



AGENCY AND CHOICE AMONG THE DISPLACED

Returnees' and IDPs' choice of destination in Afghanistan

Behind the decision making process





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List of Acronyms

BPHS	Basic Package of Health Services
DACAAR	Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees
DoRR	Department of Refugees and Repatriation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
KIS	Kabul Informal Settlements
LAS	Land Allocation Scheme
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
NFI	Non-Food Item
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NRVA	National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
ODK	Open Data Kit
PDMC	Provincial Disaster Management Committee
PIN	People in Need
PSU	Primary Sampling Unit
ToR	Terms of Reference
VRF	Voluntary Repatriation Form
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

FOREWORD

Afghanistan is in a period of rapidly changing migration dynamics

The era of large-scale refugee returns is over, while internal displacement is increasing, and Afghanistan is itself starting to host refugees in considerable numbers. At a moment in which displacement dynamics are changing, this report provides a timely insight into the motivations driving the decisions and movements of returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Urbanisation is taking place at a rapid – and uncontrolled – pace. The study provides further evidence of the rise in importance of peri-urban areas in Afghanistan requiring development actors' input. Key Informant Interviews highlighted the positive impacts of urbanisation and its potential to serve as a motor for development while providing improvements to quality of life. Afghan respondents were more likely to view it as a potentially destabilising process that Afghan cities are ill-prepared for. The different perspectives on displacement show that there is still much awareness raising and information sharing to be done on what constitutes forced migration in Afghanistan.

Migration decisions are based on multiple motivations – external assistance is not one of them

The incentives for refugees to return to Afghanistan appear to be diminishing and are now largely driven by a combination of push factors and emotional rather than material considerations. Insecurity is, unsurprisingly, the principle factor driving internal displacement, yet economic considerations also play a role and most moves were not the result of a single incident.

According to the findings of the study, external assistance has little impact on migration decisions. Only around half of all IDPs surveyed received any external assistance and those that leave in smaller groups are least likely to receive support. This suggests that small-scale displacement may not be being adequately captured or addressed by the tracking systems currently in place.

Local authorities play only a very marginal role in providing support to returnees or IDPs – a key factor for consideration in a period of transition, decreasing donor funding and attention away from Afghanistan to other humanitarian crises in the world: the needs of the displaced are not covered by their government, although the Government of Afghanistan remains the main duty bearer.

Future returns will be directed towards peri-urban areas: A negotiated group decision

Urban areas are seen to offer greater employment opportunities, security and public services, while those living in rural areas are likely to have been attracted by ethnic ties, the presence of friends, relatives, and cheaper accommodation. For those who do not own their own land in rural areas, life in cities was a significant improvement. The number of returnees returning to reclaim land (as a percentage of the total sample) has halved in the past four years indicating that future returns are likely to be even more directed towards urban areas.

Networks play a huge role in both influencing migration decisions and facilitating integration. Surprisingly though only around one in twenty families had close members that were absent (mostly young men working in Iran). This highlights further changing patterns, with families leaving together rather than choosing splitting up as a strategy. The decision-making unit is wider than the family alone: it is, in most cases, **a negotiated group decision**.

IDPs and women are the most vulnerable, yet success stories exist and can be learned from

The study confirms earlier findings¹ that IDPs are a key vulnerable group. IDPs have exceptionally low literacy, while returnees have average literacy levels (though still low by international standards). IDPs are worse off than returnees in earnings, assets and home ownership. Nevertheless there is large diversity within the sample and not all IDPs are vulnerable – some also show agency and self-reliance: factors to be built upon to enhance resilience among the displaced.

The findings of the study paint a concerning picture for **women**. Female literacy, education and participation in the labour market are exceptionally low. Women who lived in Iran however are an important exception. They are much more educated (indeed they have literacy levels above the male Afghan average) and while fewer than one in ten is in work this is still considerably higher than female returnees from Pakistan or IDP women. Their particular profile is one to learn from – and build upon – in attempts to engage in cross-border strategies of return.

Migration remains a successful coping strategy – with its discontents

Few respondents regret their migration decisions. However there are clear exceptions to this rule. Returnees from Iran and those living in **Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) sites** stand out and are comparatively far less satisfied with their situation since moving. These findings suggest that, while in a wider sense migration seems to have positive impacts, experiences are not uniform and are likely to depend on individual circumstances and expectations prior to leaving.

Worryingly high numbers of children are still out of school, as noted above women's labour market participation is almost non-existent, and access to healthcare in rural areas remains limited. Further, low levels of formal or even informal land tenure characterise many of the groups surveyed and there are high numbers who have no choice but to illegally occupy land, thereby increasing the precariousness of their situation and inhibiting future development of their property and community. All of these findings have important implications for future programming.

Despite all of this however, a huge majority (92%) plan to stay living where they are currently. These results have important implications for response strategies as they suggest a clear preference for local integration as opposed to return or resettlement.

John Morse
Director
DACAAR

¹ See for example the following Samuel Hall studies: "Challenges of IDP protection in Afghanistan" 2012 for NRC; 2013 "Evaluation of the UNHCR shelter assistance programme" with Maastricht University/MGSOG; "Cash programme review for IDPs in the KIS" 2013 for DRC.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1979 and 2002 over 6 million Afghans fled their homes to seek refuge, contributing to the largest, and longest lasting, refugee caseload in the world. From 2002 onwards, following the fall of the Taliban regime, over 5.7 million Afghans chose to return home, representing almost one quarter of the current population of Afghanistan. Despite both an expectation that refugees would return to their region of origin, large numbers of returnees chose instead to ‘return’ to urban areas.

Settlement patterns are related to a combination of refugees’ experiences in exile, urban-oriented lifestyles and skills-sets, loss of connections to previous areas of origin, perceptions of greater economic potential in urban areas, and the formation of networks. Further, even for those who did return to rural areas of origin, up to two thirds later suffered secondary displacement² and many ended up in cities.

While the numbers of new returns has dropped off steadily in recent years, internal displacement has risen dramatically. Around 873,000 people are currently displaced³ (though the actual totals are thought to be much higher) and of those around 40% are in urban locations⁴. While municipal authorities often regard IDPs as a temporary, transitory population, many have little or no intention of returning to their villages. The combination of massive returns and growing internal displacement has led to a high, and potentially unsustainable, rate of urbanisation that poses a number of risks, as well as benefits, to the Afghan economy and society.

No in-depth study within Afghanistan has ever been carried out to analyse the decision-making process behind these choices. Such information has numerous implications for future policy-making and development assistance. It can enable policy makers to anticipate trends, and potentially also influence them to make them more sustainable. Further it enables them to meet the needs of returnees and IDPs by focussing attention on the aspects that populations consider most important to their future life – and their transition out of displacement.

A. OBJECTIVES – Supporting the transition out of displacement

How do returnees and IDPs make their decision about settling down in Afghanistan, and how can these decisions be supported to alleviate displacement-related vulnerabilities? This study aims at supporting the transition out of displacement in target areas that are known to be the most popular sites of relocation among Afghanistan’s displaced. The objectives are to:

1. Investigate the decision making process for returnees/IDPs to settle in rural or urban areas
2. Comment on the livelihood situation for returnees and IDPs
3. Inform organisations working with returnees and IDPs in developing appropriate strategies

² Human Rights Watch 2013

³ UNHCR Monthly IDP update April 2015

⁴ OCHA 2014

B. STUDY FOCUS AND SCOPE

The focus of the study is on **the decision-making process** that lies behind refugee returnees' and IDPs' choices of destination. This research identifies factors that influence whether a returnee/IDP individual, family or community chooses to move to an urban or a rural location. The study presents a nuanced analysis of the combination, and interaction, of different influences and variables in affecting migration decisions to urban or rural areas.

The secondary focus of the study is on the **livelihoods** situation of displaced populations. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive assessment of skills and employment – rather to bring clarity to the influence of migration on livelihoods. The study considers both the economic and social impacts of movement to urban or rural areas and compares these to the prior expectations of returnees/IDPs.

Finally, the study provides a **policy dimension** to inform future programming for returnees and IDPs – at a time of significant policy developments in Afghanistan: with the implementation of the National IDP Policy. The policy analysis presents macro-trends and the views of key stakeholders on migration dynamics, and concludes with a section on policy recommendations for future action.

The scope of the study is:

- Limited to IDPs and refugee returnees. This does however include non-VRF returnees from neighbouring countries.
- Purposely does not include the non-displaced as agreed upon in the inception phase: rather than comparing returnee and IDPs' situation with that of the local population, this study goes in depth in the decision making process, and the elements of choice, even in a forced migration context.
- Spread out across urban, peri-urban and rural areas in the main regional hubs and provinces of Afghanistan (see Methodology for further detail).

C. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a large statistically representative quantitative survey conducted in all regions of Afghanistan for a broad coverage representative of the geographic, ethnic and social profile of returnees and displaced persons in Afghanistan. Given the assumption that people on the move tend to gravitate around main hubs with the increasing insecurity levels in Afghanistan, the study focuses on four of the five main provincial centres of Afghanistan.

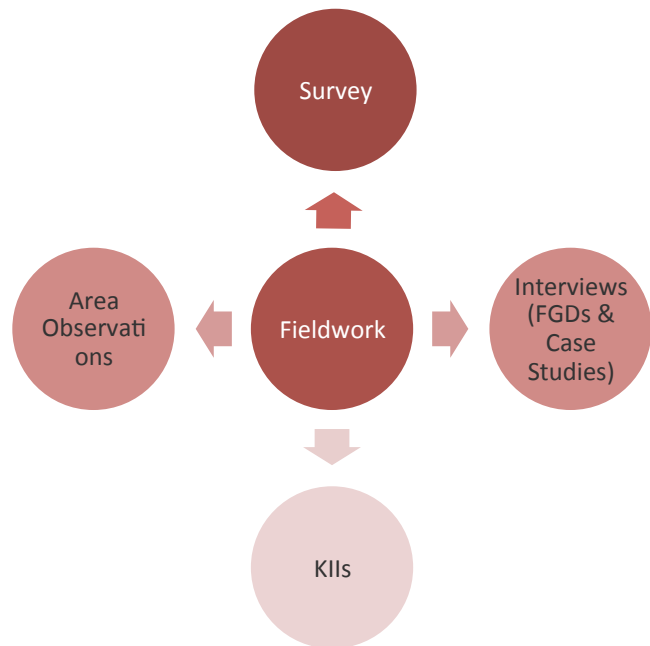
Both quantitative (survey) and qualitative research were led by a team of researchers in four provinces of Afghanistan in November 2014 – covering the main return and resettlements hubs:

- **Central region – Kabul**
- **Western region – Herat**
- **Southern region – Kandahar**
- **Eastern region – Nangarhar**

In total **870 interviews** were conducted with returnees, IDPs and in some cases with both returnees-turned-IDPs. The report voices their decision making process, livelihoods and needs.

In addition to **9 Focus Group Discussions** and **9 Case Studies** (two per province, and three each in Kabul).

Additionally **34 Key Informant Interviews** were conducted in the four provincial capitals of key migration experts and relevant stakeholders. List of organisations provided in the annex.



Sampling

The study findings are based on results of over 900 interviews, a statistically representative sample. The quantitative data has been evaluated by Samuel Hall statisticians to identify trends and to assess the statistical significance of findings. The survey sampled returnees and IDPs in rural, peri-urban and urban areas of the target provinces to obtain comparative data at provincial and local levels.

At Samuel Hall, we define peri-urban in the Afghan context as districts neighboring the capital district of a province. In other country contexts, the definition may vary. How can practitioners better define a common in-between zone between rural and urban centers? How can we recommend appropriate programmes and policies in these zones?

With local contexts closely in mind, the sampling was defined to include a representative proportion of each of the main category of respondents targeted – namely returnees, IDPs, both male and female, both from groups of recent and past returnees.

Each province was divided into Primary Sampling Units (PSU). In each PSU, field teams reported first to the local community leader then dispatched field interviewers – starting from a landmark (mosque, school, or community center), and knocking on doors of households. No gender breakdown was imposed to maintain statistical rigour: instead, the first qualified respondent was chosen. However, the field team’s gender balance ensured that women could be interviewed by women and represented in our sample.

In most locations there were much higher numbers of either returnees or IDPs present. In particular IDP camps and Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) sites tended to have, unsurprisingly, much higher numbers of IDPs and returnees respectively (three LAS sites were included in the survey, Saodat in Herat, Sheikh Mesri in Nangarhar, and Barikab in Kabul and plots of land in these sites were in theory reserved for returnees with VRF forms). In addition, teams had difficulties in locating rural IDPs in Herat and Kabul provinces, hence the relatively higher number of surveyed returnees, compared to IDPs, as a percentage of the total in rural areas.

D. THE LACK OF CLARITY SURROUNDING KEY TERMINOLOGY

Many of the key terms on which the study is based denote broad concepts that are not understood in the same way in Afghanistan. Among these are the central terms ‘rural and urban’; ‘insecurity’; ‘returnees’ and ‘IDPs’. Of these the most contentious appears to be the definition of who is an IDP, and what impact this classification should have in terms of assistance (see *targeting*).

Rural/Urban – the invisible internal border and the power of terminology

Due to a decade of massive and prolonged urban growth, most Afghan cities have expanded well beyond their established municipal borders. According to the World Bank, the urban population of Afghanistan will represent 40% of the overall population by 2050 – with a significant strain on absorption capacities and service delivery, as well as access to land and housing. The population of Kabul city alone has gone from 500,000 in 2001 to estimates ranging between 3.5-5 million today: with a rise of informal settlements, as well as peripheral settlements on the outskirts of many cities.

Many locations on the periphery of cities continue to be referred to as villages but would now more accurately be described as part of a wider urban sprawl – what the study refers to as ‘**peri-urban**’ – and their local economies have become intricately linked to the urban economy. District capitals, many once little more than large villages, have also grown and taken on urban characteristics. In addition investment in infrastructure, particularly for main roads and highways, has made it much easier and less costly in many rural areas to commute to work in cities. As a result the urban/rural divide in Afghanistan has been eroded, making it less easy to classify areas as fully rural, or for that matter to distinguish easily between urban and peri-urban areas.

A further complication is provided by the classification of many **Land Allocation Scheme (LAS)** sites as urban and hence outside the remit of rural development programmes, due to their formal designation as townships (a word that has an urban connotation in Dari, as in English), whereas in fact most LAS sites are more or less rural. The classification of urban or rural remains a key obstacle to the integration of IDPs and returnees in full-fledged national priority programmes like the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development’s successful National Solidarity Programme (NSP).

The understanding of the impact of peri-urban life on households is central to the Afghan context, providing both benefits and disadvantages to inhabitants. As seen in a recent STEPS Centre study, how the peri-urban is viewed will have implications for social justice and sustainability and rapid change may run the risk of increasing marginalisation.

Box 1.

The failure of integrating land allocation sites in rural development programmes: how terminology can exclude the displaced

A bone of contention between returnees and IDPs in Land Allocation Sites (LAS) and government representatives is the categorization of LAS as rural or urban settlements. Land Allocation Sites, in Dari, are referred to as “*shahrake mohajereen*”, indicating *townships*. But not all LAS are near urban areas. Community leaders have been lobbying for their sites to be included in National Priority Programmes (such as MRRD’s NSP) without success. MRRD does not integrate them as they are defined (by name only) as urban settlements.

Insecurity – a catchall term and a dominant lens for viewing migration

The term ‘insecurity’ appears to be used broadly in Afghanistan, both by affected populations and by policy actors, to cover a wide range of loosely-connected dynamics that may influence movement decisions. As elsewhere in the world, insecurity in Afghanistan takes on many forms.

The traditional conception of displacement due to insecurity tends to refer to movements of whole communities caught in the crossfire between opposing forces. This certainly occurs in Afghanistan, yet alongside these more visible moves exist many other forms of insecurity that may induce people to leave their homes and may result in more ‘creeping displacement’. Such insecurity may take the form of regular crime unconnected to the insurgency (though still linked to a general lack of law and order); extortion that places a high economic burden on families; harassment or imprisonment by security forces; targeted threats against individuals for a variety of reasons (such as a relative being employed in the Afghan security forces); or a general climate of uncertainty or fear.

In addition insecurity (in all its forms) may disrupt the local labour market, leading to economically-motivated moves that have insecurity as a root cause. The precise nature of the insecurity that prompted the move is likely to impact the nature of migration; whether families leave alone, or in small or large groups; whether they move pre-emptively or as a response; how long the move has been considered and planned and how much preparation has been possible.

In addition to a catchall term, insecurity is also the lens through which most movement dynamics within Afghanistan are viewed. This focus on security leads to all movement tending to be seen as a response to negative shocks (which it often is) and a failure of protection at the local level, rather than a result of modernisation and the natural mobility present in all societies.

Returnee – a legal approach to assistance that excludes non-refugee returnees

The term ‘returnee’ is generally used as a shorthand for ‘returning refugee’, raising the question of whether it includes people who did not have refugee status while abroad (i.e. undocumented refugees or migrants), and those that did not return voluntarily (i.e. deportees). Considering the porous, mobile and historical nature of Afghan migration to Iran and Pakistan, it is an open question as to the extent to which such a rigid distinction holds between people who may have had similar reasons for leaving Afghanistan and who may have been living in comparable situations in exile. Including, or not, non-refugee returnees within the definition inevitably has implications for targeting of assistance, as discussed below.

The uncertainty as to the extent to which *all* (or at least the vast majority of) continued cross-border movement should be viewed through the prism of refugee movements or, increasingly, of regular migration is now recognized⁵. Last, the term returnee contains an intrinsic ambiguity as it is unclear how long one should be deemed to fall into this category after having returned.

What are the standards for including non-refugee returnees in programming and what are the standards for determining when a durable solution has been achieved? These two questions remain the main challenges. Questions of mandates and donor funding primarily determine responses to this dual question, rather than considerations of vulnerability.

⁵ For more on this topic, see the report ‘Complexities and Challenges in Afghan Migration’, 2013

The national IDP policy has established an official definition of who is an IDP, in line with the Guiding Principles on IDPs, yet the definition remains subject to various forms of interpretation:

*“... 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”.*⁶

‘Forced or obliged’ implies little agency on the part of the migrant, while quantitative and qualitative data show that migration decisions are complex and involve a degree of choice. Forced migration (*being forced to leave one’s location*) is not equivalent to being deprived of choice (*choosing where to relocate*).

The central point of disagreement in policy circles remains the extent to which vulnerability is part of the definition. The official definition makes no specific reference to vulnerability criteria. For many Afghans, and some policy respondents, the distinguishing quality of being an IDP is that of being in a vulnerable situation, and indeed for many it appears to be synonymous with being an extremely poor migrant (regardless of the reasons for moving). As with returnees, a key question is: when does one cease to be an IDP? The IDP policy contains guidance in this regard noting that displacement ends an IDP finds “a place to live with security of tenure, access to basic services and livelihood on a par with others who were not displaced”⁷. Operationalizing such a definition is complex - is the comparative group other migrants in the area, who have not been displaced, or the wider host community? And what of those families that have below average living standards for reasons other than displacement? Even in optimum conditions a certain percentage of any given population will be above the average and a certain percentage below it. Such considerations therefore make determinations about the end of displacement more complex than they may first appear.

UNHCR is taking the lead on fleshing out answers to these debates. One step will be the planning of a workshop in the coming months to determine how to apply this to their IDP database in order to remove those who may no longer be IDPs according to these criteria. This study will aim to support these efforts and to feed into the wider implementation of the IDP policy.

⁶ *The definition also includes returnees who 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, and persons or groups of persons who are displaced as a result of a development project and who have not received an adequate housing and/or land alternative or appropriate compensation allowing them restore their lives in a sustainable manner.*

⁷ National IDP Policy, p.21

2. DECISION MAKING PROCESS

A. The displaced: Moving from the countryside to cities and their suburbs

This research highlights two key trends in returnees' and IDPs' settlement patterns in Afghanistan:

- **IDPs are more prevalent in and around cities** while returnees may be found in both urban and – mainly due to the early phases of return – rural areas in the main regional hubs of Afghanistan. Internal migrants showed an overwhelming tendency to move from the countryside to cities or their suburbs, with three quarters of previously rural migrants presently in or around cities, and 94 per cent of city-dwellers remaining in or around a city.
- **The new and growing emphasis is on the peri-urban** – the notion of migrating to a destination “around a city” is gaining weight among the displaced.

Table 1. Location breakdown by displacement profile (%)⁸

	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural	Overall
Both	10.42	11.35	14.67	12.18
IDP	36.46	41.84	16.33	31.26
Returnee	53.13	46.81	69	56.55

These trends are new and span the last decade of displacement in Afghanistan. When asked how long ago they had moved to their current location, the averages all fell at 7 years (Table 2). At 8 years for Kabul and closer to 6 years for Nangarhar. The changing political and economic context has been followed closely by the trends in displacement in the country – further pointing to an element of choice of location of residence, even among the forcibly displaced.

Table 2. Average time in the location since arrival (years)

	Kabul	Herat	Kandahar	Nangarhar	Overall
Time since arrival (years)	8.1	7.6	6.7	6.4	7.2

Afghan cities and their suburbs now see a convergence and mix of migration profiles – between those who were forcibly displaced abroad and are returning home, and those internally displaced. They find themselves living in similar areas while rural areas remain less cohesive in terms of migration profiles. This **urban convergence** is the challenge facing urban planners, service providers and political representation in Afghanistan.

Of those who previously lived in rural area almost three quarters opted to move to urban or peri-urban areas. While in contrast, of those previously living in urban or peri-urban locations, only 6% chose to move to rural areas.

⁸ The below table shows only the relative sizes of the surveyed population. It should not be viewed as a statistically accurate representation of the relative numbers of IDPs and returnees living in urban, per-urban or rural locations in Afghanistan.

The map below illustrates inter-provincial internal displacement of IDPs surveyed during the study (the weight of the line illustrates the number of people that have moved from a particular province and movements of fewer than five respondents are not shown). Unsurprisingly there is a clear regional dimension with IDPs predominantly being drawn from surrounding provinces. Nevertheless it is notable that many IDPs have travelled considerable distances to arrive at their current locations.



Not shown by the above map is that almost none of the IDPs surveyed in either Kabul or Herat originated in those two provinces, while 30% of IDPs in Kandahar, and 55.8% of IDPs in Nangarhar had come from within the province. However even in these two relatively insecure areas a sizeable number had nevertheless travelled from beyond the provinces' borders including, for Kandahar at least, significant numbers that had travelled many hundreds of kilometers to reach their present location.

B. Factors that influence decisions: returnees and IDPs' different choices

Returnees and IDPs are not only driven by different push factors, they are also looking for emotional, physical and material gains in their migration and in their choice of a destination: this research spans the “push-pull” dichotomy to speak instead of dynamics and agency in forced displacement and return in Afghanistan. Returnees (often) seek to return home, to a place where they know people and share ethnic ties. IDPs on the other hand are primarily seeking to improve their security and employment situations and are more willing to move to neighbouring provinces. Security is nevertheless the second most significant consideration for returnees.

- **Returnees’ unbroken link to their home provinces:** Returnees are highly unlikely to move to rural areas outside of their home province. Returnees’ ties to their prior home provinces remain strong, and influenced migration choices in a majority of cases. In rural areas 94% said that one of the reasons they were in that province was that it was their home province (compared to 30% of rural IDPs).
- **IDPs are motivated by security concerns regardless of where they go.** Around 90% of IDPs mentioned an improved security situation as being one of the reasons for their choice of destination regardless of whether they were now living in urban, peri-urban or rural areas. In contrast returnees influenced by security concerns were more likely to move to urban or peri-urban areas than rural areas.

Common to all are the importance of ethnic ties, access to land, while access to assistance is not a major decision-bearing factor – another key finding of this study. While assistance used to be a tipping point for earlier refugee returnees, it is no longer the case, for returnees and IDPs alike:

- **The availability of assistance does not seem to play a major role in migration decision-making.** Having heard of assistance being provided in a certain area was mentioned by fewer than 10% of respondents in any migration category or location. This is compelling evidence that the provision of assistance does not seem to be a major factor in permanent migration decisions.
- **Ethnic ties to the area and the presence of relatives and friends are more important factors in attracting people to rural areas whereas employment opportunities attract them to urban ones.** In addition cheaper accommodation and having been instructed to move by local authorities, were more often cited as the main reason for moving the more rural the location, while security and geographic proximity were more of a draw in urban areas.
- **Urban living is preferable for those that do not own land in rural areas.** During focus group discussions and case studies most people expressed the view that rural living was fine for those that own land, but for all others there are much greater advantages to living in urban areas, including greater security, access to jobs, education, and health services. A number of people mentioned that they felt that living in urban areas their children would have a better life, would become more educated and would be less likely to turn to crime.

1. Beyond the push and pull: Agency in forced displacement and return

Combination of factors: security and economics are mixed factors: beyond ‘push and pull’, returnees and IDPs seek to fill in a void: A first element of choice and agency

Departure was caused by a specific incident for 11% of respondents (99 individuals). This incident was most frequently an attack by pro-government, anti-government or other armed forces (56.6%). Where an incident like this did occur, it was usually the reason for departure - those respondents often (59.6%) claimed it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would have left their places of residence had the incident not occurred. Beyond the push and pull factor dichotomy, this study

looks at the link between “force and choice” in returnees’ and displaced decision-making process. Insecurity forces people to leave, and security the driving factor in the location of settlement.

70% of respondents claim that the better security situation drove their decision to settle in their current location. ‘Security as a choice’ is found specifically for those settling in peri-urban areas (78%), followed by urban areas (76%) and a small majority in rural areas (56%) – thus confirming the trend that returnees and displaced trust the security in urban hubs – whether cities or their suburbs – rather than the countryside.

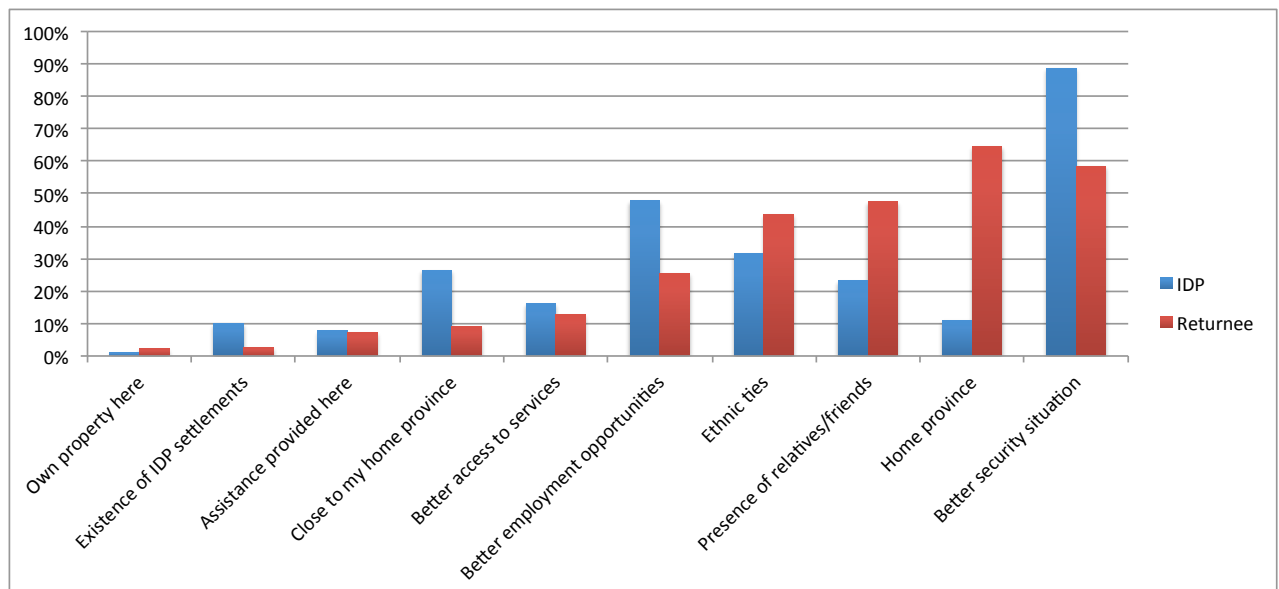
Staying near the home province is a priority: A second element of choice

Security being the driving factor, respondents will choose the most secure place in or nearest to their home province – most displaced will not travel far from their home province. Theories of displacement argue that the displaced cannot afford to go far from their homes, they aim to stay close for the purpose of returning more easily and at a lesser cost. This research finds that the emotional and social connections trump cost, distance or logistical considerations in the final decision.

Peri-urban areas are increasingly seen as a secure option by a majority: A third element of choice

While much attention has been on the rural vs. urban split in returns, respondents indicate an emphasis on the potential of peri-urban to secure their security and economic needs. While IDPs and returnees rate security considerations as high, the most telling information rests in the security perceptions and promises peri-urban areas hold for the displaced.

Graph 1: All reasons for moving to this province by migration status



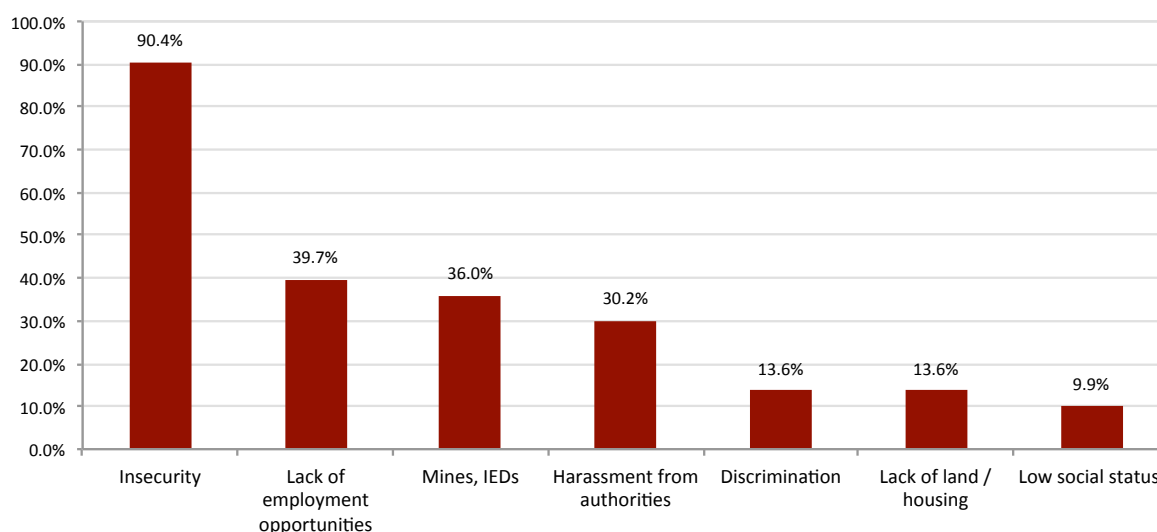
Graph 2: Main reason for moving to this specific location by setting (%)



Internal displacement often driven by mixed motivations

After insecurity (the main push factor for 90% of IDPs), the **second most cited problem is the lack of employment opportunities**, followed closely by mines/IEDs and harassment from authorities:

Graph 3: Main problems faced by IDPs prior to leaving (%)



In more than three quarters of cases IDPs had not previously been considering leaving (compared to a third of returnees). It is significant though that many IDPs had considered leaving for some time previously, indicating that they may have had at least some time to prepare and were not faced with an abrupt and immediate obligation to leave. In rare cases, though still amounting to almost one in ten IDPs, the decision to move had been considered for a few months or more.

Only 15.8% of IDPs claimed the move was the result of a specific incident, with the **vast majority stating that it was the result of a combination of factors**. Over half of those attributing their move to a specific incident stated that it was due to an attack by local armed groups or anti-government elements.

The longer a move was considered seems to have had a large impact on the choice of destination, with IDPs in urban areas being more than two and a half times more likely to have been considering leaving for more than a couple of days.

The qualitative data indicates that **many internally displaced families have experienced multiple moves**. While early moves may have been driven by an immediate need to seek sanctuary later moves may have been motivated either by a desire to improve standards of living (which invariably decreased following sudden displacement) or by continued instances of insecurity.

Insecurity manifested itself in various ways. During focus group discussions and case studies a range of individual experiences of insecurity were described including extortion, harassment from authorities, inter-tribal conflict, ethnic discrimination, assassinations, general lawlessness, damage to property and fear of being targeted due to relatives serving in the security forces. In most cases respondents stated that the decision to move was not the result of one specific incident but rather a combination of factors or previous events.

2. Emotional gains matter in the choice of province of settlement

People like to return home – still, Kabul stands out: the capital province attracts more people seeking improved security conditions. Return may not be a one-way event, nor a permanent or durable solution.

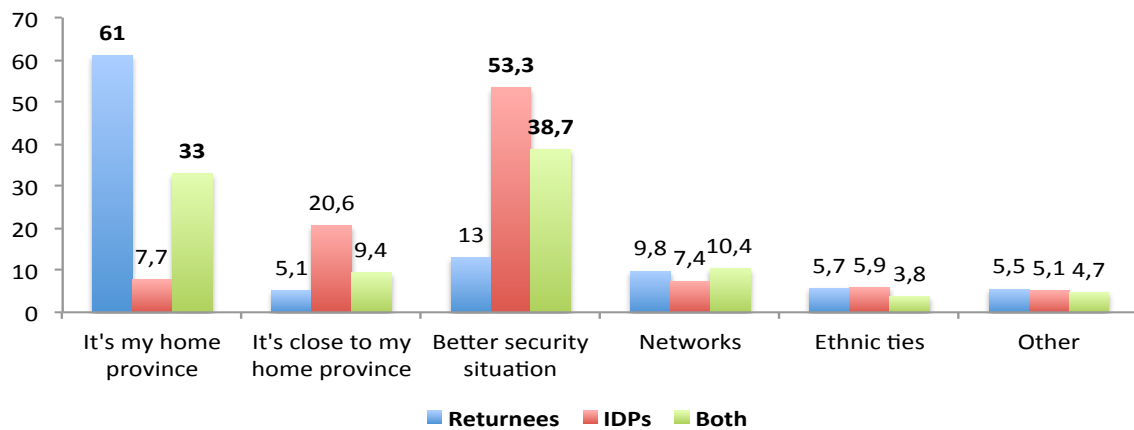
The emotional factor of returning home is especially true for refugees returning to Afghanistan – while for IDPs, return is the least preferred durable solution. IDPs choose their location of settlement based on security considerations first and foremost as illustrated in Graph 4.

Multiple moves following displacement

We were accused of being Taliban and persecuted by [General Dostum's] forces. Thus, our lands and houses were seized and destroyed. I took my wife and my small daughter on a horse and left the area along with my property. We were shot at a lot, but we survived thankfully. Later on, we moved to Murghab district and stayed there for one month. There we were also attacked by Dostum's forces, so we moved to Rubat Sangi district of Herat. About 606 families were left from my original place and settled in Rubat Sangi district. We were involved in agriculture-related tasks ... After one year, our livelihood was getting worse, so some of the IDPs decided to look for somewhere else for a better livelihood. Finally, we found this place and took our family here about 21 years ago.

(Urban IDP, Herat)

Graph 4. Main reason for moving to this province by migration status (%)



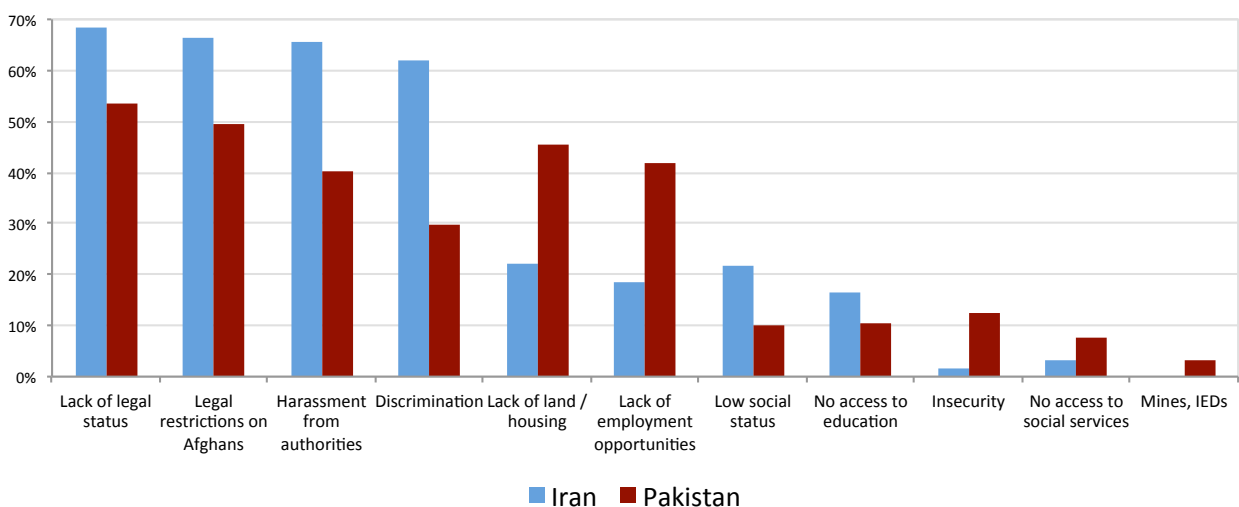
While IDPs seek better security, **returnees seem to be largely influenced by a desire to improve their social status and an enduring affinity to their country**: A strong perception of being second-class citizens in exile and a longing to be in one's homeland appear to be the most important factors driving return, trumping more 'rational economic' motivations. While, according to the below chart, low social status, discrimination and harassment would appear to be more significant factors in Iran, the focus groups and case studies conducted indicated that these concerns were widely, if not unanimously, shared by returnees from both countries.

Discrimination against Afghans

We didn't have big problems in Iran except for being insulted and assumed to be worthless human beings because we were Afghan. (Urban returnee, Herat)

We returned here because we were usually made fun of by the people of Pakistan saying why don't the idiot Afghan people return to their country, and they usually argued with us and fought against us (Rural returnee, Kabul)

Graph 5: Push factors by country of exile



Economic ‘push’ factors are a stronger issue in Pakistan, reflecting a relatively weaker economic situation, though similar numbers in both countries complain that the only jobs available for Afghans are relatively low paid. While not one of the principle push factors, **insecurity was mentioned by almost 10% of returnees from Pakistan** (compared to practically no respondents from Iran), though this has not markedly increased as a push factor in the past four years. Other particular issues, frequently raised during case studies and focus groups, included official restrictions on movement, residence, employment and education after 8th grade for Afghans in Iran, and lack of employment and shelter, low wages and high rents for Afghans in Pakistan.

While many of the factors driving return have been covered in previous research, this study provides **important new information on how motivations have changed over time**. Compared to older returnees, those that returned more recently (in the past four years) were much more likely to report extortion as being a concern, slightly more likely to report feuds within communities, and less likely to report harassment from authorities, lack of employment opportunities, or lack of legal status as being major problems while in exile.

For many though, despite the problems they were facing in exile they would nevertheless have been **happy to stay were it not for enforced moves** prompted by camp closures in Pakistan and the declaration of ‘no go’ areas for Afghans in Iran.

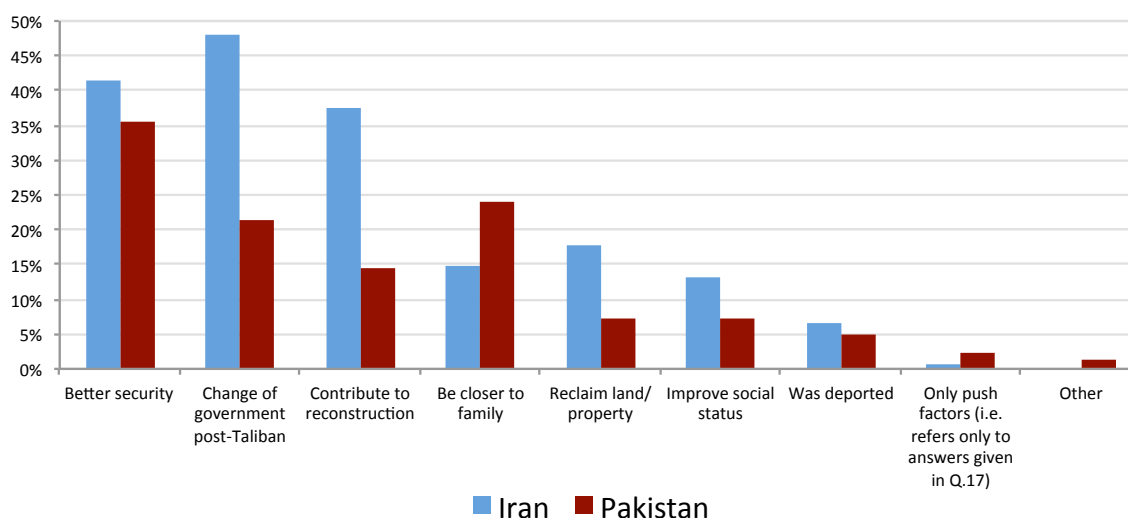
Forced moves from Iran and Pakistan

Previously, we were 4 households living in Iran in the Zahidan area when we were forced by the Iranian police to leave the area. The police were looking everywhere for Afghans in order to expel them by force. We were really unhappy when we were forced to leave Iran because jobs are unavailable in Afghanistan and it's difficult to make enough money for food here. The female members of my family were very happy there because they had a comfortable life. (Urban returnee, Herat).

Once the Afghan government won [the war], Pakistan warned the Afghan refugees to go and to leave the camp. There were no other reasons such as economy or natural disaster or anything else. As I mentioned, they gave us one month to leave, and when the designated time was over they began to demolish our houses. ... Nobody had already planned to relocate and to leave the camps.

(Rural returnee, Nangarhar)

Graph 6: Pull factors by country of exile⁹



The most common reason cited by returnees was a desire to reconnect with their homeland. Most respondents made reference to **strong emotional reasons for wanting to return to their homeland. While the desire to reconnect has remained stable, every other pull factor has diminished in the past four years.** More than a quarter of returnees had been considering leaving for over six months and over 93% indicated that their move was due to a combination of factors, rather than due to a single incident, indicating that in many cases **returns were the result of long-considered decisions.**

No strong correlation was noted between motivations to return and choice of destination areas. There is some evidence that those in rural locations were marginally more influenced by emotional reasons (wanting to reconnect to homeland, change of government post-Taliban, and contributing to reconstruction) while those living in urban areas were marginally more influenced by better employment opportunities, yet these are not marked differences.

The numbers of those returning to reclaim property are low and decreasing. Less than a fifth of returnees Iran hoped to reclaim land or property, with returnees from Pakistan at less than a tenth. As many key informant interviews suggested that the principle reason returnees would go to rural rather than urban areas was to reclaim property this finding may well indicate a future change in migration patterns with fewer returns to rural areas as a percentage of the total returnee population. Nevertheless, while the data clearly shows that reclaiming land and property was a much stronger justification for those now living in rural areas, still fewer than 20% of rural returnee respondents stated this as a factor, suggesting that this has not been as important a factor as many key informant interviews assumed it to be.

Almost none of those currently living in peri-urban areas were influenced to return by the prospect of reclaiming land or property, probably because most peri-urban areas were undeveloped rural areas in which few people owned property at the time of departure to exile.

⁹ Considering the low numbers of people reporting security problems in exile (particularly in Iran) it is assumed that ‘better security’ was interpreted by respondents as referring to an improved security situation in Afghanistan, rather than compared to where they were living in Iran or Pakistan, and equally it seems likely that ‘better employment opportunities’ was interpreted in the same way.

Box 2. Key findings on Decision Making Process

While reintegration programmes are centred on the return of the displaced (returning refugees or IDPs) to their locations of origin, in reality, the displaced settle in places of their own choosing: urban – and increasingly, peri-urban – areas or to a lower extent rural areas that offer better economic and social opportunities. A few of the key findings from the above section are highlighted below:

- 84% of IDPs were prompted to move by a combination of factors, rather than a specific incident, and 18% had been considering moving for a few weeks or more.
 - 50% were able to undertake some preparatory activities for the trip.
- Expectations of external assistance contributed to their choice of destination for fewer than 8% of all respondents
 - Aid was the primary reason for the choice of location for less than 1%.
- 94% of families left intact and 69% of families left together with other families
 - Small groups of two to six families travelling together are most common.

The quantitative data provides new information on the evolution of motivations driving returns and confirms that return to Afghanistan is becoming a steadily less attractive prospect. While the desire to reconnect with one's homeland and family remains strong, all other pull factors have decreased in recent years. In the past four years the numbers returning to reclaim property have also decreased by half (as a percentage of the total), which may have implications for future migration patterns and suggest fewer returns to rural areas.

IDPs' main concern is insecurity, though the second most-quoted problem prior to displacement is a lack of employment opportunities, suggesting that motivations for moving are likely to be mixed. A key finding of the study, and one that may have important implications for future policy, is that the availability of assistance does not appear to be a major factor in the vast majority of migration decisions.

Decision-making within families is strictly hierarchical. Heads of families take decisions, in almost two thirds of cases women are entirely excluded from this process, and disagreements are almost non-existent (or at least are not admitted to). In most cases (both for returnees and IDPs) families leave in groups, indicating that the decision-making entity is wider than the family unit.

In most case the decision to move is not due to a single isolated incident, but rather a combination of factors or events, and most families do have some time to undertake preparatory activities (though there does not seem to be a statistical correlation between these variables).

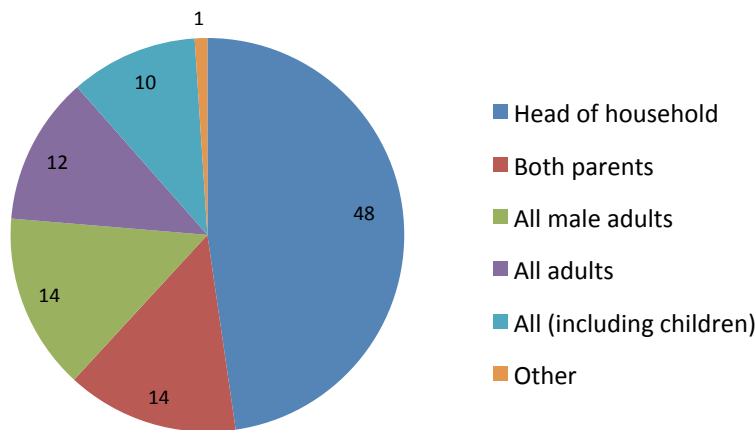
In terms of drivers of movement, aside from responding to very different push factors, returnees and IDPs are also attracted by different things in their choice of destination. Returning to home provinces where there are personal and ethnic connections ranks highly for returnees, while IDPs are more likely to consider prevailing economic and security conditions. The former group also tends to have considered moving for longer and to have undertaken more preparatory activities. In some ways though the two categories show some striking similarities; for instance in terms of the size of groups travelling together the patterns are very similar.

C. The social factor: Who influences decision-making?

1. The importance of the collective: The decision to move is often a group decision

In almost half of all cases the decision to move was taken by the head of household alone, followed by all male adults and both parents together. **In almost two thirds of cases women were excluded from the decision-making entirely.** 98% of respondents stated that there was no disagreement regarding the decision, however this may also be somewhat linked to respondents not wishing to openly admit to disagreements as previous studies have found lower levels of unanimous decision-making¹⁰. Movement of individuals alone, or families splitting up, was exceptionally rare with 94.4% of families reporting having moved all together.

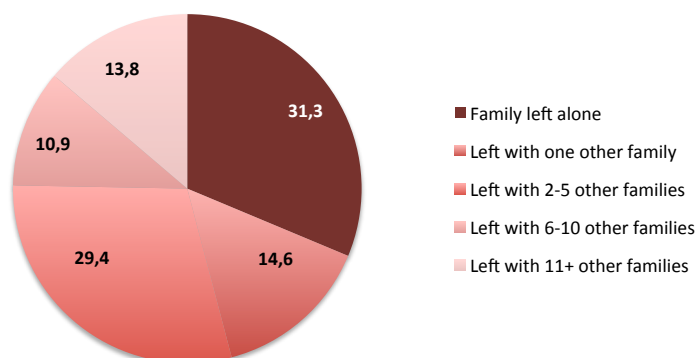
Graph 7: Who made the decision to move here?



Only one third of families left on their own: **in more than two thirds of cases families did not leave alone, and rather left together with one or more other families**, meaning that the decision-making process was wider than the family unit. Most commonly they would move in groups of six families or fewer (see below graph). In 65% of cases in which multiple families left together they all went to the same place. Interestingly the migration patterns, in terms of the size of the groups moving together, do not seem to be markedly different, as one might expect, between returnees and IDPs (though IDPs are marginally more likely to have left in groups of over 11 families). Further, there appears to be no statistical correlation between either movements prompted by a specific incident or the length of time a move was considered and the likelihood of families leaving together. These patterns are replicated in most provinces, with only Kandahar showing a larger number of moves by single families alone and a correspondingly smaller number of mass migrations compared to other provinces.

¹⁰ For instance, in an AREU survey of returnees in 2005 only 22% of heads of households claimed the decision to return had been unanimous

Graph 8: Family movement alone or in groups



Movement alone or in groups depends on a range of factors including local community dynamics. In certain insecure areas focus group and case study respondents mentioned that families would tend to leave alone and in secret as openly discussing leaving could have made them a target. In some locations in which qualitative interviews took place future decisions to move seem to be viewed as decisions for the community and in others they are seen as private decisions for families to take alone. For returnees, camp closures and declarations of ‘no go’ areas are likely to account for at least some of the larger movements of returnee families.

Community vs. family return movement

Only my family was involved in the decision to move here because my family and I did not live in the camp; those people living in the camp were most likely to return as a community.

Returnee, Kandahar

2 Displacement can be prepared: Planning and preparation count and further emphasise the agency of IDPs and returnees

Returnees are the most prepared – yet this group shows differences based on the country of exile. While refugees in Iran primarily sell assets and rent out their homes to finance their return, those living in Pakistan sell livestock and other assets to a lesser degree (Table 3), showing less financial capital to finance their migration. Comparatively 55% of returnees from Pakistan and 80% of returnees from Iran undertook some preparation activities. Most significantly returnees from Iran were far more likely to be able to rent out their houses, sell other assets, or call in loans than other groups, and were also less likely to need to borrow money. Those from Pakistan by contrast were slightly more likely to be able to sell their houses and were much more likely to have livestock to sell compared to those coming from Iran.

Table 3. Preparatory activities undertaken

	Afghanistan	Iran	Pakistan
Sell livestock	32.1%	4.9%	19.1%
Sell other assets	20.6%	48.9%	26.3%
Sell house	7.4%	7.1%	11.6%
Rent out house	1.1%	33.2%	6.6%
Borrow money	10.1%	4.9%	10.9%
Call in loans	1.6%	13.6%	2.5%
Contact relatives/friends in current location	3.6%	6.5%	4.1%
None of the above	50.1%	17.9%	44.7%
Other	0%	1.6%	0.6%

In around half of all cases IDPs had time to undertake some preparation for the trip. Selling livestock and other assets were the most commonly undertaken preparation activities.

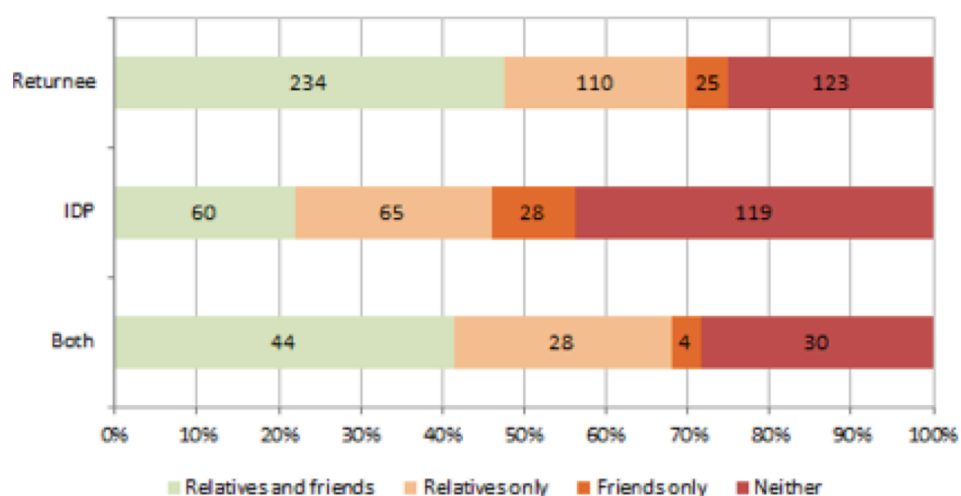
Those considering moving for longer were more prepared for the trip. There was some correlation between the amount of time a move had been considered and the preparation activities that took place with those that had considered moving longer generally undertaking more preparation for the move. For instance 32% of those considering moving for several years sold their houses, compared to 13% considering between 6 months to a year, 6% of those considering for a few months and 0% of those considering for a few weeks (though the figures increase again to 2% of those who had only considered moving for a few days and, strangely, 8% of those who said they had no time to consider moving at all).

3. Networks and Integration

Networks heavily influence migration choices in Afghanistan – where the collective decides to leave as a group, they also choose to re-unite as a group with relatives and friends for support. Where networks were in place, they generally (76.9%) encouraged or strongly encouraged the respondents to join them – only 22.2% were neutral, and hardly anyone discouraged their relatives or friends to join them. The collective matters not only in displacement but in the choice of location of settlement.

Returnees were more likely than IDPs to have friends or relatives in their destination locations (three quarters of returnees compared to two thirds of IDPs). Where networks were in place families were encouraged or strongly encouraged by their friends and relatives to join them three quarters of the time. Only in 2.2% of cases were families discouraged from moving by their friends or relatives already living there. The importance of networks in places of destination was frequently mentioned during case studies and focus group discussions.

Graph 9. Connections in place by migration status



Very few respondents had family members living in other locations. Overall only 5% of respondents claimed that members of the immediate family were absent (though the proportion rose to 11.5% in Herat) and in those cases the absent members tended to be young men in their 20s living in Iran. Generally these individuals neither sent nor received remittances. This evidence appears to contrast with the expectations of many of those interviewed during KIIs, in which it was commonly assumed that far larger numbers of impoverished IDP and returnee families would choose to employ the strategic migration of family members as a coping strategy and a way of diversifying risk.

There is a strong regional dimension and limitation to the spread of networks. In Herat and Kandahar connections to Iran and Pakistan respectively are much stronger than those to Kabul.

- Over a third of Herat respondents have contacts in Iran,
- 31.8% of respondents in Kandahar and
- 39.6% of those in Nangarhar have contacts in Pakistan.

Relatives were also the main source of information about the destination area for around half of all respondents. Other important sources of information included friends (13%), and people living in the same community (15%). Only 4% of people relied on the media as their main source of information while 15% of people had no information at all about the destination area before moving there.

Friends and relatives provided a high level of support to the new migrants. In many cases they provided them accommodation, with returnees being slightly more likely to be able to avail themselves of this type of support. IDPs by contrast were more likely to have had to camp or squat land immediately following their move and were also less likely to be able to afford to rent or buy a house. If respondents had family or friends in their destination area they received some form of support from them around 90% of the time.

Staying with friends or relatives is a short to medium-term strategy. Almost a quarter of respondents in the first five years since their move were staying for free with friends or relatives yet this number falls to around 5% for those that moved more than 5 years ago.

A majority of all types of migrants retained contacts in their previous place of residence though there were marked differences between the groups in this respect, with IDPs most likely to retain connections and returnees from Pakistan least likely. Following a similar trend 14% of those from Pakistan, 18% of those from Iran, and 21% of IDPs had family members who had moved back to those locations. Less than one in ten families reported still owning a house in their previous location; almost exclusively IDPs or returnees who were later displaced (only 3 returnees reported still owning a house abroad).

Importance of networks in destination area

Before coming here, I knew some of my relatives and friends were living in this location. Their presence in this place was important for me because I could settle here without any tension. IDP, Kandahar

We would never have come here if our relatives had not settled here two years earlier than us; they helped us in all kinds of ways. They helped us by providing shelter and guided us where to go to get daily labouring jobs. IDP, Kandahar

We had some of our relatives living here. Before we moved, they gave us a call and frequently asked us to leave our area due to war. Finally, we decided to leave and come here. At first, they prepared a banquet for us, then they provided us with shelters.

IDP Nangarhar

D. The outcome of the decision making process: expectations vs. reality

1. Early returns driven by high hopes and promises of land and jobs

In the early days following the fall of the Taliban regime there appears to have been a period of great optimism and a desire to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. This has diminished over time and these have steadily become less important factors according to the data (comparing the motives of those that returned recently with those that returned longer ago).

The perception or hope that returnees would receive support, most notably land and jobs, either from UNHCR or the government, contributed to early returns. This was especially the case for those people allocated land in LAS sites. It is not entirely clear whether these high expectations were the result of an overly optimistic view of what the new government would be capable of achieving, or due to specific promises made to returnees while they were in exile, though in any case it seems likely that these high expectations will have contributed to later levels of disappointment. It is worth noting here a distinction with a later finding in the report, specifically that assistance does not play a major role in migration decision-making. In the case of early returnees the assistance expected, specifically land and jobs, was substantial and long-term, while the assistance that is currently expected and on offer to IDPs and other migrants tends to be more humanitarian and temporary.

2. External Assistance: Mostly humanitarian in nature and limited for certain groups

Returnees were more likely to have received external support than IDPs (59.6% compared to 50.7%). They were also much more likely to have received it earlier than IDPs, though as many returnees receive support at the border this is not necessarily surprising. The most commonly provided support (to all groups) was humanitarian in nature, consisting of food (47.9%), Non Food Items (28.2%), and fuel (25.3%). With the single exception of fuel returnees were more likely to have received all types of support than IDPs.

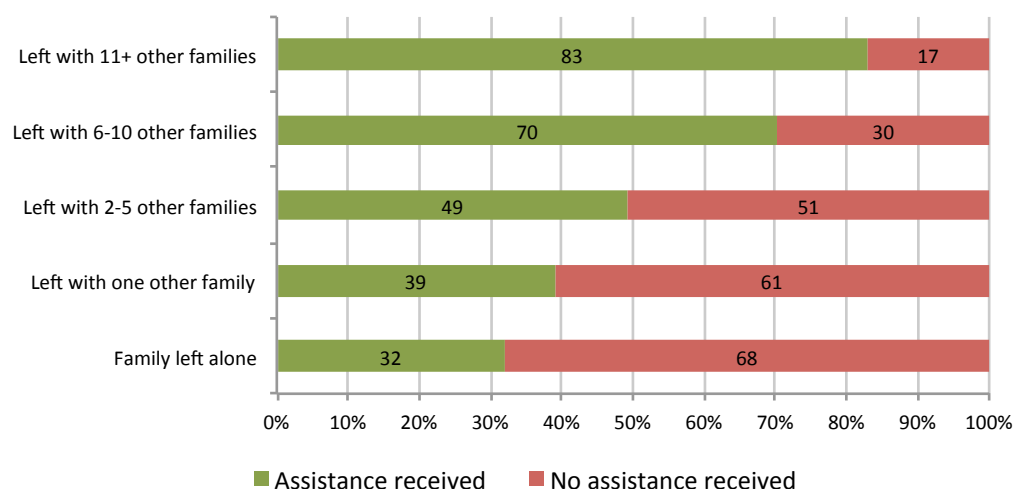
Table 4. Assistance received (%)

	Afghanistan	Iran	Pakistan	Total
Food	45.21	50	49.69	47.93
NFIs	26.85	32.07	27.50	28.16
Fuel	27.12	28.80	20.94	25.29
Shelter / housing	8.77	13.59	13.75	11.72
Financial support / cash grant	5.48	15.76	15.31	11.26
Medical treatment	3.01	0.54	6.88	4.02
Training	1.92	3.80	4.69	3.33
Business start-up grant	1.92	1.63	4.38	2.76
Other	1.37	1.09	4.38	2.41
Education	0.55	4.89	2.50	2.18
Information / counselling / legal assistance	1.37	1.09	1.88	1.49
Transport	0.55	0	2.19	1.03
Job placement	0.27	1.09	0.63	0.57

Possessing a VRF card greatly increases the likelihood of accessing support for returnees. Three quarters of returnees without a VRF card had received no assistance at all since returning, compared to around 15% of those that had VRF cards. Possessing a VRF card not only increased the likelihood of receiving assistance from UNHCR (55% of VRF holders were assisted by UNHCR compared to only 6.5% of non-VRF returnees), but also NGOs, which were more than twice as likely to support returnees that hold VRF cards (37% to 17% respectively).

Only around 10% of the IDPs that received support were provided it within one week of being displaced and less than half within one month. Further there is a very strong correlation between the size of the group that IDPs left in and the likelihood of their receiving external support (see chart). Both of these findings **may indicate a considerable amount of internal displacement going undetected** by the regional IDP task forces and provincial authorities, with in particular smaller movements likely to be less visible.

Graph 10: IDPs: Size of group and assistance received



External assistance comes from predominantly international and non-state based sources. Local authorities only provided assistance to around 6% of respondents in total.

3. Social Integration: respondents report feeling welcome in their location of settlement

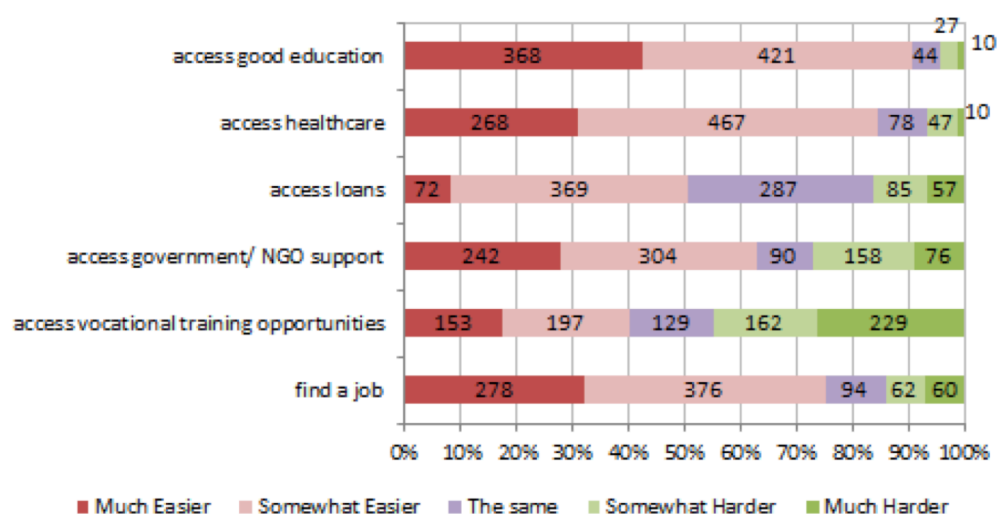
As a result of the strong social component in the choice of location of settlement, a large majority of all migrant groups, in all settings, and in all provinces reported feeling welcome in the area they were currently living in. IDPs were slightly more likely to feel welcome than returnees and hardly anyone felt very unwelcome. There are also clear regional differences in the extent to which people feel welcome (or at least report doing so). In Kandahar over 95% of respondents reported feeling welcome, whereas only 77% did in Kabul.

Few respondents reported feeling that there was discrimination against any particular groups, though again there were regional variations in responses with those in Nangarhar most likely to report discrimination. Between the groups, IDPs were most likely to be judged to be discriminated against (by 12.7% of respondents), followed by returnees from Pakistan (10.7%), people of low social status (10.4%), and returnees from Iran (8.7%). Notably though the numbers disagreeing, or strongly disagreeing, about the presence of discrimination far outweighed the number of those agreeing to its presence in all provinces and for all population types. It may however be possible that discrimination (or indeed being made to feel unwelcome) is not commonly admitted to.

Most respondents trust their community representative after displacement and return: Only 13% of respondents (117 individuals) disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “my community leader represents my opinion”, most of those being in Kabul and Herat.

4. Unfulfilled expectations: a focus on education, health care and employment

Graph 11. Prior expectations (ratings)



Overall, on all indicators respondents thought their situation would be much or somewhat easier. Only a minority found expectations and reality aligned.

Education: A major disappointment for returnees and IDPs

Education is a disappointment for everyone, but especially for returnees from Iran, 58.7% of whom had assumed it would be much easier to access good education. This is only the case for 38.9% of people moving from another location in Afghanistan and 36.9% of respondents coming from Pakistan. Again, Kabul (68.8%) and Herat (61%) do much worse than Kandahar (21.8%) and Nangarhar (18%).

Healthcare: Low levels of coverage outside urban areas

Healthcare services were commonly felt to be better in urban areas. In some rural locations included in the study residents had no access to healthcare and even when clinics theoretically existed in practice they did not necessarily provide any services. Improved access to healthcare was therefore felt to be one of the main benefits of living in urban areas; a finding that is not necessarily surprising but which demonstrates the persistent weaknesses of the government's Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS); a flagship programme that aims to provide universal free primary healthcare in rural areas only.

Finding employment: back to reality

Respondents thought it would be much easier to find employment –

- 26.6% among those who were in Afghanistan just before moving
- 47.3% of those who were in Iran
- 29.4% of those who were in Pakistan
 - 66.5% of Kabul and 50% of Herat respondents thought it would be much easier to find a job, vs. 6.4% and 5.5% of Kandahar and Nangarhar respondents.

Box 3. The social dimension of the decision making process

Indicators of well-being often focus on tangible and physical markers that are easy to assess. Yet social well-being is equally important and depends to a large extent on the degree of integration in the local community. Indeed physical and social well-being are connected as the social capital that comes with being part of a community may also serve to reinforce social safety nets and facilitate access to employment. In tightknit closed communities it may be difficult for outsiders to integrate without existing connections to facilitate this process, leaving newcomers ostracised and vulnerable. How important therefore are existing networks to migration decisions? And to what extent do migrants feel welcome in the places they are currently living?

Some key findings from the above section are highlighted below:

- 75% of returnees and 66% of IDPs knew friends or relatives in their destination location prior to moving there
- Only 5% of families have close members living elsewhere (and very few of those send remittances).
- IDPs' likelihood of receiving support is strongly connected to the size of the group in which they leave, rising from 32% of families that left alone to 83% of those that left in groups of 11 or more families.
- Holding a VRF card increases the chances of returnees receiving support from UNHCR from 6% to 72%, and from NGOs from 15% to 49%.
- Only 4% of respondents reported feeling unwelcome in the communities in which they were now living, yet 23% felt that there was some pressure on them to leave

The study confirms what was previously suspected in regards to networks, namely that they are important in influencing migration decisions and outcomes, particularly for returnees. Where networks exist, friends or relatives provide the primary source of information about a destination area, have a strong tendency to encourage others to join them there, and provide wide-ranging initial support on arrival. All categories of migrants in all areas report feeling welcome by the host community and discrimination levels are low, or at least not commonly admitted to.

Families tend to stick together and the number of families that have members in other locations was exceptionally low, indicating that this is a coping strategy utilized less often than thought by many of the stakeholders that were interviewed (both international and Afghan).

Importantly, half of IDPs report not having received any external support at all, and there is also a clear correlation between the number of IDP families moving together and the likelihood of receiving support, suggesting that a significant amount of internal displacement, particularly of smaller groups, goes unrecorded. Returnees that did not have formal status abroad were least likely to receive any external assistance, whereas returnees that had formal status were much more likely than IDPs to have received support.

3. Livelihoods and Education

A. EDUCATION AND SKILLS

1. Low levels of literacy and education: Particularly for IDPs and women

Afghanistan has among the lowest literacy levels in the world. In that context, IDPs fall well below the national average. Most worrying of all is that current schooling levels are also low, meaning that the second generation of IDP families will similarly be disadvantaged in later life.

Girls are also systematically excluded from education. However, on a positive note, those families that have lived in Iran, where female education is valued more highly, are much more likely to send their girls to school even after returning to Afghanistan.

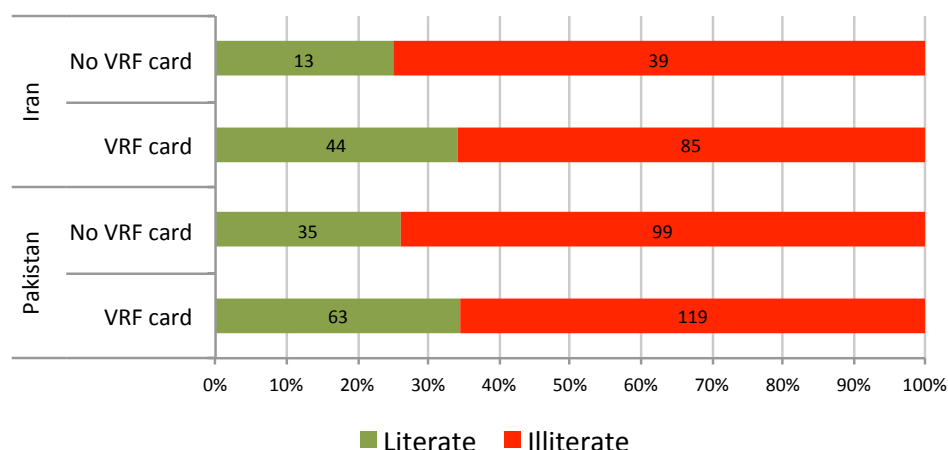
Returnees have average literacy levels, while IDPs are well below the average. Only 31% of returnees in surveyed households are literate, yet that is roughly in line with the national average¹¹ and compares to only 19% of IDPs. Of all groups and settings rural IDPs were least likely to be able to read and write, though strangely the pattern is reversed for returnees, with a marginally higher degree of literacy in rural areas (likely due to the higher percentage of VRF card holders in the rural sample – see below). Schooling is closely correlated to literacy and shows similar results to literacy patterns. IDPs' schooling may have been disrupted by the move and they are also more likely to come from more remote and impoverished areas where schools are less common.

In terms of the younger generation, and in line with the above results, **the children of returnee families were much more likely to be in school than those of IDP families** at all ages. Around 35% of IDP children between 6-17 were in school. For returnee children the figure was just under half of children aged 6-12, falling to 42% of 13-17 year olds. School attendance levels of children aged 6-12 were surprisingly higher in rural areas (39.6% urban, 44% peri-urban, 48.8% rural). This is possibly due to a higher proportion of returnees in the rural sample but also suggests that there are significant problems in accessing education for displaced communities even in urban areas where there are more schools.

Aside from IDPs the study also found that **women, and returnees that did not enjoy refugee status in exile, are comparatively disadvantaged groups** (the latter in comparison to returnees that did have refugee status rather than those that have never left Afghanistan). Returnees that came back with assistance from UNHCR (i.e. VRF card holders) are significantly more likely to be literate than returnees that came back without assistance: Over a third of assisted returnees were literate (above the national average), compared to only a quarter of non-assisted returnees, and these figures differ remarkably little between returnees from Iran and Pakistan. This is likely to be due to greater access to education for registered refugees in both countries and suggests that, as a group, returnees that did not enjoy formal refugee status in exile may face greater difficulties integrating into the labour market on return.

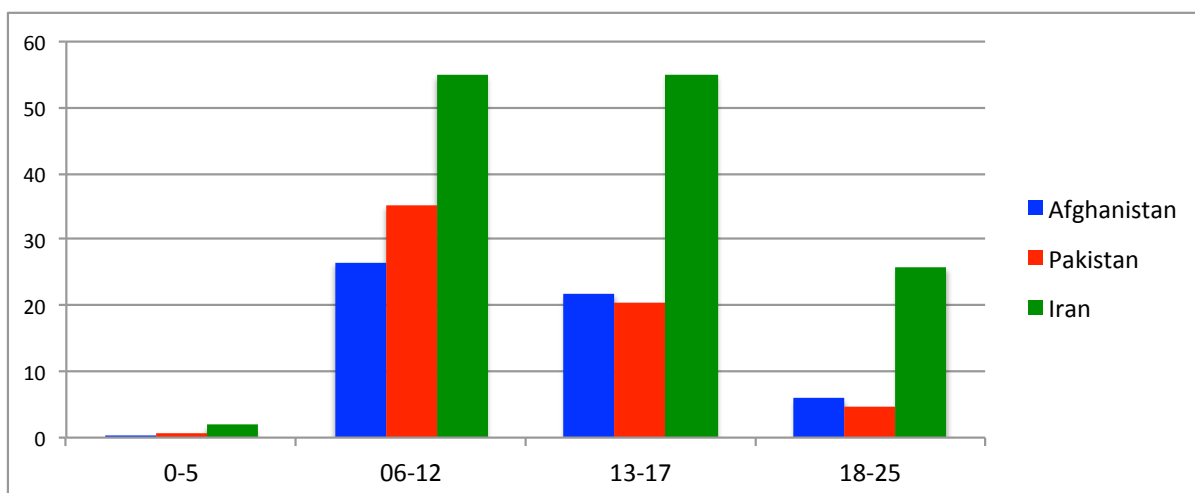
¹¹ According to the NRVA 2012/13 national adult literacy levels are 31.4%

Graph 12: Literacy of assisted and non-assisted returnees



In terms of female literacy there are large differences across migrant groups. While 85% of IDP women and 80.6% of female returnees from Pakistan are illiterate this figure fell to 60% of female returnees from Iran (which is notably lower than the male average for Afghanistan according to the NRVA 2012/13). These differences were evident at all levels of education and women returning from Iran were five times more likely to have attended secondary education. Importantly, returnee families from Iran were also more likely to send their female children to school even after returning to Afghanistan, with girls from these families being twice as likely to be in full time education.

Graph 13: Girls currently in education (IDPs, returnees from Iran and returnees from Pakistan)

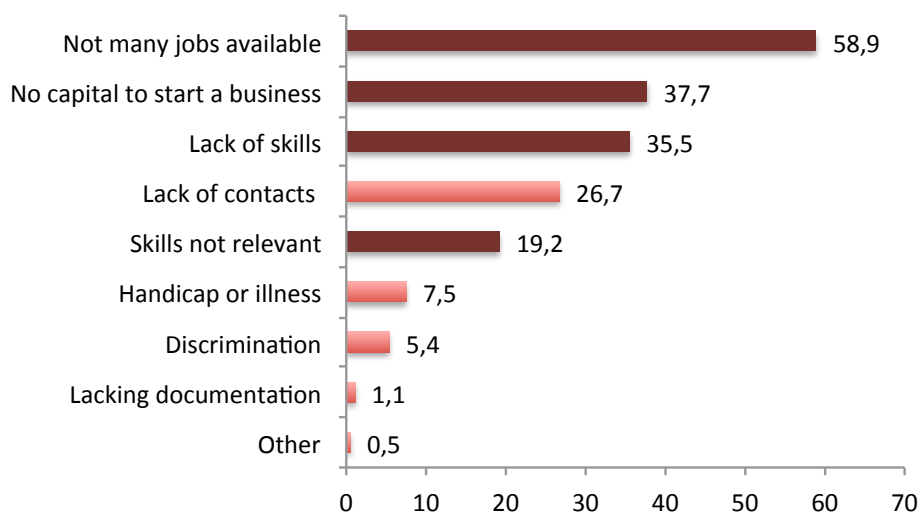


Education levels are lower among respondents in Kandahar than in our sample from other provinces. 84% of Kandahar respondents had received no education at all compared to around 70% in the three other provinces surveyed. Overall though, the education levels of the surveyed population were slightly above but roughly in line with national averages (as per the NRVA 2012/13). The provincial differences in education levels are replicated for current school attendance, which is lowest in Kandahar and highest in Herat.

2. The lack of skills worsens with multiple displacement

The main obstacles to finding work are first, the lack of available jobs; second, the lack of capital to start a business; and third, the lack of skills. **Over half (54.7%) of respondents relate their difficulties in finding work to their lack of skills (35.5%) or skills possessed that are not adapted to their context of settlement (19.2%).**

Graph 14. Reasons for not finding more / better work (% , multiple answers possible)



The lack of skills or of adapted skills rates equally among returning refugees and IDPs. Yet it rates far worse for those who have suffered from multiple displacement: 90% of returnees who then became displaced suffer from the lack of adapted skills in accessing employment (Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for not finding more / better work (by migration status, in %)

	Returnee-IDP	IDP	Returnee	Overall
Lack of skills	70.67	46.03	45.07	48.36
Skills not relevant	18.67	26.98	27.20	26.13
Discrimination	1.33	8.47	8	7.36
Lack of contacts	32	33.86	38.40	36.31
Not many jobs available	76	80.42	80.80	80.13
Handicap/Illness	8	10.58	10.40	10.17
No capital to start a business	49.33	46.56	54.13	51.33
Lacking documentation	2.67	1.59	1.33	1.56
Other	0	0	1.07	0.63

B. FINANCIAL BURDEN AND IMPACT OF MOVING

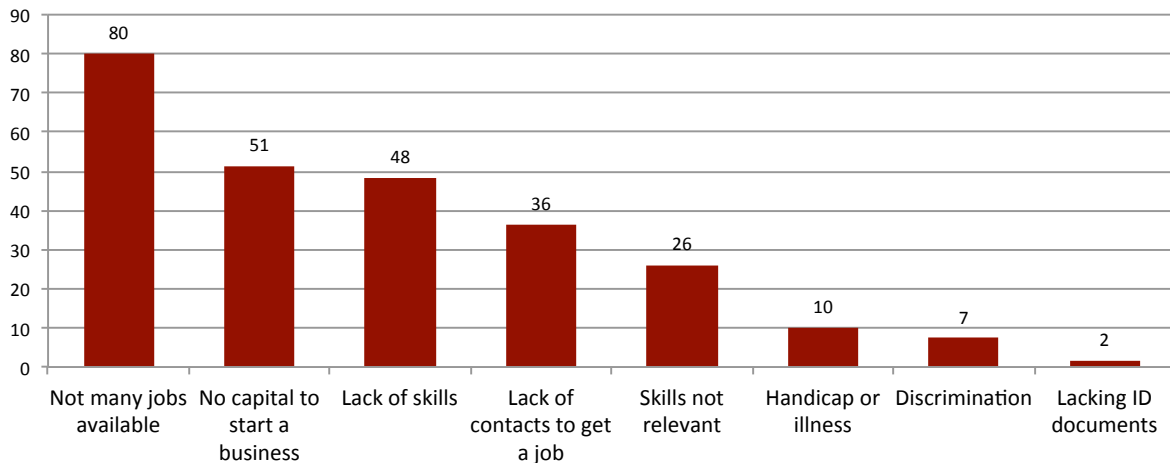
1. Employment: Low paid and insecure

Respondents from all categories are mostly engaged in low paid insecure work in the informal sector that is highly vulnerable to seasonal variation even in urban locations. As a result many are keen to change jobs though the primary obstacle to doing so is a saturated labour market in which decent jobs are in short supply. While this more structural problem is likely to persist, the second and third most common obstacles are a lack of capital to start a business and a lack of relevant skills; both issues that may be addressed by targeted programming. Additionally women's labour market participation remains exceptionally low, depriving families of much needed potential sources of income.

Levels of satisfaction with employment are low, with significant regional differences: almost half of respondents in Nangarhar and Kandahar reported satisfaction with their current employment compared to only around 5% in Herat and Kabul.

For those who did wish to change jobs the obstacles to doing so are shown in the graph below. Interestingly the responses given by IDPs and returnees were remarkably similar, with the only notable difference being that returnees were slightly more likely to mention not having capital to start a business. **Lack of available jobs is more of a problem further from cities**; it was mentioned by 75.7% in urban areas, 80.5% in peri-urban areas, and 83.7% in rural areas.

Graph 15: Reasons for not being able to find better work



Though often mentioned as a potential problem for IDPs, **lack of identification documentation does not appear to be a major obstacle to finding work**. This is likely because most IDPs are looking for work in the informal sector. Lack of ID documentation may nevertheless be a problem in terms of school enrolment.

Interestingly, **seasonal availability of work affected both rural and urban locations similarly.** During spring and summer around 90% of respondents in all locations reported having more work than usual, falling to just over 50% in autumn, and 21% in winter. About half of all respondents reported work being scarcer in winter.

Women are largely excluded from the labour market. The most likely to be working were female returnees from Iran (9%) compared to IDP women (5.7%) and female returnees from Pakistan (4.6%). Working women were generally self-employed, indicating that they were most likely engaged in low paid home-based livelihoods activities. The limitations on women working therefore exacerbate an already difficult livelihoods situation by depriving vulnerable families of additional sources of income.

Almost all heads of household work at least a few days a week. Only 4% reported not working at all in a typical week and 1% only one day a week. With no social safety nets in place heads of household must find some form of work, however low paid, in order to feed their families. 43% of heads of household work between two to five days a week, 29% work six days a week, and 23% work seven days a week. Most commonly though the work involved is daily labour and therefore is unpredictable in terms of its availability.

People work marginally more in urban areas than in peri-urban or rural areas, both in terms of the number of days worked per week and hours worked per day; though there were no significant differences between migrant categories in these locations. It also seems that people in Kandahar and Nangarhar work longer days than those in Kabul and Herat.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences in terms of either occupational roles or sector across location types. However there were some differences between provinces, with unemployment being slightly lower in Herat with more people employed in agriculture, those in Nangarhar were slightly more likely to be in full time education, and in Kandahar there were fewer self-employed people and more daily labourers than elsewhere.

2. Debt burdens are extensive

Dependency ratios tended to be slightly lower in Kandahar and Nangarhar as families in these provinces also tended to be significantly larger. Families in Kabul and Herat averaged 6.7 and 6.5 members respectively, whereas for Kandahar and Nangarhar family sizes were on average 8.1 and 8.3 members respectively. These provincial differences in family size replicate earlier findings¹². However, interestingly, although Pashtuns comprise the dominant ethnic group in Kandahar and Nangarhar, Pashtun families in Kabul or Herat tended to have similar size families to their neighbours, suggesting that the different family patterns are regional, rather than ethnic.

A large majority of all respondents are in debt, with IDPs slightly more likely to be in debt than returnees. However debt is not necessarily a reliable indicator of vulnerability status as those that

¹² For instance SAMUEL HALL (2014) "A Study of poverty, Food Security and Resilience in Afghan Cities" for DRC and PIN.

are able to borrow money are likely to possess social capital in their community, which for instance may not be available to relative newcomers, and debt may also enable greater investment in livelihoods. For instance over 80% of respondents in Kandahar are in debt, compared to around 70% in the other three provinces, while according to most other indicators in the survey Kandahar appears to be better off. 14.8% of returnees are owed money by others compared to 11.4% of IDPs (though many of these people are also in debt).

3. Assets increase rapidly following the move, then stabilise

Many returnees and IDPs see their situation improve in the first five years following displacement, stabilising thereafter, though some remain in a precarious position even many years down the line. Landlessness is a major problem and without land tenure security communities are unable to develop and live in constant fear of eviction

Returnees are better off than IDPs in terms of all assets included in the survey. Over half of IDPs had no assets at all, compared to a third of returnees. Returnees are three times as likely to own a fridge, and almost twice as likely to own a TV. Returnees are also more likely to be in possession of a radio, gas oven, bicycle, motorcycle and car. While there do not appear to be major differences between rural and urban locations there are large provincial differences with Kandahar appearing to be the richest province. Only 24% of respondents have no assets at all, compared to 60% in Kabul.

Assets increase markedly during the first five years following the move but improvements during the next five years are more modest. The ownership of all assets included in the survey is considerably greater among those that have been in displacement for five to ten years than those in the first five years of displacement. However for those that moved over ten years ago the situation is only marginally improved. This suggests that most households “catch up” to a certain level relatively quickly, yet do not progress beyond this. 37% of respondents had none of the assets in question ten years after their move, compared to 45% in the first five years of displacement.

House ownership appears much higher in rural areas and among returnees, though this is at least in part due to inclusion of LAS sites in the rural sample (where returnees have been provided property). There are **huge provincial variations in the percentage of people squatting land**, ranging from 12% in Kandahar to 67% in Kabul province. Squatting was most common in peri-urban and urban areas and among IDPs, while the number of returnees squatting land in rural areas is exceptionally low:

Table 6: Proportion of respondents squatting land (%)

Proportion squatting land		
	IDPs	Returnees
Urban	53.3	26.8
Peri-urban	59.3	42.4
Rural	30.6	7.7

There are also **large differences in the extent to which house ownership is formalised** across provinces. In Kabul and Herat around 90% of homeowners possessed a deed to their house while in Kandahar and Nangarhar only 43% did.

Box 4. Livelihoods as a key to durable solutions?

Establishing a successful livelihood is not only key to achieving a durable solution following internal or international migration, it is also often what drives it. Equally important, the area of livelihoods is generally the one in which it is easiest for outside actors to intervene and make a difference.

Some of the key findings are highlighted here:

- Only 19% of IDPs are literate, compared to 31% of returnees
- 64% of IDP children and 52% of returnee children aged 6-12 are not currently in school
- While only 35% of girls from families that returned from Pakistan and 27% of girls from IDP families are in school, this figure rises to 55% of girls from families that have returned from Iran
- Only 6% of women from surveyed families are engaged in income generating activities
- 54% of households are less able to find work in winter, 30% are less able to find work in autumn

IDPs have exceptionally low literacy and schooling, compared to average levels for returnees (though still very low by international standards).

Returnees that did not have refugee status in exile are also a comparatively disadvantaged group in literacy terms compared to those that did (though not necessarily compared to those that never left Afghanistan).

Returnees are also much better off than IDPs in terms of earnings, assets and home ownership. In general terms assets tend to increase during the first five years following the move and then to stabilise. The greatest problem facing all groups is a lack of decent jobs, and this appears to worsen the further from city centres (along with access to basic services and electricity).

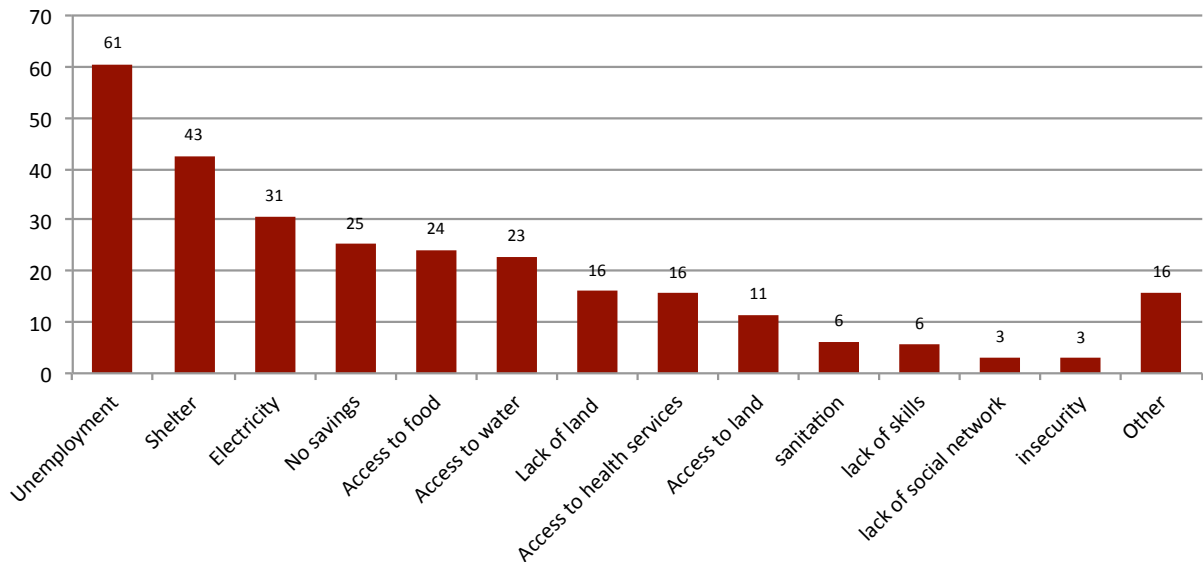
Landlessness remains a major issue. While in some areas there appear to be worryingly high numbers of people squatting land, there are also massive provincial differences in terms of this finding with the situation being most acute in Kabul province. On the other hand, there are also clear provincial variations in the extent to which land claims are formalised, with occupiers claiming to own their land being far more likely to have a deed for the property in Kabul and Herat than in Nangarhar or Kandahar.

C. ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS IN AN OVERALL SUCCESSFUL MIGRATION

1. Unemployment and lack of shelter are the greatest self-reported problems

Among the greatest problems faced by households, concerns over the labour market take precedence, followed by shelter.

Graph 16: Greatest problems currently faced by household



Two thirds of respondents self-reported as being in one of the extremely vulnerable categories. These results did not vary significantly across migrant categories or rural/urban locations. Respondents reported having a very low income (one third of households; though this varies from 7% in Nangarhar to 66% in Kandahar) or having a chronically ill head of household (one fifth). The Persons with Special Needs (PSN) categories reported include:

- 48 unaccompanied elderly
- 15 unaccompanied minors
- 121 physically disabled
- 81 mentally disabled
- 27 female heads of household
- 23 elderly heads of household
- 162 chronically ill heads of household
- 112 large families
- 275 very low income households
- While only 281 (one third of our sample) did not report any extreme vulnerability.

The data show that health needs are acute among the displaced and returnees: 41.8% of the sample reported some form of disability: physical, mental and chronic illness. Health care remains high on the programming needs of the displaced – yet their access is limited (particularly in rural areas), an argument for more health related programming (whether psychosocial, physical or routine health). This is a current gap as voiced by returnees, and by practitioners during key informant interviews. A possible next step for programming?

2. A successful migration: Self-perceptions

Box 5. Moving: A successful coping strategy

While numerous previous studies have noted that displacement in Afghanistan may exacerbate certain vulnerabilities¹, one of the key findings of the report that has been previously overlooked is that moving tends to be a successful coping strategy (at least from the point of view of improvement of the situation that induced the move in the first place). However an important exception is in regards to returnees from Iran who, having become used to higher standards of living whilst abroad, are far more likely to experience disappointment on return than other groups. Another group of people that are far less likely to view their migration experience positively is those currently living in the Land Allocation Scheme sites. While overall a majority of people are generally positive there are nevertheless significant numbers in all migration categories and locations that express discontentment at their current situation.

However regardless of any past regrets and current dissatisfaction almost all respondents in all migration categories and locations definitely plan to stay where they are currently living. This finding has important implications in terms of durable solutions, suggesting that local integration is likely to represent the most appropriate option for the majority of IDPs and returnees.

Migration is viewed positively; hardly anyone plans to move again

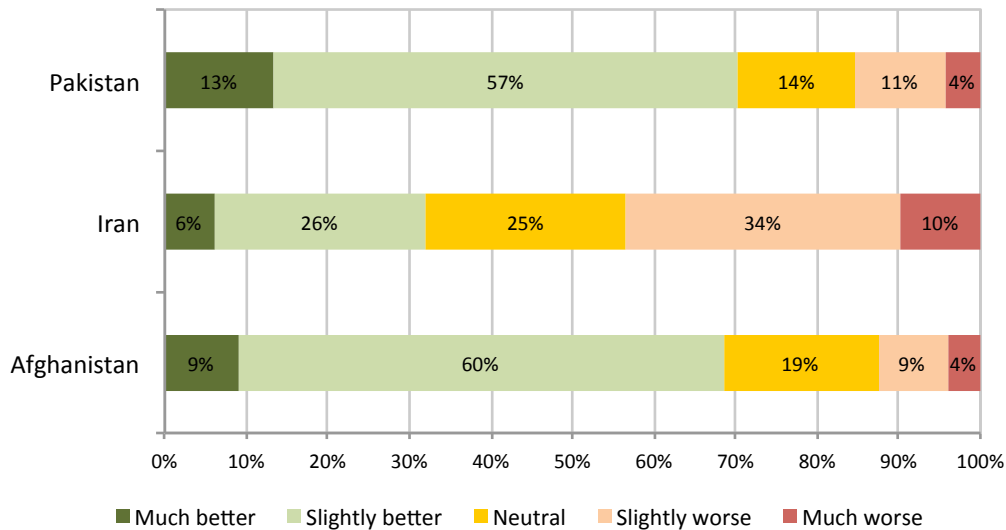
Overall, for most people moving appeared to be a successful coping mechanism. Only 13% of IDPs felt that their situation had become worse since moving. In comparison, the satisfaction levels of returnees from Pakistan were similar. On the other hand returnees from Iran were far more likely to be disappointed with their current situation. Less than a third felt their situation had improved since moving and almost half felt it had deteriorated. Key informant interviews in Herat also indicated that returnees from Iran tended to have overly high expectations due to their experiences of living in that country.

All categories had high expectations prior to moving. Those returning from Iran consistently had the highest expectations, which perhaps accounts somewhat for their relatively higher levels of later disappointment (see below). Healthcare and education were the two areas in which respondents most expected improvements on their previous situation, with 90.7% and 84.5% respectively expecting that the situation would be better than where they were previously living in terms of these public services. These results should be viewed cautiously however as there may be a tendency for respondents to interpret the question in light of later disappointment, rather than in terms of expectation prior to leaving. More than three quarters of respondents felt that moving would make it easier to find a job and two thirds thought they would be more likely to receive assistance. Expectations regarding vocational training and accessing loans were lower, though sizable numbers still felt improvements in these areas were likely.

Qualitative data showed a mixed picture in terms of the satisfaction of respondents. While many IDPs appreciated the safety of their current location they were unhappy for other reasons.

Returns on the other hand generally appreciated being back in their homeland but often felt that their situations had deteriorated in other ways.

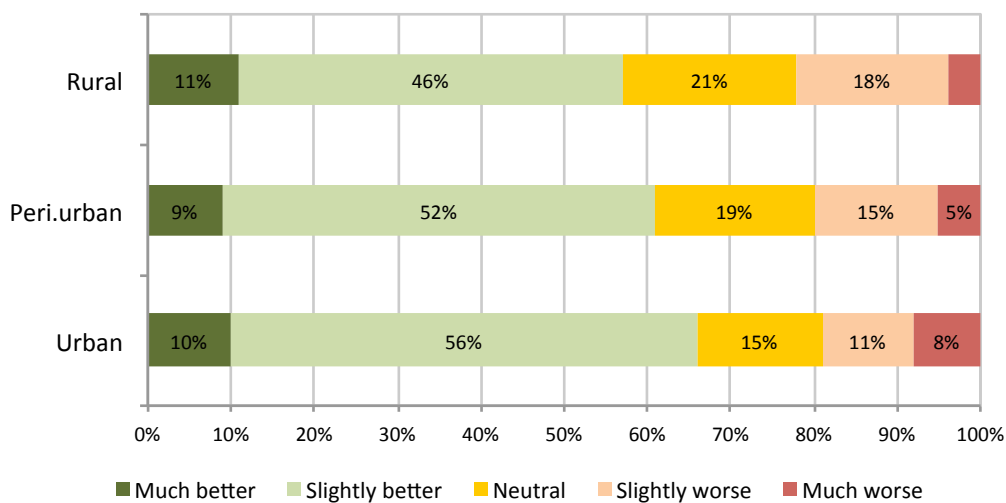
Graph 17: Change in problems since arriving at current location by last country of residence



As noted previously, returnees from Iran were most likely to be disappointed by their migration choices, with less than a third feeling that their problems had improved; compared to around 70% of IDPs and returnees from Pakistan.

Although patterns were broadly similar across location types, **people in urban areas were more likely to feel that their situation had improved**, though at the same time they were also more likely to feel it had become much worse.

Graph 18: Change in problems since arriving at current location by setting



Box 6. Disappointment on return

We expected better facilities in Afghanistan such as job opportunities and access to clinics and medicine because it is our homeland. But nothing is according to our expectations here. Our livelihood is getting worse since we've come here. My children have not even eaten adequate food here. We've spent all our money that we saved in Iran. Job opportunities and access to social facilities in term of clinic, medicine and school are not available here. Returnee, Herat

We had access to jobs and plenty of food items in Pakistan, but our livelihood is getting worse here due to unemployment, not being able to pay the costs of treatment, no access to electricity, drinking water and school for the children. Overall, we are not happy about being here, but we don't have any other alternative to move; it is our homeland.

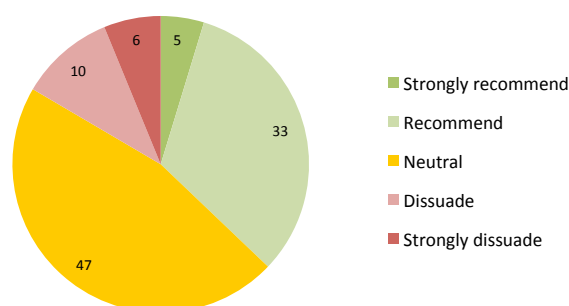
Returnee, Kabul

Well-being and satisfaction increase in the first five years following the move and then stabilise.

Ownership of assets and homes increases in the first five years and then stay broadly similar over the next five years while satisfaction levels also show similar patterns for all indicators. There are **significant pockets of discontentment**. Returnees Iran in high numbers consider that moving did not benefit their families (29.9%), a mistake (26%) and made them poorer (37%). While not as high, significant numbers of IDPs and returnees from Pakistan nevertheless felt similarly.

Relatively few respondents would recommend others to move to the same location. Under a quarter of those from Iran, a third of IDPs and almost half of those from Pakistan would positively recommend their current location. The greatest differences were between regions: in Nangarhar and Kandahar a majority recommend their area, compared to around a fifth in Herat and Kabul.

Graph 19: Would you recommend people to move here?



A large majority (92%) of respondents stated that they definitely planned to stay where they are. IDPs (88%) were slightly less likely to be committed to staying than returnees (94%). These results both confirm earlier findings¹³ and bear implications for response strategies as they suggest a clear preference for local integration as opposed to other durable solutions. A majority of those considering leaving would do so with their families and would move to another urban location.

¹³ World Bank/UNHCR 2011 study on IDPs in urban settings; Samuel Hall/IOM 2014 evaluation of return and reintegration activities.

Box 7. Land Allocation Scheme (LAS)

The Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) sites are townships created by the Afghan government for returning refugees in the wake of massive returns in the early 2000s' repatriation from Iran and Pakistan. Qualifying returnees (and some IDPs) were granted plots of land in these sites, and entrance was technically restricted to those who were landless, held VRF cards (i.e. who had possessed formal refugee status in exile), and wanted to return to their areas of origin. The scheme has been heavily criticised in the past for exceptionally high levels of corruption and the frequent complaint that sites were located on infertile land far from urban centres and thus failed to attract sufficient private sector activity to sustain populations living there.

Three LAS sites were included in this survey: Barikab in Kabul province, Sheikh Mesri in Nangarhar and Saodat in Herat. When visited Barikab and Saodat were both almost entirely empty with most of the resident population having left to find employment elsewhere.

Some of the findings associated with these three sites are that LAS residents have above average literacy (37.4% compared to 30.2% for those not living in LAS sites) and education levels. They are also less likely to be living in the same household as siblings of the head of household (2.8% compared to 7.6% outside the LAS), probably due to LAS sites being awarded on the basis of a nuclear family definition, and are more likely to have left in larger groups (as most sites were allocated during the period of mass returns). On the other hand over 30% of LAS residents report that they are staying in the house of a relative for free (compared to around 7% outside the LAS) suggesting that the actual owners have moved on or had bought LAS plots for investment and speculation purposes, as widely reported in other sources.

LAS residents are much less content with their current situation. Whereas outside the LAS 64% of respondents felt their situation had improved since moving only 47% inside did. LAS residents were around twice as likely to think both that the move had been a mistake (22% compared to 11.6%) and that it had made their family poorer (36% compared to 19.6%) than others surveyed. They were also significantly more likely to feel unwelcome, that there was discrimination within their community, and that the move had not benefited their family or improved their social status. The likely cause for this discontentment is the lack of employment opportunities and services as LAS residents are much more likely to identify this as the major problem that their household is facing (57% compared to 40% outside). These results reiterate the urgency of finding solutions to the plight of LAS inhabitants – at the policy level.



Abandoned houses, Aliceghan LAS



Abandoned houses, Saodat LAS

4. STRATEGIES: Conclusions and Recommendations

Key Informant Interviews (34) of migration decision-makers and experts were conducted – including representatives of donor states, UNHCR and IOM, NGOs, national and regional authorities. Actors' perceptions will inform our suggestions for recommendations to bridge the gap between the findings from the field and the responses, in the second part.

A. Stakeholder Perceptions – The need for a common understanding

Perceptions of returnees and IDPs

Policy makers almost universally view IDPs as amongst the most vulnerable people in Afghan society. By contrast perceptions of the relative vulnerability of returnees differed from slightly worse off, to much better off, than average Afghans, with most assuming them to be in a slightly better position as a group than most Afghans. Respondents shared a strong recognition however that the labels 'IDP' and 'returnee' are inadequate alone as markers of vulnerability.

A large number of policy makers expressed the view that motivations for internal migration are mixed, containing elements of insecurity-related concerns coupled with economic ones. Except in cases where whole communities were suddenly displaced, it was understood that people were responding to an accumulation of push factors that at some point tipped the balance in favour of departure. There was also recognition that migration for work and seasonal migration have long been traditional coping mechanisms within Afghanistan. In terms of returnees it is clear that incentives to return are currently very low and unlikely to see improvement in the near future. Returnees' main incentive in moving to rural areas would be to reclaim land and that if they did not already own land they would most likely move to urban centres in line with their previous urban lifestyle in exile. At the time of the research, Afghan officials and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have reported large inflows in Afghanistan of refugees fleeing persecution in Pakistan – families returning in response to harassment (police raids and coercion). These dynamics have to be assessed more closely in future research to assess the decision making process and patterns of settlement of the most recent waves of forced returns¹⁴.

During key informant interviews, respondents highlighted negative perceptions present in Afghan society. Some respondents mentioned that returnees tend to be viewed as having a sense of superiority, due to their advanced education and experience in Iran, which may engender some hostility, but that on the whole they were felt to contribute positively to the city. IDPs on the other hand were blamed for crime, insecurity, begging, and reducing the general attractiveness of the city and holding back its development. There was suspicion that IDP populations had been manipulated by political leaders for their own ends (such as inviting them to the city to vote during elections, or persuading them to come over a longer period in order to change the ethnic balance of the area). These negative views were offset by a strong sense of charity towards unfortunate people combined with a duty as a host to provide for their basic needs.

¹⁴ The Nation, February 8, 2015.

Targeting of assistance – Prioritising displacement or vulnerability?

This remains to date a key question for stakeholders. Although prior studies have aimed to showcase specific displacement-related vulnerabilities¹⁵, questions were raised at policy levels as to whether displacement alone remained a sufficient lens through which to target assistance in Afghanistan. Targeting of assistance raises complex issues for many of the reasons discussed above in the section on terminology, as both the terms ‘returnee’ and ‘IDP’ are open to multiple levels of interpretation. Competing for assistance alongside these groups are the wider urban or rural poor, and vulnerable migrants that have moved for non-security or natural disaster related reasons. As many respondents pointed out, within all categories in Afghanistan there are extremely vulnerable individuals together with many that are not immediately in need of assistance. Due to generally high levels of poverty in the country distinctions in any case tend to be between the poor and the very poor. In this context, opinions on how to target aid were split between those advocating for a continued focus on displacement and those favouring a focus on more general vulnerability criteria. Four reasons were cited for focusing on displacement as a key determinant of external assistance:

- I. Displaced populations may have specific displacement-led vulnerabilities and needs: lack of shelter, identity documents, access to services, social links to their present community, education, skills and livelihoods.
- II. In a situation in which needs surpass resources it is necessary to prioritise assistance, even if the process of categorisation inevitably involves a certain degree of arbitrariness as the immense range of individual experiences will always defy classification into categories. IDPs are on average amongst the poorest sections of Afghan society, as has been demonstrated by numerous studies (including this one) and the IDP focus is thus as appropriate as any.
- III. Targeting poor urban migrants can increase rural-to-urban movement. However, this study shows that the availability of assistance does not appear as a major driver of migration; and secondly that moral hazard was far more commonly referred to in the sense of migrants self-identifying as IDPs in order to access assistance (i.e. aggravated by the focus on displacement rather than caused by it).
- IV. Internal constraints of organisations’ mandates oblige them to focus uniquely or predominantly on displaced populations. However, even within these organisations some respondents recognised the limitations of these constraints and suggested that a certain amount of blurring of categories may be acceptable.

In general, almost all donors interviewed tended to favour a needs-based rather than status-based approach regarding the use of their funding. Nevertheless, in almost all cases they generally preferred to delegate decisions of this kind to their partners, judging them to be in a better position to determine relative needs.

¹⁵ World Bank/UNHCR 2011 ; Samuel Hall/NRC 2012.

Perceptions of Urbanisation

On the topic of urbanisation, differences in perceptions between Afghan and international respondents illustrated a significant disconnect in perceptions, regardless of the organisation¹⁶. International respondents commonly stated urbanisation to be an irrevocable process, exacerbated but not caused by insecurity, with positive impacts outweighing any negative impacts. The positive consequences associated with urbanisation cited by (primarily international) respondents included more cost effective service provision, a motor for job creation and economic growth, improvements to quality of life for those who have made the move, softening of tribal identities, a means of reducing pressure on scarce rural land resources, and the creation of new markets for products.

“Even if the diversity of food available is higher in urban areas, the rate of food insecurity is also higher. In the city, you have to pay for a lot of other things, not only food items. Households have to pay for their rent, for electricity...So in terms of the quantity of food that households are able to access in the city, urban households are actually worse-off.” – WFP representative (*Samuel Hall for PIN/DRC 2015*)

In contrast Afghan respondents were much more likely to view urbanisation as a process linked to internal displacement that would slow down, stop, or even be reversed if security conditions were to improve. Additionally they tended to view urbanisation as a primarily negative process and a threat to and strain on government services, exceeding the absorption capacity of cities and leading to unplanned urban growth not in conformity with city master plans. Continued rural-to-urban migration was blamed for an increase in crime, insecurity and disease. It was also believed to increase competition for jobs, depress wages, increase prices for houses and other commodities, and lead to other negative outcomes, such as traffic congestion, all of which it was felt made life harder for the resident urban population. In addition, Afghan key informants interviewed were more likely to feel that Afghanistan’s economic potential lay in its agricultural sector, rather than in more urban sectors such as manufacturing or industry in which the country was less well-positioned to compete with its neighbours, and that urbanisation would thus not only not be an economic advantage but would rather lead to depopulation of the countryside and reduce the agricultural workforce.

Generally there are expectations, including among migrants, that urban living offers greater economic opportunities. All locations however – whether rural, urban or peri-urban are vulnerable to high levels of food insecurity – with seasonal varieties – in Afghanistan. A recent study showed that urban areas are characterised by high levels of food insecurity with a direct impact on quality of diets and access to food of households. This is not the reality that returning refugees and IDPs expect to find when choosing to relocate to urban areas – hence limiting their resilience. The question of availability vs. access is a key challenge for the displaced.

¹⁶ While not all respondents expressed an opinion regarding urbanisation, of those that did seven international respondents expressed generally positive, though often mitigated, views of the effects it was likely to have compared to twelve Afghans that expressed a more or less wholly negative view of urbanisation.

B. Disconnect between stakeholder perceptions and reality

Assistance as a draw?

There was a strong consensus that providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs and returnees was unlikely alone to have a decisive impact on their decision to move or their choice of destination¹⁷. Yet, it is a prevailing fear within government that providing support to IDPs might encourage further migration to take place, thereby feeding urbanisation, and this has contributed to a belief in some sectors that assistance should consequently only be provided in provinces of origin. At one point this appeared to be the official position of the regional government of Herat and was the motivation behind the issuing of a letter in 2011 requesting all NGOs to stop providing support to IDPs. Nevertheless, perhaps in part due to the adoption of the IDP policy recently, attitudes regarding assistance to IDPs appear to be changing.

Two exceptions were nevertheless identified by a number of respondents. The first was for temporary short-distance moves. In particular suspicions persist that such moves happen around the times that distributions are planned to take place, attracting occupants from nearby camps or villages who would then return after assistance had ended. This practice was not generally felt to be widespread. The second exception, which is discussed further below, is the provision of land.

Durable Solutions – Land allocation?

The number of people moving to cities unable to afford to buy or rent property appears to be increasing, contributing to the growth of illegal or informal settlements. Local authorities generally fear either encouraging more of this type of migration, or fostering permanency for those that are already illegally occupying land, and thus prohibit upgrading dwellings or, except in rare cases, offering resettlement options. There is nevertheless a growing acceptance, in the wake of the IDP policy, that solutions to displacement will need to encompass local integration, as well as return and resettlement elsewhere, yet the means by which this is to be achieved are still a matter for debate.

Land allocation is a central aspect of any conversation about durable solutions, though it remains a highly contentious issue in Afghanistan. The country's previous experiments with land allocation have been unsuccessful. The Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) was plagued by corruption and the sites have failed to attract private sector activity due to being located too far from urban centres or to offer opportunities for agriculture due to the inhospitable nature of the terrain. In all three LAS sites included in the survey (Barikab in Kabul, Sheikh Mesri in Nangarhar, and Saodat in Herat province) employment opportunities were lacking and, in Barikab and Saodat, the vast majority of dwellings were deserted. There seems to be little appetite for future land allocation to returnees and IDPs. The solutions most commonly suggested are a mix of land allocation, social housing and formalising of informal settlements.

¹⁷ Of those that expressed an opinion on this topic in Kabul and Herat, six people mentioned that assistance would not be a draw for permanent moves, two said that it may have a very limited effect or an effect "only for those on the verge of starvation", two said assistance, or rather services in general, may be a draw combined with other factors, and a final respondent said its effect was likely limited to encouraging inter-camp moves. None of those interviewed in Nangarhar noted assistance as one of the factors attracting people to their current areas, whereas all those interviewed in Kandahar mentioned assistance as one of the attractions of urban areas along with numerous other factors such as jobs, health, education and security.

C. CONCLUSIONS

This study adds to the evidence base on the profiles and needs of returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan and highlights new elements with a strong potential to contribute to more tailored and effective programming to support the forcibly displaced. The key findings of this research highlight, in conclusion:

I. The move to peri-urban areas: beyond urbanisation, understanding peri-urban areas

- The future for programming lies in the ability to tailor to peri-urban areas – as urbanisation alone does not translate the variety of settlement patterns, increasingly in suburbs or neighbouring districts: the rise of the attractiveness of peri-urban areas for returnees and IDPs is established in this research, with significant weight for programmatic recommendations.
- Stakeholder interviews provide feedback on the rural-urban divide without sufficient analysis of the expanding peri-urban reality: urges caution in the way stakeholders understand settlement patterns.

II. Social elements of the decision making process: the importance of communities

- The weight of emotional considerations, after security and economic factors is highlighted in this research – mainly for returnees.
- Resettlement is not a decision based mainly on cost, distance or logistical constraints: it is based on social connections and networks, with the collective acting as a force to move and a force to settle.
- Networks heavily influence migration choices: the collective decides to leave together, the collective also determines where support will be sought, based on the presence of relatives and friends.
- As a result of the strong social element of the decision making process, a large majority of returnees and IDPs, in all provinces, reported feeling welcome in the area they live in.
- This data serves as a solid evidence base to contest stakeholder concerns over the impact of aid on settlement patterns and inter-community tensions.

III. The unfulfilled expectations on education, healthcare and employment

- Low levels of literacy and education disproportionately impact IDPs and women
- Child protection issues: the younger generation suffers from displacement: children of returnee families are more likely to be in school than those of IDP families
- Women are largely excluded from the labour market
- The first five years are a window of opportunity during which assets increase for returnees, and well-being and satisfaction as well. As for IDPs, the ownership of all assets included in the survey is considerably greater among those that have been in displacement for five to ten years, than those in the first five years of displacement. This provides a longitudinal view to support targeting of assistance by phases of return and displacement.

IV. Moving beyond push and pull factors as an insufficient lens to understanding decision making patterns – introducing agency: returnees and IDPs as actors in the decision making process:

- This study shows the dynamics and mirror effects in the choices of settlement: what returnees and IDPs may lose in their previous province or location of residence, they will seek to fulfil elsewhere.
- Planning and preparation count and further emphasize agency in forced displacement and return. Returns are the result of long-considered decisions for the most part; while internal displacement also comes with a degree of planning and collective decision-making.

V. Migration is viewed by returnees and IDPs as a positive coping mechanism and hardly any respondent plans to move again: coping mechanisms and durable solutions

- The main pockets of discontent remain returnees from Iran who were far more likely to be disappointed with their current status.
- This provides a key element of consideration for the need for strengthened regional programming and regional coordination, information sharing and awareness raising: although returnees take time to prepare their return, their information base remains limited and biased. More should and can be done by stakeholders present in all three countries (Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan), and whose mandates cover refugees as populations of concern, to better prepare them for return. This is the direction that the current EU Aid to Uprooted People is taking – and should be strengthened by other donors as well. This will in turn avoid parallel country programmes and ensure a proper regional and coordinated program for Afghan refugees and returnees at times of political and economic change in the country.
- Land Allocation Sites (LAS) should be revisited and resolved: integrating them in rural development plans or facilitating inhabitants to move to more economically active areas (for instance by allowing them to officially sell their plots of land). The issue of land is a key to durable solutions and has not yet been tackled through effective policies. The National IDP Policy remains a step in the right direction and on strengthening the path to durable solutions.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

In many ways, the data on return to Afghanistan and displacement in Afghanistan paint a grim picture of the situation facing many IDPs and returnees. Low levels of education and literacy, and insecure low-paid employment, characterise both populations. Yet these results should be seen in the wider context of an extremely poor and fragile country in which much of the population struggles to survive at or below the poverty line.

This study also highlights positive results that further support the agency among returnees and IDPs: Few people regret their move, most perceive a successful migration, with conditions improving markedly in the first few years. Overall this suggests that migration is generally a positive coping strategy, though not all individuals and families benefit to the same extent. In addition, returnees and IDPs move in groups and benefit from the support of relatives, friends, and trusted community leaders. While social capital is there – the economic and financial burden remain and are to be addressed if expectations are to be aligned with reality. This will ensure that displacement does not lead to frustrations and resentment, but instead builds the resilience and self-reliance of returnees and IDPs, contributing to the power of agency.

The 13 recommendations of the study fall under 4 categories:

I. MOVING TO NEEDS-BASED TARGETING

1. Prioritise vulnerability over displacement
2. Prioritise at an individual and community level and de-politicise assistance
3. Moving away from return and reintegration to community-based programming

II. ENHANCING LIVELIHOODS PROGRAMMING

4. Bridge the skills gap
5. Alleviate the financial burden
6. Exploit opportunities for female employment
7. Improve access to schooling for the displaced

III. REFOCUSING ATTENTION ON LAND AND DURABLE SOLUTIONS

8. Increase the focus on peri-urban programming
9. Rethink land solutions on a community basis
10. Time to learn the lessons of the failed Land Allocation Sites

IV. SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL IDP POLICY

11. Develop provincial IDP plans based on the evidence base available
12. Raise awareness among policy makers that assistance is not a draw
13. Track the most vulnerable

1. Prioritise vulnerability over displacement status

There are both inconsistency regarding the limits of the IDP and returnee labels and a recognition that they are to a certain extent inadequate in any case in terms of vulnerability markers. As one interviewee stated “for programming you do need labels unfortunately but they can also become an obstacle to addressing needs”.

Two approaches may serve to mitigate this situation: either interpreting the terms broadly (for instance to include the poorest migrants both within and into the country) or interpreting the terms narrowly but then delinking them from programming. A narrow interpretation closely linked to programming would inevitably serve to prioritise past displacement over current vulnerability.

Most donors suggested a preference for funding to be used to support the most vulnerable groups – one used the example that a tented economic migrant should have priority over a housed IDP. However donors generally did not feel in a position to dictate targeting preferences to implementing partners, and hence the onus is on the latter to ensure that their targeting criteria focus on vulnerability above all else.

A more useful marker of vulnerability than migration status is food security status. An accurate food security assessment (possibly contributing to a wider resilience index) is more likely to give a reliable assessment of the relative needs of a particular household or community and is a means of linking displacement and economic vulnerability issues under one ‘humanitarian umbrella’¹⁸.

2. Prioritise at an individual and community level and de-politicise assistance

While the study has shown that the migration experiences of IDPs and returnees are not uniform there is a clear tendency (a) to move in groups and (b) to rely on the support of relatives and friends on arrival. Although this does not apply to all, in a majority of cases it implies that both decision-making and economic burdens are shared more widely than the family unit. In other words the dynamics at play are those of a wider collective, and solutions should be designed bearing this in mind. In particular, in cases where whole communities have moved together, or have since become tightknit, the only solutions that are likely to be acceptable to them are those that encompass the whole community; while in other circumstances families in less close communities with more mixed origins may feel their own destinies to be less closely tied to those of the collective.

Depending on the type and scale of intervention needs-based targeting needs to take place at both the community and individual level. Wherever possible interventions should aim to assist not only those directly affected by displacement but also those indirectly affected, i.e. the wider community. However even within less disadvantaged communities, vulnerable individuals exist and the effect of community-level programmes cannot be expected always to trickle down to the poorest individuals; so for these two reasons a second layer of needs-based targeting at the individual level is necessary.

¹⁸ See the 2014 Samuel Hall study for PIN/DRC on Urban Poverty for a successful example of using food security, within the context of a wider resilience index, to profile particular populations

3. Moving away from return and reintegration to community-based programming

The focus of humanitarian and development assistance should be on the poorest individual families; many of whom will be IDPs or returnees. The argument for targeting returnees as a particular group is becoming less convincing. As this study shows returnees are comparatively much less vulnerable than IDPs, well-being increases in the early years following return and the numbers returning recently are exceptionally low (one donor commented: ““The numbers of returnees are peanuts. They’re hardly worth considering somehow”). Future numbers will likely continue to be low, unless there is a dramatic change in policies in Iran or Pakistan, and, crucially, will probably be more directed towards urban areas.

The current focus of support, as shown by the huge difference in numbers that have received assistance, is on returnees that had formal status abroad and returned with VRF cards, while as the study shows, that population is actually comparatively privileged, compared to returnees without VRF cards, due to the greater access to education, employment and social support that they received while abroad and the cash grants facilitating their return. These populations would also benefit from a renewed focus on vulnerability rather than specific migrant status.

Community-based programming delivered through the established national programmes should gradually replace targeted return and reintegration programmes. In turn these programmes will need to improve their ability to target on the basis of vulnerability although, as noted above, this does not necessarily imply on the basis of past displacement.

Enhancing Livelihoods Programming

4. Bridge the skills gap

A large number of respondents in the survey complain that the skills they possess are not adequate for them to secure decent employment. Vocational training should be provided for a sufficiently long period and combined with access to capital. Trainings should be standardised and make use of the National Skills Development Programme (NSDP) framework. A great variety of short-term vocational training is provided in Afghanistan without proven impact. Innovative models should be sought out and changed often to avoid market saturation and different models compared in terms of length of training and size of grants/toolkits to determine the optimum levels of investment in trainees.

Urban, as well as rural areas, are equally affected by seasonal trends in employment as the availability of low paid daily labour is much reduced in both locations during these periods. Hence it makes sense to provide not only winterisation support, but also vocational training during these seasons as the opportunity costs for participants (who are prevented from working elsewhere during training hours) will be lower.

5. Alleviate the financial burden

While almost all respondents are in debt, the second most mentioned reason for not being able to improve the working situation of respondents (after the lack of available jobs) was the lack of capital to start a business. This suggests a high level of desire to undertake entrepreneurial activities that could be addressed through external assistance. Micro-credit, small business grants, and the formation of savings and loans groups may all serve to stimulate economic activity within displaced

communities. The business endeavours of those communities that have access to urban markets (as compared for instance to those in the LAS sites) are likely to fare considerably better. Notably this type of programming does not necessarily serve to increase permanency in a specific location, indeed it may enable families to upgrade into rental accommodation elsewhere, and hence is particularly appropriate in communities that are informally occupying land.

6. Exploit opportunities for female employment

The study, in line with all former studies, shows that displaced women are almost entirely excluded from the labour market and are thus an under-used economic resource for vulnerable communities. In those families where women are permitted to work they are mostly engaged in home-based extremely low paid work. Opportunities for culturally acceptable female income generating activities should be exploited. Negotiations on these points should take place with communities with the potential economic benefits made clear to them.

7. Improve access to schooling

School attendance rates of the surveyed population are very low: under half of returnee children and around a third of IDP children are currently in full time education. In urban areas fewer than 40% of children aged 6-12 were in school. In focus group discussions many respondents complained of the lack of school availability, and in many cases while schools did exist the children of displaced communities, particularly those lacking documentation, were not permitted entry.

In addition the study suggests that rural populations in many areas still struggle to access healthcare. This finding is likely to go beyond displaced populations and to be a problem affecting the country as a whole (despite large improvements in this field having been made in recent years). The lack of healthcare provision is particularly important considering the large number of respondents that complained of having health-related difficulties.

Refocusing attention on land and durable solutions

8. Increase the focus on peri-urban programming

Urban municipalities may not however have the capacity to adequately respond to the current fast-pace of urbanisation and reactive short-term responses are likely to be more costly in the long-run. As most future migration is likely to be towards urban centres alleviating urban poverty will probably be the most important step towards durable solutions for displacement-affected populations.

Greater information on the speed and extent of Afghanistan's urban spread is needed (UNHABITAT is collecting information for a report on the state of Afghanistan's cities) and this information should be linked to provincial budgeting so that service delivery can be scaled up correspondingly. A range of measures can be put in place to assist the landless urban poor to progressively achieve greater land security and more reliable and productive employment. Recent studies¹⁹ have shown that food insecurity is a pressing issue even in urban areas, and may be exacerbated by urban living as household expenses are higher and subsistence agriculture is less of an option.

¹⁹ SAMUEL HALL (2014) "A Study of poverty, Food Security and Resilience in Afghan Cities" for DRC and PIN.

9. Find land tenure solutions on a community-by-community basis

One obvious conclusion of the report is that a focus in terms of durable solutions should be on local integration. Operationalising such a concept, for those too poor to rent, is more complicated.

There is no easy answer to solving the problem of poor landless families and communities (whether displaced, migrants, or otherwise). The consensus seems to be that solutions should involve some combination of formalising of informal settlements, land allocation, and social housing. Additionally local councils could 'buy back' illegally occupied land at a price that would give the occupants the ability to settle elsewhere in a more formal manner (either as a lump sum, or in regular small-scale grants for a defined period, or through a scheme of subsidising host families). All options are to a certain extent costly and run the risk of encouraging both corruption and future irregular settlement patterns; yet the latter at least is likely to happen regardless.

Without land tenure there is a very low limit on the extent to which communities can develop. Many communities left their previous location together and enjoy strong social cohesion, meaning that individual families moving on progressively to more established neighbours at the moment that they are financially able is not a feasible option: Often the choice is that either the whole community moves together or everyone stays. Whereas in other communities this is not the case, in ones that are closely unified it would seem that solutions need to be tailored to the group as a whole and that splitting up such communities may do more harm than good.

10. Time to learn the lessons of the Land Allocation Scheme (LAS)

Land allocation and/or social housing should be considered with extreme caution in the Afghan context and, if attempted, lessons should be drawn from the Land Allocation Scheme. First, land should be provided sufficiently close to urban centres. The optimism that accompanied the former scheme, that providing a certain amount of development support, services and infrastructure in otherwise inhospitable areas would sufficiently stimulate private sector activity to sustain the populations placed there, was clearly misplaced. Secondly, whole (landless) communities (in which all members are vulnerable, at least to the extent that none enjoys land tenure security) should be moved together, primarily because providing land on an individual basis creates opportunities for corruption but also because, as noted above, social cohesion within the community may thus be maintained. And thirdly, responsibility for providing land should lie with local municipalities, which should approach the issue on an area-by-area, community-by-community basis.

Supporting the implementation of the National IDP policy

11. Develop provincial IDP plans based on the evidence base available

The next step in operationalising the IDP policy is to create provincial-level plans in those provinces with large numbers of IDPs. KIIs conducted during the study revealed very low levels of knowledge of the IDP policy among local authorities, including DoRRs. UNHCR is planning to address this through regional workshops, yet the focus will need to be wider than merely the DoRRs if the strategy is to have any impact. Crucially it will need to have the support of the urban municipalities. It was further noted that the IDP strategy as it currently stands is an unwieldy document that may need to be simplified in order to improve its utility.

As noted above there are multiple possible interpretations of who is an IDP and provincial practice may well differ to a certain extent. This was not necessarily regarded as a problem by those that mentioned it in KIIs, rather it was felt that there should be common minimum standards but that each province could then choose on the basis of its own situation, resources and needs to prioritise further support above this minimum level differently.

12. Raise awareness in local authorities that assistance is not a draw

One important finding of the report is that assistance does not seem to be a major factor in migration decisions. Much more important are the security and labour market situations in the places of destination. This finding should be emphasised strongly during the roll-out of the IDP policy to ensure that this mistaken belief does not lead to support being withheld.

13. Track the most vulnerable

The current displacement tracking data requires improvement. It allows for double or triple counting, small-scale movements and secondary moves are likely to be missed, and the mechanisms for removing names from the list once they have been added to it are inadequate. Nevertheless current tracking arrangements were described by one respondent as “the best possible system” and most KIIs appeared satisfied that the available data was sufficient for their purposes. While the concerns mentioned above are important, investments in improving tracking systems (particularly when this involves verifying the situation of 700,000+ registered people) are likely to be costly and to detract from implementation. Notably it is not, and probably should not be, a beneficiary register, yet the emphasis should nevertheless be on tracking new displacement events, which it currently attempts to do, and following the situation of particularly vulnerable communities. Potentially therefore, rather than attempting the impossible task of verifying the situation of all IDPs on the full list, within the wider displacement database a sub-register could be developed to follow more closely only the situation of known particularly vulnerable displaced/migrant communities and this should be regularly updated with clear criteria for graduating from the database.

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