

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light pink zip-up coat and black pants, stands in the center of a restaurant. She has her hands clasped in front of her. The restaurant has a warm, rustic atmosphere with brick walls, wooden tables, and red upholstered chairs. In the background, there is a bar area with a white and gold patterned counter and a computer monitor. Large windows with horizontal blinds are on the right side. The lighting is warm and ambient.

# Caritas

Austria

# IRMA plus II

Caritas Austria's Reintegration Project





## Caritas Austria Opening Statement

It is one of the key priorities of Caritas Austria to assist migrants at **all stages** of their migration process. Caritas Austria has been actively involved in this field for over 20 years, gradually expanding the scope of its support services from legal assistance through advocacy to reintegration assistance.

Reintegration projects complement existing voluntary return schemes by providing returnees with tangible help in starting a new life and by supporting them in rebuilding their lives and generating sustainable income. Return and reintegration are often the final stages of a sometimes long and difficult migration process. In the case of vulnerable migrants, the usual difficulties of this process are further exacerbated by complex family situations, physical or mental illness or a long absence from their countries of origin. The need for reintegration assistance in these cases is even greater. Following a successful three-year reintegration project "IRMA plus I" (2017-2019), Caritas Austria's "IRMA plus II" (Integrated Return Management Plus II) continued to provide vulnerable voluntary returnees with financial assistance as well as individual counselling through partner organisations in countries of return.

Caritas Austria's primary **focus on vulnerable returnees** follows directly from its general mission as an NGO that has decades of expertise in supporting people in precarious social situations. It has established itself as a significant stakeholder in the Austrian framework for voluntary return and reintegration.

## The IRMA plus II Project

In its three-year project period (01/01/2020 - 31/12/2022), IRMA plus II **reached over 230 voluntary returnees**. The project offered reintegration assistance to **almost 140** returnees and supported (directly or indirectly) their 94 family members as well.<sup>1</sup> The project was co-funded by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior (BMI) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union (AMIF).

<sup>1</sup> As of 10. June 2022. This was shortly before the announced cut-off date (30th June 2022).

IRMA plus II is the only Austrian reintegration project with a special focus on vulnerability. Vulnerability is defined on the basis of Decision No 575/2007/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council.<sup>2</sup> The indicators listed therein provide the basis for participating in the project.<sup>3</sup> These include:

- Children
- Unaccompanied children (UAC)
- Single parents with children
- Elderly people
- Pregnant women
- People with physical disabilities or learning difficulties
- People with physical or mental health problems or illnesses
- People who are expected to face major challenges in reintegrating and finding a sustainable solution due to their individual background (e.g. illiteracy, little education, lack of a social network, a long period spent outside one's country of origin)
- Traumatized people
- Victims of violence (e.g. persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence)
- Members of specific communities facing repression, prejudice or other forms of discrimination or discriminatory violence in their country of origin
- Women (and men) who are in danger of becoming victims of forced marriages, genital mutilation or trafficking for sex, domestic servitude and/or labour purposes
- Single women/female headed households returning without any family support (to certain countries)

This list is far from being exhaustive. Vulnerability can depend on the combination of several individual factors and may also vary based on the country of return.

The reintegration assistance offered in IRMA Plus II consists of up to **3000€ in-kind support**. The assistance secures the returnees' livelihood in their countries of origin for the first months after their return and ideally helps them to rebuild their lives permanently. It may be used to cover basic needs, to provide medical and

<sup>2</sup> Decision No 575/2007/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 May 2007 establishing the European Return Fund for the period from 2008 to 2013

<sup>3</sup> The two other reintegration projects where Caritas Austria was involved, "ERSO SURE VD" and "IRMA plus I" used the same list of indicators as well.

psychological care, to help setting up a mini-business, or to contribute to clients' education or vocational trainings.

The reintegration process takes place with the close assistance and supervision of local partner organisations with whom Caritas Austria cooperates within the network of the European Return Support Organisations (ERSO). This partnership of eight European NGOs working in the area of return and reintegration, with more than 40 overseas partners, provides a unique opportunity for close cooperation, mutual assistance and common standards.

Within the IRMA plus II project Caritas Austria offered reintegration support in the following eight partner countries:

Armenia, Gambia, Ghana, India, Kyrgyzstan,  
Mongolia, Russian Federation, Tajikistan

## Project Highlights

### Flexible Solutions in Times of Crisis

The partnerships set up during the previous project period and continued in the current project proved to be stable and flexible enough to withstand the continuously shifting national and international environment. The **COVID pandemic as well as the war in Ukraine** were both major disruptions that led to decreased flights and therefore directly affected the project by leading to a decline in the number of participants. The project management and the local partners doubled their efforts and made a number of adjustments to ensure the continued support of our vulnerable target group in these challenging situations. Communication with partners remained uninterrupted even during extended lockdowns. During these periods, local partners counselled the returnees primarily over the phone, per e-mail or via video calls (often with the help of social media), and advised them to invest in crisis-resistant branches which continued to be in great demand even during the pandemic (such as repair and taxi services), or which did not involve direct contact with customers (e.g. agriculture businesses).

The pandemic unfortunately made the organisation of partner visits and on-site monitoring impossible. As these activities form a crucial part of the project's quality management system, Caritas Austria decided to organise **two long-distance monitoring sessions**, one with Russian and one with Mongolian returnees (in 2021 and 2022). The project team conducted a total of 13 in-depth interviews and evaluated 14 additional written questionnaires. The interviews were conducted directly via video call, with the help of an interpreter. They provided insight into country-specific vulnerabilities (such as the difficulties faced by small Russian businesses, ruined by the lack of legal certainty; or the precarious housing situation of single parents and elderly, unsupported women in Mongolia), which are now further exacerbated by the pandemic and soaring prices. The findings of the monitoring helped to provide return counsellors with up-to-date information and realistic return scenarios. This monitoring also proved to be a unique opportunity to contact beneficiaries of the previous Caritas reintegration project IRMA plus I to provide a better picture on the project's long-term effects on returnees' situations.

It remains a priority for Caritas Austria to enhance the good cooperation with overseas partners through **personal visits**, which provide insight into the focus areas of the participating organisations as well as into the situation of returnees on the ground. A personal project visit to Caritas India is planned at the beginning of October 2022, with the participation of return counsellors of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services (BBU).

### **Continued Engagement on National and European Level**

Several meetings served as useful opportunities for learning and dialogue for the project coordination as well as for Austrian return counsellors. Due to the pandemic, these events took place online – which, in turn, made them more accessible to a wide range of actors. Return counsellors in Austria were able to profit from several events, including exchange sessions held by Caritas Austria. The project coordination also contributed to some of the specialised trainings held by IOM, and was also involved in the AG Reintegration, the quarterly exchange format for Austrian stakeholders in the field of reintegration, established by the Austrian Ministry of Interior.

On a European level, information exchange and project coordination within the field of reintegration continued to be vibrant. Quarterly meetings of the ERSO network provided a stage for fostering cooperation and interrelations among the partners.





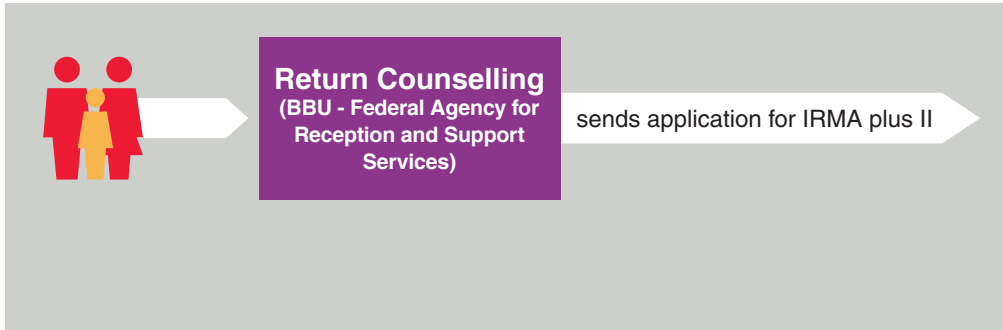
### **Tailored Solutions to Meet Returnees' and Partners' Needs**

Vulnerable returnees have special consultation needs in the process of return and reintegration. It is a demanding task to assess how chronically ill returnees can be assisted in finding a sustainable source of income despite their vulnerability. It is equally challenging to decide what treatments are needed so their health situation remains stable. In order to help returnees and local partners with these complex questions, Caritas Austria has been closely cooperating with a voluntary doctor to properly assess chronically ill returnees' medical needs and their chances of reintegration into a suitable segment of the labour market. Local partner organisations received an additional, well-founded medical assessment together with the regular application data for these special cases, which helped them to assist these clients in finding the small businesses and treatments most suited for their individual situation.

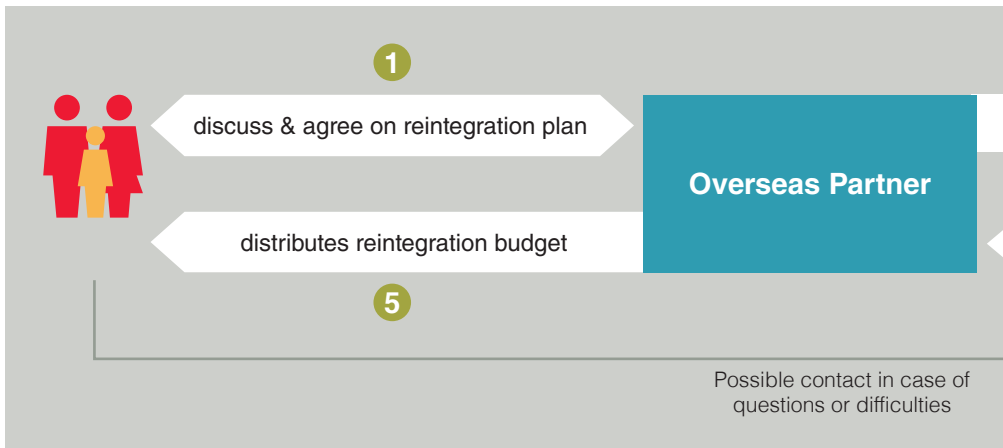
### **The Project in Practice – Tasks, Responsibilities and Cooperation**

The following chapter shows the concrete ways in which IRMA plus II has contributed to the successful reintegration of voluntary returnees. On the next pages you can find a schematic illustration of the actors that play a role in the different phases of the project.

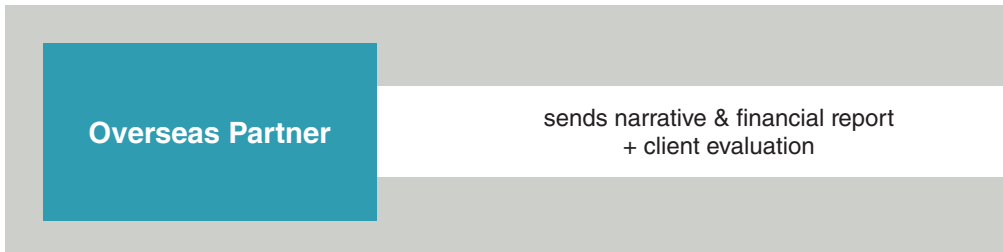
## Prior to Return



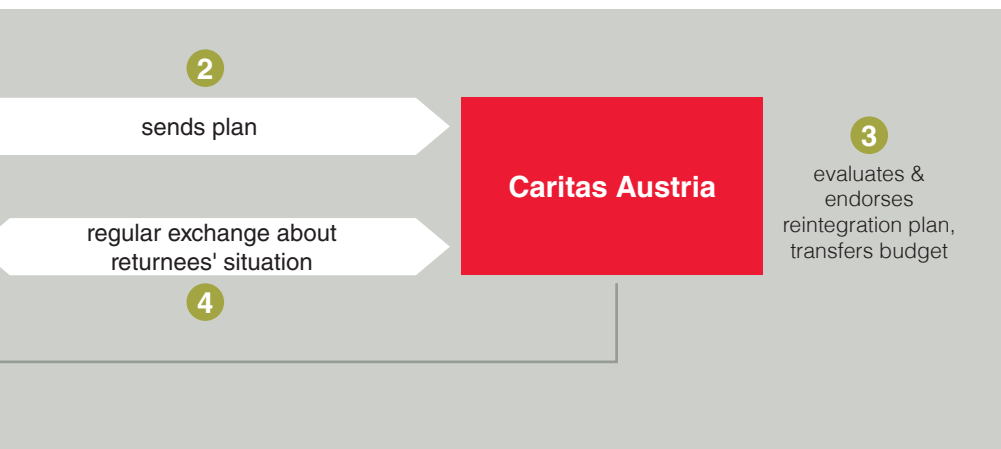
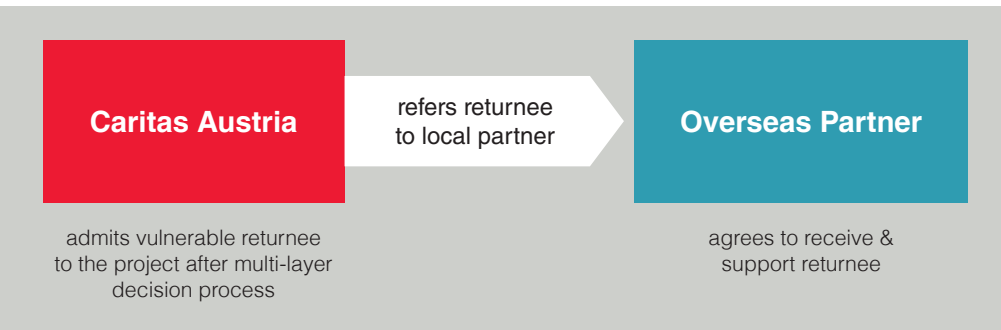
## During Supporting Period



## During Supporting Period







## Pre-departure Counselling and Preparation

Caritas Austria has always emphasized that return can only be sustainable if the decision has been taken out of one's own free will, based on unbiased and comprehensive information. The **voluntariness** of the return decision is an essential element of successful reintegration and thus of the IRMA plus II project. Of course, return situations are often highly complex. Having received a return decision and therefore the obligation to leave Austria, a returnee's options are limited. The Caritas network was involved in return counselling in Austria for twenty years, helping migrants take an informed decision about return. The IRMA plus II project team cooperated closely with return counsellors of the Caritas network and of Verein Menschenrechte Österreich (VMO), and later established excellent cooperation with counsellors of the Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services (BBU) when the Agency took over return counselling activities in Austria at the beginning of 2021.

Pre-departure counselling provides a **solid basis for successful reintegration**. The sessions help build trust, make returnees acquainted with their local partner and help them get a realistic glimpse of daily life after their return. Each returnee's case is **individually assessed for vulnerability** during the pre-return counselling. This is facilitated by a **list of vulnerability indicators** that each counsellor consults during the meetings with potential returnees. As many returnees have multiple vulnerabilities and very complex family situations, it is all the more important that the return counsellors stay up-to-date about assistance opportunities in the different countries of return. The project coordination therefore **regularly updates return counsellors**, who receive information about changes relating to the local partners – e.g. whether a partner is overworked as a result of a surge in the

“ After coming back to Armenia we found ourselves a home and bought a car from the reintegration budget to provide a taxi service in Yerevan. It proved to be a good decision as the demand for taxis was increasing during the COVID pandemic. My husband is driving the car and it is a good source of income. Sadly, I haven't found a job so far, but I'm eagerly looking for one. I'm happy that my son is going to school to receive an education.”

**Ms M., returnee from Armenia**

number of returnees, whether significant political changes have taken place in a country of return, or whether the current stage of the COVID pandemic causes new administrative regulations that returnees have to keep in mind after their return. This exchange of information takes place individually with counsellors, but also in the form of regular updates via e-mail on a management level.

In addition to the regular updates, a series of **five exchange events** took place in 2022, where counsellors received detailed information on the situation of specific vulnerable groups in all participating countries, the work of local partners and on administrative issues of relevance in countries of origin.

In addition to informing return counsellors, Caritas Austria also provides information directly to returnees. **Country-specific information sheets** proved to be an instrumental tool in informing returnees in their native language on important details of the project (reintegration budget regulations, airport assistance, emergency accommodation, etc.). Furthermore, whenever necessary, the project team or case managers organised a phone/video call between the local partners and the returnees, which helped to build trust and clarified details of complicated cases.

## The Supporting Period

### Vulnerability

Almost 90% of the project's participants are vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> The most common vulnerability factor among participants was a **long absence from the country of origin**. Almost 50% of our returnees spent six or more years in Austria; eight of them stayed for up to 15-20 years. Most of these cases were from Armenia, India and the Russian Federation. In such cases, local partners not only focused on assisting the returnees to reconnect with their home country and their families/communities, but they also had to guide them in the process of getting to know the local economy, supply and demand, the labour market, etc. again. They also had to consider the returning children who were born and raised in Austria and for whom return was often a very difficult process.

<sup>4</sup> Upon request of the Austrian Ministry of Interior (BMI), non-vulnerable returnees were allowed to participate in the project in certain countries (India, Armenia, Gambia).

A great number of returnees were affected by physical/mental **illness** (40%), sometimes exacerbated by severe **traumatisation** (in 11 cases) or partial/total **disability** (in 11 cases). This was most prevalent in the Russian Federation, Armenia, Mongolia and Gambia. Local partners helped returnees in finding the right medical assistance through their connections to other NGOs as well as to the national health services. They assisted parents in finding the necessary trainings for their disabled children, they helped traumatised returnees in finding access to psychological assistance and they worked together with families to find a reasonable way to divide their reintegration budget between imminent medical needs and sustainable economic reintegration.

**Single women returning without family support** constitute the third most prevalent vulnerability category in IRMA plus II, with a total of 31 cases from Armenia, Mongolia, Gambia and the Russian Federation. Some of the project's most complex cases belong to this group, as this was a vulnerability which never appeared on its own but always together with one or more additional factors. Many of these women also suffered from serious health issues, and half of them returned with one or more children. As in the countries of return in the project, access to the labour market is still more limited for women than for men, these vulnerabilities were exacerbated and such women had an increased risk of poverty.

“Returning to Mongolia wasn't easy for me as I wanted to stay in Austria, but due to the help of Caritas I was able to set up a business, and I also managed to find an apartment. I rented a small café and hired two employees. COVID hit us strongly, as we had several lockdowns in Erdenet, but recently the business has been running well. I'm working hard to keep up the café and to maintain it.”

**Ms G., returnee from Mongolia**

IRMA plus II assisted 21 **single parents** in total. Returnees, whose spouses died shortly after return (due to illness, e.g. last-stage cancer) are also counted to this especially vulnerable group. The assistance needed in such cases showed variation, a standard part of it being helping parents to find stable income as soon as possible and cope with the necessary administration to re-register their children in schools/kindergartens. The latter remains a key part of the assistance when children have never or only for a short time lived in their country of return.



The project assisted 15 **elderly** returnees. Some local partners, such as Caritas Armenia, have other, long-standing projects with a focus on assisting lonely people of age (often in distant, hard-to-access villages), and they can use this specialised experience when advising old returnees in finding the right mini-business for their long-term benefit.

Moreover, IRMA plus II has provided assistance to two **pregnant** women, a **victim of human trafficking**, and to 20 non-vulnerable returnees (from India and Armenia).

### Supporting Returnees

During the supporting period, local partners appoint a case manager who serves as personal contact and as coach for the returnees during the months following their return. The supporting period normally lasts for six months, but due to the difficulties arising from COVID-19 the project coordination has extended this in most cases to 12 months, in order to reduce the pressure on returnees and partners alike. The reintegration budgets are paid out in tranches by the partner organisations to the returnees. They can be used for specific reintegration activities in four main areas: basic needs, medical and psychological help, economic reintegration and (further) education.

Our local partners assist each returnee individually in the areas that are important to them. The reintegration services vary according to the circumstances and the needs of returnees. What is common in the consultations is the focus on **long-term sustainable reintegration**. Some clients feel pressured to invest the entire available budget into medical assistance for a sick child or into making their home suitable for a disabled relative with a wheelchair. The local partners' case managers are experienced social workers who help to transform this pressure into thinking of sustainable long-term solutions which secure the imminent necessities of the family and at the same time enable more financial independence gradually.



## Basic needs

- Clients who have left their countries a long time ago, who lost touch with their family network or who have severe illness usually ask for **basic post-arrival services**. Airport pick-up and the organization of emergency shelter belong to this category.
- Some returnees may ask for assistance to **get in touch with their families** or friends after a long absence. This is primarily important for African returnees, for whom the shame and stigma of “returning home empty-handed” is especially prevalent.

## Further education

- Trainings and courses can significantly **increase the chances of employment**. Local partners can assist returnees in looking for a suitable course (e.g. to be trained as a hair-dresser, to get a specialized driving license, etc.) and pay the course fee from the reintegration budget.
- The budgets can also be used for buying **school equipment** or paying the necessary extra tutoring for children.



## Medical or psychological assistance

- Mental and physical health is a **cornerstone** of reintegration. Returnees recognize the importance of this factor; many of them mention in their application that they need to stabilize their health condition before they can take up regular employment.
- A majority of the vulnerable returnees of IRMA plus have a **permanent medical condition** that needs regular check-ups and specialized medication. The most common illnesses include liver diseases, hepatitis, heart diseases and psychological disorders (depression, insomnia, PTSD).
- Medical assistance in the countries of origin is always a difficult issue due to the differences in the medical standards of the country of return and Austria. Nevertheless, if the returnee makes well-considered plans already before returning, it contributes to a **less drastic transition** after return.
- **Local partners help returnees** with setting up a list of necessary medicine, finding the right specialists and places for treatment (e.g. for children with inborn conditions), getting necessary equipment/treatment (wheelchair, crutches, physiotherapy) and referring the returnee to specialized NGOs.

## Economic reintegration

- The initial settling down is followed by an intensive assistance period. The local partner carries out the **assessment** of the returnee's needs and abilities, qualifications and plans. Together they look for solutions to enter the labour market again.
- The returnees' economic plans are discussed and, if needed, adjusted in the course of their business assistance. The reintegration budget also finances the **purchasing of necessary equipment** to run the business (e.g. the purchasing of machinery for agriculture). Finally, monitoring the already operating micro-business through regular check-ups/calls is a crucial part of the support.
- If a returnee wishes to find a job in an existing company as an **employee**, the local partner supports this request through orientation and skills analysis. Local partners often have a network which can provide useful assistance in looking for a job.

Some returnees need support directly after arrival. IRMA plus II provided 12 returnees with **initial support** for their basic post-arrival needs. In most cases, this was financial assistance to allow them to pay rent for a few of months. Around 10% of all supported returnees received **medical assistance** through the project, either for themselves or for a close relative who returned together with them. For example, cancer patients were assisted in continuing their treatments and check-ups, and returnees with chronic diseases such as diabetes, liver or kidney insufficiency, arthritis, etc. were advised about available health care options and received funds for essential treatment and medication for the critical transitional period directly after their return. The overwhelming majority of returnees (about 85%) invested their reintegration budget (or a part of it) in an **income generating activity**. This underlines that economic reintegration remained the general focus of the project.

“Coming back wasn't easy for the family; especially my children were suffering. In order to maintain a living, I've purchased a few animals (poultry, ducks, rabbits, goats) for sale and for our own supply. COVID was bad for us, as my husband wasn't able to work during the lockdowns, but at least I was able to feed our animals. The situation is getting better and we are planning to buy a hatchery to be able to sell eggs. My children are attending school. My oldest daughter is suffering from autism and we are trying to help her as much as possible.

**Ms. U., returnee from the Russian Federation**

Our local partners made sure to advise returnees to adapt to the new economic challenges brought by the COVID pandemic when establishing new mini-businesses. Even so, many businesses were very adversely affected by the pandemic, and some were unfortunately forced to close permanently. Returnees shared with us during the monitoring interviews how their otherwise well-running kiosks and restaurants were ruined by the pandemic. However, mini-businesses in agriculture as well as in some service sector areas were relatively safe from the negative effects of the pandemic. These two areas made up almost 80% of the businesses established. Examples of agriculture businesses include cattle breeding, dairy farming (chiefly in the Russian Federation and India), logging and timber trade (Russian Federation) and providing tractor services to other farmers in the area (India). The



most relevant crisis-resistant area of the tertiary sector involved transport businesses, which was not only perceived as an unbureaucratic and fast way of accessing the labour market, but which also proved to be a sustainable source of income during extended lockdowns when getting around was strictly limited and using public transport (if available) was to be avoided. Further areas of the service sector that proved to be a good solution even during the pandemic included shoe and computer repair businesses, a local tourism agency, a tyre service workshop, etc. Here it is also a distinct advantage that people may allot their time according to the specific needs of their families, which is especially important for single parents or for people with sick family members who need care during the day. For example, tailor shops and a shoe repair business served as examples of a flexible form of self-employment for single mothers or mothers with young children in the Russian Federation.

Almost 20% of all businesses are various kinds of shops, ranging from clothes shops and grocery shops to specialised vendors of agriculture machinery. Some of the retail businesses involved the home production of semi-prepared food as well as a kimchi packaging business.

Investing in **education** remained the least significant way of using the reintegration budget throughout the project. Six returnees invested their reintegration budget in education - either in specialised trainings (marketing, graphic design, and an MBA-course in India) or as a way to allow returning children to complete their basic school education.

## Following the Supporting Period

### Reporting & Quality Management

Six - or in most cases twelve - months after the receipt of the reintegration budget, local partners prepare a final narrative report on the developments of each case they assisted. Additionally, clients also fill out an evaluation form at two key moments of their return: one directly following their arrival, and one at the end of their supporting period. The narrative reports are completed by a detailed financial report which includes all the invoices related to costs covered by the reintegration budget. These **reports** provide a valuable source of information for the quality

management of IRMA plus II. Based on the feedback provided by returnees and counsellors alike, the project was tailored and optimised in each participating country to best fit returnees' and partners' needs.

Moreover, as part of the ERSO Network, IRMA plus II and its partners also follow a set **Quality Framework**. Each partner subscribes to this framework when joining the Network and agrees to continuous monitoring, exchange and capacity building when necessary.

The project management's **monitoring and partners' visits** (whether online or on-site) also enable an even closer cooperation with the local stakeholders, and further contribute to the improvement of project processes.

## Perspectives

Both Caritas Austria's current and previous reintegration projects have shown steady development over the past six years. IRMA plus I and II have contributed to the reintegration of a remarkable number of vulnerable voluntary returnees, while showing a great deal of flexibility and resilience in adapting to the ever-changing international environment. Caritas Austria is hoping that this success story can continue in the future, and the cooperation with overseas partners, donors and European ERSO partners stays as fruitful as it has been in the past two project periods.

## Return Story

Ms. R. moved to Austria to secure a better living situation for herself and her young son (aged 5), who remained in Mongolia with his grandparents. She had medical issues and hoped for better health care as well as better job opportunities in Austria. She had no contact to the father of her child and therefore had to raise her son alone with the help of her parents. After receiving a negative asylum decision in Austria, she voluntarily returned to Mongolia in 2020 shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Following her return, she moved into her parents' house in Erdenet and lived there until recently. After having disputes with her mother, Ms. R. decided to move to her brother, and she is trying to find a permanent apartment for her family.

She rented a restaurant lounge in a hotel with the help of the reintegration assistance, and she has been able to maintain the business until today. The COVID pandemic has been problematic throughout the country, and the situation worsened over time. Several lockdowns made it impossible to plan things ahead properly. Nevertheless, the restaurant has been running well and business continues to get better. Ms. R. even expanded the business and which now offers cocktails, pizza and burgers for lunch additionally. She works with up to 11 people in the restaurant, and is even planning to launch an online clothes' business beside her current occupation.

As Ms. R. suffers from heart problems, she registered for a medical consultation in Mongolia, which has not taken place so far. Due to a new law in Mongolia, which offers a free preventive medical check-up, the waiting list for examinations is long, but she will be able to receive medical assistance for free.

**Caritas**  
Austria

 **Bundesministerium**  
Inneres



IRMA plus II is co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the European Union and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior.

**[www.caritas.at/reintegration](http://www.caritas.at/reintegration)**