



Caritas
Austria

IRMA plus

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. Helping their voluntary return and reintegration is an important part of this mission. Besides offering voluntary return counselling for the past 20 years, Caritas has gradually expanded the scope of its support services, ranging from legal assistance through advocacy to reintegration assistance.

Reintegration projects offer a meaningful and necessary **contribution to voluntary** return projects, which they complement by providing returnees with palpable help in starting a new life and support in the first months after return to rebuild their lives and generate sustainable income opportunities. Return and reintegration are the final stages of a sometimes long and difficult migration process. In the case of vulnerable migrants, the usual difficulties are exacerbated, for example 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. The reintegration project of Caritas Austria, **IRMA plus - Integrated Return Management plus**, fulfills this role in the Austrian framework of reintegration support.

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

The IRMA plus Project

In its three-year project period (01/01/2017 - 31/12/2019), IRMA plus **reached more than 450 returnees**, offered reintegration assistance to 196 returnees and helped (directly or indirectly) their 269 family members as well. The project was co-funded by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and the Asylum, Migration and

Integration Fund of the European Union (AMIF). IRMA plus is the only Austrian reintegration project with a special focus on vulnerability. Vulnerability is defined on the basis of the ERSO SURE manual that lists the following general indicators:

- 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 and lack of a social network)
- 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)
- The list is not exhaustive, and vulnerability can depend on the combination of several factors on individual basis and country differences.

The reintegration assistance offered in IRMA Plus consists of max. **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 psychological care, to help setting up a mini-business, or to contribute to clients' education or vocational trainings.

The reintegration process takes place in close assistance and supervision of local partner organizations with whom Caritas Austria cooperates within the network of the European Return Support Organizations (**ERSO**). This partnership of 10 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 project Caritas Austria offered reintegration support in the following 15 partner countries:

Armenia, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo,
Morocco, Mongolia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russian Federation,
Serbia, Tadjhikistan, Ukraine

Project Highlights

IRMA plus has reached multiple milestones during the three years of its implementation. Caritas Austria established stable cooperations with nine local partners already in the first year of the project. Even though the project was originally intended for 150 returnees, the growing list of partner organisations and the inclusion of non-vulnerable returnees in some countries made it necessary to extend the number of available places. Therefore two consecutive extensions raised the total number of participant places from **150 to 200**. This underlines the continuous demand for the project.





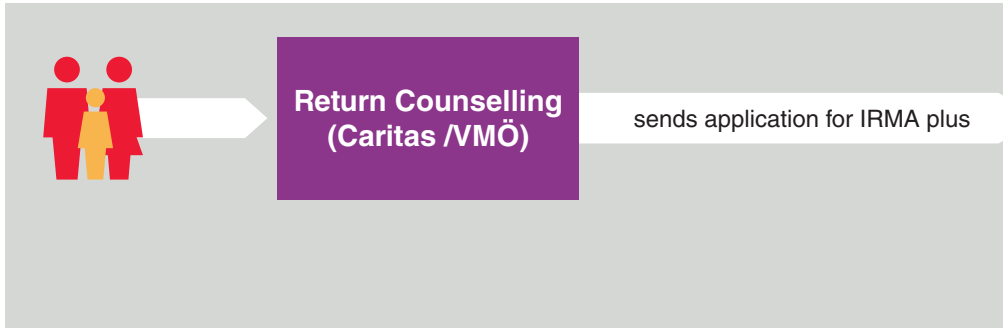
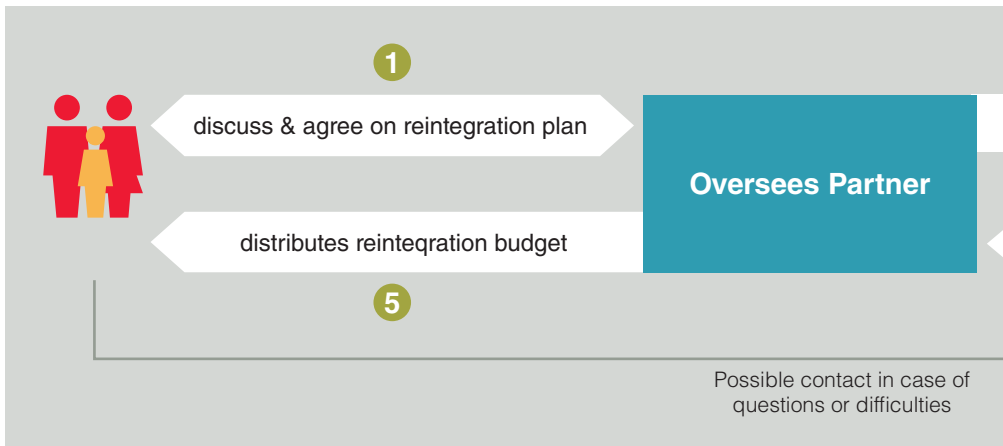
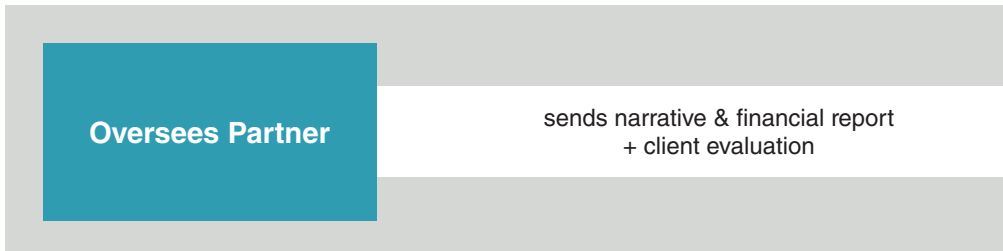
A good cooperation with overseas partners is a crucial aspect of the IRMA plus project. Caritas Austria has deepened its cooperation with the local partners through **three project visits**. These visits to Caritas Georgia (April 2018), Caritas Armenia (November 2018) and Caritas Mongolia (May 2019) provided a unique opportunity to get to know the focus areas of our local partners and the situation of returnees on the ground. The project management and several return counsellors participated in the visits and conducted a total of 25 interviews with IRMA plus returnees during these visits. These provided insight into the country-specific vulnerabilities (such as the precarious situation of chronically ill people in Armenia, the structural difficulties faced by people with disabilities in Georgia or the situation of single parents in Mongolia). This allowed Caritas Austria to gain a deeper understanding of reintegration opportunities in these countries and later allowed Caritas' return counsellors to provide up-to-date information and realistic return scenarios during pre-departure consultations with clients.

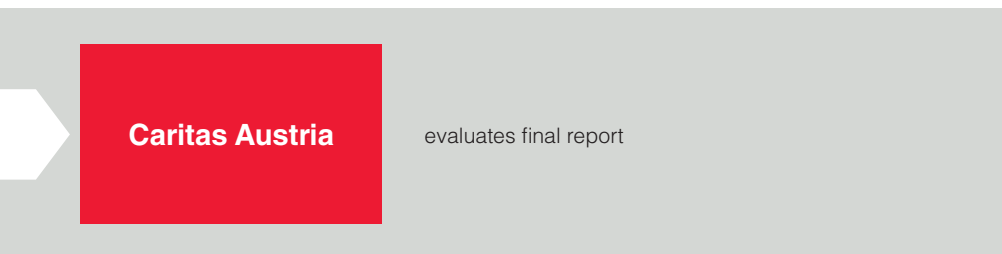
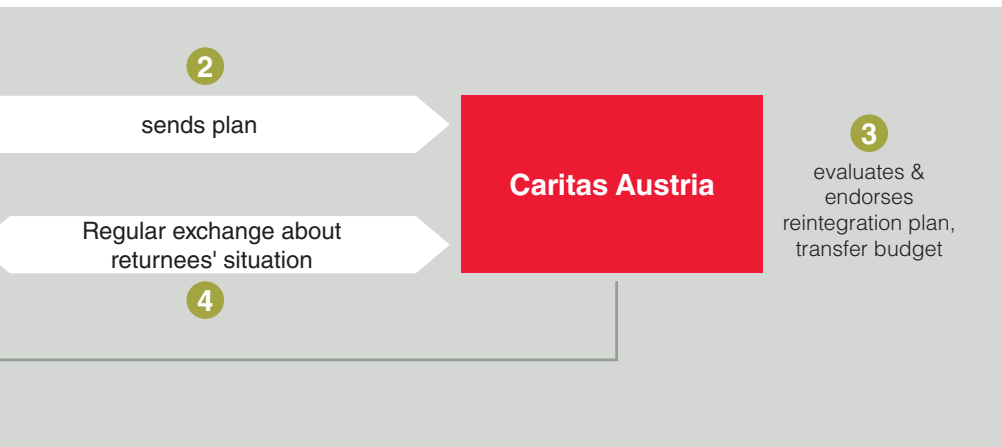
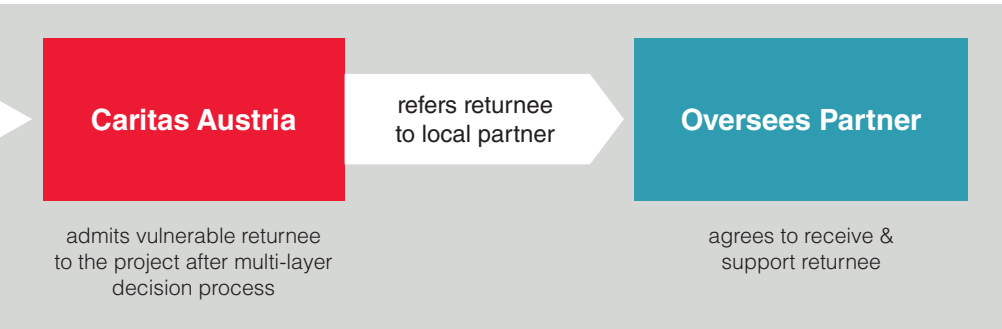
Several other **meetings** served as useful exchange and learning opportunities for the project coordination as well as the counsellors, allowing them to personally meet local partners. These included ERSO meetings, partner meetings and the Transnational Exchange Workshops organised by Caritas Augsburg, as well as the IRMA plus Kick-off and Final Conferences.

The project has shown steady development over the three years and it has contributed to the reintegration of a remarkable number of vulnerable returnees. 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 this project period.

The Project in Practice – Tasks, Responsibilities and Cooperation

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

Prior to Return**During Supporting Period****After Supporting Period**



Pre-departure Counselling and Preparation

Caritas 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 information. The **voluntariness** of the decision is an essential element to successful reintegration and thus to the IRMA plus project. Of course, the reality of return situations is complex. Without a legal basis to stay in Austria, a returnee's options are limited. However, Caritas supports its clients with the necessary information for them to make an informed decision about a voluntary return.

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. A **country-specific information sheet** provides returnees with important details of the project in their native language (reintegration budget regulations, airport assistance, emergency accommodation, etc.). Questions regarding the availability of treatments and medicine in countries of origin are also clarified in advance with the local partner. Whenever considered beneficial, the counsellor organizes a Skype/ phone call between the local partner and the returnee, which helps trust-building and clarifies the details of complicated cases.

IRMA plus is a project primarily for **vulnerable** returnees. Indicators for vulnerability may vary from country to country; therefore each returnee's case is assessed **individually** during the pre-return counselling. This is facilitated by a list of vulnerability indicators that each counsellor consults during the meetings with potential returnees.

The general **indicators of vulnerability** include (among others): single parents with children, elderly people, pregnant women, people with physical disabilities or learning difficulties, people with physical or mental health problems, trau-



matised people, victims of violence, single female-headed households returning without any family support, people who lived in Austria for many years, members of specific communities facing discrimination, etc. The list is non-exhaustive and serves as a useful guideline for counsellors. Many returnees have multiple vulnerabilities and very complex family situations. Therefore 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 regularly updates return counsellors, who receive information about changes relating to the various local partners – e.g. whether a partner is over-worked because of a surge in the number of returnees, whether significant political changes have taken place in a country of return (as was the case in Armenia in 2018), etc. This exchange of information happens individually with counsellors, but also in the form of regular updates per e-mail as well as at the Caritas Counsellors' Meetings every six months. This all contributes to a constantly high quality of counselling.

The Supporting Period

Vulnerability

The above-mentioned vulnerability criteria are based on Decision no. 575/2007/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council,¹ and they already served as a list of indicators in the ERSO SURE project, a previous reintegration project where Caritas Austria was involved (2012-2014).

The **most common vulnerability factors** among participants of IRMA plus were physical/mental **illness** (50%), sometimes exacerbated by severe **traumatisation** (in 18 cases) or partial/total **disability** (in 22 cases). This was most prevalent in Georgia, Armenia and the Russian Federation. Local partners helped returnees in finding the right medical assistance through their connections to other NGOs as

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Our clients, who want to return home, are quite often in desperate need for support and assistance. For us as counsellors, it is great to be able to offer vulnerable customers IRMA Plus project support. Through the project we can jointly develop viable paths to return and reintegration and give the returnees a real perspective.”

Wolfgang Vogeser, Return Counsellor Caritas Linz

¹ 7 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 2008 to 2013

well as to the national health services. They assisted parents in finding the necessary trainings for their disabled children, they helped traumatised returnees find access to psychological assistance and they worked together with families to find a good way to divide their reintegration budget between the imminent medical needs and sustainable economic reintegration.

Also, a significant number of participants spent **a long time in Austria:**

in 41 cases, returnees stayed five or more years, some of them up to 17 years. Most of these cases came from Armenia, Georgia, Nigeria and the Russian Federation. In such cases, local partners also focused more on helping the returnees reconnect with their home country and their families/communities as well as guided them in the process of finding a feasible business (by getting to know the local economy, supply and demand, the labour market, etc.).

IRMA plus assisted 34 **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, but a standard part of it was helping parents find stable income as soon as possible and cope with the necessary administration to re-register their children in schools/kindergardens. 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.

Belonging to **oppressed/discriminated** groups is also a significant vulnerability factor in the project. In total IRMA plus supported 17 cases of this kind of vulnerability. The social situation of the Azeri population in Armenia, the Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan, the Roma in Serbia and Kosovo or the Crimean Tartars in Ukraine is still precarious, due to exclusion and prejudice. Persecution due to sexual or political orientation can also be a major hurdle to reintegration. Protracted conflicts, such as the one in Ukraine, also lead to extreme cases of vulnerability. In all of these

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Coming back has not been easy for us. My husband drinks too much and we separated when we got back. I now take care of our two small children on my own. I am so grateful for the help from Caritas. With the money my son can go to a private school which really helps, because he did not learn to read and write in Mongolian before. I bought a sowing machine and work seamstress now. Business is going well and I am happy I earn my own money.”

Ms. B., returnee from Mongolia

cases our partner organizations have taken careful measures to assist the reintegration of such clients without exposing them to the public. A good example of this help is assisting the set-up of a mini-business where returnees can protect their privacy, especially in the case of belonging to a sexual minority, where otherwise people would have meagre chances of finding employment on the regular labour market. Since all local partners work with well-trained social workers, they possess the necessary skills to provide meaningful assistance even in sensitive and complicated cases.

Supporting returnees

Local partners appoint a case manager who serves as personal contact and as coach for the returnees for the six (in more difficult cases 12) months after return. In this period, the returnee can receive up to 3000€ in-kind reintegration support from Caritas Austria. This budget can be used for specific reintegration activities which can be divided into four main areas: basic needs, medical and psychological help, economic reintegration and (further) education.



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.



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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.

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 the returnees. What is common in the consultations is the focus on **long-term sustainability**. 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 change this pressure into thinking of sustainable long-term solutions which secure the imminent necessities of the family and at the same time enable gradually more financial independence.

Almost a third of the supported returnees received some **initial support** for their basic post-arrival needs. In most cases, this was financial assistance to allow them to pay rent for a couple of months. Around 20% 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, nine returning children with serious disabilities could participate in rehabilitation and logopedics courses, while other returnees were advised about available health care options or could finance essential medication for the critical transitional period directly after their return. The overwhelming majority of returnees (93%) invested their reintegration budget (or a part of it) into an **income generating activity**. This also underlines that economic reintegration has steadily remained the general focus of the project.

“As the saying goes, every disappointment can be a blessing. It hasn't really been easy since we returned, but at least I can take care of my family from my income. I am planning to set up a grocery shop for my wife, by God's grace, from the profit early next year to also support the family income. The two older children are helping the younger ones from Europe to adjust to the language and in their school activities”

Mr. O., returnee from Nigeria

Most returnees chose a mini-business in agriculture (cattle breeding, dairy farming, beekeeping, greenhouses, etc.), closely followed by transport businesses (transportation of goods or working as a taxi driver). The latter was especially perceived as a good means of finding employment in the Caucasus as well as in Russia, because it proved to be an unbureaucratic and fast way of accessing the labour market, which helped many families in need.

Almost a fourth of all businesses are various shops, ranging from clothes shops though grocery shops to specialized vendors of motorcycle parts, pharmaceutical products or other convenience items.

Around 14% of the business investments are in the tertiary sector. This was especially a popular choice in Armenia, Georgia and Russia. These returnees provide services as beauticians, repairmen, seamstresses or hairdressers. Here it is 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.

Setting up bakeries, cafés or fast food restaurants is also a popular option for project participants in all countries of return.

Investing in education remained the least significant way of using the reintegration budget through the project. In the 17 cases it was used, however, it made a contribution to children's education possibilities and it provided specialized trainings for returnees (such as barista/hairdresser/pedicure-trainings).

Following the Supporting Period – Reporting & Quality Management

6 months after the receipt of the reintegration budget, local partners prepare a final narrative report on the developments of each case they assisted. This is completed by an evaluation form where clients express their opinion on the assistance they received during the project, as well as 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. Based on the feedback provided by returnees and counsellors alike, the project has been tailored and optimized in each participating country to best fit returnees' and partners' needs. IRMA plus and its partners are part of the ERSO Network, and 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 **partners visits** also enable an even closer cooperation with the local stakeholders, and can further improve processes and structures.

Return Story

Ms. D. came to Austria with her three children (aged 18, 8 and 5). The family had sold all their belongings, including all property, in order to finance their journey to Austria. As Ms. D. and two of her children suffer from health problems, they hoped for better medical care, as well as better education and a chance for a better life. The father of the children stayed in Mongolia. Ms. D. made the difficult decision to return voluntarily to Mongolia because she realised that their chances of getting asylum or residence permits were very low, and a legal stay in Austria seemed impossible. Another reason was that the children missed their father very much.

Following their return, the family reunited and lived with the father's sister and shared one room. Despite the lack of space and the difficult situation, the family was very happy to be back together. Ms. D. started working on a reintegration plan with Caritas Mongolia. The family was in great financial need despite the fact that the father had a job. Being a professional masseuse, Ms. D. wished to establish a massage saloon, but soon understood that the reintegration budget would not be enough to cover the cost for this business venture. After discussing the issue with her case manager at Caritas Mongolia and with friends, she decided to invest her budget into a small convenience store in the countryside instead. She rented a building that was divided into a shop and living space for the family. As the shop is located close to the premises of a recreational camp for members of the military and their families, it attracts many visitors all year around. Ms. D. took out an extra loan to pay for the goods she now sells in the shop and is currently repaying the credit on a monthly basis. This is the first time Ms. D. is a shop manager, so it took some improvisation and getting used to at the beginning, but she soon got the hang of handling the business. Currently, her parents run the shop during weekdays, while she and her family are in the capital where the children go to school and university, and on weekends Ms. D. and her husband take care of the business.

The family managed to pay for the medical assistance of the sick children (Ms. D's daughter has eye problems, and one of her sons suffers from heart disease) with the father's salary. The children are all well-reintegrated in Mongolia, but also remain in touch with their school friends and teachers from Austria.



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IRMA plus 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