



© NRC/Enayatullah Azad

RETURNING TO WHAT?

THE CHALLENGES DISPLACED AFGHANS FACE IN SECURING DURABLE SOLUTIONS

This note is based on research conducted by Samuel Hall for the Norwegian Refugee Council in 2016 and 2017. Three separate studies were conducted in which over 4,090 displaced persons were interviewed across five provinces, as well as 380 host community members and 203 businesses in Jalalabad.

POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the situation faced by returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan, calling for a collective approach across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Displaced persons in Afghanistan face ever-worsening situations as three studies presented in this policy brief highlight:

- 1 Returnees and IDPs suffer from worsening displacement-related protection needs;
- 2 the support to mass number of recent returnees in Jalalabad remains short-term and focused on life-saving needs; and
- 3 the lack of a systemic response to services and market integration all point to a **lacking conducive and responsive environment for durable solutions.**

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO DISPLACEMENT

Humanitarian response alone is insufficient. Development assistance needs to be refocused to be more sensitive to displacement and better consider how to design programmes that work towards the achievement of durable solutions for displaced Afghans. It is not about sequencing activities but actively working together – with new flexible funding streams (both humanitarian and development) and new collaborations that bring together international, national and local actors who have not worked together before (including municipalities and civil society organisations) to create an environment more conducive for durable solutions to be realised.

Barriers continue to exist in the provision of life-saving and humanitarian support across the country. Yet, in order to address the collective challenge of displacement, the dominant mindset that sees development interventions as a second-line response need to be confronted. **Needs-based development aimed at improving local service delivery, economic opportunities, the capacity of local institutions, and supporting social cohesion-building, needs to move to the forefront to avoid future crises.**

Development actors are often neglecting to consider how key protection priorities faced by displacement-affected Afghans can be addressed, with repeated humanitarian interventions instead being the standard practice of responding to Afghans trapped in displacement. Three studies presented in this brief highlight some persistent needs affecting displaced communities that all require a longer-term development programme response.

AFGHANISTAN'S MASS DISPLACEMENT

Since 2012, over 1,362,900 Afghans have returned from Pakistan and 445,700 from Iran.¹ 1,286,000 Afghans were internally displaced as of the end of 2017, including more than a third from new displacements.² **94% of IDPs surveyed said they had fled conflict, violence or persecution.**³ **Durable solutions remain out of reach for most IDPs owing to ongoing insecurity.** Obstacles for returnees who become secondarily displaced (returnee-IDPs) are similar, and many of their needs overlap with those of other IDPs.

¹ 1,362,979 and 445,798, respectively, as of June 2018, according to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) <http://bit.ly/2PGLxvw>

² <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan>

³ <http://bit.ly/2DCKXaU>

CHALLENGES IN DISPLACEMENT

The inability of IDPs to access adequate housing and tenure security, or to find employment matching their skillset, generates a cycle of other needs and negative coping strategies.⁴ These in turn lead to protection concerns across generations. In Afghanistan today, the situation faced by IDP and returnee respondents is as follows:

- 🕒 **63% of all respondents rate their housing conditions as either poor or very poor.** Poor quality shelter may lead to other concerns, including illness and injury.
- 🕒 **Only 27% of respondents still own land / assets in their place of origin** to which they could go back. Even fewer have actual deeds for their land and assets, with 5% of returnee-IDPs and 12% of IDPs reporting deeds recorded in their place of origin, and 15% and 7%, respectively, in their current residence.
- 🕒 **Food insecurity is worsening compared to data from 2012.**

“ *People can hardly provide food for themselves, and they are afraid that they may die of hunger.*”

Female IDP, Jalalabad

In Kandahar and Nangarhar, where respondents were best off, **only 20% never had problems satisfying their food needs in the past year. One in two respondents had trouble satisfying their food needs on a regular basis.**

- 🕒 **46% of respondents said their household's access to livelihoods was restricted**, with female-headed households more vulnerable as the majority of day labour opportunities tend to be in sectors such as construction which are limited to men.

The above humanitarian challenges reflect major gaps in access to services, compounded by insecurity, physical and bureaucratic constraints. As a result **only 25% of IDPs reported receiving some form of aid or assistance.**

RETURNEES FROM IRAN AND PAKISTAN

Returns today are taking place against a backdrop of increased internal displacement, high civilian casualties and persisting instability in Afghanistan. The challenges faced by returnees from Pakistan to Eastern Afghanistan, and from Iran to Western Afghanistan, are presented in this policy brief to shed light on best practices for mitigating them. The impact of the voluntary repatriation grant and aid package are generally short-lived and in any case restricted only to documented refugees. The majority of returnees consider livelihoods as the highest priority – without a sustainable source of income, food insecurity looms and negative coping mechanisms range from unsustainable debt to child labor.

⁴ Afghanistan's National IDP policy, endorsed in 2013, guarantees the rights of displaced persons as citizens, articulating the responsibilities of stakeholders to protect these in accordance to the Guiding Principles, but is not being effectively translated into practice. Government of Afghanistan, *National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons*, 2013, available at: <https://goo.gl/EPpGCg>

REALISING INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO AFGHANISTAN 2016-20

At the Brussels Conference in 2016, the international community committed to providing \$15.2 billion until 2020 to support Afghanistan's development needs. However, this much-needed investment continues to be undermined by leaving the needs of displaced populations unaddressed. As things stand, **Afghans tend to receive less assistance and support the longer they are displaced. Two returnees in three face legal and administrative hurdles** to access the job market or initiate alternative economic activities. Beyond a structural deficit, the returnees have the added disadvantage of not having had the chance, in displacement, to acquire income-enhancing skills.

As the international community comes together with the Government of Afghanistan at the Geneva conference in November 2018, this is a crucial moment to consider how displacement-affected Afghans – IDPs, returnees and their communities – can be linked to a development agenda contributing to peace and security in their areas of displacement, and of return. Humanitarian assistance alone cannot provide a catch-all response to displacement. The development sector must refocus their attention to establish conditions conducive for those living in displacement to achieve durable solutions over time.

UN member states, as part of the 2030 agenda pledged to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”. In order for this commitment to **‘Leave no one behind’** to be realised development donors must refocus their aid allocation strategies to incorporate the needs of displaced populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to move towards a collective response to displacement international donors and the government must:

- **Design and agree on collective outcomes to guide response to displacement** through an inclusive process including government, humanitarian and development actors, and displacement-affected communities.
- **Integrate the immediate and long-term needs of displaced populations into current development programmes and national policies** e.g. Provincial Capital Master Plans.
- **Provide a framework for advancing collaboration by providing more flexible and predictable multi-year funding** and more flexible assistance modalities within these.
- **Define a displacement-specific early recovery strategy** that brings together humanitarian and development stakeholders with local actors, including displacement-affected communities themselves.
- **Develop a joint monitoring framework to assess progress towards achieving durable solutions in displacement-affected communities.**



1. Post-return challenges / Returning to displacement

Many of those refugees and undocumented migrants returning to Afghanistan find themselves again in situations of displacement upon return. Global and regional policies on Afghanistan need to recognise that returnees can often effectively become IDPs when they are unable to integrate sustainably. A case study by IDMC/NRC/Samuel Hall in 2017 reviewed the challenges facing those returning to displacement, and revealed three findings:

- Contrary to expectation, many returnee-IDPs are trying to rebuild their lives in rural rather than urban areas. Their location plays a role in determining their assistance and protection needs, particularly in terms of registration, access to housing, aid and health services.
- Obstacles for returnees overlap with those of other IDPs. Both groups lack information they need to make well-informed and dignified choices about their future.
- Three quarters of returnee-IDPs would prefer to restart their lives locally, preferring local integration than return to their place of origin or birth.

Beyond their risk of secondary displacement, multiple challenges lock returnees into cycles of poverty.

- **Returnees are largely unaware of their rights, and pathways to claiming them.** In Jalalabad, research among returnees from Pakistan found that even months after return, they are “involuntarily immobile”, failing to situate themselves spatially in the city, or navigate essential basic services beyond their immediate vicinity. The lack of networks and access to information (community-wide or job related) limits returnees’ ability to benefit from the resources of the city. Perhaps for the same reason, returnees feel that their political engagement and influence on local affairs is quite limited.

➔ **Health problems were widely reported.** A third of households said at least one member had a chronic illness, and 34% a mental or physical disability. One in four respondent (24%) lacks access to health services. Multiple displacements correlate with increased rates of illness and injury. The poor nutrition and housing related earlier contribute to worsening health problems. One focus group participant in Herat said:

“ *When there is a storm, the house fills with dust. There are eight of us living in the house, and we do not have enough income. We do not have enough water and food. Our children cannot go to school and stay in this unhealthy house. It is not safe for them. We are close to the bazaar and we have electricity, but our sons cannot work, they do not go to school. They just stay at home and get ill. We're happy there are no shootings here, but our home has made us ill.*”

➔ **70% of family members do not hold any identity documents,** making it difficult if not impossible for them to access assistance and services provided by the government and national and international NGOs. Returnee-IDPs have fewer documents per person in the household. The lack of identity documents such as tazkera (the National ID in Afghanistan) specifically precludes access to school (33% of respondents noted lack of *tazkera* as impacting schooling). Tazkera are required for the issuance of housing, land and property (HLP) certificates and title deeds. Women are less likely to hold such documents, worsening their pre-existing vulnerabilities. Among respondents, 26% of respondents said their lack of documentation impeded their access to education, 12% to employment and 12% to healthcare. 13% said it restricted their movement, and 12% that it led to harassment.

➔ **Children face several obstacles in attending school. In addition to enrolment difficulties due to lack of documentation, parents highlighted the dangers of the journey to school and the low quality of education.** Research in Jalalabad underlined the need for enrolment support, with returnees unsure how to enrol their children in school. Returnees from Pakistan have lower literacy rates, with interviews revealing that parents often preferred to put their children to work than in school. Girls in particular are less likely to attend formal schools (only 15% of girls in documented returnee households in Jalalabad and 21% of undocumented) taking on household chores instead.

Humanitarian and life-saving aid is only one part of the necessary response when it comes to IDPs and returnees. The critical safety net provided in the initial first phase of the response cannot be overstated. However the involvement of the development sector is critical in order to lay the ground for IDPs and returnees to achieve durable solutions.. As things stand, however, the displaced tend to receive less assistance and support the longer they are displaced.

RETURN OF MINORS

In recent research conducted at the western border points of Islam Qala and Zaranj in Afghanistan, one out of five deportees are families, including, women and children. More than one in ten respondents were minors at the time of return, between 10-17 years of age. 11% were minors separated from their family.

What are their needs post-deportation?

Families, often with children, are more vulnerable to forced returns and require special assistance.

- One third required medical assistance
- One in ten had psychosocial needs
- Drug addiction remains a real issue among Afghan returnees in the West.

What assistance is provided at border points?

The response centred on food, water, temporary housing and transportation, and a change of clothes does not cover wide range of child-focused protection services that children expect or need.

“In one day where there were 1,400 returnees and 500 deportees at Islam Qala, 22 were unaccompanied children. There need to be more screeners at the border”

War Child, Herat 2016

2. Economic barriers to early recovery and durable solutions

Most respondents view local integration as their preferred durable solution. The case study of Nangarhar suggests that, in theory, this is feasible; local residents express sympathy for the displaced, many having followed a similar path. The limited skillset of displacement-affected, along with challenging local economic environments, characterised by a scarcity of jobs and livelihood opportunities, however, hinder this integration.

Insufficient financial support and assets on return

It is not clear what impact the UNHCR cash grant to registered refugee returnees has, particularly when weighed against other important return preparedness factors, such as social networks and skills-readiness for finding new livelihood opportunities. While the cash assistance does undoubtedly support returnees in the initial return period, there was evidence during 2016 that an enhanced cash grant was prompting Afghan refugees to return prematurely and that this had adverse longer-term impact on the ability of returnees to (re)integrate. We also see marked disparities between the assistance afforded to undocumented returnees (those returning from Pakistan with no Proof of Refugee status cards, for example), and registered refugee returnees. The former tend to return with limited or no cash assistance and barely any savings at all. While the durable assets of both categories of returnees are often repatriated, in 2016, during the mass return to Eastern Afghanistan from Pakistan, a rushed and ill-prepared return meant that many returnees were unable to recover larger investments. This, in turn, has a negative impact on cash levels.

“ *The Pakistanis told us to leave the place where our children were born, and deported us to a place where we can barely survive.*”

Community leader, Jalalabad

The only sources of credit available to returnees are often informal and used to meet basic needs, not to invest in enterprise or sustainable livelihoods. and consumption-based: only one respondent borrowed money from a microfinance institution.

“ *For an institutional investor, lending money to returnees is a high-risk investment we cannot take.*”

Afghanistan Commercial Bank, Jalalabad

Rental prices have risen, accessing loans and affordable interest rates is difficult, and families are in a debt trap. **72% of returnees to Jalalabad report that their income does not cover their expenses. 57% depend on loans they took over the past year** to resume a life post-return.

Negative coping mechanisms fill the aid gap

Poverty exposes displacement-affected Afghans to a number of protection risks and these tend to be exacerbated the longer they remain in displacement. Here we see displaced Afghans much less likely to be accessing education, securing legal remedies and gaining access to decent livelihood opportunities. Displaced households frequently find themselves locked into protracted cycles of poverty, debt and vulnerability. **82% of displaced households were in significant debt and unable to make their repayments** and more than three-quarters of both IDPs and returnee-IDPs said their households hold more debt than they spend in a month. The figures were higher among women than men, at 87% and 77% respectively.

“ *I was not in debt before displacement, but I am now. I pay all my family expenses from the money I have borrowed.*”

Female IDP, Kabul



Almost one in five families relies on child labour to help meet their basic needs. Returnee-IDP households are even more likely to do so, with 24% relying on child labour. Families who contributed to the research for this study, which considers children under 14 working as child labour, had a pragmatic approach to the issue. It should not happen, but they do not perceive any other choice. Many said their children were not forced to work, but rather that it was the natural thing for them to do, whether instead of school or because they were not in education anyway.

Like child labour, **child marriage is associated with economic vulnerability**. The deeper families are in debt, the more likely they are to use their children as a coping strategy. While only 5% among families who have debts lower than their monthly expenditure, and 7% for those whose debts are higher report marrying off their children, this may reflect underreporting. For people fleeing conflict and violence, and particularly for those displaced a number of times, child marriage can also be a means of consolidating networks.

Ill-adapted skills profiles in saturated markets

Returnees struggle to find their place in the labour market for lack of connections. The slightly higher employment rates upon return than in exile are not correlated with higher household incomes. **The average monthly income in Pakistan stood at 109USD compared to 87USD in 2017 in Jalalabad.**

Women in particular have a very limited access to the job market upon return. They find accessing jobs practically impossible while youth struggle to find decent work. Adult and youth men work as daily labourers in Jalalabad (37%) and construction (13%) with extremely low wages.

Whilst a majority of male youth returnees in Jalalabad has achieved at least primary school, a positive sign compared to the previous generation, just under half (49%) remain illiterate. Overall, 93% of surveyed women above the age of 15 are illiterate, compared to 62% of surveyed men. This creates obstacles to accessing more sustainable and decent work.

Returnees from Pakistan have professional experience limited to untrained casual work. Technical skills reported are tailoring and cooking, followed by driving, cultivation, masonry and handicraft. These skills are generally not marketable, given market saturation. When asked what skills they most desire, tailoring features first (66%), showing most returnees are not returning with the skills they require for local market needs.

Ultimately labour markets in provincial capitals where many returnees live are competitive and closed to outsiders: one third of respondents who noted that there was no demand for labour in their sector, and three companies in 10 who stated that they did not need new workers. Most hiring is done through family, friends and referrals – only 4% through job adverts.

Window of opportunity for improving supply-demand mismatch – Highlights from Jalalabad⁵

The rise in the number of returnees and IDPs has aggravated the glut of unskilled labour supply and dearth of skilled labour market participants already observed in Nangarhar in 2013 in previous research (SH/DRC). Employers interviewed reveal a demand for skilled labour or none at all, indicating that potential employability remains reduced for unskilled returnees. Whilst there is limited receptiveness to full integration of IDPs / IDP-returnees in the workplace, several avenues of integration can be explored.

Employers in Jalalabad are often returnees or youth themselves. Over one third of employers in manufacturing, services, repair and trade, as well as seasonal needs for the construction sector are youth. The capital was invested through borrowing. As such, they can set an example for other returnee youth as well as empathise with the situation of displaced persons. **Many employers in Jalalabad recognize that returnees have a positive impact on the local economy and on growth**, especially in the construction sector, due to the demand for housing and infrastructure. More than 80% of surveyed employers report being open to hire returnees.

The job market in Jalalabad is also conducive to youth employment. 37% of employers are open to taking on youth as apprentices, reducing the skills gaps noted above; this must be caveated with the fact that companies relying on apprentices hire less than half of them.

However child labour remains a structural issue: one in four companies surveyed hires children under 15 either full or part time. Returnee households are particularly at risk of child labour.

⁵ This section builds on a market assessment conducted in Jalalabad specifically by Samuel Hall for NRC.

3. The humanitarian-development-(peace) nexus and the global agenda in Afghanistan

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) represents a framework for humanitarian-development actors to consider and plan ahead for durable solutions. While at a global level the CRRF has been endorsed, and Afghanistan is now part of the CRRF, little is known about how to adapt CRRF to a conflict-prone (not refugee-hosting) setting. The elements of insecurity and emergency that continue to plague Afghanistan require a stronger discussion around how to use CRRF to guide responses and planning on the ground.

Currently, the primary response to displacement in Afghanistan remains focused on providing immediate humanitarian assistance. This humanitarian approach continues to be overstretched and hindered by insecurity, as well as physical and bureaucratic constraints, and is fundamentally ill-suited to provide a catch all response to displacement. This reliance on humanitarian solutions creates a gap whereby the increasing number of Afghans living in situations of protracted displacement receive less and less assistance and durable solutions, at this point, are inaccessible to many. The development sector must refocus their attention to establish conditions conducive for those living in displacement to achieve durable solutions over time. To make the humanitarian-development-peace nexus feasible in Afghanistan, a few requirements must be met urgently.

Recommendations

- **Design and agree to collective outcomes to guide stakeholders – government, humanitarian, development and displacement-affected communities.** Collaboration among multiple actors, including national and local responders – with urban stakeholders, border officials, civil society organisations, service providers as well as traditional humanitarian and development partners in the design of these collective outcomes is essential to their success.
- **Integrate the immediate and long-term needs of displaced populations into current development programmes and national policies** e.g. Provincial Capital Master plans.
- **Provide a framework for advancing collaboration by providing more flexible and predictable multi-year funding and more flexible assistance modalities within these.** Lessons learned from humanitarian service delivery is the need to resource more mobile health and child protection teams and provide cash-based assistance where appropriate.
- **Develop a displacement-specific early recovery strategy** that brings together humanitarian and development stakeholders with local actors, including displacement-affected communities themselves. Global best practices exist to outline the steps needed – from early recovery clusters to urban early recovery responses, to be adapted to the Afghan context.
- **Define a joint monitoring framework to assess progress towards achieving durable solutions in displacement-affected communities.** These include the Multi-Dimensional Integration Index (MDI) pioneered by stakeholders in Afghanistan under the leadership of UNHCR, the Government of Afghanistan and Samuel Hall. Clear indicators can frame progress towards displacement-affected communities' ability to influence decisions and plans, their improved access to basic services and adequate livelihoods.



© NRC/Enayatullah Azad

METHODOLOGY OF REPORTS CITED

The research presented here was conducted in three separate phases:

- A **market assessment** in Jalalabad, for which 203 business and 369 returnees were interviewed through a quantitative survey, and additional case studies and FGDs were conducted.
- An **early recovery** study in Jalalabad, for which 1520 residents, documented and undocumented returnees, and IDPs were interviewed in total, across 12 enumeration areas. Visual mapping exercises were further conducted during focus group discussions, as was heat mapping.
- A **research study on the challenges faced by IDPs**, with research in Nangarhar, Kandahar, Kabul, Kunduz and Herat provinces. 1,420 IDPs and 1,161 Returnee-IDPs were interviewed with a quantitative survey. Focus group discussions were conducted with both of these populations as well as the host community.

KEY DEFINITIONS

DURABLE SOLUTIONS: In the context of this study, “a durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement”. Conditions such as active conflict may not be conducive to their achievement, and there may be socioeconomic and political obstacles, but action can still be taken to reduce IDPs’ vulnerabilities and support their self-reliance, which are important steps toward them. Durable solutions are ultimately achieved through “sustainable reintegration at the place of origin”, “sustainable local integration in areas where internally displaced persons take refuge” or “sustainable integration in another part of the country” (OCHA, Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998)

EARLY RECOVERY: A multidimensional process of recovery that begins in a humanitarian setting. It is an integrated and coordinated approach, using humanitarian mechanisms, to gradually turn the dividends of humanitarian action into sustainable crisis recovery, resilience building and development opportunities. (UNDP)

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE: Internally displaced people (IDPs) are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally-recognized State border” (OCHA, Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998)

RETURNEE-IDPs: Returnees become de facto IDPs in Afghanistan if they “are unable to settle in their homes and/or places of origin because of insecurity resulting from armed conflict, generalized violence or violations of human rights, landmines or ERW contamination on their land, land disputes or tribal disputes” (This research refers to such people as returnee-IDPs. Returnees also become IDPs if they are unable to settle in their places of origin because of socioeconomic issues such as the loss of property and assets, or a lack of livelihood opportunities or other services as a consequence of their displacement)



www.nrc.no

For further information, please contact:

Anthony Neal
Advocacy Manager
NRC Afghanistan
anthony.neal@nrc.no



www.samuelhall.org