

THEMATIC SERIES THE INVISIBLE MAJORITY

This thematic series addresses the gap in awareness, data and knowledge about the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions.



A DIFFERENT KIND OF PRESSURE

The cumulative effects of displacement
and return in Afghanistan

JANUARY 2020

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Cover photo: An Afghan family deported from Iran makes their way to the border town of Zaranj, Nimroz province.

Photo: NRC/Jim Huylebroek, August 2016

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Returnee children waiting for their parents in a packed vehicle at transit center near Torkham crossing. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad, April 2017

SUMMARY

Displacement in Afghanistan is both a historical and contemporary phenomenon. One in four Afghans have been displaced, and conflict triggered 372,000 new internal displacements in 2018.¹ Attempted peace talks have failed to prevent civilian casualties reaching unprecedented levels.² Despite this bleak picture, however, more than 3.3 million Afghans have returned from abroad since 2012.³

This study, based on a non-representative survey with 120 displaced Afghans in Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar provinces, examines the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in Afghanistan. It arrives at the following key findings.

| Displacement patterns reflect the political geography of the conflict

Most displacement in Afghanistan occurs from areas that are heavily contested or under Taliban control toward those with better security. Many of those displaced find refuge in urban centres, where they live in protracted displacement, often in informal settlements.

| Limited resources both drive and constrain onward movement

The shrinking protection space abroad has altered the profile of Afghan migrants, most of whom now leave in search of employment. Lack of jobs and livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan is a significant driver of cross-border movement. For many internally displaced people (IDPs), however, financial losses incurred during displacement restrict onward travel across borders.

| The distinction between forced and voluntary return is blurred

A wave of deportations from Pakistan led to hundreds of thousands of premature returns to Afghanistan in 2016. Even in the absence of force, deportation threats, harassment, poor living conditions and a lack of viable alternatives have prompted many Afghans to return. The economic crisis in Iran has accelerated the phenomenon. Iran has now overtaken Pakistan in terms of numbers of returns.

| A holistic response is needed across the whole displacement continuum

The majority of returnees from abroad live a life of internal displacement. They are either unable to return to their areas of origin or become displaced again once back in Afghanistan. Despite the adoption of a national policy on IDPs and a policy framework for returnees and IDPs, the response is fragmented. Needs in terms of housing, livelihoods and basic services are significant, and the resulting pressure on hosts risks undermining social cohesion. A holistic response requires an integrated, whole-of-society approach that focuses on affected communities irrespective of their displacement status.

INTRODUCTION

Firash is a former farmer from rural Nangarhar province. He fled to Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan in 1990, during the civil war between the Afghan army and the mujahideen which followed the Soviet withdrawal. Life in Peshawar was hard. After more than two decades living in tents and makeshift shelters, he decided to return to Afghanistan in 2013. “We couldn’t live in another country forever,” he said. “Living as a refugee is very difficult.”

Because his home had been destroyed after he moved to Pakistan and there were few economic opportunities in his village of origin, Firash decided to go to Kabul where he works as a driver. “I will move back to my village if security improves there and I have money to rebuild my home”, he said. “No one can predict the future. If there

is more war, we may need to move to another country or another city in Afghanistan again.”

Firash’s story is far from unusual. Since the late 1970s, Afghanistan has experienced Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule and international military intervention. One in four Afghans have been displaced.⁴

Afghanistan adopted a national policy on internally displaced people (IDPs) in 2013 and a policy framework for returnees and IDPs in 2016, but the country continues to struggle with widespread displacement.⁵ Conflict and violence triggered 372,000 new internal displacements in 2018, and there were nearly 2.6 million internally displaced people as of the end of the year.⁶ Drought displaced nearly as many as conflict in 2018,



An informal settlement for forcefully returned refugees from Pakistan in Laghman province. Photo: NRC/Jim Huylebroek, March 2017

adding to the existing crisis. While this report focuses on conflict and violence, it is important to remember that natural hazards are another important driver of displacement in Afghanistan.

More than 2.4 million Afghans are estimated to have fled the country over the past seven years, and many more continue to leave.⁷ More Afghans attempted to seek refuge in Europe than any other nationality in 2019, accounting for 20 per cent of all Mediterranean sea and land arrivals.⁸ Even more people returned from abroad between 2012 and 2019, but many if not most have gone back to a life of internal displacement, swelling the number of the country's internally displaced.⁹

To better understand the relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements in Afghanistan, this study examines the drivers of displacement within and across borders, and explores obstacles and opportunities in terms of durable solutions for IDPs and returnees from abroad.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this study took place with support from Afghan Horizon Consultancy Services in September 2019. A total of 120 survey interviews were conducted with IDPs and returnees from abroad in Herat, Kabul and Nangarhar provinces. All names in the report have been changed.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Many returnees from abroad, both documented and undocumented, are currently internally displaced. They are referred to throughout the report simply as returnees, irrespective of whether they are currently living in internal displacement. The term in no way implies that they have achieved durable solutions. Respondents who have only ever been displaced inside Afghanistan and have never sought refuge abroad are referred to as IDPs.

Fieldwork locations were selected in consultation with the Norwegian Refugee Council. They included three informal settlements in districts to the west of Kabul, a camp for IDPs in the Khogyani district of Nangarhar and

three settlements for IDPs in the Injil district of Herat. The study was initially intended to include IDPs who had returned to their areas of origin, but insecurity made it difficult to reach them. Roads were unsafe and sometimes under the control of non-state armed groups.



Surveys were conducted using KoBoToolbox, developed by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative for research in challenging environments. Respondents were identified through a convenience sample which combined non-probability sampling techniques that drew on the local knowledge and social networks of researchers, partners and participants. The findings are not representative, but offer a useful insight into the experiences of those interviewed for the study.

TABLE 1: Survey respondents

	IDPs	Returnees	Total
Herat	21	17	38
Kabul	26	19	45
Nangarhar	26	11	37
Total	73	47	120

To complement the survey data, ten key informant interviews were conducted with affected people, government officials and NGO staff members, and a thorough review of existing literature and documentation on internal displacement and cross-border movements in Afghanistan was undertaken. Thanks to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the study also benefited from additional analysis of displacement tracking matrix (DTM) data, including a recent flow monitoring survey (FMS) with returnees and a drivers of migration survey (DMS) with Afghans pre-departure.¹⁰

'NO ONE WANTS TO BE DISPLACED'

Initial and onward displacement

A HISTORY OF AFGHAN DISPLACEMENT

Displacement in Afghanistan has been ongoing for over forty years. The decade-long Soviet occupation that began in 1979 forced millions of people to flee their homes as the western-backed mujahideen fought the government. Nearly six million Afghans were thought to have fled the country at the height of the violence in the late 1980s, and another two million were living in internal displacement.¹¹

Around three million refugees returned to Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, but two successive civil wars pitting Afghan forces against mujahideen factions triggered further displacement.¹² The Taliban's takeover in 1996 temporarily restored some semblance of law and order, but the brutality of its rule soon prompted more people to flee their homes to escape persecution.

After a sharp rise in displacement associated with the US-led invasion in 2001, the fall of the Taliban led to widespread returns. About six million refugees and more than a million IDPs are thought to have returned between 2001 and 2006.¹³ Now the Taliban is resurgent, and controls or is contesting more than half the country.¹⁴ Peace talks collapsed in September 2019, and it is unclear when or even if they will resume.¹⁵ Islamic State has emerged as a force opposed to both the Taliban and the Afghan government.¹⁶

Civilian casualties have also reached an unprecedented level.¹⁷ The Taliban were responsible for the majority of civilian deaths in 2019 as a whole, the result of its increased use of suicide bombs and other improvised explosive devices, but Afghan forces and their US-led allies caused most in the first half of the year.¹⁸ Almost two-thirds of the population live in areas directly affected by conflict, and the ongoing hostilities are thought to

have left as many as 250,000 people in need of emergency medical treatment in 2019.¹⁹

"Today, most Afghans live in poverty, corruption is endemic, literacy and life-expectancy rates rank among the lowest in the world, approximately a third of girls become child brides, and no country exports more illicit opium."²⁰ The portrayal is bleak but accurate. Following decades of violence, Afghanistan scores 170th of 181 countries on the UN Development Programme's human development index.²¹

Displacement is also on the rise again. IDMC recorded 213,000 new internal displacements associated with conflict in the first half of 2019, and projections for the year as a whole are well above the figure for 2018.²²

PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

Only one IDP in this study had been displaced multiple times, and 80 per cent of participants in IOM's flow monitoring survey who had experienced internal displacement had only been displaced once.²³ This finding diverges from those of similar studies conducted in Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria and South Sudan, where repeated displacement is common. Repeated displacement is reported to be more common in the north and north-east of Afghanistan than in the areas of study.²⁴

Respondents' understanding of what constitutes displacement may be a factor. Those who had fled their homes for short periods or within the same community did not always consider themselves to have been displaced, meaning that repeated displacement may be more common than findings suggest.

Another explanation lies in the political geography of Afghanistan's conflict. Many people are displaced from areas that are heavily contested or under Taliban control

FIGURE 1: Timeline and displacement in Afghanistan, in millions

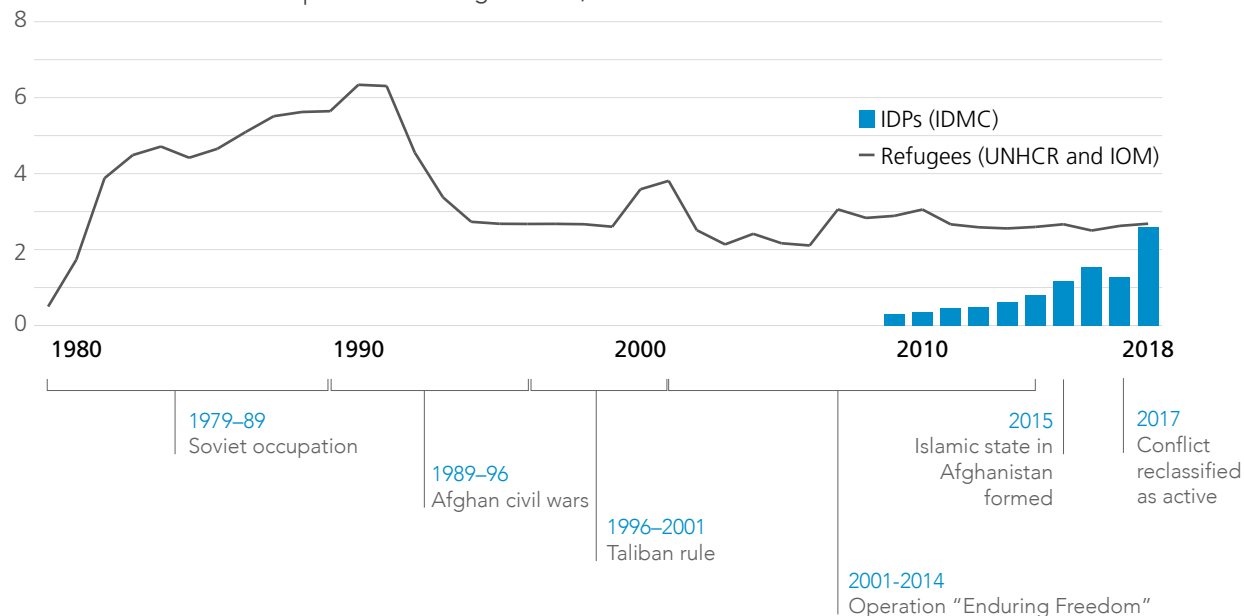
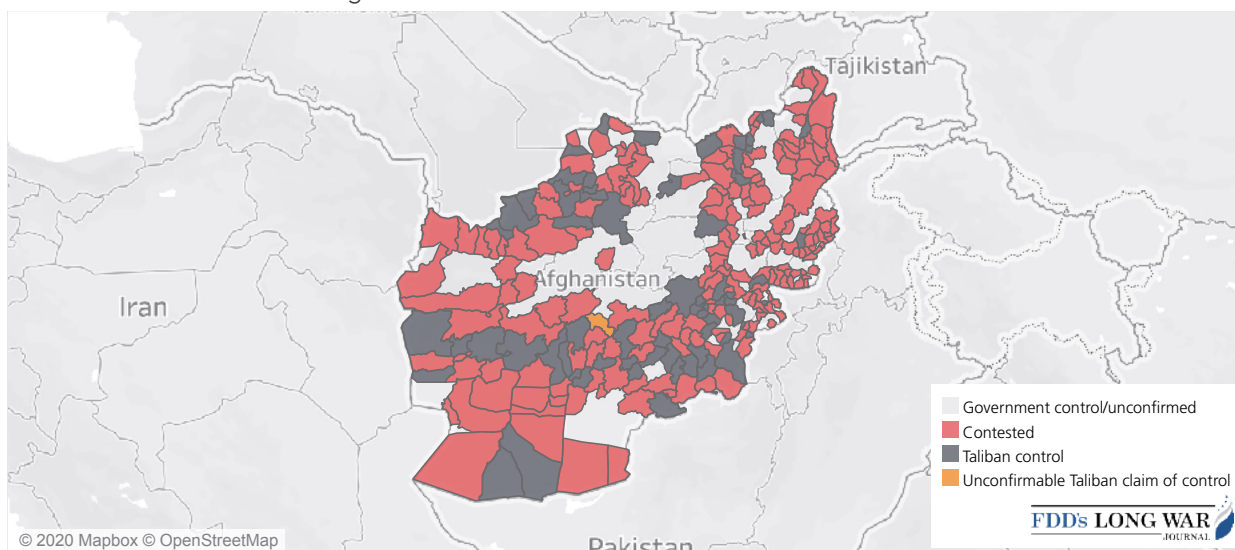


FIGURE 2: Taliban Control in Afghanistan²⁶

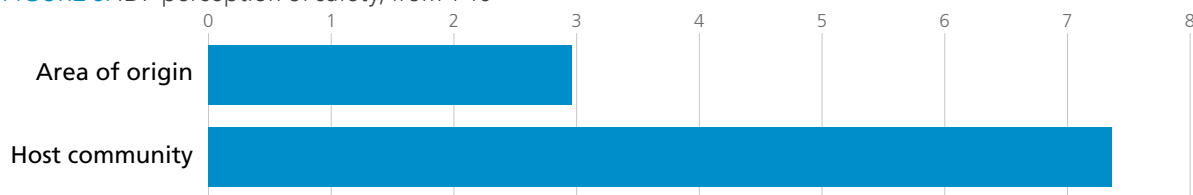


toward those predominantly under government control (see figure 2). Of the three most common areas of origin among research participants, Bala Murghad has been under Taliban control since May 2019, and Jawand and Ab Kamari are contested. The Taliban is already enforcing sharia law in the latter.²⁵

Many people flee from rural to urban areas.²⁷ The population of Kabul has more than tripled since 2001, partly as a result of displacement.²⁸ Areas in which people seek refuge are comparatively stable. Despite the Taliban’s objective of capturing and holding major towns

and cities, all provincial capitals were under government control as of December 2018.²⁹ This helps prevent repeated displacement despite a marked increase in indiscriminate attacks.³⁰ “I worry about suicide bombings while I go about Kabul for work or to buy the basics for my family,” said Afsoon. The capital is, however, still significantly safer than her home in Sangin, which the Taliban overran in March 2017.³¹ On a scale of one to ten, with ten being most secure, the IDPs surveyed for this study gave their areas of origin an average security rating of 2.96, compared with 7.36 for their host areas (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3: IDP perception of safety, from 1-10



Eighty per cent of IDPs chose their location because of better security. Despite the belief that the presence of humanitarian organisations and the availability of services attract large numbers of displaced people, only a quarter said the prospect of assistance had influenced their choice of destination. Less than a third cited economic opportunities. IOM also found the availability of humanitarian aid to feature very low in the order of priorities.³²

Social networks appear to carry more weight. Nearly two-thirds of the research participants said the presence of family and friends had influenced their choice of destination. IOM likewise found that proximity to home villages, relatives and assets was the second most important appeal of host communities after physical safety.³³ An official at the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) said that welcoming and supporting relatives was a cultural imperative for Afghans: “If a relative is displaced and asks for help when he is in a difficult situation, I cannot deny him. I have to accommodate him, otherwise it is a cultural taboo.”

I Crossing borders

More than 2.4 million Afghans have moved or fled abroad since 2012, including around 385,600 in 2018.³⁴ Evidence from around the world suggests that most refugees have been internally displaced before crossing an international border, but only 19 per cent of the returnees who participated in this study and 13 per cent of those interviewed as part of IOM’s flow monitoring survey said they had been internally displaced before leaving the country.³⁵

This is partly explained by the cost of cross-border movement. Following the financial losses incurred during their initial displacement, many IDPs find themselves unable to afford further travel. According to one 2017 study: “The destitute do not move on from their places of displacement because they are unable to afford to.”³⁶ Seventy-three per cent of the IDPs who participated in this research cited financial cost as an obstacle to cross-

border movement, making it the most significant barrier. Travel from Afghanistan to Greece can cost upward of 22,000 euros.³⁷

At the same time, the low proportion of Afghan returnees who were first internally displaced could also indicate that people who have been internally displaced in Afghanistan are less likely than others to return once they have crossed an international border, perhaps due to the trauma occasioned during displacement. An IOM study with migrants preparing to leave Afghanistan found that 35 per cent had been internally displaced, an increase of more than 20 points compared with the survey conducted with returnees.³⁸

The decision to cross borders is multifaceted. Lack of jobs and livelihood opportunities are the main driver of migration among those preparing to leave the country and many decisions to migrate are triggered by unemployment, but 11 per cent of departing migrants surveyed by IOM said it was a security event that triggered their decision to leave.³⁹ A 2017 survey of more than 10,000 Afghans also points to a relationship between insecurity and migration. It found that 43.5 per cent of those who had experienced violence in the past year wanted to leave the country, compared with fewer than 38 per cent of those who had not.⁴⁰

Driven by security fears and economic concerns, people’s desire to migrate abroad is increasing despite the financial barriers they face. In some parts of the country it has reached record levels.⁴¹ The shrinking protection space in neighbouring countries, however, is prompting fewer to seek international protection, simultaneously altering the face of Afghan migration and contributing to onward travel to Turkey and Europe.

'THERE IS STILL A WAR GOING ON'

Returns to displacement

More than 3.3 million Afghans returned from abroad between 2012 and 2019.⁴² The vast majority went back from Pakistan and Iran, and there were 189,000 returns from non-neighbouring countries.⁴³ More than 820,000 Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan in 2018 alone.⁴⁴ Many returnees, however, have gone back to a life of internal displacement. IDMC found as early as 2008 that they faced economic and social reintegration challenges that were leading to secondary displacement.⁴⁵

VOLUNTARY OR FORCED RETURNS?

Pakistan's government cracked down on Afghan refugees and migrants in 2016, and many of the 756,000 returns that year were considered involuntary.⁴⁶ "There

were almost 1,000 people every day being deported," the MoRR official interviewed for this study said. "But now there are various types of pressure on the refugees so they return."

The number of forced returns has decreased since 2016, but return journeys are rarely free of coercion. Seventy per cent of returnees surveyed by IOM in 2019 reported having been deported, and nearly 20 per cent had returned for economic reasons, because they had been unable to make enough money to meet their needs or had lost their job.⁴⁷ Even in the absence of force, a lack of viable alternatives often prompts return.

The distinction between forced and voluntary returns tends to be blurred. More than half of the returnees who participated in this study said they had not returned



An Afghan family, just returned from 35 years in Pakistan, fled again after fighting broke out near their home, having already settled in the Chahar Dara district of Kunduz. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad, January 2019

voluntarily. A third of them had been deported and two-thirds had left because of the threat of deportation. Among those who considered their return voluntary, more than a quarter said poor living conditions had been their main motivation. Poor treatment in their host country was the most important second reason cited. Or as one 2019 study put it, many of the nominally voluntary returns are driven “by fears of deportation and uncertain legal status in the case of Pakistan and economic difficulty and integration concerns in the case of Iran”.⁴⁸

The deteriorating economic situation in Iran has prompted many Afghans to return, both recent arrivals unable to find work and others who had been living in Iran for decades. One 2018 study found that more than half of returnees from Iran cited poor economic conditions, including unemployment, as their reason for return.⁴⁹ According to key informants interviewed for this study, the economic crisis is also encouraging deportations as the government seeks to free up jobs for Iranians.

Iran’s economic crisis may also be having the indirect effect of increasing deportations from Turkey. As Iran becomes an increasingly unviable destination for Afghans, many are instead travelling to neighbouring Turkey, either in hope of finding better opportunities there or as a step in their journey to Europe. Many, however, find themselves in overcrowded and insalubrious detention centres from where they are eventually returned to Afghanistan.⁵⁰

Afghans’ chances of being granted asylum in Europe are falling. Recognition rates decreased from 66 to 44 per cent between 2015 and 2018, and the risk of forced removal is growing following a joint commitment between Afghanistan and the European Union “to step up their cooperation on addressing and preventing irregular migration, and on return of irregular migrants”.⁵¹ Despite evidence of continued and even growing insecurity, “an increasing number of EU member states have designated parts of Afghanistan safe for return”.⁵²

RETURN TO DISPLACEMENT

Despite the element of coercion in many of cross-border returns, information and social networks play an important role in determining people’s choice of destination in Afghanistan. “Through these networks they try to find the place they want to return to,” said the MoRR

official interviewed for this study. “They seek assistance before they come, asking relatives to find them a house or a piece of land to rent.”

Less than 13 per cent of the returnees surveyed had visited Afghanistan before returning, but those who do play an important role in disseminating information. “Some refugees visited Afghanistan, and we would ask them about the situation in Afghanistan when they came back to Pakistan,” said Badih, a returnee in Kabul.

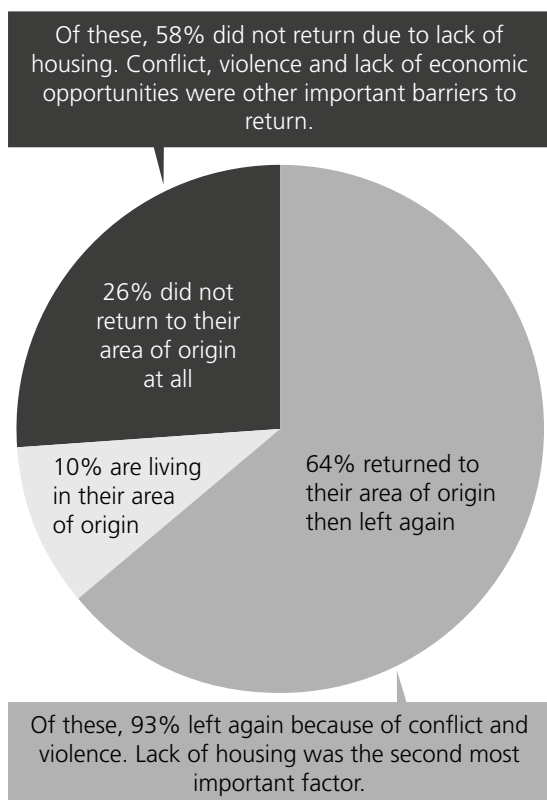
Afghans who visit neighbouring countries also share valuable information. “A large number of people in Afghanistan go to Pakistan for medical treatment,” the MoRR official said. “So these contacts and the exchange of information is there.” Around a third of Afghans crossing the border into Pakistan are seeking access to health services.⁵³ Even without such sources, information is easy to obtain. “Since the fall of Taliban, there are more telecommunications companies in Afghanistan so it’s easier to call and get information,” said Badih.

Perhaps in part because of this information, 26 per cent of the returnees surveyed decided not to return to their area of origin when they arrived back in Afghanistan. Lack of housing was their main concern. Seventy per cent of returnees who owned property before they were displaced said it had been damaged, and ten per cent that it had been destroyed. Firash decided to settle in Kabul when he returned from Pakistan because he knew his house was in ruins. Ongoing insecurity and lack of economic opportunities were also concerns.

Sixty-four per cent of the returnees surveyed did return to their area of origin only to leave again, predominantly because of conflict and violence (see figure 4). Dadvar returned from Pakistan in 2010 and settled in his area of origin, but last year he was displaced to a settlement for IDPs. “I am not living in Sherzad district anymore because of the war going on between Taliban and Islamic State,” he said.

Around half of returnees nationwide are thought not to be living in their province of origin because of insecurity and the lack of housing and economic opportunities.⁵⁴ Within provinces of origin, fewer still are likely to have returned to their homes.⁵⁵ An April 2019 study determined that many returnees “find themselves living in internal displacement ... either by being unable to return to their place of origin or by being displaced after return

FIGURE 4: Returnee settlement patterns



to their place of origin".⁵⁶ As such, returns continue to add to Afghanistan's already sizeable displaced population.⁵⁷ Around 450,000 people are thought to have returned from abroad between January and November 2019.⁵⁸

Many returnees who are unable to go back to their areas of origin settle instead in comparatively safe urban areas, the same places that attract large numbers of IDPs. Economic opportunities are scarce, and returnees are often worse off financially than Afghan refugees abroad.⁵⁹ Absorption capacity is increasingly limited, and the pressure on local services, resources and infrastructure is undermining prospects for durable solutions.⁶⁰ "You can see the pressure on local host communities," the MoRR official said. "If you visited the schools six or seven years ago, you would find 40 students in a class, but after these massive returns you see 70 to 80."

In some areas just providing enough housing is a significant challenge.⁶¹ One in three people in Herat and Nangarhar are either an IDP or returnee.⁶² The strain on already scarce resources has also caused tension between displaced and host communities, and poor conditions are driving people to adopt negative coping strategies, including further displacement.⁶³

DOCUMENTED AND UNDOCUMENTED RETURNEES

There is a sharp contrast between the experiences of documented returnees "who were registered refugees in host countries and requested voluntary return with UNHCR and relevant national authorities", and their undocumented counterparts "who returned spontaneously or were deported from host countries, irrespective of whether or not they were registered refugees with UNHCR and relevant national authorities".⁶⁴ The difference lies in the mandate of intervening authorities. UNHCR supports documented returnees, while IOM supports those who are undocumented.

Around 36 per cent of returnees are documented.⁶⁵ UNHCR's assistance includes "repatriation cash grants and other support" to help them meet "their immediate humanitarian needs".⁶⁶ The grants are worth an average of \$200 per person.⁶⁷ UNHCR also works with its partners to provide other services at four encashment centres in Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul and Kandahar, including basic health assessments and vaccinations, mine risk awareness, information on education, access to land and procedures for obtaining civil documentation.⁶⁸

Undocumented returnees receive less support. In areas of high return, IOM's Reintegration Assistance and Development for Afghanistan programme supports their sustainable reintegration via vocational training and other initiatives.⁶⁹ Those who are identified as vulnerable at the border, such as unaccompanied minors, female-headed households and unaccompanied older people, are eligible for immediate humanitarian support through its Cross-Border Return and Reintegration programme, including short-term accommodation, onward transport, non-food item kits and medical care.⁷⁰ Many others, however, receive no support.

Among the returnees surveyed for this study, 87 per cent of those who had been registered as refugees received some support upon return. For those not granted refugee status, who represented two thirds of returnees interviewed, the figure was only ten per cent. Even when support is provided, sums ranging from \$40 to \$390 per person pale in comparison with the thousands, or even tens of thousands of dollars that many spent to finance their journeys.⁷¹

'WE WORRY THAT WINTER IS COMING'

Conditions in displacement

LIFE ON THE MARGINS

Although this study is based on a small and non-representative sample, it is telling that comparing the conditions of IDPs and returnees reveals no significant differences. The main discrepancy, though still not significant, is in terms of income. Eighty-seven per cent of returnees find it difficult to get by, compared with 64 per cent of IDPs.

The implication, supported by other studies, is that returnees “face the same challenges as other IDPs in accessing their rights and securing durable solutions”.⁷² The challenges both groups face are manifold. Afghanistan’s national policy on IDPs recognises that many “exist on the margins of society, unable to meet their basic needs for food, water, sanitation, housing, health care or education”.⁷³



Ghulam Ali, 46, coming out of his makeshift home in Kabul. He and his family live in a makeshift tent in a subzero temperature. His wife had just given birth to his seventh child a week before this photo was taken. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad, January 2019

Only just over a third of research participants were satisfied with their housing. Many live in mud huts or damaged buildings. More 1.2 million IDPs live in informal settlements, where their lack of tenure security means a real threat of eviction.⁷⁴ In a country where winter temperatures drop below freezing in some areas, almost 500,000 returnees and IDPs live in tents or in the open air.⁷⁵ “We worry that winter is coming, we do not have warm clothes for our children”, said Afsoon, an IDP in Kabul.

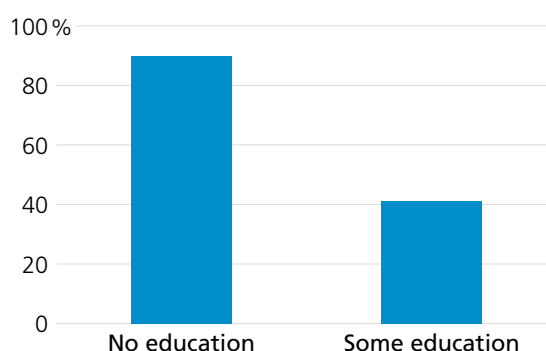
Fifty-seven per cent of respondents described healthcare provision as bad or very bad, mainly because of too few doctors and too far to travel to the nearest facilities. Nearly 2.8 million returnees and IDPs nationwide have to travel more than five kilometres for health services.⁷⁶ Around 4,000 hours of healthcare delivery were also lost and 335,000 consultations missed in 2018 as a result of attacks against health workers and facilities.⁷⁷

A similar proportion of respondents were dissatisfied with the education services available, with distances to the nearest school cited as a barrier to their children attending. Many schools have also been destroyed during conflict, and attacks on education facilities tripled between 2017 and 2018.⁷⁸ Nearly half of Afghanistan’s school-aged children are not in education.⁷⁹ Those who have been displaced are even less likely to be in school. Early and forced marriage and child labour are common negative coping strategies among vulnerable households.⁸⁰

Adults’ education levels appear to play a significant role in determining their resilience and shaping their experiences of displacement. Ninety per cent of respondents with no education said they found it difficult to get by, compared with 41 per cent of those with some education (see figure 5). Only 14 per cent with no education said they never suffered hunger, compared with 63 per cent among those with some education. The latter were also more optimistic about public services and the economy.

Respondents perceived lack of education as the second most significant barrier to employment after the lack of job opportunities. Across the population as a whole a quarter of the workforce is unemployed, and much of the work that is available, such as day labour, is vulnerable and insecure.⁸¹

FIGURE 5: Percentage of respondents who find it difficult to get by, by education



| Access to support

Afghanistan is a rare example of a country affected by internal displacement that has a national policy on the issue, adopted in 2013.⁸² It also has a policy framework for returnees and IDPs, which was introduced in 2016 “to streamline and accelerate the government’s response to displacement”. It highlights the importance of running longer-term development initiatives in parallel with humanitarian interventions.⁸³

Beyond the limited support that UNHCR and IOM provide for returnees, displaced people are in theory able to access humanitarian assistance through their provincial Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR). Applicants, however, are required to visit the office in person to register and the system is all but inaccessible outside government-controlled areas. Nor are many potential beneficiaries aware of their rights and entitlements.⁸⁴

The national policy on IDPs emphasises documentation and registration, but displaced people’s lack of documents continues to undermine their access to assistance and services.⁸⁵ Those without a *tazkera*, or identity card, struggle in terms of education, employment, healthcare and loans.⁸⁶ Only 55 per cent of the survey participants had all of their necessary documentation. “We have problems getting our documents,” said Isaad, an IDP in Herat. “The process is very longwinded and expensive. We also need to go back to our village, which is dangerous.”

When support is provided, it is rarely as comprehensive as foreseen in the policy framework. “Only basic and temporary support has been provided for IDPs”, said an NGO staff member in Kabul. “No concrete action has been taken to help them return to their normal life.”

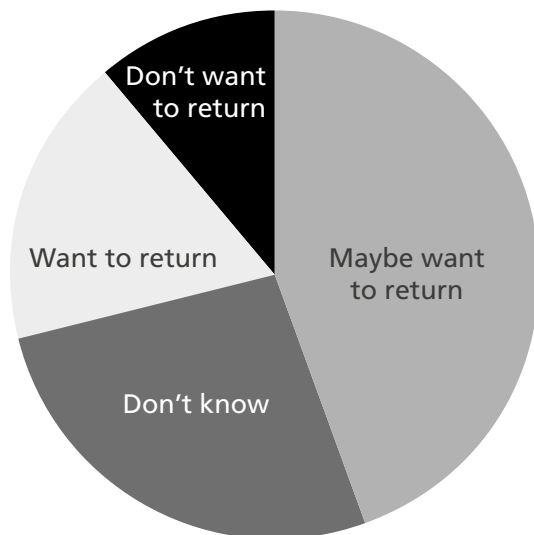
'NO ONE CAN PREDICT THE FUTURE'

Intentions and opportunities

"No one wants to be displaced from their home," said the MoRR official interviewed for this study. "They have an emotional attachment to it. These people want to be in their places of origin provided there is security and safety."

Sixty-two per cent of returnees surveyed outside their areas of origin said they planned to go back in the future, but IDPs were more indecisive. Only 18 per cent were sure they wanted to return (see figure 6). Security was a key concern among respondents, undermining prospects for timely return. "There is still a war going on between the government and the Taliban in my area," said Afsoon. "It is not possible for us to go back to our village. We plan to stay in Kabul until our district is secure again."

FIGURE 6: IDPs' return intentions



Housing is also an important consideration. On the one hand both IDPs and returnees cited regaining their property as an important motivation for return, but on the other lack of housing can be an obstacle. Firash, for example, will not be able to return even if security in his area of origin improves. He will first have to raise the money to rebuild his home.

The duration of displacement can also influence people's decision about returning. Among the IDPs surveyed, only one displaced before 2018 wanted to return, compared with 22 per cent of those displaced in the last two years. The availability of services in host communities, particularly for families with children, also encourages people to integrate locally.

Some efforts have been made at the national level to facilitate local integration by providing land occupancy certificates to residents of informal urban settlements. These improve their tenure security and reduce the risk of their being evicted.⁸⁷ In some cases, the certificates are expected to pave the way for title deeds that grant full ownership to the occupant.⁸⁸

A land allocation scheme launched in 2005 also provides housing plots to eligible IDPs and returnees.⁸⁹ Despite revisions to the strict eligibility criteria which initially prevented displaced people from benefitting from the scheme without required documentation, implementation continues to face challenges.⁹⁰ Some plots "do not meet basic living standards and are located far from the cities", which undermines prospects for durable solutions.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Nearly 2.6 million Afghans were living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence as of December 2018.⁹² They include many of the 3.3 million people who returned to the country from abroad between 2012 and 2019.⁹³ As conflict and displacement continues, these premature and often involuntary returns undermine prospects for durable solutions for returnees and internally displaced people alike.

Both groups tend to congregate in comparatively safe urban areas, where absorption capacity is increasingly limited. Displacement due to drought in 2018 has added to the crisis. Many live in informal settlements where their basic needs and rights are neglected. The increased pressure on local housing, resources, infrastructure and services has been a source of tensions between displaced and host communities, and such neighbourhoods are

potentially fertile recruiting grounds for radical armed groups such as Islamic State.⁹⁴

An integrated, whole-of-society approach that focuses on affected communities irrespective of their displacement status would be best suited to address vulnerabilities and shore up social cohesion.⁹⁵ The sheer scale of displacement and return represent a huge challenge for responders, particularly given that the humanitarian response plan is only 43 per cent funded.⁹⁶

As Firash said, no one can predict the future. It seems likely, however, that violence will increase as parties to the conflict vie for leverage at the negotiating table.⁹⁷ If this results in further displacement, the need to invest in affected communities' resilience is all the more acute.



Mustafa sleeps in the open air in Kaga, some two kilometers from Khogyani's district center. Mustafa's family, along with 17,000 people, have just been displaced from the nearby village due to clashes between IS and the Taliban. They lived in the desert without having proper shelter, food, water or other facilities. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad, November 2017

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