

STUDY VISIT

06/01/2022

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Study Visit to Helsinki

1 December 2021, Online

Study Visit to Helsinki: the management of child returnees

Key outcomes

Finland was one of the first European Union Member States that started repatriating its citizens, particularly children, from formerly Daesh-affiliated territories. As a result, local structures and multi-agency cooperation between all relevant actors were established in Helsinki and put to the test. The aim was to facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children and their mothers. On 1 December 2021, a digital RAN Study Visit to Helsinki provided practitioners the opportunity to gain experience from Helsinki's efforts integrating returning children and their mothers. The digital study visit provided insights from those who are directly working with the target group. In addition to sharing experiences, participants were able to raise questions and enter into discussion with the expert practitioners.

The main points highlighted during the study visit are listed below.

- Finland's overall approach to repatriation is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. As such, Finland's goal is to repatriate all Finnish children from the camps in formerly Daesh-controlled territory.
- The main goal is to provide child returnees with safety and wellbeing and to facilitate their integration into Finnish society. Safe housing is made available and the location of the children and their mothers is not disclosed to the public. The preventive police work unit is tasked with keeping the returnees and the people around them safe by staying in touch with both the returnees and the receiving communities.
- Education is prioritised. Education for the child returnees from Helsinki is conducted remotely (via smartphones) at one of the camps (Al-Hol) in collaboration with a non-public education project. Children are taught Finnish language, culture and other subjects. This helps the children (and their mothers) by providing them basic skills, a routine and building their confidence.
- Upon the children's arrival in Finland, the multi-agency team starts formulating a shared goal for their work with them. Their aim is to strengthen cooperation and facilitate information sharing. Two social workers are involved. One for the child and one for the mother.
- The overall approach to the child returnees and their mothers is based on trauma-informed work. Working on trust building, openness and transparency, empowerment and acknowledging someone's life situation in the past and present. Mental health practitioners continuously monitor the children for signs of possible traumas that may show up after a few years. This approach calls for a long-term commitment and policy.

This paper summarises the main insights gained about Helsinki's management of child returnees, describing the multi-agency cooperation in a chronological order. This is followed up by recommendations from the practitioners from Helsinki to their colleagues from different Member States. Follow-up and inspiring practices are also presented.

Highlights of the discussion

The return management process starts with selecting the most vulnerable children for repatriation, preparing them for the return and their eventual rehabilitation and reintegration into Finnish society.

Before the repatriation of children and their mothers

- The agreements set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child constitute the grounds on which Finland has decided to repatriate all children from the camps in Syria and Iraq. Based on materials such as the reports by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service PET¹ and by the Ministry of Interior², it was agreed that leaving the children in the camps is a larger security threat in the long-term than the security threat of repatriating them to Finland. A special envoy oversees the selection process and arrangements linked to the children's departure to Finland. As it is important for the wellbeing of the children to keep the mother and child together, the children's mothers are repatriated as well. Most returnees came to Helsinki. The mothers are not currently prosecuted.
 - Finland criminalised the travelling into conflict zones in December 2016. Most women that were or still are in the camps travelled to Syria before this. Therefore, the returning women have not been prosecuted.
- The city of Helsinki prepared by setting up a systematic approach and multidisciplinary collaboration. The overall approach has been outlined in an expert report titled *National modelling for arranging long-term support measures for children returning from conflict zones and their family members* (see Further Reading). For every child, the practitioners responsible must decide on a case-by-case basis what is needed and who needs to be involved. Actors may include practitioners with a background in healthcare, early childhood education and care, teachers, professionals from the child welfare services, preventive police, forensic psychology and psychiatry, adult social work, NGOs, and religious communities.
- Based on the realisation that young children growing up in the camps have poor education and little or no knowledge of the Finnish language, the special Finnish envoy initiated a mobile distance learning project for the camps that was initially kept secret from the public. Although phones are generally forbidden in the camps (and this is also the most important reason to keep the project secret), the mothers were provided with phones their children could use to connect to the education service.
 - The education project built and/or recovered basic language skills, maths and English for older children. Additionally, the project provided the children and their mothers with meaningful activities and stimulated their sense of routine and their self-confidence. The result was a growing sense of inclusion and easier rehabilitation and reintegration of the children and their mothers.
- Upon the children's arrival in Finland, child protection social workers were at the airport to welcome the families and bring them to safe housing in child welfare institutions.

After the repatriation of children and their mothers

- The main focus is to keep the returnee children safe. This provides a more stable rehabilitation and reintegration process and is beneficial for their overall development. Therefore, not only are the children and mothers kept safe, but also their family members and their community.
 - The city allocates housing within its child welfare institutions. This is unique compared to other countries. The children and mothers cannot leave the emergency placements from the city.

¹https://www.pet.dk/Nyheder/2021/~/_/media/Hjemtagelse%20af%20DK%20kvinder%20Syrien/SikkerhedsvurderingTFEpdf.ashx

²https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79612/Palaaajat%20_enkku.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

- Each family is assigned a multi-professional team to assess their general care and rehabilitation needs. The team members are from child protection, social work, family rehabilitation, family counselling, adult social work, health services, day-care, school, police and mental health.
 - Two social workers are supporting each family, one works with the mothers and the other with the children. The social workers assess the condition of the children and the parenting skills of the mothers. How do the mothers treat their children? How do the mothers co-operate with the authorities? The social workers also support the returnees with the bureaucracy.
 - The children are enrolled at day-care or school as soon as possible.
- The mental health practitioners in Helsinki provide trauma-informed care focusing on safety, trust and transparency, peer support, mutuality, empowerment and choices. They are also sensitive in terms of cultural and social contexts.
 - One of the difficulties in addressing the trauma suffered by the children is the role of the father. The practitioners in Helsinki acknowledge the absence of a child's father (either he is deceased or remains in Syria or Iraq). Providing these children a chance to talk about their father is important. It can be exceedingly difficult for the children to deal with what their parents did.
 - Children may take on their parents' burden as they are exposed to the trauma of their parents. The practitioners work together with the mothers to teach them how to set boundaries. The mothers can feel they are under pressure to show their responsibility for their children even if they are struggling to cope with their own traumas. There are under a lot of pressure to show that they are good mothers.
 - Some returnees remain in contact with people from the camps, which can influence their reintegration process and trauma processing. There is a chance that minors might want to go back to the camps because they miss their friends (with whom they keep contact with after repatriation). It is also possible they feel guilty because they had the opportunity to escape the camp while their friends do not.
 - After an initial assessment of their mental health, the children may be deemed stable and show no signs of trauma. However, the mental health practitioners take into consideration that this can be different in the long-term, as trauma may surface years later.
- The role of the prevent unit from the Helsinki police is to safeguard the returnee's safety, while also taking on a reassuring function in the receiving communities. When there is something happening around the returnees, everyone knows to contact the police. Their role is to maintain a sense of calmness around the children.
- Within Helsinki's system for multi-agency cooperation, practitioners receive independent counselling. This provides practitioners with supervision and a place to unwind and offload. These moments of supervision and counselling aim to tighten the cooperation but also to share and exchange challenges.
- The example of Finland shows interesting dynamics at play as regards the public perception of and public debate around returning children and mothers. Before there were any returnees, there was a lengthy debate that polarised the public about whether Finland should accept returnees. However, the Finnish government outlined their strategy for repatriation and quickly afterwards repatriated two orphans in 2019.

Recommendations

The multi-agency cooperation: recommendations for practitioners

- When working with returnees, now or in future, practitioners should be aware of their own role and responsibilities, as well as those of their colleagues. Also, office hours may not be regular since managing the wellbeing of the returnees might initially be a 24/7 responsibility. It takes a strong involvement, which changes the scope of practitioners' work.
- In multi-agency cooperation, practitioners work towards shared goals and creating mutuality in their process of rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. With good preparation via workshops and working on these shared goals, building trust and sharing information will become easier.
- Practitioners should be openminded towards the children and their mothers. They should be guided in reflecting their own biases. However, taking into consideration that the mothers might be prosecuted and convicted, it is important to not be naïve about this process either.
- Supervision with independent counselling for practitioners is important in order to create a place to reflect and to offload stress. The concept of helping-the-helper should be considered.

Recommendations for handling public opinion

- The Helsinki experience shows that public perception evolves in a pattern of waves. It may be a coincidence that the attention to returnees fades away. However, Helsinki advises other cities to take active control in shaping the narrative from the side of the institutions around the public discussion about returnees.
- Current data and information on the repatriation process is necessary. It is important to point out that the (long-term) risk of leaving the children in the camps is higher than repatriating them.

Practical recommendations on managing child returnees

The foundation of the Finnish approach to repatriation is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the report of the Ministry of Interior from April 2017. It sets out the right to childhood and education, as well as Finland's constitutional obligation to protect children.

- Decreased or unjust access to education causes or contributes to conflicts and radicalisation. Education combats (further) radicalisation. Therefore, starting with education and activities that support immediate schooling and learning are recommended. This can be empowering for both the children and their mothers.
 - The younger children should enter daycare as soon as possible. Each child's unique needs (depending on their age) should be considered.
- Practitioners working with child returnees and their mothers should firstly work on trust-building and open dialogue by staying transparent and collaborating with them in their process. This will create confidential and safe relationships. Additionally, it will help them to be trauma conscious.
- Practitioners should create a safe environment for the children. Ensuring their safety is a starting point. Therefore, it is important to keep the mothers safe as well. The wellbeing of the mothers influences the children and their overall development.
 - A long-term approach is needed for the rehabilitation of the children. While a child may appear stable at the beginning, signs of trauma may emerge after several years. Relations to the families should be long-term and grounded in trauma-informed care.
- Practitioners should focus on the communities receiving the returning children and mothers. The multi-agency team (police, youth worker, social worker) should be open and listen to their concerns and recommendations.

Relevant practices

Inspiring project and practice from Helsinki

1. [Mobile distance education to Finnish children in Al-Hol, Finland.](#) Children in the Al-Hol camp follow education on the Finnish culture and language via a specially designed mobile app. This form of remote schooling helped children, who barely spoke Finnish and knew very little about Finland, to prepare for their repatriation. Above all, it gave the children and the mothers a purpose, routine, and boosted self-confidence.
2. [Trauma-informed care.](#) All practitioners in Helsinki working with returnees are providing trauma-informed care. It focuses on safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, humility and responsiveness. By doing so, it acknowledges the patient's life situation in the past and present.

Follow up

The need for guidance in dealing with public opinion and debate around child returnees, and returnees in general, was evident. A follow-up could be in the form of a RAN Small-scale meeting on how to build resilience against 'toxic' narratives in the public debate, and how to make the factual narrative appealing to the public.

Further reading

SOCCA – The Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (2021). National modelling for arranging long-term support measures for children returning from conflict zones and their family members. Expert Report. See: [http://www.socca.fi/files/9312/National_modelling_for_arranging_long-term_support_measures_for_children_returning_from_conflict_zones_and_their_family_members_Expert_report_\(2\).pdf](http://www.socca.fi/files/9312/National_modelling_for_arranging_long-term_support_measures_for_children_returning_from_conflict_zones_and_their_family_members_Expert_report_(2).pdf)

UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (2019). [Handbook Children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach.](#)

UNICEF (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child.](#)

RAN Specialised Paper. June 2021. [Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE.](#)

RAN Specialised Paper. November 2021. [Focus on Children – The challenge to reflect on values with imprisoned extremist parents.](#)

RAN FC&S multi-meeting. May 2021. [Dealing with returning children and their mothers from Daesh: taking stock and going forward.](#)