



REGUIDE – A Holistic, Restorative, and Gendered Approach to Guide Returnees to their Home Country: Developing a Sustained Restorative Approach (SRA) for Prison and Probation

- *This brief underscores that A Sustained Restorative Approach (SRA) is essential for Belgium's long-term management of returnees because current prison-based reintegration structures are fragmented, security-driven, and unable to offer coherent, future-oriented support. Our findings show that meaningful reintegration cannot occur in environments marked by overcrowding, staff shortages, opaque decision-making and the absence of coordinated communication channels across institutions. A community-anchored and family-centred SRA, operationalised through the Living Lab model, provides a realistic and evidence-based alternative. By creating structured spaces for dialogue, trust-building, and multi-actor cooperation, the SRA addresses key reintegration needs—housing, family stability, administrative clarity, and psychosocial continuity—that cannot be met inside prisons. It strengthens institutional coherence, counters the unintended harms of purely security-oriented measures, and promotes long-term social stability. Developing an SRA is therefore not an add-on but a necessary policy shift toward sustainable, rights-based, and socially grounded reintegration practices.*

Context and question(s) of research

Belgium's management of returnees from Syria and Iraq has created an exceptional political, judicial, and social landscape. As the European country with the highest number of departees per capita, Belgium confronted the challenge of adults returning directly into the prison system after years in conflict zones. Following the 2014–2016 attacks, counterterrorism legislation and prison regimes expanded significantly, producing a security-first environment marked by isolation measures, the creation of D-RadEx units, and the categorisation of detainees through CelEx. While reintegration is a formal objective of imprisonment, the realities inside prisons—overcrowding, understaffing, political pressure, and fragmented multi-level governance—raise questions about how reintegration is actually understood and practiced.

This research investigates how reintegration for returnees is shaped within Belgian prisons: How do prison directors, psychosocial services, and justice actors conceptualise and implement reintegration under security-driven constraints? How do returnees themselves experience detention, support structures, and barriers to reintegration? And what structural, institutional, and lived factors impede a meaningful reintegration trajectory?

Main findings

The needs assessment showed that the initial ambition to implement restorative practices inside prisons was structurally unfeasible. Belgian prisons operate under severe constraints—overcrowding, staff shortages, security-driven decision-making, fragmented governance, and limited institutional autonomy—making sustained restorative work impossible within the prison

walls. At the same time, both professionals and returnees identified needs that lay largely outside prison regimes: cross-sector communication, family stability, administrative clarity, and long-term community support.

In response, the Sustained Restorative Approach shifted from a prison-based model to a community-centred, dialogical methodology anchored in the Returnee Reintegration Living Lab (RELAB). The Living Lab became the project's operational core: a co-creative, multiperspectival space linking research, practitioners, families, and returnees. It enabled trust-building, mutual learning, and the integration of legal, social, psychological, and family perspectives. As it evolved, RELAB fulfilled bonding, linking, and bridging functions, transforming knowledge exchange into a sustained restorative infrastructure shaping reintegration beyond the prison context.

Conclusion and recommendations

The SRA emerges from evidence across WP6 and the broader REGUIDE–BELSPO project, which collectively show that reintegration unfolds within a complex landscape of institutional fragmentation, legal precarity, stigma, and structural obstacles. To respond effectively, the SRA requires coordinated, long-term, relational, and cross-sectoral interventions. Living Labs—co-creative, reflective, multi-actor spaces—are central to operationalising this approach.

I. Policy Level Recommendations

Move from ad hoc security-driven responses to coherent reintegration policy.

Reintegration should be grounded in long-term strategies that align the T.E.R. framework with rehabilitation and social inclusion rather than reactive measures to political pressure or media attention.

Ensure national consistency across prisons.

Develop shared guidelines for placement, daily regimes, access to services, and engagement with families, ensuring returnees are not subject to arbitrary or unequal treatment across regions.

Protect legal certainty and citizenship rights.

Avoid excessive administrative sanctions—such as nationality revocation or residence withdrawal—that undermine reintegration, as demonstrated in the Legal Framework analysis.

Recognise reintegration as long-term security policy.

A reintegration-oriented approach strengthens public safety by reducing recidivism risks and promoting social stability.

II. Institutional and Professional Level Recommendations

Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Coordination.

Establish consistent and structured exchanges between prisons, probation, justice assistants, OCAD, LTFs/LIVC-R, youth protection, municipalities, and social services. Reintegration requires coordinated systems—not siloed interventions.

Enhance Relational and Long-Term Support.

Reintegration is non-linear and requires continuity, trust, and sustained engagement. Institutions should adopt long-term accompaniment models rather than project-bound or short-term initiatives.

Invest in staffing and organisational capacity.

Address structural constraints such as understaffing, overcrowding, and the absence of middle management that impede reintegration work and exacerbate stress among frontline staff.

Improve communication between institutional levels.

Create clear information flows between federal, regional, and local actors to ensure continuity between prison-based and post-release reintegration structures.

Balance security with rehabilitation in assessments.

Complement risk monitoring with recognition of resilience, behavioural change, and progress toward reintegration.

Train LEA practitioners through Living Labs as primary restorative spaces.

Instead of generic national training modules, invest in Living Labs where frontline staff, managers, social workers, probation officers, prison educators, imams/chaplains, police actors, municipalities, and families engage in: shared reflection on complex cases, co-learning and knowledge exchange, confronting institutional dilemmas, co-creating reintegration solutions.

Living Labs provide the sustained reflective environment required for restorative practice.

III. Individual and Family Level Recommendations

Provide tailored reintegration support.

Ensure access to housing, employment, document regularisation, financial rights, psychosocial support, and education, addressing barriers that decisively shape reintegration trajectories.

Address trauma and psychological needs.

Adopt trauma-informed approaches, recognising the experiences of returnees from conflict zones, detention, and social exclusion.

Integrate Family-Centred Methodologies.

As demonstrated in WP5, families are essential reintegration structures. Institutional pathways should facilitate sustained family contact, planning, and support—including family encounters, family days, and Living Lab family involvement.

Foster trust, motivation, and meaning-making.

Encourage spaces where returnees can engage with professionals, religious counsellors, peers, and mentors. Support religious, ethical, and moral development as meaningful sources of stability and transformation (WP5).

IV. Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Address structural and administrative barriers.

Prioritise pathways for housing, employment, financial access, and family reunification, which have been shown to determine reintegration outcomes more strongly than in-prison programmes.

Counter stigma and media-driven narratives.

Develop communication guidelines and public materials that challenge fear-based and racialised representations—drawing directly from the Media and Political Discourse WPs.

Ensure proportionality and rights-based approaches.

Reintegration should be grounded in dignity, fairness, and legal certainty. Avoid cumulative punitive measures that contradict rehabilitative aims.

Institutionalise the SRA and Living Lab model.

Embed the SRA—and its central Living Lab infrastructure—within justice houses, prison teams, probation services, community organisations, and local prevention platforms (LIVC-R/LTFs).

Living Labs should become permanent spaces for multi-actor cooperation, restorative dialogue, joint problem-solving, and the continuous refinement of reintegration practices.

Establish permanent *Living Labs*

Bring together all key actors involved in the trajectory of returnees—judges, lawyers, justice assistants, prison directors, frontline staff, local police, psychosocial professionals, religious counsellors, academics, civil society practitioners working with prisoners, and families of prisoners. These Living Labs should serve as structured spaces for co-creation, where experiential, professional, legal, and academic knowledge meet to identify problems, test solutions, and ensure consistency across institutions.

Read more

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