



# REMOVED

Stories of hardship  
and resilience in facing  
deportation and its aftermath

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*\*Real names have been changed*

## Who we are

Founded as an initiative of grassroots organisations, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) represents a network of 164 organisations working with undocumented migrants in 33 countries.

With nearly two decades of evidence, experience and expertise on undocumented migrants, PICUM promotes recognition of their human rights and provides an essential link between local realities and the debates taking place at policy level.

Based in Brussels, Belgium, PICUM provides regular recommendations and expertise to policymakers and institutions within the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union as well as on national and local level.

## Introduction



This booklet is the outcome of collaborative work between Jill Alpes, researcher, who collected the stories narrated in the book during hours of qualitative interviews in Nigeria and Mali; several volunteers, who illustrated the stories with their art and creativity; and PICUM.

By providing short glimpses into the lives and stories of individuals who have been deported from Europe to Nigeria and Mali, this project aims to shed light on the impact of EU return policies on people's lives and dreams.

For people who have been deported, sharing their stories is not always easy, as their experience of deportation may lead to stigmatisation and exclusion. Moreover, the process can bring back forgotten experiences of trauma, violence and injustice. For all these reasons, we would like to express our gratitude to all those people who accepted to share their stories with us, and to thank Jill Alpes for her research work, without which their stories would remain unknown. The stories were collected through thirteen open-ended semi-conducted qualitative interviews with individuals deported from France, the UK, the Netherlands and Estonia, and now living in urban areas in Nigeria (Lagos and Benin City) and Mali (Bamako). Research participants were contacted through a multitude of avenues, including introductions by NGOs, lawyers, academics, local researchers, activists and journalists.

While the intention of the research was not to interview mainly male deportees, in practice the stories ended up being almost entirely of men. The limited gender disaggregated data on return from the EU indicates that more men are deported than women (according to Eurostat data<sup>1</sup>, 67 % of the individuals who were deported or returned from six EU member states in 2019 were men), but the discrepancy is also linked to the reluctance of many to share their stories of the return process, due to fears of stigmatisation. The gender imbalance should be noted and is also a call to ensure that the distinct experiences faced by deportees due to gender are not overlooked in the return process.

This booklet does not aim to be comprehensive in its coverage of experiences of people who have been deported from Europe. It rather aims at sharing glimpses of individuals' lives and experiences. The booklet aims to give a more nuanced understanding of the impact of EU policies on returns. The final section of the booklet includes some key recommendations concerning EU return policies, as well as additional resources to learn more.

People who are deported are too easily forgotten and muted. Being deported from Europe should not mean forgetting one's experiences. By sharing these stories, we hope that this booklet can help to expand our understanding of what deportation policies really mean in practice.

<sup>1</sup> This data includes both forced returns and assistance voluntary returns. Data is available only for the following countries: Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovakia and the UK. Sources: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_eirtn1&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_eirtn1&lang=en)

## Roland

I was born in Lagos, but my father brought me to the UK when I was 7, after he got married to a British woman. I went to school. After he moved to another city, I was assigned to a foster family. At 15, I went to college, where every student had to travel to work in a car company abroad. That is when I found out that I had no passport and I was living irregularly in the country.

From there, I was put in a detention centre for adults for over nine months. I had no criminal record and I was scared. I almost committed suicide. They never allowed me to pick up my belongings at my foster family's home. When they took me to the Embassy, the staff refused to provide the travel documents for my deportation because I was a minor. I do not know what sort of document I got deported with. Even when I asked, they refused to show the documents to me. I had a lawyer in the detention centre, but I do not have his contact anymore because I did not have access to a phone when they deported me.

*I only had one court hearing, one chance.*

I was handcuffed when I got deported. It was to avoid I would commit suicide. I was outraged when I saw I was channelled through the cargo section of the airport in Lagos. Other deportees on the flight protested because I was a minor. I think the Nigerian police were bribed to deport me. When I arrived in Nigeria, I had no experience in the country. I did not even know who to call. All the people I knew were from Birmingham. One of the deportees took me on. I lived with his family for a week. I started to learn how to become a plumber. I slept on the different sites where I was working. I was playing a lot of football, but it does not give you money. I had the same clothes every day. I was not eating. I had to sell my phone because I was staying for two days without seeing food.

Some people at work might know that I got deported because of my accent, but I keep it for myself. I feel ashamed.





## Esther

In Nigeria, my stepmother was mistreating me. In 2007, at 23, I flew to France where I worked for six months before going to the Netherlands. For the first three years in Europe, I had renewable residence permits. I had three children with an Ivorian man who was living in France with a residence permit. He wanted to take us with him, but he was not allowed to. After that, things became very difficult. I was not sending money to Nigeria because I did not have a job.

They picked us on a Monday, nine years after I had arrived in Europe. We were not even able to pack our things.

*My daughters (8, 7 and 5 years old) and I were locked up two weeks in the detention center in Zeist.*

I was sick. We got deported in April 2016 on a charter flight. We did not even see the documents (laissez passer) they used to deport us.

Once in Nigeria, I did not call my family because I did not have their phone number anymore. We were in the street. After three hours from the landing, a pastor came and took us to Obu State where we are living now. The man took us to a house. I was scared, but we did not have any choice. We had to go.

I can get used to it, but it is still difficult for my children. They want to go back to the Netherlands, where they were born. They miss their father, their teachers, their friends. So do I. If it will ever be possible, we will go back.







## Daniel

### *I am stranded.*

I come from Sierra Leone, but I no longer have family in Sierra Leone because of the war. I did not go to school much, and I do not remember how old I was when I left Sierra Leone. I just know somebody took me away to Mozambique. From there, a pastor connected me with a businessman who paid my flight ticket to the UK in 2006. I immediately sought asylum, but my application got refused. I was put in detention in 2008 because they sentenced me for failing to comply with going to the High Commission of Sierra Leone for Emergency Travel Document (ETD).

### *When you are in detention, you cannot go out, you waste your time, you have no freedom. It was terrible.*

They brought me to the Sierra Leone High Commissioner. They denied I was from Sierra Leone. They brought a language specialist and they said I was from Nigeria. I never met the High Commissioner of Nigeria, I only had a phone interview. The man told me I could receive 5,000 Pounds for saying I was Nigerian. The British authorities never showed me the ETD, I never had any documents about this whole process, and I did not have any lawyer to check it.

I was deported in 2009 on a charter flight. When we arrived in Nigeria, immigration authorities entered the plane to ask everyone for addresses to be able to leave the plane. I had no address or contacts in Nigeria. They took me to the police station where they forced me to write something. If I did not write an address, they would put me in prison. I gave them 5,000 Naira and they dropped me off at a bus station. I did not know anybody, so I looked for a hotel and paid with the little money I had from my work in the detention centre.

When I got deported, I tried to move to different countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea. It was very difficult because I did not have a valid passport or other identity documents, so I came back to Nigeria. I am staying at an old woman's, but she is sick, and the house is falling apart. There is no money. Sometimes I am not able to eat every day. A British friend of mine sometimes sends money, but it is complicated to receive it as I do not have a passport.



## Michael

I arrived in the UK with my mum when I was 2, on a joint visa with her husband. I got the indefinite leave to remain in the country, which is like a second-class citizenship. I wanted to work in business and sport, and I was doing a Higher National Diploma in Business Management.

One day, I was hanging out with friends at my place, and one of them came with girls. One of the girls had run away from home, and the police was looking for her. When they rushed in, my friend rushed out with the girls. I told the police I did not know the under-age girl, I had nothing to do with her. When they found her, they thought I was lying. They accused me of “holding a minor against will”. I got a first judgment for the criminal trial, which my lawyer advised me to appeal. The deportation order came as the appeal was still pending. I was put in pre-trial detention for six months before the first judgement of the criminal trial. Then I was sentenced for another eighteen months. One day, while in prison, they brought me to a detention centre to meet staff from the Nigerian Embassy. I was telling them that I had always lived in the UK, and that my case was still pending. They pulled a copy of my Nigerian passport and pressured me to sign it.

*I literally did not know whether I would be deported until the night they came to me.*

They came to take me in the night but did not say anything. Once in the plane, they gave me a phone and I called my mum. I was waiting for the results of my appeal. They were not supposed to put me on the plane. It was a charter flight; it was a nightmare.

Being deported is worse than being in prison. In prison, I just had to do my time and then I could go out again. I don't know whether I'll be stuck here forever.

Once in Lagos, I started sleeping on the street until I found a pastor who helped me reconnect with my lawyer in the UK. I used the internet café to look for my mum on Facebook. She told me she did not have friends in Nigeria anymore. She was scared and told me to go to a church. I went from church to church for several weeks. I've now told her I am staying with a friend so that she does not worry.

It's been a long time since I last spoke English. I learned Pidgin after the deportation – and the hard way. My mind is in the UK, I do not want to settle here.





## Ismael

I left Niger when I was 13. I went to Libya with the help of my uncle. I was cleaning offices there, and later worked as a mechanic in a company in Misrata (Libya). I was sending money to my mother – between 50 and 100 euros.

In 2011, ten years after I left Niger, Misrata was under siege. I stayed three months in the company without being able to leave. When the military entered the city, they transferred us to Tripoli. Three days later, they brought us to a large ship. We were 350 people per ship. Three ships out of five drowned. The motor of ours broke, but a helicopter came and rescued us.

After disembarking in Lampedusa, I stayed in Turin for a year and a half. However, I was not able to find work, so I went to Germany, where I applied for asylum. I was living in a tent in Oranienplatz, in Berlin. When the German police came to evacuate the encampment, they said they would get me Duldung [a document stating that I was not going to be deported despite having no residence permit] and transferred me to a hotel. But the hotel pushed me out, so I ended up sleeping in a church. When I tried to renew the Duldung, the police arrested me.

My friends in Berlin brought my belongings to the detention centre in Frankfurt, but the staff refused to give them to me, saying that “gifts” were not allowed.

*I was 29 when I was deported back to Niger.  
I did not even know how the local currency worked.*

Here in Niamey I am alone, and I cannot work. My friends in Germany keep sending me money so I can pay my rent in Niamey. Next month, I will go to Ghana to study German, because there is no Goethe Institute here. My girlfriend and I are still planning to get married so that I can get a residence permit in Germany.

There was no school in my village, the first time I went to school was in Italy.





## Sekou

I went to Ivory Coast in 2001 and spent two years there. At 20, I left for Europe.

I worked in a restaurant in France. I stayed there for 14 years. I saved money and was able to send some to my family and friends in Mali. With that money, my mum was able to get treatment against her breast cancer. One day, the police found me in the restaurant where I had been working for years.

I spent two days in police custody and thirty-seven days in detention.

*The police obtained a Laissez-Passer, but I was not allowed to see it. I wanted to know what the paper was and what was on it. When I asked to see it, the policeman insulted me, he said it was confidential.*

I only got access to it later with the help of the Association Malienne des Expulsés (AME).

In 2017, I was deported to Mali. Today, I am married, and I have a child. I am struggling.

I came back with 300 euros savings only. I had 3.000 EUR on my French bank account, but I used all of them in legal fees to try to regularise my position, without success but I cannot access it.

I do not earn any money at the moment.





## Issa

I come from a village in the North of Mali. In 2012, I was 17 and we fled because rebels came to the village and killed a lot of people. My family was dispersed. My father went to work in Kaye. I went by bus to Mauritania and then hid in a truck to go to Spain. That same year, I went to Germany.

I stayed four years in Germany. One day, the police came to where I used to sleep. The return to Africa was a surprise for me. I did not resist but I insisted to know why I was deported. I did not receive any letter saying that the police would come and pick me up.

*Since my return in 2016, I am alone in Bamako.  
I am not in contact with my family,  
I am not even sure whether they are alive.*

After the deportation flight to Bamako, I met some fishermen in the city. They had tents and that is where I have found shelter. I used to get sand out of the river and sell it.

Today, I am almost homeless. My tent is far away from the city centre. I am only able to eat because the fishermen let me eat out of solidarity. I will try and do fishing with them, but I need a loan.

I approached public authorities several times, but I did not succeed to get funding for my project. If it does not work, I will have debts. I think I will leave again and try and go to Morocco.





## Ibrahim

I studied until I turned 15. I had no money to continue my studies beyond that. I started washing motorbikes to save some money. I got married and had two daughters who were going to school.

In 2013, I went to Moscow for work, and I stayed there. I was delivering newspapers and after seven months, I went to Estonia where I was immediately detained.

In the detention centre, the food was not enough. I needed to use some of my savings to eat properly. They gave us potatoes, there was also pasta. In the morning, it was porridge. The food was very simple and poor. When I was arrested, I had roughly 1.000 Dollar. After three months, I already had nothing left. Everything they sold were expensive. What normally would cost 1 Euro costed 4 Euros. When you were sick, you had to pay yourself for the medicine.

I was detained for 37 months – 3 years – in Estonia. The Malian Consular recognised the Malians citizens who were detained – including me – without even coming to the detention centre.

*I lost a lot of time in detention, I don't want to think back to those three years.*

I was deported to Mali end of 2017. I returned with a Laissez-Passer, but I was not able to check it before or during the flight. When we arrived, the escorts gave the Laissez-Passer straight to the Malian police. I was very angry that they did not give it to me when we arrived.

During my whole time in detention, I was not able to send anything back. As a result, my daughters dropped out of school. They were 7 and 10 years old. My relationships with my family have gotten worse after my deportation. I have no support. My wife is living at her father's house because I do not have any money, not even for the food. That is why we are living separately.





## Siaka

I was doing trade in Mali and Nigeria. In 1998, I lost the capital of my trade because of a fire and a heat wave. I was in debt, and the only solution I saw was to try and leave. I first wanted to go to the US, but I finally spent 3.500.000 CFA (around 5.300 Euro) to get a Schengen visa for Europe. I was 28 and had three children (1, 5 and 7 years old).

*I stayed seventeen years in Europe.  
I lived in France, Luxembourg, Germany and Spain.  
With what I earned from my work in the farms, I was able  
to pay rent for the house in Mali. One day, while in France,  
the police stopped me and checked my papers.*

I was put into a detention centre for two days and got deported. I went back to the house where my wife was. I was 46.

I'm not earning anything now. Today my children are 18, 22 and 24 years old. They are following professional training classes in plumbing and electricity. I do not know how much a plumber, or an electrician can earn in Mali. They would love to go to Europe, but they lack the means.

I feel a bit European now. There are some tensions with my wife because I want some things in a European way. Reintegration after seventeen years is hard. Now my life is very precarious. I have debts to pay and I feel socially rejected. The Association Malienne des Expulsés (AME) was able to help me with the rent for six months. Otherwise I had no help, no assistance. Nobody. Nothing.

I would like to work in agriculture, but I lack the resources.

When you have nothing, you are nothing.





## Faruq

I am the fourth in a family of six children. I dropped out of school early on and worked as a dressmaker. I had a shop but I still wanted to travel. I was not very close to my parents even then. When I was 26, I paid 1.000.000 Naira to a man who promised to get me to Europe. The passport he gave me had a different name on it; my lawyer tried to change it later on, but it was not possible.

I did not even know to what country I was flying to. I was in the hands of this man who asked me to sell drugs. I ran away but he threatened me with a knife and said I would be deported back to Nigeria. I found support from several organisations and eventually ended up in the Netherlands. A lawyer managed to get me a one-year residence permit. After that one year, I was left without papers. A few years later, I was arrested and detained for six months. Then, I got deported. The day they brought me back to Nigeria, I was beaten up by the Dutch police.

*When I arrived in Nigeria, I was on the street.*

I had a towel on my head because the police had beaten me up before my deportation flight. I went to churches to sleep. I met a man who offered to host me in his house. I work in a bar now, but they do not know I have been abroad. If they know that I have been deported, they will not give me a job. They will not trust me. They will think that I will try and steal money so that I can go back to Europe. In Nigeria, people think you got deported because you are a criminal. If they know I have been deported, they will not give me a job.

My life is even worse than before. I have lost everything, even my sewing machines. We receive no support from the government, and the wages are not enough to survive.







## Ousmane

I left Mali for Algeria to work on a construction site, because they pay more there. I stayed in Algeria for six months and saved some money, but racism was hard. I had no further migration project at first, it all happened through a friend when I was 25. I had a sister in France and thought life would be better there. I stayed in Morocco for five months, trying to cross over. Finally, a cousin sent me some money so that I could go on a safer and better boat. I tried three times with the boat, before being able to finally cross.

Upon arrival on the Spanish islands, we were brought to a detention centre. After three days, I was transferred to mainland Spain. Three weeks later, I went to France to find my sister. I wanted to work as an electrician. I worked in a restaurant while waiting for the training. One day, the police stopped me at a bus station in Paris and took me to the police station. Later, at the Embassy, I was handcuffed during my interview. There was no problem to get the passport because they had access to my birth certificate. I spent twenty-five days in detention before being deported.

I was deported in March 2018 on an Air France flight. I was handcuffed during the deportation. I had a full suitcase with clothes and documents – including my birth certificate – but I could not put a hand on it when I got deported. After we landed, I was escorted out of the plane by some border police officers. Then they left shortly after. I spent one week at my brother's and then went back to my parents' house. My mother was very angry that they sent me back. It is hard when you see your son starting to succeed and then coming back. I am often in a bad mood. I was not accepting what happened, I was alone and angry.

*Once I have the means, I will try to go again.*

I am only here to do my papers and I will return to France. My sister is willing to bring me over again.



## Oumar

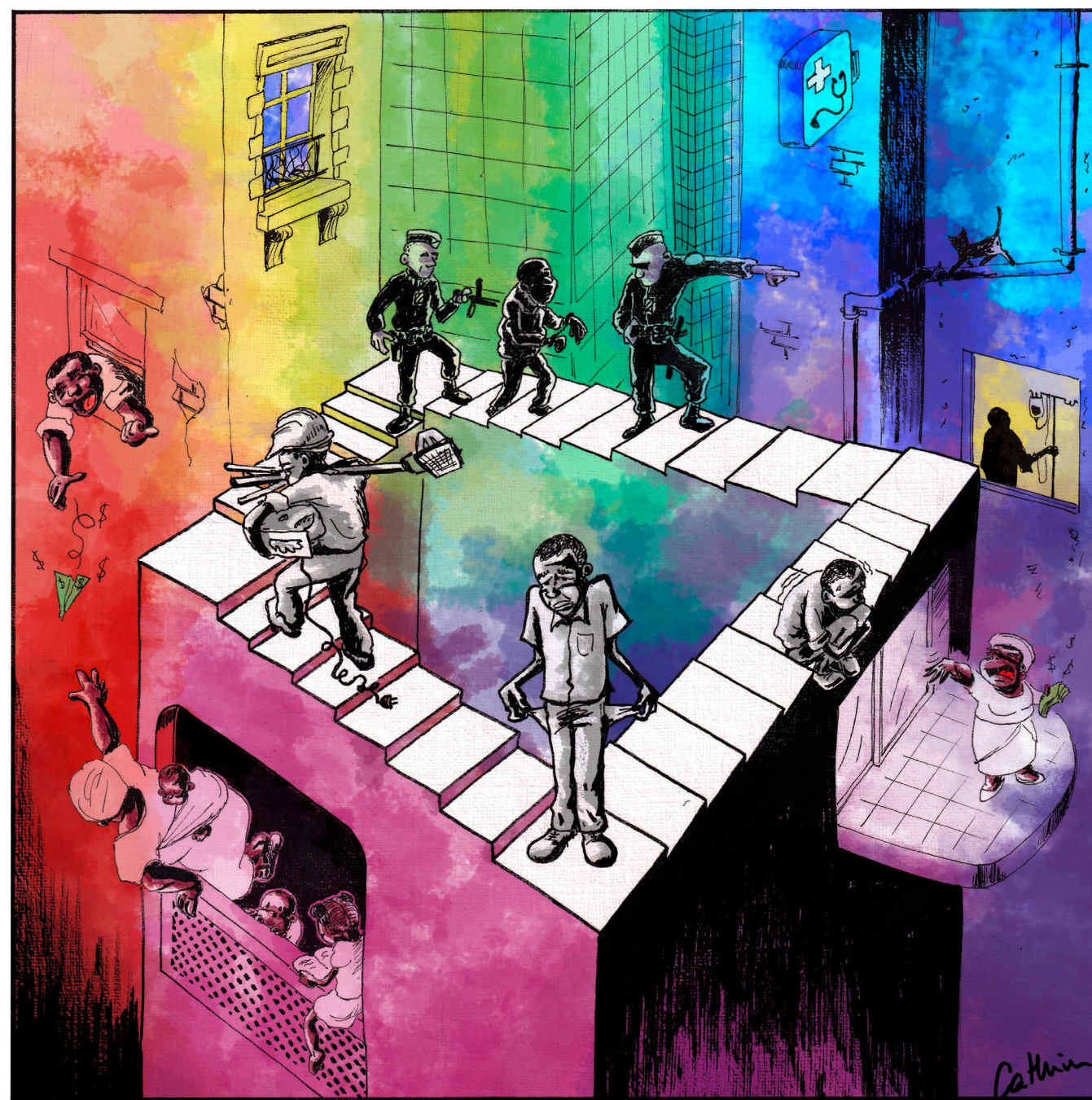
After I graduated from high school, I wanted to go to France to go to university. I knew I had no future in Mali because of corruption and nepotism. I got a Schengen visa for three months to visit my uncle in France. I flew there in 2001, knowing I would stay longer. Once in France, I did plenty of different jobs: security, cleaning, handler, waste sorting. I also gave French classes with the *Secours Catholique* to newly arrived migrants. In 2007, when Sarkozy got elected, the general climate changed. Company managers feared hiring undocumented people, and I could not find a job. Up until then, I was frequently sending at least 300 euros to my parents and sister. I was also able to save money. But since 2007, I could not work more than four times a year and all my savings went away.

In 2018, I was searched by the police. I immediately got arrested because I only had my passport but no residence permit. I spent 48 hours in police custody and then stayed for 35 days in a detention centre. One early morning in May, they came to pick me up and drove me to the airport.

*I was handcuffed until the plane took off and my legs were tied during the whole flight.*

During the flight, a Malian woman asked the passengers if they could help me and gathered 343 euros for me. She also told me she could accommodate me in Bamako. I trusted her immediately because I didn't have any close family anymore in Mali and asked her to keep the money for the moment. When I arrived at her place, there were no empty rooms, so I slept on her terrace. I asked for my money to buy a mattress and some clothes, and she gave me 153 euros. Twenty days later, I asked for the rest of my money. She did not give it to me as she considered it paid for the rent, even though I was sleeping outside and sometimes under the rain. They stole all my stuff. I am now living at a friend's, but I cannot stay much longer there because the house will be rented by others. We both fear homelessness.

I don't do anything for the moment. I also need a surgery for health issues, but I cannot afford it. I was already sick in France and getting treated, but at the detention centre, they said it was not urgent. I live on a day-to-day basis, and there are a lot of days when I do not eat.



## Recommendations

- Before a return decision is issued, all options of case resolution should always be assessed, including regularisation, moving to a third country and returning to the country of origin.
- During the return procedures, case-management based alternatives to detention should always be prioritised.
- Return decisions should always be based on an in-depth assessment of individuals' circumstances, needs and vulnerabilities, and the impact that returns would have on their lives in terms of respect of fundamental rights, including private and family life.
- When children are involved, the best interest of the child should be the guiding principle.
- Voluntary departure should be the preferred option, and the use of force always be rejected.

## Resources

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UNICEF, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Save the Children, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and Child Circle (2019) [Guidance to respect children's rights in return policies and practices](#).



We wish to thank the following foundations and institutional donors for their financial support:



This publication has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>



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