and addressing vulnerability across the return and reintegration process (in host, transit, and origin countries).

On the second day, participants **visited the CAMR Omoa reception centre**, as well as **CAMR La Lima and CAMR Belén reception centres**. After the field visit participants had the opportunity to exchange their impressions on the field visits and showcased best practices that can be replicated in other countries.

The third day started with the session on **global and regional dialogue and processes of relevance to return and reintegration**. Presenters from IOM and UNHCR updated on progress achieved in global and regional fora, from IMRF, the Regional Conference on Migration, Regional Champion countries meeting, LA



Declaration, the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS), Issue Based Coalition on Human Mobility (IBC), and other dialogues and processes.

On the third day, participants were divided into three groups with the purpose of discussing how the Checklist could be used to support achieving GCM commitments and operationalize relevant GCM objectives and promising practices discussed, and how the checklist could be used to support reporting processes on RRR commitments in view of the next IMRF and the upcoming 2023 Global Refugee Forum or for use in any other coordination platform or forum. Participants also discussed possible ways to improve coordination across the return and reintegration process, between host, transit, and origin countries, and identified actionable recommendations. Each group was coordinated by a moderator and a rapporteur from the government presented the main discussion points from each group.

## PROMISING PRACTICES IN THE REGION HIGHLIGHTED BY PARTICIPANTS DURING THE EVENT


- **Inter-institutional structures** established that include all relevant ministries, organizations, UN agencies and other key actors, to ensure **effective and coordinated response**.
- Whole-of-government approach and intersectoral coordination: **national committees for migrants** that include all relevant ministries, as well as **inter-institutional working groups**, that monitor migrants' access to rights.
- **Inter-institutional agreements for referrals of cases** in need of support and provision of services.
- **Feminist assistance policy** which centers on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (improving access to financing for women and young people, encouraging women to participate and have leadership roles in their communities; access to health services, especially sexual and reproductive healthcare, and new technologies).
- Welcome and **registration systems** for returnees.
- **Municipal offices** for supporting returnees - a localized, decentralized approach to reintegration.
- Mobile consular visits to other countries known as **mobile consulates**.
- **Mega consulates** when government deploys staff to speed up the process.
- Developed **protocol for consular officials** to address the issues of children and youth while abroad.
- **Training** for consular officials in working with children and youth.
- **Reception guide for children** in the context of human mobility.
- Specialized programs for the protection of boys, girls, and adolescent migrants, emphasizing the **comprehensive protection** of their rights and their best interests.
- Legislation passed to guarantee children's rights including returnee children.
- Legislation **prohibiting immigration detention for children**.



- Development and implementation of **alternative care protocols**, including for migrants in vulnerable situations and migrant children.
- **Coordination** between sending and receiving States about how repatriations of children are to be carried out.
- **Management model** for reintegration that includes activities such as identification upon return, prioritizing special profiles (unaccompanied children, victims of violence, people with disabilities), and follow-up activities (home visit, individual care plans, delivery of seed capital, educational scholarships, psychosocial and medical care, and referrals to other services).
- Efforts have been made between governments and organizations **to facilitate and expedite the registration of children and adolescents** born abroad and guarantee **free processes**.
- In some countries, **safe passage passes (*laissez passer*) are issued by consulates** for people who have been outside their country of origin for a long time and do not have national identification.
- In some cases **where children are not recognized, child protection authorities are closely involved in the process of recognition and identification** of minors.
- Some countries allow **the registration of minors born abroad**, by just proving the nationality of the parents. Some countries have already made progress in accepting original documents that prove the identity of a baby, without them being notarized or translated.
- Some countries have **procedural manuals** related to their care processes for returned people and **direct support** is provided so that people can carry out their documentation/registration procedures.
- **Updating of technology by consular services** that allows people to access their documents more quickly.
- **Linking property registration authorities with consulates** so that people can register their assets.
- Some programmes are focused on **working with the private sector and banks**, to facilitate access to soft credits for returnees to start generating income.
- **Technical reintegration roundtables** led by communities with the support of international organizations contribute to the creation of support spaces for migrants.


## CHALLENGES IN THE REGION HIGHLIGHTED BY PARTICIPANTS IN THE EVENT


- Children and adolescents are often overlooked in return processes, leading to the neglect of their rights, which can affect their lives and prospects for sustainable reintegration.
- Reintegration is often addressed at the central level, and not at the municipal or local level. A **localized, decentralized approach to reintegration** is needed.
- Difficulty for returnees to **access legal identity documents**, which impedes their access to other rights and services. The processes for obtaining legal identity documents are often complex.

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- Weaknesses in current **cross-border coordination** between countries, which exacerbates protection risks. Regional solutions would allow safe transit and return of migrants.
  - There is a need to **reduce stigmatization** towards migrants. Some awareness-raising campaigns focused on migration risks were ineffective.
  - For some countries, the **demand for consular services** is greater than the state's capacities.
  - Even when **vulnerability profiles** of returnees are available, **regional information on the services available** to migrants in process of return and reintegration are often lacking.
  - **The lack of resources** does not allow for the **availability of sensitized and specialized staff** working with migrants in transit or returning.
  - **Access to justice** is often impossible when there are no clear processes or information available to migrants.
  - Several modalities of **human trafficking** (e.g., forced begging) have become normalized, causing a violation of the rights of migrants and creating a perfect climate for traffickers.
  - Some good practices that are currently in place are not sustainable solutions or long-term practices, they are palliative, so **structural solutions** must be found.

## KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY PARTICIPANTS DURING THE EVENT

- All actions in return and reintegration must be underpinned by a **rights-based approach**.
- The need for a **whole-of-government** and **integrated approach to reintegration**. Cooperation among different institutions is vital for the reintegration process, avoiding duplication. **Intersectoral coordination** is considered key, with established national committees for migrants that include all relevant ministries.
- Migration benefits everyone and it is important to ensure safe migration channels to reduce risks of human trafficking. Priority should be given to **safe and legal pathways**, including more open work permits for foreign citizens and their children in destination countries. States should create possibilities for mobilization in a safe and regular manner (temporary work programmes and access to safe movements).
- The need for access to healthcare and social security, support with national education institutions, and job placement support were highlighted.
- Efforts by states to identify resources to care for returned children and adolescents and reintegrate them into their communities, including special protection when necessary are required. Implementing **alternative care programs for migrant children** such as temporary protection, rather than institutional care, is important.

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- The **reunification and reintegration** programmes for migrant children and their families must start before the return process.
  - The right to family unity, including **non-separation of siblings and family** (which is often one of the reasons for re-migration) prevails over other migration control considerations.
  - **Sustainable reintegration** significantly reduces unsafe/irregular re-migration, but successful reintegration to a high extent depends on the services available in the community, as well as peer and group support. Inter-institutional agreements for referrals of cases and provision of services are needed.
  - The need for strategic responses on **transferring remittances into investments** and enhancing the development factor of remittances.
  - Governments should **advocate for expanding the registration of children and adolescents** born abroad.
  - Strengthening consular services by involving **MHPSS** and **child protection personnel** to support consular staff.
  - **CSOs** should be facilitated to be **present at points of entry and reception centers**, as they can provide support to returnees/deportees. Protocols should be put in place ensuring that CSOs are informed when groups of returnees/deportees are arriving. CSOs are actively involved in supporting transport to communities of origin, and providing other support, e.g. with provision of information, access to employment etc. Allowing the participation of CSOs in return processes can help give confidence to returnees/deportees, to accompany them and guide them towards sustainable reintegration.
  - **Legal identity** is a fundamental right, and it is intertwined with access to other rights, including accessing services, and accessing bank accounts and investment opportunities in their countries of origin. Improving access to legal identity documents is essential, including simplifying processes and disseminating information on processes. UNNM RRR Workstream is developing a guidance document for governments and a roadmap for achieving better access to legal identity for migrants in the context of return, readmission and reintegration.
  - Analyse the possibility of making the procedures for obtaining legal documentation less complex and free in countries where they are not yet free.
  - Consular offices can have contact with national registry offices to be able to prove the identity of people and expedite procedures.
  - Access to identification documents, but also to travel documents, e.g. in **cases of survivors of domestic violence**, is of high importance.
  - Difficulties that people have in registering when host governments are taking away their documents is a point that should be discussed between States. People should be given **sufficient time to collect their identity documents** before being returned.

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- There should be an effective coordination at the regional level that will enable **access to updated and reliable information on services available to migrants** and ensure that **policy changes** in transit countries are reported to countries of origin or other transit countries.
  - The importance of **quality data** and evidence to better understand the structure of returnee populations and enhance **evidence-based decision making** both at regional and national levels.
  - An exercise linking all the promising practices from the different countries and how to implement identified promising practices in other countries would be useful.
  - **The allocation of resources** is necessary to strengthen institutional capacities to ensure safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration, as well as the identification of cases that are in need of international protection.
  - Focus should be on **innovation, strengthening information systems, simplifying processes** for accessing services, and strengthening information provision for migrants to better understand their rights and obligations.

## KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE UNNM CHECKLIST FOR SAFE AND DIGNIFIED RETURN AND SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION

- The Checklist is a guide for all stakeholders to improve return and reintegration processes in their countries. Participants agreed that the Checklist is a useful tool for authorities to track progress and challenges, monitoring the implementation of existing policies, identifying innovative practices, and promoting different initiatives. Participating countries expressed the intention to use the Checklist to **assess their policies and programmes** and whether national legislation is in line with international standards. The Checklist establishes the basis of action for the creation of public policies and standardized procedures. But the focus should be on **measurable and achievable actions**, and using the opportunities that exist in certain countries, to avoid being lost in long-term aspiration.
- Participants proposed to adapt and use the Checklist at technical level, including local level, for the working groups that see the reality in the countries. The checklist must have minimum adaptation criteria for each country.
- At the regional level there is a need to generate spaces and strategies to accompany and promote the Checklist implementation and promote it on regional platforms.
- The importance of having a **transnational perspective** as well as **inter-institutional working groups** to resolve some of the structural problems was highlighted. Transnational dialogues that would include governments and CSOs from host, transit and countries of origin would be a good format. Some countries have already created inter-institutional working groups with different state entities, and it is a way to monitor migrants' access to rights.

- It is necessary to **involve different stakeholders**, such as CSOs, international organizations, private sector, as well as different levels of government.
- Participants expressed interest in organizing **training for technical level staff** who are directly involved in the process, including those in reception centres, local migrant care units and local authorities, **on how to apply the Checklist**, and stressed the necessity for **monitoring and evaluation** of the application of the Checklist.


## CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The event reaffirmed the regional **commitment to a comprehensive coordinated response** to migrant returns at the individual, community, and structural levels. It provided a valuable platform for exchange of information and was an opportunity to learn about the processes and regional migration dynamics, identify joint challenges that exist and how to address these challenges, explore the opportunities for implementing the Checklist in national contexts and promote practical policies that have gender- and youth-sensitive perspectives.

During the event the participants had the opportunity to present their work, share experiences, promising practices, challenges they face, contributing to strengthening their capacities with the aim to guarantee that all returns are safe and dignified and reintegration sustainable. The participants agreed that the event **successfully facilitated networking and strengthened inter-institutional coordination at both national and regional levels**. They emphasized the importance of involving CSOs, academia, and the private sector in future events, recognizing their valuable contributions, as well as the importance of involving local service providers and municipalities to enhance the effectiveness of policies and practices at the local level. Participation of returnees, who shared their experiences of migration and return, were especially praised, contributing to the more balanced and nuanced discussion.

Participants showed a keen interest in establishing regular follow-up meetings, virtually or in-person, **to continue exchanging information and practices**, especially concerning the **reintegration** of vulnerable groups. Challenges in sustainable reintegration and the need for a comprehensive approach were recognized, emphasizing the importance of linking return and reintegration with broader thematic agendas, including sustainable development. The importance of evidence-based policies, enhanced coordination, and information exchange at national and regional levels was underscored.

This was the **first regional peer learning event on return and reintegration organized within the UNNM** framework providing an opportunity for networking and building a community of professionals and have thus **contributed to strengthening inter-institutional coordination** between actors at both national and regional



level. All participants have reiterated their commitments to continue strengthening the national and regional mechanisms since migration is a phenomenon that requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach.

The **Checklist** was recognized by participants as a useful tool against which Governments and other stakeholders can assess whether their return and reintegration activities are consistent with the GCM, and one which merits further operationalization through targeted training and other future actions.

The UNNM at the global, regional and national levels reiterated their **commitment to continue providing support to the governments and civil society to advance Objective 21 of the GCM**, rolling out of the Checklist through the many opportunities jointly identified during the event (e.g. community of practice, dissemination of best practices, development of pledges, further peer learning exchanges, capacity building workshops, etc.).

This peer learning exchange also aimed to support the implementation of states' commitments in the Progress Declaration and will inform the next GCM Regional Reviews and the content of the next Secretary-General's report in 2024 on the GCM. All stakeholders were encouraged to fully implement existing pledges, submit further pledges, share replicable promising practices on the Migration Network Hub, and make use of existing practices related to safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration, that are already on the Hub.

Overall, the meeting has generated a commitment to turn discussions into concrete actions that can drive positive changes in the region in managing rights-based return and reintegration more efficiently and effectively in line with international standards and commitments.