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Michèle Demierre,
program officer



PHOTO: JULIEN CHAVALLAZ

...how to accompany asylum seekers back to their country?

Michèle Demierre, 52, supports migrants in returning to their country of origin.
Success stories motivate her.

I like the idea of a second chance. That is also the basic principle of the "Reintegration in the Country of Origin" program. It is run by the International Social Service, for which I work as a program officer. It is about migrants who want or have to return to their country of origin - we want to help them to build a new life.

We address various target groups, including rejected asylum seekers, people without legal status in Switzerland, people whose permits have been revoked and deported foreign prisoners.

The past is not of interest

All participants must bring one thing with them: interest in the program. In the case of prisoners who have to leave Switzerland, the social workers in the correctional facilities contact me - if they are looking after an interested person who is a candidate. We have an initial interview and I explain our program.

We never talk about the deed. I'm not interested in what people have done in the past. I want to know what they want and can do in the future. I trust these people. It's always impressive to see the impact this belief and trust can have. It's important to me that they have their own idea for a job or training. This is the only way to develop real motivation and perseverance.

A popular job in prison is baker. Many of our clients set themselves the goal of opening a bakery when they return. In many cases, this is successful because there is a demand in many countries and people have learned their trade very well during their time in prison.

Our resources are limited. The program is financed through private donations. I can spend a maximum of 4,700 francs per person. With our budget

get and my work capacity, it is possible to support an average of 65 people per year. Surprisingly, my work is met with little criticism. The right-wing parties are happy that migrants are leaving Switzerland and - in their eyes - relieving the burden on our social system. The left appreciates that we are enabling these people to return with prospects.

I have been doing this job for 14 years and have learned a lot. Every situation is different and offers me the opportunity to improve the process. In West Africa in particular, the enormous expectations of the family are a problem. For example, we supported a young man from Guinea-Bissau who opened a grocery store in his home village. It was natural for his relatives to stock up on food and drinks there - without paying. In the end, he had to close the shop. To avoid such a situation, returnees sometimes decide to make a fresh start in a larger city instead of returning to their home village.

Our success rate is around 57 percent, which is impressive considering that many of these people have a very low level of education.

An Instagram success story

It is often difficult to measure success. One client really wanted to open a flower shop and took a course in botany. But business did not go as well as she had expected. She stayed motivated and deepened her botanical knowledge. Today she advises people on plant care via Instagram and is very successful at it. The knowledge she acquired has helped her in another way.

It's stories like these that make me happy. With a few thousand francs, people can build a new life for themselves. That's really remarkable.

Recorded by Manuela Enggist