

The Belgian return houses

An NGOs' perspective
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1. Jesuit Refugee Service Belgium

- International NGO active in more than 50 countries
- Accompany – serve – advocate
- Refugees and forced migrants
- In Belgium:
 - detention centres
 - return houses
 - promoting community based ATD's.

2. Return houses – history

- Very important step forward
- °2008
- Families with minor children
- Condemnations ECtHR

2. Return houses – what?

- Individual houses and apartments
- 28 units
- 169 beds
- 5 locations - villages

2. Return houses – where?



Locatie van de verschillende sites van de terugkerwoningen

2. Return houses – what?



Site van Sint-Gillis-Waas, bestaande uit eengezinswoningen



Site van Tubeke, bestaande uit 7 appartementen

2. Return houses – what?

- Mixed family profiles
- Not guarded
- Restriction of liberty
- Legally detention order => no difference with detention centres
- Return officers – coaches

3. NGOs' Observations

- Around 40 families yearly
- Mixed profiles – different experiences – adapted approach
- Uprooted from familiar environment
- Isolated areas
- Difficulties in building trust with return officers

3. NGOs' Observations

- Children traumatized by sudden arrest by the police
- Schooling and leisure activities
- No screening and assessing of vulnerabilities /best interest of the child
- Limited awareness among lawyers

3. NGOs' Observations

- Infrastructure and personnel
- No external audit to study the efficiency
- There are in law and practice no less coercive measures in place
- Unavailability of data

4. Towards a new model?

- Use a large definition of ATDs
- Focus on early engagement
- Independent case manager – facilitating relations of trust between migrant and the authorities
- Future orientation and durable solutions - both legal residence options and sustainable return
- Protocols to ensure best interest of child – give children a voice in these administrative procedures

5. Opportunities

The Belgian government

- will explore community based ATDs (cfr pilot projects for undocumented migrants)
- aims for an audit of the migration institutions: why not an independent audit of the return houses ?
- insists on the necessary transparency

6. Conclusions

- 'Return house' is a very valuable concept
- Be ambitious to achieve full respect of children's rights
- Explore, with civil society organisations, **if** return houses can become a true community based alternative to detention

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