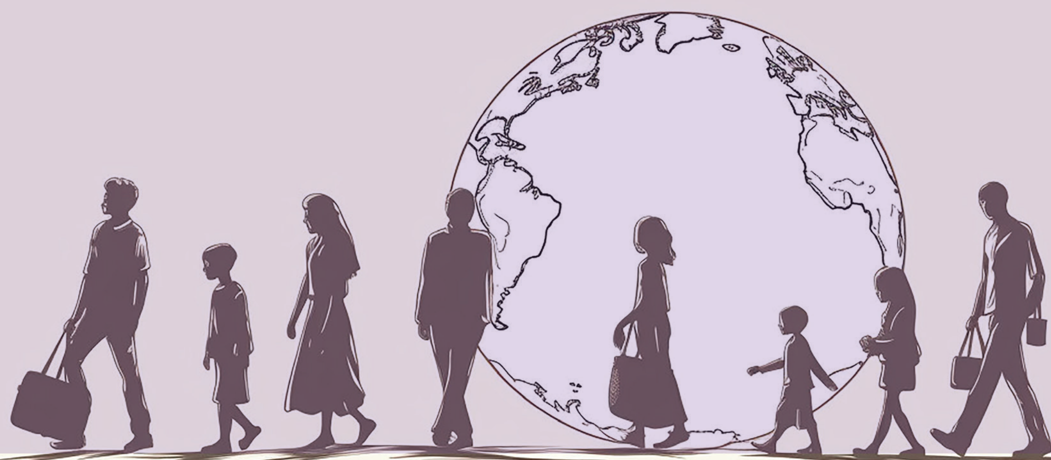
British Embassy
Tirana

From Precarious Journeys to Local Futures:

REINTEGRATION LESSONS FROM Albania

Evidence and learning from the Creative Hubs Programme



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report brings together practice and evidence from the Creative Hubs programme that supported 105 recent returnees in Albania. It examines why precarious migration persists, what people actually face in the UK, and what helps or hinders reintegration on return. The core insight is straightforward but often missed: precarious migration is not simply an economic calculation; it is socially organised. Distorted narratives circulate through peers, diaspora and social media; formal and legal routes feel restricted, unclear or out of reach; and many young adults seek not just income but also dignity, recognition and a better future. Against that backdrop, irregular movement can appear normal and even rational.

Participants' accounts of life in the UK frequently contradicted expectations. Undocumented status, limited rights, voice and bargaining power. Work was often exhausting and insecure, with debt a recurring thread that followed people home. On return, most were in the early stages of rebuilding their lives, with reintegration experienced as a conditional and nonlinear journey. Many want to stay, but only if there is a believable path that aligns work, dignity and stability. Material insecurity (unemployment, informality, low income) overlaps with household pressure and stigma. Interpersonal trust remains relatively high, yet confidence in institutions is significantly low, and people are more likely to engage when approached by relatable, credible figures over time and in informal, approachable settings.

The programme showed that territorial disparities are tangible. Tropojë and similar areas face slow information flows and limited services. Two approaches proved effective: close partnerships with local and/or state bodies (e.g., municipalitylinked anchoring) to make support local and visible, and hybrid access (e.g., FlexyHub) to overcome distance and stigma through online mentoring, training and followup. These elements are defining features of the Creative Hubs model.

The Creative Hubs should be read as a defined, transferable model rather than a loose bundle of activities. Its distinctiveness lies in five design choices that work together. It is communityembedded and hybridbydefault, so people can access support where they live and remotely. It is trustfirst, treating relatable figures and repeated contact as core operating methods. It deliberately bundles livelihoods and psychosocial support, including business incubation, employability and mentoring delivered in a stigmaaware, traumainformed way, to sustain engagement and progress. It provides practical accompaniment into permits, formalisation and job brokerage, turning aspiration into concrete steps. Additionally, it uses adaptive evidence and feedback loops through continuous consultations with both staff and participants, to keep delivery aligned with evolving realities. Implemented together, these elements reduce access barriers, improve disclosure, and make it more likely that people will persist with a local pathway.

Recommendations

- UK policymakers should communicate visa routes, bans and consequences clearly through trusted messengers, and review how lawful mobility options can be made genuinely usable.
- Albanian institutions should strengthen practical, local reintegration services, reduce territorial inequality via municipalitylinked hubs, and embed hybrid access for remote districts.
- NGOs should deliver staged, trustled programmes that bundle livelihoods with mentoring and psychosocial support, pair physical hubs with hybrid models (e.g., FlexyHub), and fund followup as core delivery rather than an addon.
- UK–Albania collaboration should coordinate nonstigmatising narrative change that counters misinformation where it actually spreads, with a specific emphasis on engaging trusted diaspora voices as messengers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared as part of the Creative Hubs for Reintegration programme, implemented by Medaille Trust in partnership with Social Development Investment (SDI) – Digital Roots, EntreImpact Balkans / Yunus Social Business, and Code Partners. Funding and strategic support were provided by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through its initiatives to counter organised immigration crime and to strengthen UK–Albania cooperation on return and reintegration.

The work presented here would not have been possible without the insight, trust, and commitment of the 105 returnees who engaged with the Creative Hubs, took part in consultations, and shared their experiences of migration and return. Their honesty and reflections sit at the core of this report. We are deeply grateful for their participation and trust.

Warm thanks go to the Creative Hub teams in Shkodër, Tropojë, Dibër, Elbasan/Berat, and the FlexyHub for their outstanding work in outreach, mentoring, and relationship building. Their sensitivity, consistency, and dedication made possible the kind of engagement and learning reflected here.

Special appreciation is extended to local partners, community organisations, and municipalities who supported implementation, helped identify participants, and connected the hubs to local structures and opportunities. Their collaboration anchored this project within the communities it aimed to serve.

We would also like to thank the diaspora representatives, Home Office representatives and stakeholders who joined the London roundtable and shared-learning events. Their contributions enriched the analysis and strengthened the link between local practice and cross-border policy dialogue.

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their direct contributions to the research and report as members of the research team.

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Finally, this report is dedicated to all those who embark on precarious journeys and find their way back home to rebuild their lives with resilience, dignity, and hope; and to all practitioners and partners working alongside them to make return and reintegration safe, sustainable, and meaningful.

1.1 Purpose and intended audiences

This report presents findings from the Creative Hubs programme on the experiences of Albanian returnees, with particular attention to the relationship between precarious migration, return, and reintegration. It is intended for programme partners, policymakers, practitioners, donors, and researchers working on return and reintegration, prevention of exploitation and organised immigration crime, and community-based responses in Albania and the UK. The report is designed to support both operational learning and strategic reflection by combining participant profiling, thematic analysis, participant voice, and stakeholder perspectives.

1.2 Scope and research questions

The report examines who engaged with the Creative Hubs, what their current circumstances and support needs look like, how they describe precarious migration and return, and what conditions appear to support or undermine sustainable reintegration. It is guided by five broad questions:

1. What is the demographic and socio-economic profile of participants?
2. What factors shape precarious migration journeys and decisions to leave?
3. How do returnees describe their experiences in the UK and after their return?
4. What barriers and enabling factors shape reintegration in Albania?
5. What lessons emerge for programme design, policy, and future prevention efforts?

1.3 Definitions and framing

This report uses the term **precarious migration** to describe migration pathways marked by insecurity, irregularity, dependence on informal intermediaries, heightened vulnerability to exploitation, and limited access to rights or protections. This framing is broader than a narrow legal distinction between "regular" and "irregular" migration. It is useful because risk often accumulates across the journey rather than at a single point. This also supports a risk-and-harm-on-a-continuum perspective (Hodges et al, 2022; Murphy et al, 2023), in which smuggling, exploitation, coercion, debt, legal insecurity, and social pressure may overlap rather than appear as neatly separate categories.

Reintegration is treated in this report as a multidimensional and non-linear process involving economic self-sufficiency, social connectedness, and psychosocial well-being over time. It is not understood merely as physical return, nor as an outcome that can be adequately assessed only in the first few months after arrival. Both the literature and the project data suggest that reintegration is often marked by setbacks, interruptions, conditional decisions to stay, and renewed consideration of onward migration or re-emigration where local conditions remain fragile. The report, therefore, treats reintegration as a longer-term process of rebuilding a stable life, a sense of belonging, and a realistic future, rather than as a one-off event or final outcome.

Finally, the report refers to those involved in the project as **participants** rather than only as "beneficiaries" or "cases." This reflects a deliberate emphasis on agency, involvement, and the fact that those engaged with the project were not simply passive recipients of support, but active contributors to consultations, evidence generation, and reflection on migration and reintegration.

1.4 Report structure and how to use it

The report provides a short project overview and methodology, followed by a brief review of relevant literature. The findings chapter is then organised into two main analytical sections: Precarious Migration and Reintegration Journeys, each broken down into key themes and sub-themes. A final reflections section considers what the findings imply for future programme design, including how trust-building, livelihoods support, psychosocial support, and community-based approaches can be better integrated.

2.1 Context and project rationale

Return and reintegration are widely understood as multidimensional and non-linear processes, in which economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial wellbeing interact over time rather than unfolding in a simple sequence (IOM Finland, 2019). Reintegration monitoring, however, often remains relatively short-horizon, commonly focused on the first 6 to 12 months, even though both policy and empirical work emphasise longer trajectories, fluctuation, and the "ups and downs" of adjustment over time (Malakooti and Zwick, 2022).

Research on return migration in Albania shows that returnees often bring back valuable resources, but that fragmented support, weak institutions, and limited local opportunities continue to undermine sustainable reintegration (Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022; Xhaho, Bailey and Çaro, 2024). The literature also highlights a discrepancy between returnees' needs and the available policy responses to support them, particularly in terms of coordination, institutional clarity, and evidence-based reintegration planning (Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018; Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that sustainable reintegration cannot be approached only as immediate return assistance or individual motivation. It requires locally accessible, multidimensional and sustained support that combines livelihoods, case management, service navigation, and attention to psychosocial and social dimensions of return (Reuben et al. 2009; Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022).

2.2 Project aim, outcomes, and intended impact

The Creative Hubs programme was designed as a practical, community-based reintegration response for Albanian returnees, combining vocational training, entrepreneurship support, mentoring, and opportunities for social connection. Its premise was that reintegration cannot be addressed through a single service offer alone. Returnees often face overlapping economic, social, and psychosocial pressures, and therefore require support that is accessible, trust-based, and responsive to the realities of life after return. The hubs were intended not only as points of service delivery but also as locally rooted spaces where returnees could begin rebuilding confidence, relationships, and future plans.

Operationally, the programme sought to improve access to employment, skills development, business support, and mentoring, while supporting agency, social connection and engagement with local opportunities. It aimed to help returnees develop more sustainable local alternatives to renewed precarity and onward migration.

In the short term, the Creative Hubs aimed to increase access to training, improve employability, support business start-up or development, and connect returnees to services, networks and local opportunities. In the longer term, the programme sought to strengthen resilience, reduce vulnerability to exploitation or organised criminal influence, and generate practice-informed evidence on return and reintegration in Albania.

2.3 Partners and roles

Medaille Trust implemented the project in Albania, coordinating delivery and working with local actors to establish the Creative Hubs across different regions. Its role included overseeing implementation, supporting hub development, coordinating engagement with returnees, and aligning delivery with the programme's reintegration objectives.

This work was carried out in close collaboration with local partners[1] and stakeholders, whose contribution was essential to grounding the hubs within the communities they served. Local partnerships supported the practical establishment of the hubs, strengthened outreach to returnees, and helped connect participants to existing opportunities, networks, and support at the municipal and community levels. This locally embedded model was important in ensuring that the hubs were not perceived as stand-alone interventions, but as spaces linked to wider community structures and local realities.

The project was supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), whose funding enabled the development of the Creative Hubs model, the delivery of reintegration-focused activities and the research element. Beyond financial support, the wider project set-up also created space for learning and exchange among different actors concerned with return, reintegration, and precarious migration, including through consultations, stakeholder engagement, shared learning events, and the generation of evidence to inform future responses.

2.4 Project set up and outreach

The project commenced in September 2025 with the establishment of the Creative Hubs and the launch of a targeted recruitment campaign. From the outset, the approach was deliberately proactive and community-based. Rather than relying solely on the expectation that returnees would independently identify the hubs, trust the service offer, and present themselves in person, the project sought to reach people where they were already living and experiencing the realities of return. This meant going beyond the physical hub spaces and actively engaging with individuals in their own communities, through local outreach, relationship-building, and informal contact points.

This approach was critical to engaging 105 returnees to varying degrees. Many returnees do not immediately present to formal services, even where support is needed, because of stigma, disappointment, shame, uncertainty, mistrust, lack of information, or fear that engagement could expose them to judgement or affect future plans. Proactive outreach reduced some of these barriers and widened access.

As outlined further in Sections 2.5 and 3.1, the outreach model is aligned with the project's broader emphasis on accessible, trust-based, and locally embedded reintegration support. It helped establish the Creative Hubs as visible and approachable spaces through which trust could be built before more formal engagement.

2.4.1. The importance of 'Relatable Figures'

A further enabling factor was the role of relatable figures in outreach, engagement and trust-building. In work with communities and vulnerable populations, trust is rarely created through information alone (Lansing et al., 2023). It is often built through people perceived as credible, approachable and able to understand migration, return and reintegration without judgement. Relatable figures included hub staff, peer mentors, outreach workers and others whose communication style, background or lived experience allowed returnees to feel recognised rather than assessed.

Relatable figures reduced the distance between the programme and participants. For those wary of formal services or unfamiliar professionals, they made engagement feel safer, more human and more practically relevant, particularly where returnees carried shame, mistrust of authority, or hesitation about disclosure.

They also supported sustained engagement. Returnees were more likely to remain involved when they felt that staff understood not only practical needs, but also the emotional and social dimensions of return. This strengthened motivation, reduced withdrawal, and encouraged more honest discussion of aspirations, frustrations and setbacks.

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[1] *Implementing partners: Social Development Investment (SDI) - Digital Roots; EnterImpact Balkans - Yunus Social Business; Code (consulting and development) Partners - Arka Youth Centre, Shkoder*

Relatable figures were also important for data collection. Information was generated through trust-based interaction alongside support provision, rather than through a purely extractive process. Trusted relationships increased the likelihood that returnees would share meaningful information about journeys, needs, risks and reintegration experiences, especially where disclosure was shaped by fear, stigma, legal uncertainty or trauma (Kopec et al., 2025).

For this reason, relatable figures should be treated as a core operational feature, not an optional add-on. They build trust, improve access, strengthen retention and generate richer evidence, making them central to both service delivery and the credibility of the findings (Allen et al. 2021).

2.5 Creative Hubs: Approach, Activities, and Operating Model

The proactive outreach approach was one of the key elements of the project and helped 105 returnees engage, to varying degrees, with the support offered through the Creative Hubs. The Creative Hubs were designed as holistic support spaces that combine a startup incubator, vocational training, mentoring, and communitybased support. Their purpose was not only to strengthen employability and entrepreneurship, but also to build trust, create safer and more supportive environments, and offer practical alternatives to exclusion, exploitative work, and reengagement with harmful networks. In this way, the hubs addressed both the economic and social dimensions of reintegration. As a concrete example of hub–municipality collaboration, the Dibër Creative Hub was established from inception through a partnership with the municipality and Digital Roots, creating a new institutional access point for returnees in an area where structured reintegration support had previously been limited.

Using existing local resources, including underused municipal spaces and partnerships with local stakeholders, the hubs aimed to provide rapid business incubation and vocational support, alongside coaching and guidance tailored to returnees' needs. Activities were designed to support participants in generating viable business ideas, strengthening their skills, accessing opportunities, and building the confidence and agency needed to reestablish their lives locally. Support was delivered through structured mentoring, business idea refinement and validation, introductory business planning and costing, vocational guidance, and direct connections to employment and selfemployment pathways. In several cases, this led to immediate livelihood opportunities, including smallscale service provision in fields such as mechanics, construction, and tourism, where existing skills could be readily mobilised.

Particularly important elements of the model were mentoring, coaching, and trustbuilding. Given that many returnees had experienced isolation, mistrust, or reluctance to disclose sensitive experiences, the project placed emphasis on relationshipbuilding and peer support. In practice, relatable figures, as described above, and peerbased engagement helped create safer conditions for participation, strengthen engagement with support, and generate deeper insight into reintegration experiences.

The Creative Hubs should be read not as a loose bundle of activities, but as a defined operating model with four interacting design choices:

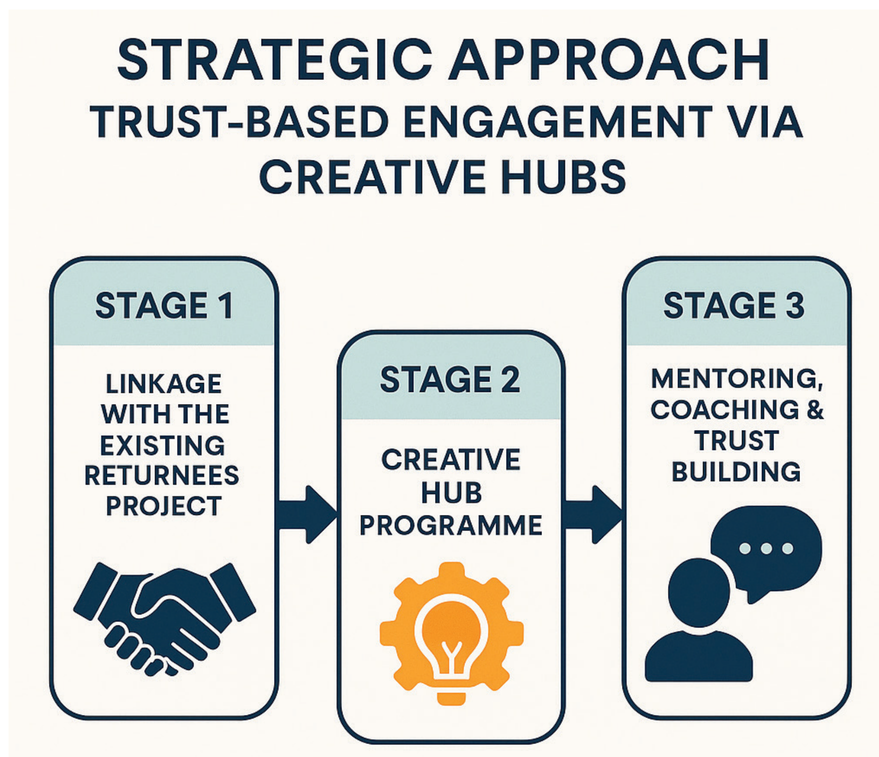
- Communityembedded, with hybrid delivery: locally visible hubs combined with online pathways to reduce geography and stigmarelated barriers.
- Trustfirst engagement: relatable figures, consistent contact, and approachable settings as core methods that enable disclosure and sustained participation.
- Bundled livelihoods and psychosocial support: business incubation, employability and job brokerage delivered alongside mentoring and stigmaaware, traumainformed practice.
- Practical accompaniment: handson navigation through permits, formalisation, and employer connections to turn aspiration into concrete steps, followed by hybrid followup.

The research, however, is not a formal comparative study of other reintegration programmes, and it did not systematically evaluate alternative models. Therefore, this report cannot make definitive claims about how Creative Hubs differ from other approaches. Nevertheless, given the high engagement across five hubs, consistent participant feedback on accessibility and trust, and observed uptake of mentoring, business support and training, it can be reasonably argued that this model is effective in this context and merits further investment and testing.

Alongside service delivery, the project also generated evidence and learning. Data collection took place throughout implementation, complemented by three participant consultations, one diaspora roundtable in the UK, and a shared learning event where preliminary findings were presented to a wider UK audience. Together, these activities allowed the project to combine practical reintegration support with ongoing reflection on precarious migration, return, and local reintegration pathways.

3.1 Overall approach

The project adopted a trust-based, trauma-informed, and consent-led approach. The Creative Hubs were not established primarily as research sites, as their main purpose was to provide guidance, support, and mentoring to returnees. The research element was therefore intentionally complementary rather than extractive. This matters because many returnees are navigating shame, disappointment, uncertainty, or trauma, so relationship-building and safe conversation were prioritised over formal data extraction alone.



3.2 Sampling and participant profile

The project engaged **105 returnees** overall, while the quantitative profile used in the report is based on those who chose to share information through the enrolment questionnaire. The core participant dataset contains 86–105 cases depending on the variable, reflecting missing responses in some fields, where participants chose not to disclose information.

The sample was drawn through a non-probability, purposive and network-based approach (Tongco, 2007; Heckathorn and Cameron, 2017). All participants were returnees from the UK who had returned within the last three years. Some had already been identified through another returnee assistance initiative, the HORRP Project[2], while others were reached through community-based outreach undertaken by local actors connected to the Creative Hubs. In addition, some participants were identified through informal referral pathways, including friends or acquaintances who had already joined the project and knew others in similar circumstances. The sample, therefore, reflects a combination of targeted outreach, existing programme links, and trust-based peer referral.

[2] The Home Office Returnee Reintegration Programme (HORRP) is a UK Government-funded reintegration initiative supporting Albanian nationals returning from the United Kingdom. The programme provides structured case management, referral mechanisms, and tailored reintegration assistance, including support for employment, vocational training, and small-scale enterprise development, alongside psychosocial support and service navigation during the initial post-return period.

The participant group is predominantly male, concentrated in the 25–34 age group, and geographically clustered around the main hub areas of Shkodër, Tropojë, Dibër, and Elbasan/Berat, with a smaller dispersed group served through FlexyHub. The sample is therefore grounded and operationally useful for understanding the profile and experiences of returnees who engaged with the project, but it should not be treated as statistically representative of all Albanian returnees.

3.3 Data collection methods

Data were collected through a mixed-methods design that combined quantitative and qualitative methods throughout the project. Specifically, the report draws on:

Enrolment questionnaires to the project. Participants completed two enrolment/screening questionnaires when joining the programme, one of them focusing on support needs, and the other gathered data around migration and the return process. These generated the core profile data on demographics, place of residence, hub affiliation, return timing, support needs, education, work history, income, wellbeing, migration history, and business aspirations.

Ongoing consultations with key workers. Case-related information was generated through regular trust-based conversations between participants and Creative Hub staff/key workers during programme engagement. These consultations captured changing priorities, vulnerabilities, intentions regarding onward migration, service access, and progress or setbacks in reintegration. The project worked through five Creative Hubs, including four physical hubs and one online hub, FlexyHub. The largest share of participants came through Shkoder, followed by Tropojë, Elbasan, Diber, and then the online platform. What matters here is not just the numbers, but the geographic spread: the hubs are clearly rooted in local areas and linked to the communities where returnees actually live. This gives the project a strong community-based foundation. It also shows that support needs are not concentrated in one place only; they are distributed across several regions, which suggests the importance of decentralised, accessible reintegration support.

Group consultations. Three participant consultations were held in Tropojë/Bajram Curri, Shkodër, and Dibër, involving 35 participants in total (32 men and 3 women). These consultations were used to explore migration decisions, expectations, return journeys, stigma, and views on local opportunities in greater depth. They are also very valuable for showing how participants themselves interpret precarious migration. They are analytically valuable but should be treated as small-group consultations rather than as representative of the whole project sample.

Diaspora round table. A roundtable held in London brought together representatives of the Albanian diaspora, Home Office participants, an IOM researcher, and project-linked stakeholders. This provided an external stakeholder lens on legal routes, enforcement, diaspora narratives, return, and the role of dignity and opportunity in shaping migration decisions.

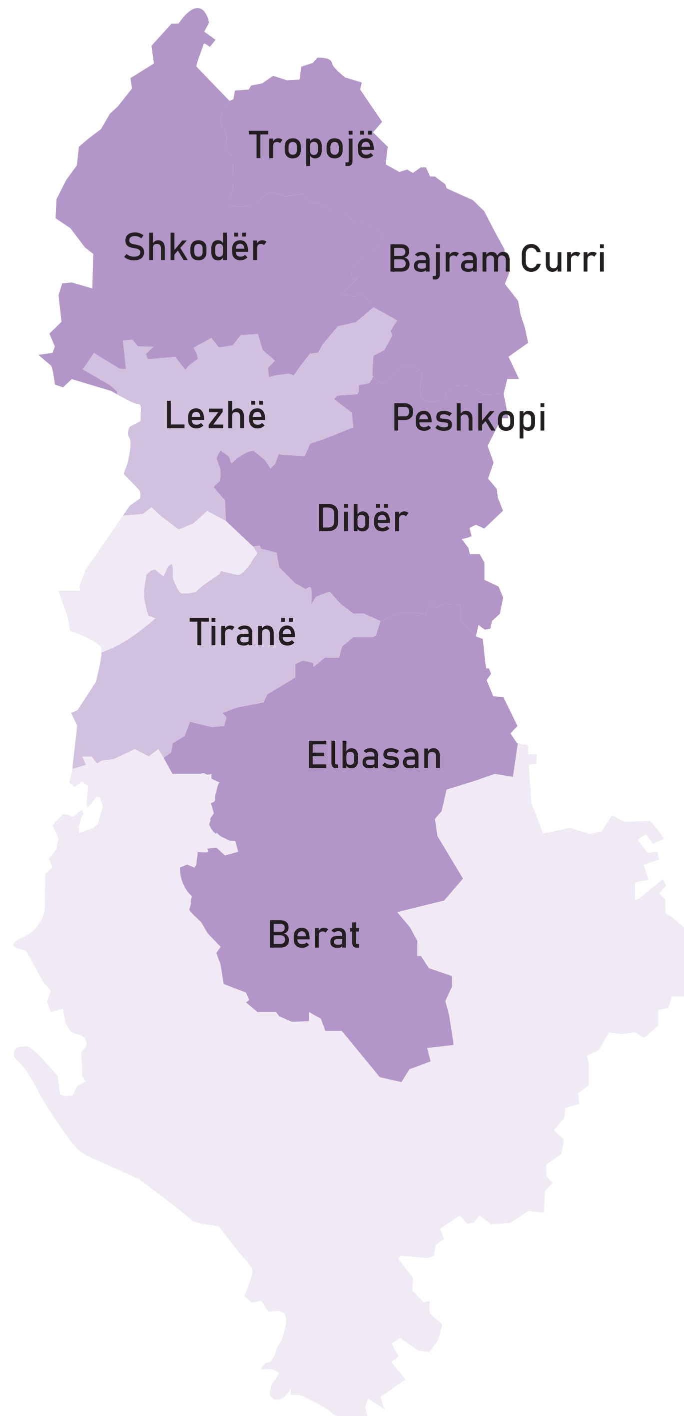
Consultations with key workers/hub leads. Hub workers and project staff also played an important role in validating and contextualising emerging findings. Draft analysis was also cross-checked with Creative Hub leads/workers as part of triangulation and validation.

Shared learning event. Preliminary findings were shared and discussed in London among practitioners, policy makers and academics.

3.4 Data management

All data were handled under an anonymised, access-controlled process. Quantitative and qualitative data were stored securely, with access limited to the research and programme team. Identifying details are removed from reporting outputs, and quotations are anonymised and used in a way that protects participant confidentiality. Data quality checks included reviewing incomplete entries and triangulating quantitative patterns with qualitative material from consultations and case notes.

MAP OF CREATIVE HUB COVERAGE



*FlexyHub offered hybrid/online access and covered areas such as Tirana and Lezha.

3.5 Analysis approach

The analysis combined descriptive profiling of enrolment data with inductive thematic analysis (Braun, and Clarke, 2006; Nassaji, 2015; Naeem et. al, 2023) of consultations, case notes, and stakeholder discussions. Themes were developed iteratively and then tested across sources to identify areas of convergence, contradiction, or added nuance. This allowed triangulation among enrolment questionnaires, casework observations, group consultations, and the diaspora roundtable. Validation also included feedback loops with Creative Hub staff.

3.6 Safeguarding and referral pathways

Given the sensitivity of the topic, participant well-being was prioritised throughout. Conversations were conducted on a voluntary basis, with attention to distress, confidentiality, and appropriate boundaries. When participants disclosed urgent needs or vulnerabilities, the project relied on existing case management and referral pathways through the Creative Hubs and partner organisations. In practice, this meant that research and support were closely connected. Participant well-being and safeguarding were prioritised throughout, and the research team's approach meant that, when concerns emerged, responses could move beyond data collection toward signposting, accompaniment, or referral.

3.7 Limitations

The findings should be read with several limitations in mind. A key limitation is the short programme timeframe, particularly given the trust-based approach underpinning both support and data collection. The model deliberately moved at a pace that protected trust, dignity and willingness to engage, especially where returnees carried shame, uncertainty, trauma, fear of disclosure, or concern about how information might be used.

This relationship-based approach sits in tension with short project cycles. Some participants only began to open up after several meetings, once they understood the project and felt reassured that engagement was safe and non-judgmental. The timeframe therefore constrained both the depth of support offered and the insight generated, especially on less visible issues such as psychosocial distress, debt, stigma or fear.

This matters because reintegration is itself non-linear and long-term. Trust-building, psychosocial recovery, livelihood stabilisation and readiness to seek help do not follow funding-cycle timelines. The project laid important foundations, but meaningful reintegration work requires continuity, patience and longer-term resourcing to remain ethical and effective.

Additional caution is needed. The sample is overwhelmingly male, limiting gender-sensitive conclusions and likely underrepresenting women's experiences. The data are predominantly self-reported and may be shaped by shame, fear, partial disclosure or memory bias (Khan et al. 2021). The qualitative data offer depth rather than prevalence, and the report captures an important but partial view of longer-term outcomes.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The work was underpinned by a strong commitment to ethical research and ethical practice**.** The research team brings extensive experience of formal ethics processes, and these principles were applied throughout the project regardless of whether formal organisational requirements demanded them. The research was guided by the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2017)**.** In addition, an initial ethics workshop was held with Creative Hubs staff at the start of the project, before any data collection began. This helped ensure a shared understanding of the project's ethical approach, including safeguarding responsibilities, consent, confidentiality, and the importance of responding appropriately to distress or disclosure.

The central ethical consideration throughout the project was the sensitivity of the topic**.** Many participants were likely to have experienced difficult, complex, and in some cases potentially traumatic journeys and return experiences. For that reason, participant wellbeing was treated as the foremost priority at all stages of the work. Both the research team and Creative Hubs staff took care to ensure that those involved understood what participation entailed, that they felt their views and experiences were respected, and that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that participants' dignity was upheld, that no one felt pressured to disclose more than they wished, and that engagement took place in a way that was attentive to vulnerability, trust, and the possibility of distress.

The Albanian literature reinforces the view that reintegration is shaped not only by the resources returnees bring back, but also by the wider context into which they return. In particular, fragmented support, weak institutions, limited local capacity, and poor information are repeatedly identified as barriers to sustainable reintegration (Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018; Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022).

A first strand of literature highlights the development potential of return migration. Returnees may bring back savings, work experience, professional know-how, social remittances, and wider networks, all of which can contribute to local economic and social development (Gjorduni, 2021). At the same time, this literature warns against romanticising returnees as automatic "drivers of development," since the extent to which their capital can be used productively depends on labour-market conditions, institutions, and local opportunity structures (Gjorduni, 2021; Xhaho, Bailey and Çaro, 2024).

A second strand of literature focuses on barriers to reintegration and policy fragmentation. Research on Albania's social protection framework argues that policy responses have often lagged behind returnees' needs and that evidence-based policymaking on return has been limited (Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018). Related work on labour market reintegration likewise shows that support is often project-based, fragmented, and weakly sustained over time, with insufficient information on available services and inadequate institutional capacity at local level (Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022). Together, these studies suggest that returnees are often left at the margins of mainstream economic and social programmes rather than being systematically supported through them (Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018; Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022).

A third strand examines returnee entrepreneurship and the business environment. Research on Albanian returned migrants shows a strong tendency toward self-employment and business start-up, often drawing on skills and savings accumulated abroad (Kuka and Kerpaci, 2025; Xhaho, Bailey and Çaro, 2024). However, this literature also demonstrates that returnees frequently face corruption, bureaucracy, weak networks, informality, and opaque licensing or investment procedures, which make enterprise development harder than expected (Kuka and Kerpaci, 2025; Xhaho and Fetahu, 2022). Kuka and Kerpaci (2025) argue that returnees can become "outsiders in the home market," with some businesses failing and some returnees remigrating because their individual resources are not enough to overcome home-country constraints.

A fourth strand highlights the role of migration aspirations, re-emigration, and limited prospects on return. In their study of returned Albanian asylum-seekers, Gëdeshi and King (2022) show that many returnees faced difficult reintegration, yet their experience abroad could still yield savings, social capital, new expectations, and new outlooks. At the same time, the authors emphasise that many returnees saw little future in Albania and remained strongly oriented toward re-emigration, especially where economic and social reintegration remained weak (Gëdeshi and King, 2022). This is particularly relevant for understanding return not as an endpoint but as a moment within a longer, more uncertain migration trajectory (Gëdeshi and King, 2022).

A fifth strand is especially relevant to this report's focus on precarious migration and exploitation. Research on cultural influences and cultural competency in UK–Albania work on trafficking and modern slavery argues that simplistic narratives often obscure the complex social and cultural realities that shape precarious journeys (Brachou et al., 2025; Murphy *et al*., 2023). That work recommends approaches that attend to family dynamics, community narratives, cultural pressures, and the continuum of harm that can span the entire migration process rather than appearing at a single moment of crisis (Murphy *et al*., 2023). This is useful for the present report because it helps frame precarious migration not only as a legal status issue, but as a wider process involving social influence, misinformation, vulnerability, and unequal access to protection.

Finally, literature on return, rehabilitation, and reintegration after trafficking and exploitation shows that return can be accompanied by stigma, family exclusion, identity disruption, insecurity, health needs, and

lack of access to justice or economic independence (Ramaj, 2023). Ramaj's analysis of Albanian trafficking victims' post-return experiences is particularly important because it demonstrates that reintegration is not only an economic question, but also a psychosocial, legal, and relational one (Ramaj, 2023). This reinforces the wider point across the literature that sustainable reintegration requires more than physical return or short-term assistance; it depends on long-term support across economic, social, and psychosocial domains (Ramaj, 2023; Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018).

Across these studies, four main propositions emerge that frame this report: reintegration is multidimensional; returnees' capacities are shaped by wider structural conditions; precarious migration is socially organised; and effective responses must be holistic, long-term, and grounded in the lived realities of return (Gëdeshi and King, 2022; Dhembo, Duci and Vathi, 2018; Murphy et al., 2023; Ramaj, 2023).

5.1 Returnees profile and vulnerability patterns

In total, 105 participants engaged with the project. The participant group is overwhelmingly male, with 98 men and 7 women. The age profile is concentrated in young adulthood: 74 participants are aged 25–34, 15 are aged 18–24, and 16 are aged 35–44. The majority are single (76), while 22 are married, and a much smaller number are recorded as in a relationship/cohabiting (3), officially engaged (3), or divorced/separated (1). Taken together, this suggests that the project primarily reached young working-age adults, many of whom are navigating reintegration at a stage of life when livelihood formation, household contribution, and social status are especially significant.

Participants came from 47 recorded localities, with the strongest concentrations in Shkodër (15), Bajram Curri (14), Elbasan (9), Tiranë (7), Peshkopi (7), and Berat (5). At a broader regional level, the largest concentrations are in the Shkodër area (33), Tropojë area (24), Dibër area (17), and Elbasan/Berat area (17), while a smaller dispersed group is located in places such as Tiranë, Lezhë, Kukës, Kurbin, and other municipalities outside the main hub zones. This distribution is mirrored in Creative Hub registration: CH Shkoder (30), CH Tropojë (22), CH Diber (20), CH Elbasan (17), and FlexyHub (16). The pattern indicates that support is largely rooted in the localities where returnees actually live, while the online platform extends access to those outside the main physical hub catchment areas.

The participant profile is also marked by recency of return. The largest number of returns occurred in 2025 (41 participants), followed by 2024 (22) and 2023 (19). Only 11 participants have recorded return dates prior to 2023, while 2 returns are recorded in 2026. This matters because the findings reflect recent return experiences and the early stages of reintegration, rather than the long-term situation of people who have been back for many years. Many participants are therefore still in the process of adjusting, rebuilding routines, and testing whether staying in Albania is sustainable. The data on time spent in the UK also suggest that return is not the end of a brief or isolated episode. 49 participants stayed for 1–3 years, 38 for more than 3 years, 17 for 3–12 months, and 1 for less than 3 months. For most, the UK had become part of their life trajectory, which in turn shapes the complexity of return and readjustment.

The reasons for return include both voluntary and compelled return, with 56 mentions of voluntary return and 35 of deportation or forced removal.[3] Family reasons appear as an important secondary factor, alongside isolated references to health reasons, visa or study terminations, travel document issues, and one asylum-related reason. The support profile strongly indicates that participants are primarily seeking economic reintegration: the most frequently selected support type is business start-up or business development support (87 mentions), followed by professional or technical training (36), job search support (22), professional networking support (18), administrative support (11), and psychosocial wellbeing support (9). At the same time, 60 respondents said they would like introductions to local groups or employers, showing that reintegration is also experienced as a question of social and professional reconnection, not only income.

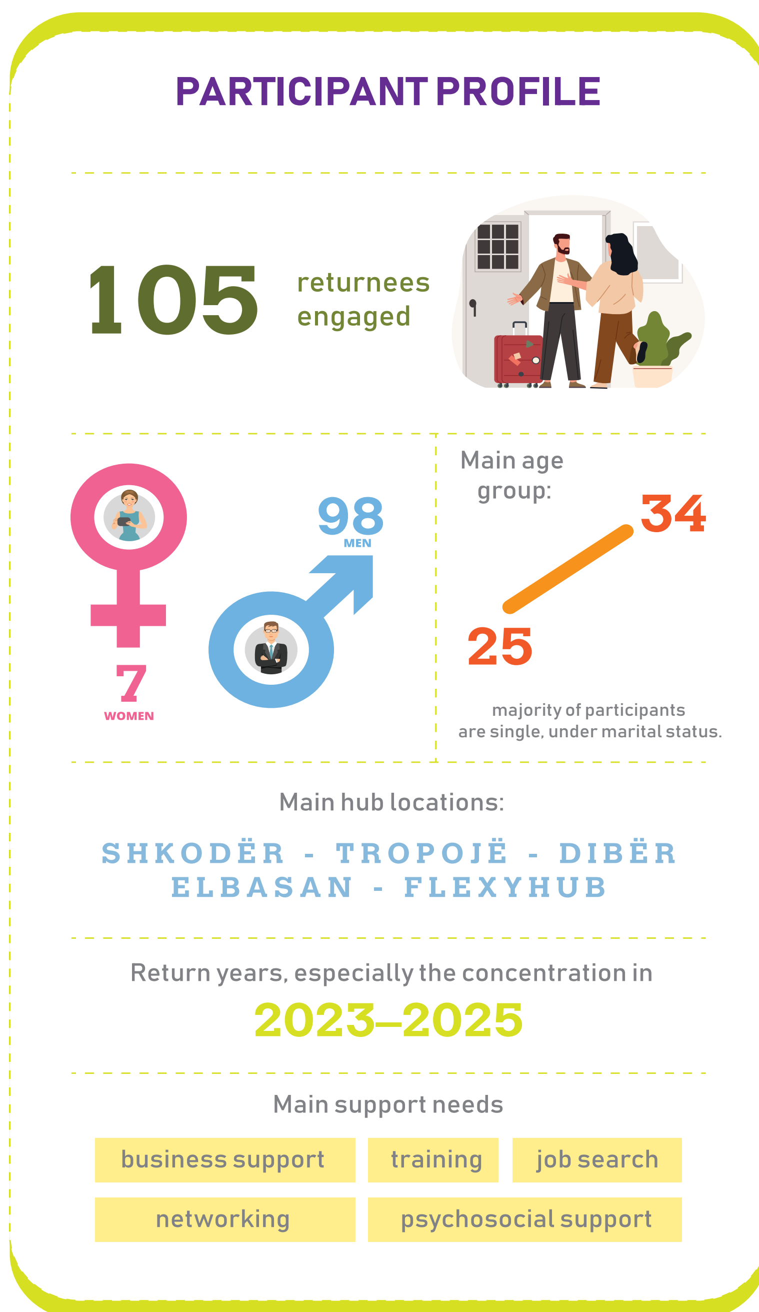
Beneath this demographic profile sits a clear pattern of economic vulnerability. Educational attainment is concentrated at the lower and middle levels: 40 respondents reported secondary education, 23 primary education, 10 vocational education, and a smaller group reported university-level education. The labour market profile presents as fragile: 36 respondents are unemployed, 15 are in informal work, and 6 are in part-time work, meaning that 57 respondents are in relatively insecure employment positions. Only

[3] The returns took place in the last three years, which means they coincide with a period of intensified UK–Albania cooperation on returns. In particular, the UK and Albania signed a Joint Communiqué on 13 December 2022 aimed at strengthening cooperation on illegal migration, trafficking, and the protection and reintegration of returnees; it also stressed the "speedy and effective implementation" of the bilateral readmission agreement. The observed mixture of voluntary return and deportation/forced removal is likely shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by the post-2022 policy environment and increased operational capacity for returns.

15 report full-time work and 11 are self-employed. Income data point in the same direction: while 34 respondents describe their income as "average," 23 report low income, 10 very low income, and 9 no income at all. Reintegration is therefore taking place in a context where economic insecurity is widespread rather than exceptional.

This vulnerability is embedded in the household and the individual. Eighty respondents report living with family, while only four live alone. At the same time, 22 respondents report caring for older people, 20 for young children, and 3 for persons with disabilities. The data therefore suggest that returnees are often dependent on family support while also carrying their own family obligations. This makes reintegration simultaneously a personal and household process, shaped by economic pressure, care responsibilities, and expectations to contribute.

A smaller but important layer of psychosocial vulnerability also emerges. The largest response category for both sadness and anxiety is "some days", indicating that distress is present but not constant across the group. At the more serious end, 13 respondents report sadness and/or anxiety at high frequency, and 17 say they would like to speak to someone about stress, anxiety, sleep, or mood. Importantly, these experiences overlap strongly with material insecurity: 12 of the 13 respondents with elevated distress also report worrying often or always about meeting basic needs. At the community level, respondents report relatively high perceived safety, an average of 8.5 out of 10, and 79 respondents say they have a trusted person they can speak to if they feel unsafe. Yet this interpersonal trust is not matched by institutional trust: confidence in local services averages only 4.5 out of 10, and 68 respondents say they have not sought help from local services at all. The participant profile is therefore not only one of economic strain, but of institutional mistrust, household pressure, and layered vulnerability in the early stages of return.



5.2 Precarious migration

5.2.1 Motivations and decision-making: why people leave, and why economics is not enough to explain it

Precarious migration cannot be understood as a single, purely economic decision. Economic insecurity is central, but participants also described frustration with limited opportunities, weak confidence in the future, lack of social security, psychological exhaustion, and the search for dignity, self-worth and recognition. As one Creative Hub staff member noted, young people do not leave only because of the economy, but because they want to "prove themselves," "contribute positively," and "evolve" (CH - staff, 2025). Migration therefore appears not only as escape from hardship, but as a search for recognition, belonging and personal development.

Consultations support this interpretation. Participants described local life as offering too little movement, clarity or reward for effort, linking this to bureaucracy, corruption, informal connections, nepotism, lack of career guidance and few visible examples of success that do not involve going abroad. In this context, migration becomes normalised not only as a financial strategy, but as a socially validated route to adulthood and achievement.

As one participant put it, “migration is a mentality” (Participant Consultation in Tropoje, 2026). Another reflected that “people are missing [referring to depopulation], and social life is missing,” while others observed that “there is no community or collaboration spirit,” and that “infrastructure is missing too” (Participant Consultation in Tropoje, 2026). Migration is therefore shaped not only by unemployment or low income, but also by weakened social bonds, limited collective life and the perception that meaningful progress is difficult locally.

This helps explain why outward migration persists even among those aware of its risks. Participants are not simply naive or reckless; they make decisions where local possibilities feel blocked and departure appears to offer material and symbolic advancement. One participant described this as the “green light model,” in which those who go abroad appear calmer, more secure and better able to provide, signalling that departure is the approved path forward.

This goes beyond simple “push-pull” explanations, as aspiration is socially shaped, departure becomes visible as success, and confidence in local effort is eroded. Precarious migration therefore emerges not only as a response to poverty, but also to a crisis of viable futures.

5.2.2 Migration myths, misinformation, and the social production of aspiration

Distorted narratives are central to migration decisions. Before leaving, participants relied mainly on friends and family (47 mentions), social media (34), and diaspora/community members abroad (20), while formal or official sources were barely present. Expectations reflected this: 54 mentions described the belief that work is easy to find quickly, even when undocumented, and 36 that debt can be repaid quickly. Smaller groups believed that everyone from their area succeeds abroad, or that younger people can stay and regularise more easily. Together, these beliefs point to a powerful mythology of migration success circulating through peer networks, family ties, digital platforms and transnational comparison.

Participants described misinformation not simply as a lack of facts, but as a wider environment in which people conceal the realities of life in the UK and social media creates an illusory world that is especially persuasive for young people.

People always lie [referring to the reality and life in the UK] (Participant Consultation – Tropojë, 2026)

It is a false world [referring to social media] (Participant Consultation – Tropojë, 2026)

Another participant in Tropojë described migration expectations as *‘completely the opposite of what we hear and what we actually experience there’*. Another warned that *“young people are easily misled by social media, for example, a secondary school student would see that and be tempted”*.

Diaspora occupies a significant position within this information environment. On the one hand, participants repeatedly emphasised that diaspora and friends abroad are among the most influential sources of information.

No influence from social media, only from friends who are there. (Participant Consultation – Diber, 2026)

As one consultation participant put it, *“the diaspora plays the most important role in the information that is shared”*. Yet the London roundtable also showed that diaspora actors are not always aware of the damage caused by fake or partial narratives. One Creative Hub representative argued that *“these (false) narratives have to change! There needs to be honesty”* and added, *“We are not doing enough to counter the*

narrative." Diaspora therefore appears both as part of the problem and part of the solution: it can reproduce unrealistic aspiration, but also support more honest, safer and better-informed pathways.

5.2.3 Recruitment and facilitation mechanisms: networks, intermediaries, and online influence

Precarious migration is rarely a purely individual undertaking. It is often enabled and sustained through social networks, intermediaries and facilitation arrangements. Among the 84 respondents who answered the question about their last journey to the UK, 41 reported irregular border crossings without going through border control, 28 said the journey was facilitated by a migrant smuggler, and 14 reported making an asylum claim at the border or after arrival. Smaller numbers referred to self-organised journeys or tourist visas followed by irregular stay. These categories overlap, but indicate strong association with irregular entry, facilitation and informal travel arrangements.

Consultations also pointed to recurring use of boats and trucks, fear, uncertainty, and journeys unfolding differently from what had been promised. In Dibër, participants referred to speedboats and described crossings promised as a few hours but lasting around ten hours at sea. As one participant put it:

"We are not properly informed. There is deception by/among Albanians".

Participants also stressed that journeys are often entered with a purposeful mindset, *"with a destination and a very concrete plan".* This suggests that precarious journeys may be approached as strategic and necessary, while still being shaped by imitation, idealisation and distorted expectations long before the realities are understood.

5.2.4 Experiences in destination: precarity, exploitation and debt

Participants' accounts of life in the UK were often marked by irregular status, insecurity, overwork, underpay, isolation and disillusionment rather than the success imagined beforehand. One stated*, "I would never take that route to England again".* Another said, "*If I had known earlier what it was really like, maybe I would not have tried at all..."* A third reflected, *"They had promised me it would be easy/comfortable...".* These accounts point not only to disappointment, but to a deeper sense of disillusionment and, in some cases, betrayal.

A strong theme is the role of documents, or lack of them. Participants described undocumented existence as blocking stability, rights, future plans and voice. One stated, *"I spent 10 years without documents.... enough".* Another summarised the situation as *"impossible without papers".* Consultations echoed this: "*If you do not have papers, you are treated badly, and you have to keep your mouth shut".* Undocumented status was therefore not only administrative; it constrained voice, rights and bargaining power in daily life.

Participants also described life abroad as exhausting and stripped of the quality they had imagined. In Shkodër, one summarised life in England as *"go to work and stay home in England...I enjoyed nothing".* Another noted, "There you have to work for survival". These accounts complicate visible markers of migration 'success': even where migration produces earnings or status symbols, daily life may involve extreme work, insecurity and limited enjoyment of what was supposedly gained.

For a small number of participants, experiences in the UK may also have included illegal or criminalised forms of work, blurring boundaries between livelihood, coercion and exploitation. Some participants briefly hinted at working in cannabis houses, acknowledging that they understood the basic nature of the job but not necessarily the full risks. Casework data also include one reference to a participant who felt "used" while carrying out illegal work, without explicitly describing this as coercion or exploitation. These accounts do not show prevalence, but suggest that criminalised work formed part of some returnees' experiences and should be understood within the wider structure of precarious migration.

Debt also emerges as a key vulnerability. Twenty-six respondents reported that debts affect day-to-day decision-making, while 14 reported recent offers to facilitate work or travel abroad. Qualitative material

suggests that some debts may be linked to the journey, work arrangements in the UK, or unresolved ties with people and networks connected to migration. Debt therefore sits at the intersection of economic pressure, shame, dependency and risk.

Taken together, these findings suggest that precarious migration is risky not only because of how people travel, but because of how life abroad can be organised once they arrive. Undocumented status, exploitative labour, debt and, in some cases, criminalised work create vulnerabilities that may persist beyond return, including insecurity, shame and difficulty speaking openly about what happened.

5.2.5 Disclosure, interactions with authorities, and the hidden dimensions of precarious migration

The hidden costs of precarious migration are also the aspects least likely to be disclosed easily. Trust is central to what people will and will not say. In consultations, some participants were "sceptical about taking part in the project because they think it could affect future applications". Withholding information should therefore not be read as indifference or lack of cooperation; it may be a rational response to uncertainty about consequences.

This mistrust extends beyond the project. Formal service confidence is low even where community-level trust remains relatively high. Participants were more willing to speak when engagement was gradual, when they encountered trusted intermediaries, and when support did not feel extractive, punitive or overly formalised. Disclosure is shaped not only by what is asked, but by who asks, in what setting and with what perceived consequences.

Debt appears especially likely to be under-disclosed. While the questionnaires capture some indebtedness, casework and consultations suggest that its scale and significance may exceed what is directly reported. Debt is bound up with shame, fear, possible coercion and unresolved ties to people or networks linked to migration. Where it is connected to criminalised work, informal labour or exploitative relationships, disclosure may feel risky because of fear of judgement, exposure or self-implication.

This is why trust-building is not peripheral to research or support. It is one of the conditions under which concealed dimensions of precarious migration become discussable. Where experiences in the UK may have involved illegal or criminalised work, guardedness should be read not simply as evasiveness, but as a potentially rational response to fear of being judged, misunderstood or exposed.

Several case records state that there were "no indicators of risk", yet broader qualitative material indicates that some experiences surfaced only indirectly, partially or after repeated contact. The absence of disclosure should therefore not be treated as the absence of risk. More sensitive experiences become visible when trust has been built, participants have time to assess safety, and disclosure can occur gradually rather than under pressure.

5.3 Reintegration journeys

5.3.1 Reintegration as a conditional and non-linear journey

The findings strongly suggest that return should not be treated as the end of the migration story, nor as evidence that reintegration has already taken place. Because the caseload is heavily weighted toward recent returns, many participants are still in the early phases of adjustment. They are not settled returnees several years down the line, but people are still rebuilding, still testing local possibilities, and still vulnerable to setbacks.

Reintegration is often conditional rather than resolved. One participant expressed this directly: *"I want to try once here, but if it does not work out, I will think again about leaving*". In Shkodër, participants also noted that "It is easier for us to go again", even while others stressed that they did not want to repeat the same journey. Reintegration is therefore not a stable state, but an ongoing assessment of whether staying is

worth committing to.

Longer stays abroad appear to intensify this challenge. Most participants had spent at least a year in the UK, and many much longer. Consultations suggest that those who stayed longer often found it harder to readjust and, in some cases, were more likely to consider re-migration. One participant in Tropojë said, "*The beginning was very difficult when I returned, after 7 years there"*. This points to reverse culture shock (Storti, 1997), in which migration alters routines, expectations and identity.

5.3.2 Livelihood insecurity, household pressure, and the economics of staying

Livelihood insecurity is the central reintegration pressure. The strongest pattern in the data is not lack of aspiration, but lack of stable footing: unemployment, informality, low income, worry about basic needs, and dependence on family remain widespread. This is why reintegration support is so strongly oriented toward work, business, training and professional connections. The data suggest that returnees are not primarily seeking therapeutic or symbolic interventions in isolation; they are trying to secure the material basis on which staying in Albania can feel possible.

At the same time, the consultations show that livelihood insecurity is not experienced privately. It is embedded in a family and household context. Many participants live with family and also care for children, older relatives, or dependents. The household, therefore, operates as both a buffer and a pressure structure. It offers shelter, support, and continuity, but it also creates responsibility, comparison, and the need to demonstrate that return will not become long-term dependency. In the Shkodër consultation, this emerged in a very direct phrase: *"Need changes a person's mind… nothing else"*. In other words, economic necessity is not only a background condition; it actively shapes decisions, dignity, and the threshold at which people reconsider leaving again.

The case notes further support this finding. They show that most participants are not currently planning immediate re-migration, but that the subgroup who are uncertain or ambivalent tends to sit closest to the sharper edges of economic precarity. The issue is not simply that people want "more money." It is that unresolved precarity keeps the door open.

5.3.3 Entrepreneurship, employability, and the search for practical routes to stability

The strongest positive orientation within the reintegration data is toward livelihood-building, especially through business ideas, self-employment, and practical work pathways. The most frequently sought form of support is business start-up or business development, and the enterprise-related questions indicate that aspirations are widespread and often grounded in prior experience. Sixty-five respondents provided substantive answers about business ideas, and 70 answered the question on the stage of their idea or enterprise: 46 are still at the idea stage, 9 are at the prototype stage, and 15 already have products or services in the market. The most common sectors, such as construction, repair and technical services, hospitality, retail, tourism, and agriculture/livestock, align closely with the kinds of work many participants had already done. This matters because it suggests that people are not imagining entrepreneurship in an abstract sense; they are trying to transfer real work experience into local possibilities.

The consultations confirm that returnees and community members clearly see this potential. In Tropojë, participants themselves stressed that *young people have very good business ideas, enabling products and services to increase. They also seek to link entrepreneurship to local innovation: To bring something different – something the town is missing.* This is important because it frames enterprise not only as personal income generation but also as a way to rebuild local social and economic life.

Yet aspirations are widespread but constrained by uncertainty about licences, permits, formalisation and viability. The mentoring responses refer repeatedly to the need for business planning, costing, marketing, formal registration and compliance support. This strongly echoes the wider Albanian literature on returnee entrepreneurship, which finds that returnees often struggle not because they lack initiative, but because

they face bureaucracy, weak networks, poor information, informality, and home-market practices that are much harder to navigate than expected. One participant in the case notes captured the positive side of the reintegration ambition: "*I have long migration experience. I want to apply the skills learned (abroad) in Shkodër (hometown)…*" But the surrounding evidence suggests that turning this ambition into reality requires long-term support and accompaniment, not just grants.

5.3.4 Dignity, stigma, and the social meaning of return

Reintegration is not only about income or services; it is also about dignity, shame and social recognition. Stigma data show that 40 respondents had never experienced stigma since return, 38 experienced it sometimes and 6 often. More than half therefore reported at least some stigma. Qualitative material shows how return may be socially read as failure, regression or status loss.

The strongest quotations come from Shkodër, where participants described return as socially read as "failure". One said: *"People look at you as if you have failed when you return to the same thing you were doing two years ago"*. Another added: *"It is not said openly, but it exists [referring to stigma]. You are seen as a failure"*. Consultations also pointed to gendered status expectations, including pressure to return only if visible advancement has been achieved.

The diaspora round table reinforced this theme: stakeholders argued that migration is about "dignity, opportunity", and that dignity in return is often "laced with shame and regret." Reintegration support must therefore address not only jobs and services, but also the rebuilding of legitimacy, status and hope in returnees' own eyes, their families' eyes and their communities' eyes.

5.3.5 Institutional mistrust, territorial inequality, and the uneven geography of reintegration

A further barrier lies in the gap between informal trust and formal service confidence. Participants generally report feeling safe locally and having a trusted person to turn to, yet show much lower confidence in local services and limited formal help-seeking. Support systems may therefore exist on paper, but their reach is constrained by mistrust, low visibility and perceptions that institutions are inaccessible or not useful.

This is especially acute outside main urban centres. In Tropojë, participants said that *"News and information in Tropojë comes late – or does not come at all"*, that *"Mistrust and incomplete information prevent people from applying for grants or services",* and that *"Opportunities are concentrated in Tirana".* Reintegration is therefore uneven not only because of individual circumstances, but because the geography of services, visibility and opportunity is uneven.

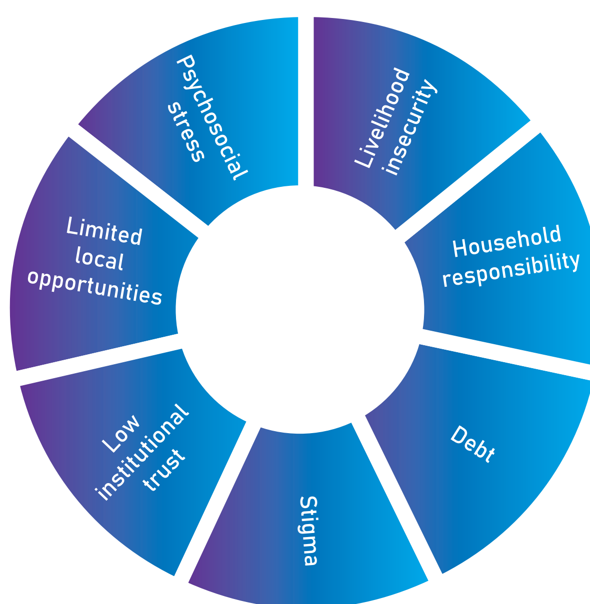
Territorial inequality is also social. Tropojë participants described weak social life, infrastructure and community collaboration, while the diaspora round table stressed the need for social spaces, social clubs and efforts to rebuild communities. Sustainable reintegration therefore requires income support, but also community life, social connection and visible local opportunities.

5.3.6 Psychosocial well-being, resilience, and protective factors

Although psychosocial support is not the most frequently requested form of help, the findings show that emotional well-being remains an important part of reintegration. The survey data indicate a smaller subgroup with elevated sadness and anxiety, and the overlap with unmet basic needs suggests that emotional strain is tightly linked to material insecurity. The case notes add a more nuanced picture: emotional recovery is possible, but uneven, and often depends on whether practical stabilisation is underway. Some participants describe becoming calmer, safer, or more hopeful after their return. One participant noted: *"Now I am at ease, without stress, and I owe no one anything"*. Another reported feeling *"calmer and safer than before"*. Yet others remain troubled by stress, uncertainty, or disadvantage. Reintegration, then, can improve psychosocial wellbeing, but usually where it is accompanied by livelihood progress, family support, or growing stability.

Protective factors are visible too. Many participants do not currently intend to migrate again, and some describe a deliberate shift toward staying and investing locally. One said: *"I do not want to migrate anymore; we want to focus on our own bar/business and improve it"*. Another said: *"I returned voluntarily; I did not see any perspective without documents"*. These are important because they show that return does not automatically produce hopelessness. Where people have some stability, some support, or a viable pathway, return can also generate commitment to rebuilding locally.

At the same time, the project findings and stakeholder reflections suggest that this kind of resilience cannot be treated purely as an individual matter. It is supported by relationships, mentoring, practical accompaniment, trusted local figures, and opportunities to convert skills into realistic next steps. This is one reason the hubs matter as more than service delivery points: they are spaces where support, belonging, and confidence can begin to reconnect.



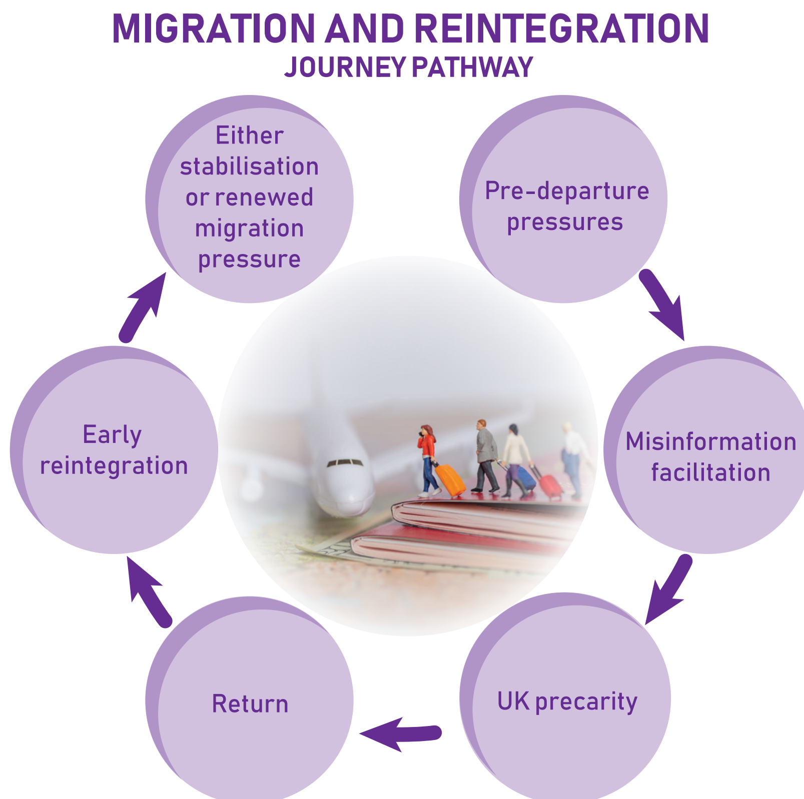
5.4 Opportunities for prevention, deterrence, and disruption

The findings suggest that prevention and disruption efforts may be most effective where they address the information environment in which migration decisions are made, as further discussed in the section below. Given the influence of family, peers, diaspora, and social media, prevention messages are unlikely to be effective if delivered only through formal channels; they need to circulate through the same trusted routes that currently sustain distorted narratives.

The findings also highlight the importance of clear legal information and trust-based advice. However, the challenge is not only about content, but also about credibility and delivery. Where official information is absent, poorly understood, or not trusted, uncertainty around bans, visas, asylum, and legal pathways can heighten risk by leaving greater space for hearsay, informal intermediaries, and false reassurance. Prevention efforts are therefore likely to be more effective when accurate information is disseminated not only through official channels but also through trusted and relatable messengers, including community-based actors, peer networks, diaspora figures, and frontline practitioners who already have local credibility. In this sense, the issue is not simply the availability of official information, but whether it reaches people in forms, spaces, and relationships that they consider trustworthy and relevant.

Furthermore, the findings show that prevention and reintegration cannot be separated. The strongest driver of renewed migration pressure is not desire in the abstract, but unresolved precarity: unstable employment, low income, debt, weak local opportunity, and a fragile sense of future. This means that deterrence alone is unlikely to work unless paired with visible, practical routes into work, business development, skills, and social reconnection. In this dataset, business support, job brokerage, mentoring, and introductions to employers or groups are not secondary add-ons; they are part of what makes staying conceivable.

Finally, the findings underline the importance of locally embedded, trust-building spaces in enabling both access to support and more open discussion of sensitive issues. This suggests that effective intervention may often depend on low-threshold, relationship-based forms of contact, including peer engagement, hub follow-up, and community-based discussion spaces.



This section brings together insights from the London diaspora roundtable, reflections from Creative Hub practitioners and frontline staff, and a wider shared-learning event. It does not duplicate the participant findings; instead, it shows how other actors understand the same dynamics, where they converge or diverge, and what this suggests for programme design, prevention and cross-border collaboration.

The London roundtable on 26 February 2026 brought together 7 Albanian diaspora representatives, 1 IOM researcher, 3 Home Office representatives and project-linked actors. The discussion covered legal routes, diaspora narratives, return, dignity, labour migration, enforcement and opportunity. Read alongside the shared-learning event, these sources reinforce that precarious migration is not only a matter of border control or individual decision-making, but also of cultural narratives, structural inequalities, fragile trust in authorities and limited pathways to reintegration.

6.1 What stakeholders agree on

6.1.1 Legal pathways are too narrow, too unclear, or too inaccessible for many

One of the clearest areas of agreement across stakeholder groups is that legal mobility options are widely experienced as too limited, too unclear, or too restrictive to function as a credible alternative for many Albanians. Diaspora voices at the round table argued directly that "*Legal routes are not accessible and not helping",* and that "*stringent legal pathways push people to go through illegal pathways."* The Home Office contribution did not frame the issue in the same way, but it did acknowledge that the raising of the Skilled Worker threshold had made legal routes harder to access for many Albanians who cannot meet the income and eligibility criteria for higher-paid roles. In this sense, even where legal pathways formally exist, stakeholders recognised that they remain out of reach for a substantial proportion of those contemplating migration.

This aligns with the participant findings, in which participants expressed recurring uncertainty about bans, visa options, and legal pathways, and, in some cases, framed irregular movement as the only realistic option. As one participant in Tropojë put it, *"No one gives us visas, thus we are forced to go irregularly".* Read together, these perspectives point to a significant gap between aspirations for mobility and the availability of accessible and credible legal routes.

6.1.2 Distorted narratives continue to shape migration decisions

A second strong area of agreement concerns the role of fake, partial, or idealised narratives in shaping migration decisions. Across the round table, consultations, and key worker reflections, there is a repeated insistence that people often make decisions within an information environment saturated with selective stories, misleading reassurances, and symbolic displays of success that conceal the actual costs of migration. The stakeholder perspective on this was particularly stark. One Creative Hub representative argued: *"Counter the fake narrative – this narrative has to change! There needs to be honesty."* The same contributor added, "*We are not doing enough to counter the narrative."* Diaspora stakeholders, too, recognised that expectations around legalisation, staying, and working in the UK are often unrealistic, even if they interpreted the causes differently.

This closely echoes the participant evidence presented in Chapter 5, where misinformation and distorted representations of life abroad emerged as central to how precarious migration is imagined and justified. The overlap reinforces the point that misinformation is not a secondary issue but a key mechanism through which risky migration pathways are normalised.

6.1.3 Migration is about dignity and recognition, not only income

A third strong area of convergence is the idea that migration cannot be reduced to money alone. Stakeholder contributions repeatedly stressed that migration is also about dignity, opportunity, self-worth, and recognition. One Creative Hub representative put this directly: *"Migration is about dignity, opportunity."* The same speaker went on to say that the concept of dignity itself needs unpacking because it is often "laced with shame and regret" in the context of return. This is one of the most valuable contributions of the stakeholder material because it offers a language that helps explain many of the participant findings, especially those relating to stigma, return, and the desire to "become someone" in a way that is visible to others.

This also strongly supports the participant findings presented in Chapter 5, where migration and return were described not only in terms of work or survival, but also in relation to dignity, status, and the fear of being seen as having failed. Read alongside the stakeholder reflections, this reinforces the point that migration and reintegration are shaped not only by economic considerations but also by questions of social standing and identity.

6.1.4 Reintegration must be social as well as economic

A fourth strong area of agreement is that sustainable reintegration cannot be built on jobs, grants, or income support alone. Stakeholders repeatedly argued that returnees also need community connections, mentoring, trust, self-belief, and spaces to rebuild a sense of possibility. At the round table, Creative Hub actors referred to social places, social clubs, entrepreneurship support, and "rebuilding hope." They also highlighted a lack of entertainment, weak social life, and the need to recreate community in places affected by migration and return. This broadens the concept of reintegration beyond the narrow labour-market focus that often dominates programming.

This is also reflected in the participant findings discussed in Chapter 5, which point not merely to strong demand for economic support, but also to the importance of social connection, follow-up, and mentoring. The evidence suggests that economic reintegration alone may be insufficient when the wider social environment remains depleted or lacks meaningful connection.

6.2 Where perspectives diverge

6.2.1 Enforcement versus opportunity: different starting points in understanding the problem

While there is broad agreement on some underlying drivers, stakeholders diverge most clearly on the question of what kind of response is appropriate. The Home Office framing, as reflected in the round table notes, is rooted in the post-2022 context of increased small-boat arrivals, diplomatic efforts, and bilateral collaboration to tackle irregular migration. From that perspective, irregular migration appears primarily as something that must be managed through cooperation, enforcement, and route disruption. Diaspora voices, by contrast, pushed back against what they saw as an excessive enforcement mindset. They argued that "*The approach has an enforcement angle – how to stop / how to enforce / how to return*" and that "*UK has to move away from the enforcement mindset."* This is not a minor disagreement about policy detail; it reflects two quite different understandings of the problem itself.

For diaspora and service-provider voices, an approach focused mainly on stopping people or returning them is insufficient because it leaves untouched the deeper drivers of migration: blocked opportunities, hard realities in Albania, and the social force of aspiration. One diaspora voice put this succinctly: *"You cannot stop people from dreaming of a better life."* Another argued that "*Life is hard, of course, but stopping people from coming is not the solution with these stringent pathways."* These views align closely with participants' reflections, which indicate that people leave not only because they are uninformed, but also because they are navigating a context of economic pressure, weak local prospects, and a limited belief that things can improve if they stay. The divergence, then, is not over whether irregular migration carries risks, as all sides recognise, but over whether those risks are best addressed through deterrence, opportunity, or some combination of both.

6.2.2 Policy language versus lived experience

A further divergence lies in the gap between policy categories and lived realities. Institutional or policy-facing actors often speak in terms of legal routes, thresholds, return frameworks, or route disruption. Participants and frontline workers, by contrast, tend to speak in the language of fear, debt, humiliation, mistrust, and blocked futures. These are not contradictory forms of knowledge, but they do not always meet easily. This is one reason why participant and frontline perspectives are so important: they reveal what gets lost when migration is described only through formal categories.

The wider shared-learning material on cultural competence is especially useful here. It argues that survivors and service users often feel "not seen" for who they are when systems focus only on case categories rather than personhood, culture, and context. Although that research is not identical to the current project, the underlying principle is highly relevant: systems can become disingenuous and even re-traumatising when they reduce people to their "migration story" or administrative status rather than recognising the wider reality of their life, aspirations, and constraints. This tension helps explain why some participants were reluctant to answer direct questions or feared that participating in a project might affect future options. It also underlines why trust-building and culturally competent practice are not peripheral considerations; they are part of whether support and information-sharing feel safe and legitimate.

6.2.3 UK-based versus Albania-based perspectives on return

A more subtle divergence emerges between actors speaking primarily from the UK context and those embedded in Albania. UK-based policy and diaspora discussions understandably focus on routes into Britain, visa systems, enforcement, and the meaning of "illegal" migration. Albania-based frontline and hub perspectives are more focused on what happens after return: how people live, whether they trust anyone, how they manage stigma, and how they might create a business or survive in their locality. This difference matters because it shapes what each group sees as urgent. For UK-facing actors, the key question may be how to reduce irregular arrivals; for Albania-facing actors, the key question may be how to build sufficient local credibility to make staying possible. The two are connected, but not identical, and the report gains analytical value by holding both together rather than collapsing one into the other.

6.3 Emerging best practices

6.3.1 Relatable figures, trust-building, and repeated contact

One of the strongest practice lessons across the project and shared-learning material is the importance of relatable figures and repeated contact. Frontline workers emphasised that people rarely disclose meaningful information in the first meeting, particularly when fear, stigma, debt, or future migration plans are involved. They described how trust was often built slowly: by explaining the project clearly, staying in contact, following up on WhatsApp, and allowing people to observe rather than commit immediately. One worker described the shift this way: *At the beginning, the main problem was trust…"*, but added that once people understood the project better, *"it became easier for them to believe in it"*. Another reflected that people became much more open only by the third, fourth, or fifth meeting.

This lesson is also reflected in the wider shared-learning data, which highlights the importance of cultural competency, reflective practice, and context-sensitive support. Together, these insights reinforce the view that trust-building is not peripheral to reintegration work, but one of the conditions that makes disclosure, engagement, and safer decision-making more possible.

6.3.2 Coaching, mentoring, and entrepreneurial redirection

A second promising practice emerging from the stakeholder material is the use of coaching and mentoring not only as support mechanisms, but as ways to redirect risk-taking and aspiration into more viable local pathways. The Creative Hub contribution at the round table was especially clear on this point, *arguing that coaching and mentoring can help redirect the willingness to take risks away from precarious migration*

and toward entrepreneurial activity and local opportunity-building. The same contribution stressed that returnees often have skills "that they don't trust that they have", and that the role of the hubs is partly to help people recognise their own capacities, connect with professional networks, and imagine concrete routes into business or work.

This aligns closely with the participant data, where business aspiration is widespread but often constrained by uncertainty about formalisation, permits, costing, and viability. It also connects with the Psychological Capital perspective in the wider report, which suggests that hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism are particularly useful when tied to concrete tasks and milestones rather than delivered as abstract motivation. What is notable here is that stakeholders are not describing entrepreneurship solely as an income solution, but also as a way to rebuild confidence, identity, and social contribution. In that sense, coaching and mentoring serve both economic and psychosocial purposes.

6.3.3 Community-embedded, hybrid spaces

A third promising practice is the creation of hybrid and community-embedded spaces. Stakeholders repeatedly described the hubs as both physical and hybrid and emphasised that support needs to be rooted in communities, not only in administrative centres. The roundtable references to Digital Roots, cybersecurity, digital marketing, and social spaces suggest a model that combines livelihood support, digital engagement, and community life. This is particularly important in peripheral areas, where participants reported delayed information, weaker service visibility, and concentration of opportunity elsewhere. In these contexts, a community-embedded model is not just convenient; it may be the difference between a service feeling relevant or invisible.

This also links to a wider concern raised in the round table around segregation, radicalisation, intergenerational trauma, and the hollowing-out of social life in areas affected by migration. Stakeholders suggested that small attempts to enrich social life and rebuild communities are not separate from prevention work; they are part of how places become more liveable and less dominated by the idea that "here is nothing." This is one of the more important practice implications of the stakeholder chapter, because it widens the lens from individual behaviour change to community conditions.

6.4 Coordination and information-sharing

6.4.1 Coordination gaps remain a structural obstacle

A recurring theme in the stakeholder data is that relevant actors, such as government, community, business, service providers, diaspora, and local initiatives, are "often not synchronised." This lack of alignment matters because the problem being addressed is itself cross-cutting: precarious migration is shaped by labour markets, culture, family influence, legal routes, social media, community trust, and reintegration conditions. When these domains are handled in isolation, gaps open: information is partial, services are fragmented, and no single actor holds the full picture. The round table suggests that better synchronisation is not a bureaucratic luxury; it is essential if prevention and reintegration efforts are to have a cumulative rather than fragmented effect.

This resonates with the wider Albanian literature and provides evidence of fragmented reintegration services, limited local information, and low trust in formal systems. Coordination, therefore, needs to be understood both vertically and horizontally: between UK and Albanian actors, as well as across local actors in Albania, including municipalities, hub workers, community figures, and economic development actors. The point is not simply to "share more information," but to build more coherent pathways between identification, support, livelihoods, safeguarding, and follow-up.

6.4.2 Information-sharing must be practical, safe, and trusted

The stakeholder data also suggest that information-sharing must be understood as more than a formal reporting exercise. It needs to be practical, safe, and trusted, particularly in contexts where disclosure may be felt to carry consequences, whether in relation to judgment, future migration options, debt, or facilitators. In such settings, blunt extraction is unlikely to work. What matters more is the gradual accumulation of credible knowledge through safe conversations, repeated contact, and respectful boundaries. A key implication, however, is that this information cannot be expected to travel effectively through official channels alone, given the low level of trust beneficiaries place in formal sources. It is more likely to be meaningful when communicated through locally credible actors, including frontline workers, peer mentors, community-based organisations, and other relatable figures who already hold trust, and in spaces that feel familiar and non-threatening, such as hubs, group activities, follow-up conversations, and low-threshold digital contact.

The broader shared-learning literature reinforces this point by highlighting the value of reflective practice among practitioners, where staff can critically examine assumptions, strengthen cultural understanding, and develop more meaningful ways of engaging with service users. This is relevant because information-sharing is not only a technical matter of transmission, but also a relational matter of who communicates, in what setting, and with what degree of credibility. Reflective practice is therefore not only a workforce development tool but also part of how better evidence and more trustworthy communication are produced. In practical terms, this suggests that the effective dissemination of sensitive or preventive information is likely to depend less on formal messaging campaigns alone and more on trusted messengers, repeated engagement, and community-embedded spaces where information can be discussed, questioned, and absorbed over time.

6.4.3 Cross-border learning needs to stay grounded in context

A final lesson from the stakeholder and shared-learning material is that cross-border collaboration should be strengthened, but it must remain grounded in the social and cultural context. The shared-learning literature warns explicitly against prevention efforts that ignore family dynamics, community narratives, or local realities in Albania. Similarly, round table participants emphasised that migration is tied to dignity, mentality, social pressure, and local opportunities — not only to the availability of formal routes. This suggests that UK–Albania collaboration will be more effective where it does not treat Albania simply as a site of "prevention delivery," but as a social context in which people are negotiating difficult structural and relational realities.

The findings show that participants are not simply recent returnees in need of practical support, but people whose migration and reintegration experiences are shaped by a wider system of informal information, social pressure, economic insecurity, and weak institutional trust. Precarious migration emerges not as an isolated act of risk-taking, but as a socially organised pathway sustained by normalised irregular channels, peer- and diaspora-based information, and beliefs that exaggerate opportunity abroad while minimising the costs of irregular status, overwork, debt, and exploitation. Reintegration, in turn, is experienced as a conditional and non-linear process, shaped less by lack of motivation than by unstable employment, low income, stigma, fragile trust in institutions, and uncertainty about how to sustain livelihoods locally.

The data from the ongoing engagement/consultations with participants reveal not only a constant need but also evolving priorities, doubt, setbacks, and gradual disclosure. They also show that while precarious migration is often remembered as a disillusioning experience, immediate re-migration is not the dominant trajectory for most participants. What emerges instead is a pattern of tentative commitment: many wish to stay and rebuild locally, but only where return can become materially viable, socially bearable, and credible as a future. The report, therefore, argues against narrow approaches that treat return as complete once someone is physically back, or that separate migration prevention from reintegration support. The evidence points instead to a structural gap between returnees' motivation, creativity, and practical aspiration on the one hand, and the difficult labour-market, institutional, and social conditions within which they are trying to rebuild on the other. Where that gap remains unresolved, the pressure for renewed mobility persists.

The data suggest that effective reintegration support for this group should continue to prioritise economic recovery and livelihood-building, especially through job brokerage, business incubation, career guidance, practical mentoring, and skills support. However, the findings are equally clear that livelihoods alone are not enough. Programmes also need to create and maintain safe spaces for targeted psychosocial support, confidential advice for those exposed to risky offers or onward-migration networks, and safe spaces where trusted, myth-busting information is delivered through peers and relatable figures. *The strongest lesson from the hubs is that people engage more openly where support feels relational, relevant, and non-judgmental, and where the project is experienced not as surveillance or extraction, but as something that can genuinely help them move forward.*

A particularly useful way of interpreting the project is through the lens of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) (Luthans and Youssef-Morgan, 2017). This framework does not replace the structural reading of return and reintegration developed in the report. Rather, it helps explain why some forms of support are more usable than others once they are offered. PsyCap treats reintegration as a multidimensional process shaped by four interrelated internal resources: hope (being able to imagine more than one pathway forward), self-efficacy (confidence in taking necessary steps such as documentation, applications, interviews, and business formalisation), resilience (the capacity to recover from setbacks), and optimism (a realistic sense that effort can still make a meaningful difference). The project findings point to the relevance of all four. Many participants have skills but lack confidence that those skills can translate into local opportunities; many are trying to stabilise but remain vulnerable to discouragement, shame, and uncertainty; and many appear motivated but face repeated structural and emotional setbacks that can weaken their sense of control.

The value of the PsyCap framing lies in its practical implications for reintegration support. It suggests that support is stronger when it helps people not only access services, but also act on them, persist with them, and re-engage after setbacks. In this sense, PsyCap supports a bundled and layered approach, in which psychosocial and livelihood support are integrated rather than separated, and where more intensive case management and accompaniment in the early post-return period are followed by longer-term mentoring, coaching, and psychosocial support as reintegration progresses. This aligns closely with what the Creative Hubs were already seeking to achieve through trust-building, community-based engagement, mentoring, and practical support around business ideas and employability. At the same time, the findings reinforce an

important caution: psychological strengthening is not a substitute for structural support. Hope does not remove bureaucracy, resilience does not replace income, and self-efficacy cannot compensate for a labour market that offers too little or too unevenly.

PsyCap is therefore most useful when understood as a capability amplifier embedded within an integrated package of case management, referrals, livelihood support, and stigma-aware community engagement. In other words, psychological support should not be treated as an alternative to economic reintegration, but as one of the conditions that can make economic and social support more accessible, effective, and sustainable over time. This also requires a culturally sensitive approach. The challenge is not only one of providing psychosocial support, but of recognising that mental health remains a taboo subject, and that many participants, particularly men, may be reluctant to engage with anything framed explicitly in those terms. Given that the project was funded for only six months, the longer-term psychosocial support that many returnees are likely to need remains underdeveloped. While the project succeeded in laying an important foundation, this aspect would require greater continuity, time, and dedicated resourcing to be fully embedded.

The project also showed that group-based and trusted spaces can make it easier for participants to discuss sensitive issues. Shared discussion appeared to reduce some of the stigma around distress and emotional strain, creating a useful entry point for more meaningful psychosocial support when participants felt ready. *This is an important foundation for future work, though it also highlights the need to move at a pace participants can sustain.*

Lastly, sustainable reintegration depends on whether returnees can rebuild both material stability and a believable future. The findings show that many participants are not asking only for jobs, grants, or services in isolation. They are looking for a pathway through which work, dignity, belonging, and realistic hope can begin to line up again. Where that pathway becomes visible, people are more likely to stay, engage, and invest in local life. Where it does not, re-migration pressure may remain dormant but unresolved.

7.1 Recommended Principles

The following principles should shape any future programming, policy, or operational response emerging from this report.

7.1.1. Do no harm and safeguard first

Any intervention with returnees affected by precarious migration must begin from a do-no-harm position. The findings repeatedly show that participants may be managing debt, trauma, shame, unresolved fear, or concern about exposure. This means that support, research, and information-gathering should not assume that disclosure is automatically safe or neutral. Questions about debt, migration history, legal status, onward plans, or risky offers should be approached carefully, voluntarily, and with appropriate referral pathways in place. The same applies where participants may have had contact with illegal or criminalised forms of work, since disclosure in these areas may carry perceived legal, reputational, or safeguarding consequences. Where there is a tension between information-gathering and participant safety, safety must take precedence.

7.1.2 Work in a trauma-informed and trust-building way

The project findings and wider evidence both show that meaningful engagement often depends on repeated contact, trusted intermediaries (relatable figures), and gradual disclosure, rather than direct extraction of information. This has both methodological and service implications. Programmes should therefore be designed around trust-building, predictable follow-up, culturally sensitive communication, and the recognition that some people will disclose only after several meetings, if at all. Trauma-informed practice should be built into both support delivery and any future research design.

7.1.3 Treat reintegration as multi-dimensional

Reintegration should not be measured or funded only as labour-market insertion or absence of onward migration. The evidence in this report points consistently toward a three-dimensional model in which economic, social, and psychosocial outcomes interact over time. Programming and monitoring should therefore recognise that income matters, but so do stigma, belonging, service access, distress, and the ability to imagine an improved and sustainable future.

7.1.4 Combine livelihoods and psychosocial support

The evidence does not support treating employment, enterprise, and well-being as separate elements. For this participant group, economic insecurity and psychosocial strain are closely linked, and support is likely to be more effective where livelihoods interventions are combined with mentoring, agency-building, peer support, and practical emotional support.

7.1.5 Prioritise practicality and cross-border realism

Recommendations must remain grounded in what can actually be implemented across the Albania–UK context. This means moving beyond abstract commitments to "raise awareness" or "cooperation" and focusing on concrete mechanisms: clearer information on legal routes and bans, accessible referrals, locally embedded support, practical accompaniment into work or business formalisation, and cross-border information flows that help challenge myth-making without reproducing fear or stigma. Given territorial inequalities highlighted in Tropojë and other remote areas, practical mechanisms should explicitly include hybrid access routes so that geography does not determine reintegration prospects.

7.1.6 Stay evidence-led and adaptive

The data in this report show both heterogeneity and common patterns. Not all returnees are exposed to the same risks, have the same aspirations, or need the same level of support. Programmes should therefore remain evidence-led, flexible and adaptive, using case-management information, consultations, and longitudinal follow-up to refine support rather than assuming a fixed participant pathway. Reintegration should be treated as a dynamic process that needs monitoring beyond the very short term.

7.2 Recommendations by stakeholder group

7.2.1 UK policymakers

UK policymakers should prioritise clearer and more accessible communication on legal routes, visa conditions, bans, and the practical consequences of irregular migration. However, this communication is unlikely to be effective if delivered through official channels alone, given the limited exposure to and trust in formal advice reflected in the findings. Greater impact is more likely where accurate information is disseminated through trusted intermediaries and community-based routes, including local practitioners, peer networks, trusted diaspora figures, and other relatable messengers who already hold credibility with the groups most at risk. While this would not address all underlying drivers, it could reduce some of the uncertainty that currently sustains reliance on hearsay and informal intermediaries.

In parallel, policymakers should assess the extent to which existing mobility regimes may unintentionally reinforce irregular pathways and consider how lawful mobility options, sponsorship routes, ethical recruitment, and bilateral labour arrangements could be made more transparent and usable in practice.

Finally, UK policymakers should continue to support community-based reintegration models in Albania that prioritise trust-building, culturally and context-appropriate, and are linked to local opportunity. The evidence in this report supports investment in practical, locally embedded support that helps bridge the gap between physical return to Albania and the longer-term process of achieving meaningful and sustainable reintegration. *Where reintegration funding exists, it should be flexible enough to support not only grants or referrals, but also mentoring, follow-up, psychosocial support, and community-based engagement over time.*

7.2.2 UK law enforcement and border agencies

For law enforcement and border agencies, the key lesson is that information, intelligence, and safeguarding must be carefully distinguished in practice, even where they interact strategically. The findings suggest that many returnees are wary of disclosure because they fear judgment, future consequences, or exposure in relation to debt, facilitators, or past activities. This means that any efforts to gather information relevant to organised immigration crime or exploitation must be accompanied by strong safeguards, clear consent boundaries, and safe referral routes. Disclosure is more likely when people believe that they are being listened to as individuals, not only approached as intelligence sources.

There is also a role for border and law enforcement actors in supporting better upstream information and downstream referrals. This could include clearer signposting on support options post-return, improved handover mechanisms where appropriate, and closer coordination with trusted civil-society or community-based actors who can continue engagement after return. The findings suggest that repeated contact with relatable figures often yields more meaningful disclosure and safer engagement than immediate direct questioning. Law enforcement approaches should therefore avoid overestimating what can be achieved through one-off encounters alone.

7.2.3 Albanian institutions and law enforcement

Albanian institutions should place stronger emphasis on accessible, visible, and practical reintegration support at the local level. The findings suggest that many returnees have low awareness of formal support, low confidence in services, and limited trust that institutions can help them meaningfully. Existing structures, such as public employment offices, vocational training programmes, and municipal social services, have historically suffered from low visibility, weak uptake, and limited perceived usefulness among returnees. In practice, many participants reported that they were either unaware of available services or did not consider them relevant to their needs. This was reinforced by low institutional trust, bureaucratic procedures, and the perception that such services do not lead to concrete employment or income opportunities. As a result, engagement with formal structures remains limited, with most returnees relying instead on informal networks, family support, or direct, trust-based outreach through programmes such as the Creative Hubs. Strengthening reintegration, therefore, requires more than nominal institutional existence; it requires simplified access, better communication, and services that are actually responsive to the problems returnees prioritise, including employment, business formalisation, documents, legal guidance, and practical referrals.

There is a particular need for better territorial equity. The consultations show that in more peripheral areas, people often feel that information arrives late, that grants and opportunities are hard to access, and that "real" opportunity is concentrated elsewhere, usually in the capital. Albanian institutions should therefore work more closely with municipalities, employment agencies, local businesses, and community-based programmes to reduce the concentration of services in urban areas and improve access in districts where return migration is strongly felt. This should include outreach, mobile or hybrid models, and better integration between economic-development and reintegration agendas.

Law enforcement in Albania should also continue to engage with return-related vulnerability in a way that is protective rather than purely investigative. Where debt, intimidation, or ongoing contact with facilitators is present, people may need confidential pathways to advice, support, or reporting that do not expose them to further stigma or risk. Close partnership with trusted NGOs and hub-like models is likely to be especially important.

7.2.4 NGOs and reintegration providers

For NGOs and reintegration providers, the findings support a holistic, staged, and relationship-based model. Programmes should combine livelihoods support, mentoring, skills development, and psychosocial elements in ways that remain traversable and responsive to the interconnected pressures returnees face, rather than fragmenting support into separate streams.

Support also needs to be delivered over time. Early post-return needs are different from later stabilisation needs, and short project cycles may fail to capture the fluctuating nature of reintegration. Providers should therefore build in follow-up support and practical accompaniment around key transition points, such as job searches, business registrations, training completions, or periods of setback. The PsyCap framework is useful here, particularly in highlighting the value of task-linked support that strengthens hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism alongside concrete reintegration steps. For remote or under-served areas, providers should pair physical hubs with online/hybrid models (such as FlexyHub) to extend low-threshold access to mentoring, training, and follow-up where travel and service concentration are barriers.

A further implication is the need to resource local trusted actors as a core part of programme design. The evidence suggests that engagement, disclosure, and sustained participation are more likely when support is delivered by locally credible and relatable figures, with repeated follow-up and low-threshold forms of contact. Programmes should therefore make space for peer mentors, community-based outreach, digital follow-up, and discussion spaces where returnees can engage without feeling assessed or reduced to a case category. For UK-funded programmes in particular, this means that trust-building should be explicitly recognised, costed, and funded as part of delivery, rather than assumed to emerge automatically from service provision.

7.2.5 Diaspora and community actors

Diaspora and community actors should be more intentionally and responsibly engaged in future responses. This could include diaspora-led myth-correction, mentorship, and community dialogue that presents more honest accounts of migration, return, and local opportunity.

At the community level in Albania, there is also value in supporting local role models and relatable figures who can credibly speak about both precarious migration and reintegration. The consultations suggest that people are influenced by what they see others becoming. Programmes should therefore think more strategically about how to surface examples of returnees who are building locally, not as simplistic "success stories," but as realistic and credible alternatives that include struggle, adaptation, and gradual progress.

7.2.6 Joint UK–Albania collaboration mechanisms

The evidence supports a stronger, more practical UK–Albania collaboration focused on implementation and policy. Cross-border cooperation should therefore include grounded mechanisms for referral, shared learning, narrative change, and service alignment, including practitioner exchanges, better information flows, and joint reflection on returnees' post-return needs.

There is also scope for developing more joined-up referral and follow-up pathways that reduce the disconnect between return, support access, and reintegration monitoring. The PsyCap material suggests the value of layered support over time, while the project findings highlight the importance of repeated contact and longitudinal understanding. Joint mechanisms could therefore usefully focus on transition points: pre-return information, early post-return contact, and sustained follow-up in relation to work, training, business development, and psychosocial wellbeing.

Finally, joint collaboration should treat narrative change as a shared task. The report's findings indicate that misinformation is one of the strongest cross-cutting drivers of precarious migration and operates transnationally through families, peers, diaspora, and digital platforms. A serious UK–Albania response, therefore, needs to include coordinated efforts to challenge false narratives with credible, non-stigmatising, and reality-based communication that speaks to both risk and dignity.

Sustainable reintegration cannot be secured through return alone, nor through short-term support focused only on immediate practical needs. For many participants, return marks the beginning of an uncertain process shaped by livelihood insecurity, household pressure, stigma, limited trust in institutions and ongoing assessment of whether staying in Albania is realistically possible. Reintegration improves where support is trusted, locally accessible and sustained, and where economic assistance is combined with mentoring, social connection and practical guidance.

The key implication is that reintegration should be approached as a longer-term, multidimensional process. Support should strengthen livelihood pathways through vocational training, business mentoring and employability support, and be delivered through locally embedded, trust-based approaches using relatable figures and community spaces. Reintegration and prevention should also be aligned, because precarious migration is shaped not only by poverty, but also by misinformation, social pressure and weak confidence in local futures.

Success should be measured in more meaningful ways than return itself or attendance at activities. Indicators should include movement into stable work or viable self-employment, reduced dependence on insecure income, progression from business ideas into functioning enterprises, uptake of training and mentoring, improved confidence in navigating services, reduced pressure to re-migrate, psychosocial well-being alongside financial stability, stronger retention and follow-up, better local coordination, and evidence that returnees feel treated with dignity.

Sustainability cannot be fully assessed within this research timeframe, which captures early reintegration during the six-month programme. The findings nonetheless suggest that reintegration remains fragile when support is short-term and participants face transition points such as training completion, job search or small-business development. Future programme design should prioritise longer follow-up, repeated engagement and stronger referral pathways between community actors, local services and reintegration programmes.

Future research should use longer-term longitudinal work to understand what predicts durable reintegration. More evidence is also needed on under-disclosed issues such as debt, shame, coercion and experiences linked to exploitative or criminalised work, on the gendered dimensions of return, and on the role of diaspora in sustaining or challenging unrealistic migration narratives.

Overall, the message for policy and practice is clear: reintegration is more likely to be meaningful where support is realistic, trusted, and sustained, and where staying offers a future people can believe in.

Annexes

Annex materials, such as research instruments and safeguarding protocol are held separately from the main report and can be supplied on request.

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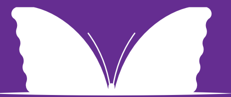

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