



BRIEFING PAPER

Recommendations for addressing internal displacement and cross-border movements in Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, Afghanistan has experienced Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule and international military intervention. One in four Afghans have been displaced.¹ High levels of violence persist despite ongoing peace talks between the government and the Taliban, which have made little progress.² Conflict triggered 461,000 new internal displacements in 2019, and civilian casualties remain high.³

Despite the continued insecurity, nearly 3.9 million Afghans have returned from abroad since 2012.⁴ Given the scale of such returns, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) conducted research in 2019 on the relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements. The study found that many returnees from abroad go back to a life of internal displacement. Whether because their homes have been damaged or destroyed or their areas of origin are unsafe, they seek shelter in precarious urban settings alongside the country's internally displaced people (IDPs).

This not only puts additional pressure on housing, livelihoods and basic services. It also risks undermining social cohesion and opportunities for durable solutions.⁵ The returns, however, continue unabated. More than 806,300 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan in 2020, the highest number on record.⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis

in Iran have contributed to the increase, as vulnerable migrants and refugees struggle to make ends meet in their host country.

The pandemic and worsening conflict have also driven up needs in Afghanistan. Around 76 per cent of the population is thought to be food insecure, and 18.4 million people are expected to require humanitarian assistance in 2021.⁷ The situation is aggravated further by a reduction in funding for aid, and the fact that both the Taliban, which now controls vast swaths of the country, and the government have increasingly restricted humanitarian space.

In the face of such challenges, IDMC organised an online workshop and a series of in-depth interviews with humanitarians to identify opportunities to promote durable solutions for IDPs and returnees. Three ways forward emerged: promoting decongestion, supporting congested urban settings and preventing premature returns. This paper examines how these measures might support those displaced in bringing their plight to a sustainable end.

PROMOTING DECONGESTION

Limited capacity to address the needs of vulnerable IDPs and returnees in congested urban centres has prompted some humanitarian agencies and government bodies to

investigate ways of encouraging settlement elsewhere. The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have identified less congested areas perceived to be conducive to return or resettlement.⁸ Investing in these priority areas would make them more attractive to displaced people and create incentives for them to relocate away from congested urban centres.

The government's land allocation scheme, which is intended to provide land for vulnerable IDPs and returnees, also has the potential to promote decongestion. The initiative, however, was marred in its early stages by inefficiency and corruption. Around 266,000 applications had been received by the end of 2014, but only 57,500 plots of land allocated, often to government officials. Only 21,000 were actually occupied because of a lack of basic services, limited livelihood opportunities and other challenges.⁹

Presidential decree 305 of 2018 established a framework for allocating suitable land to eligible IDPs and returnees, and decree 108 of November 2020 moved responsibility for coordination, implementation and allocation to the office of the first vice-president. The improved scheme provides a more robust mechanism for selecting beneficiaries, including a vulnerability assessment. It also sets out strict criteria for land selection to ensure that plots are suitable.¹⁰

More than 20,000 households in Kabul and Herat have undergone vulnerability assessments as part of a pilot scheme implemented in partnership with UN-Habitat.¹¹ More than 6,400 km² of land have been registered in the government's land bank and the authorities are looking to scale up land allocation nationwide.¹²

If the scheme manages to avoid previous pitfalls, it has the potential to open pathways to durable solutions for many vulnerable households. It is not, however, set up to provide land to all displaced people. All returnees are eligible, but IDPs who had not been displaced continuously for at least five years before presidential decree 108 are not.

SUPPORTING CONGESTED URBAN CENTRES

Despite negative implications in terms of living standards and access to land, many displaced people prefer to remain in urban and semi-urban areas because of safety and security concerns and access to livelihoods. Large numbers of urban IDPs and returnees will not leave despite efforts to promote decongestion, which means measures to encourage local integration also need to be explored.

The promotion of local integration in the long term should include the regularisation and upgrading of informal settlements.¹³ An important first step would be to strengthen the policy framework by reviewing and passing the informal settle-

ments upgrading policy, which was drafted in 2013 but never submitted to the cabinet for approval.¹⁴

Previous settlement upgrade programmes in Kabul, which have included the installation of drains, sewers and paved roads, have been limited in scope but they have increased access to services and local economic activity.¹⁵ City For All, a programme run by UN-Habitat in partnership with the government, is also providing residents of informal settlements with land occupancy certificates. More than 30,000 have already been issued, and a million households are eventually expected to receive them.¹⁶ Improving tenure security in this way reduces the risk of eviction and helps to promote durable solutions.¹⁷

Alongside these initiatives, many humanitarian organisations have adopted area-based approaches intended to increase absorption capacity by strengthening essential services, developing infrastructure and supporting livelihood opportunities in areas with high concentrations of IDPs and returnees. A multisector whole-of-community approach has been adopted for the priority return and reintegration areas identified by MoRR and UNHCR. The Norwegian Refugee Council has also adapted cross-sectoral and community-centred camp management approaches, setting up outreach teams, community centres and neighbourhood committees in urban areas.¹⁸

These efforts should ultimately dovetail with the government's development planning to make them sustainable, which reinforces the importance of advocacy and partnership.

If displaced people are to be able to integrate locally they will also need better access to livelihood opportunities. Numerous vocational training programmes already exist, but they should expand the scope of the courses on offer based on solid market assessments. Alongside tailoring and handicraft, for example, women could be empowered through IT courses which offer the prospect of better pay. Efforts to address social barriers to women working outside the home would also be required though.

PREVENTING PREMATURE RETURNS FROM ABROAD

The line between voluntary and forced returns to Afghanistan is often blurred. The number of forced returns has decreased since 2016, when around a million Afghans were affected, but departures are rarely free of coercion.¹⁹ Even in the absence of force, 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".²⁰ Restrictive policies in host countries can also hasten returns.

The bulk of the more recent returnees have been undocumented migrants from Iran rather than refugees. Those who

have been away for many years tend to be particularly vulnerable upon return, and undocumented migrants receive significantly less support than their documented counterparts.²¹

Given the decreasing levels of humanitarian assistance and growing needs linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, Afghanistan does not have the capacity to absorb large numbers of vulnerable returnees from abroad. Increasing returns from Iran driven by the country's economic crisis have already put pressure on overstretched services and infrastructure. In the face of persistent insecurity, many returnees can be expected either to find themselves living in internal displacement, increasing the congestion in informal settlements, or to move on again.

Despite the domestic challenges host countries face as a result of the pandemic, they should respect the principle of non-refoulement and refrain from forcing people to return. They should also continue to provide assistance to refugees and vulnerable migrants, uphold their rights and ensure they have access to essential services and livelihoods. This requires engagement on behalf of humanitarian and development partners and the international community more broadly, who should support host countries in fulfilling their responsibilities toward displaced Afghans.

CONCLUSION

If Afghanistan's IDPs and returnees are to achieve durable solutions, congested urban centres will have to be supported, decongestion encouraged and premature returns from abroad prevented. Comprehensive data is needed to inform these responses. This should include a thorough qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the land allocation pilot scheme to inform its future scale-up, area-based needs assessments and wide-ranging market assessments in congested urban centres.

Existing intention surveys conducted with Afghan returnees should also be complemented with similar exercises among refugees and migrants in their host countries to better understand and address the drivers of premature returns.²² If high numbers of vulnerable Afghans continue to return from abroad, their presence will overwhelm efforts to promote decongestion and support local integration, which in turn will undermine prospects for durable solutions for all of the country's displaced people.

NOTES

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- 20 Mixed Migration Centre, [Distant Dreams: Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees](#), 2019.
- 21 IDMC, [A different kind of pressure: The cumulative effects of displacement and return in Afghanistan](#), 2020.
- 22 See for example UNHCR, [Afghanistan: Border monitoring update, COVID-19 Response 06-12 December 2020](#).

Cover photo: The Torkham border point between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Photograph: Enayatullah Azad, NRC

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