

A long way home: obstacles and
opportunities for IDP return in Afghanistan
December 2019



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While durable solutions still remain out of reach for Afghanistan's internally displaced persons (IDPs), with estimates of 2.2 million IDPs last recorded in 2017,¹ evidence related to durable solutions – and specifically to the return of IDPs – is widely lacking. Research on internal displacement has focused on setting local integration on the policy agenda, yet no research study in Afghanistan has focused on what happens after their return 'home'.²

As IDP numbers rise and the government continues to face constraints in applying its National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons, the humanitarian space necessary to address these needs and effectively support IDPs is also shrinking. Escalating conflict, lack of respect for international humanitarian law, and an overcautious approach to accessing displacement-affected areas severely limits the capacity to collect evidence and information to effectively support IDP populations in areas of displacement.³

To support enhanced access to populations in need across Afghanistan, and achieve durable solutions processes for Afghanistan's displaced, more knowledge is needed on the practices, attitudes, and preferences of IDPs themselves.

Research question and background

The research turned to IDPs and their communities in six key locations of spontaneous return to assess which factors contributed to the ability of IDP populations to return to their places of origin in a manner which is sustainable and dignified. The research focused on three phases of the return and reintegration process – the preparation phase (I), the return journey and immediate return phase (II) and the longer-term reintegration phase (III).

The approach used purely qualitative and community-based participatory methods. The research teams started in each of the six locations with a community consultation to identify priority themes. This allowed for a localised approach to the research, and for concrete recommendations to addressing community priorities. The synthesis report draws from the six case studies to highlight the factors which drive IDP returns as a process, including an examination of key challenges and opportunities across three phases, and the identification of key principles to support IDPs who engage in the return process.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES

Primary data collection took place in November 2019 in six communities and provinces across all regions of Afghanistan: Marghundai (Surkhrod District, Nangarhar), Qargis Baloocha (Muqor District, Badghis), Loy Bagh (Naad Ali District, Helmand), Se Darak - District #2 (Kunduz Centre District, Kunduz), Ushkan (Baharak District, Badakhshan), and Chaharsang (Khuram wa Sarbagh District, Samangan).

Detailed accounts of the lived experiences of return are illustrated in the six case studies presented separately and individually, with supporting quotes, and life stories. The reader is invited to read the six case studies – each

¹ OCHA (2019) Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020, REACH (2017) ISET mapping

² ADSP (2018) Rapid review of the evidence provides a comprehensive review of the literature on displacement in Afghanistan and highlights that the focus on local integration of IDPs was linked to "the interest in bringing local integration higher up the agenda". The research confirmed that "additional studies on IDP return and reintegration – including obstacles to return – may be needed"

³ Samuel Hall/NRC (2018). Escaping War: Where to Next? A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan

about seven pages long – for added context and to fully comprehend IDP returnees’ return and reintegration challenges. Highlights on the implications for programming are provided below and specifically show what is possible, in the short- to medium-term, to improve the plight of IDPs and prepare them for return. Across the six locations, the coordination system will not only need to include the government and the humanitarian community but, as is highlighted, the development and private sectors, seen by IDPs as a key source of support.

[Nangarhar: integrating a dual approach to livelihood protection and livelihood promotion](#)

In Surkh Road’s Murghundai village, there can be means of relieving the burden of debt and dependence and improving the living and working conditions of displaced and other families in this area if private sector actors – in this case brick kiln owners, landowners and traders – are integrated into programming. Alongside initiatives such as the Citizen Charter and the role of CDCs, public-private partnerships need to be enhanced. Past initiatives by UNICEF to include brick kiln owners in education services and research by ILO can pave the way for scaling practices.

[Badghis: addressing the health care gap by investing more in mobile clinics](#)

In Mughur District the health care gap – with the closest clinic being in the capital district, making access unaffordable for many – is of particular concern for women and children upon return. Community members spoke of the urgent need for health care and treatment for children suffering from chronic and recurrent illnesses. Basic statistics confirm the need to invest more in mobile health teams. A recent report⁴ states that only one mobile health team is available across Badghis Province, supplementing the one provincial hospital, one district hospital, 24 clinics, and 331 health posts.

[Helmand: supporting public-private partnerships to enhance cohesion and resilience](#)

The return of IDPs in Loy Bagh offers an opportunity, according to the private sector, to improve economic cohesion. Beyond the work opportunities, the private sector respondents stated they can support with “cash, foodstuffs, home appliances and dishes”, and shared their willingness to be part of the support to IDP returnees. In order to do this, however, they call for external support and investment.

[Badakhshan: rebuilding roads for safety and security in the return process, and creating jobs](#)

Security and the economic situation remain the principal obstacles to sustainable reintegration, as well as an obstacle for access to Ushkan village for external service providers and private sector actors. In the past, the National Solidarity Program had positively contributed to local development through the establishment of a water supply system that is still active today, benefiting local and returnee populations. More can be done to revive the work of the Community Development Council (CDC) to channel government efforts and to improve access to remote locations such as Ushkan.

[Kunduz: learning from the history of aid in communities to inform IDPs and future programming](#)

Se Darak has been on the frontline of conflict between Taliban and government forces since 2015. Aid and politics divided the community in two sectors. Differences in support provided to each community has, with time, created tensions. Complaints were voiced over public water wells that had decreased ground water levels, and over NGO requirements for community leaders to rank inhabitants by poverty level, in a context where community leaders and inhabitants all struggled. The constant segregation of the community – geographically or on the basis of

⁴ AAH (2019) Badghis IDPs rapid SMART survey report

needs – has not eased tensions or improved wellbeing. The community asked to be consulted on, prepared for, and included in programming.

Samangan: building bridges between livelihoods and child protection

The village of Chaharsang, a small agricultural community, has experienced floods and disasters first hand. While there is a prominent child protection narrative across all interviews – education being, for instance, a reason for return to the village – schools are not equipped and, as a result, children are found working, alongside their schooling in cases where they attend school, in agriculture and in shepherding activities. In some cases families had to resort to drastic measures which negatively impacted upon children to survive shocks.

HEADLINE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing research shows that specific sub-groups require tailored support, such as IDP women who are highly vulnerable and often lack specialised support in displacement. Similar knowledge and evidence building is required on practices around preparations for return, the return movements, and the longer term outcomes of return of IDPs. The key findings of this research pave the way for recommendations that can span the continuum of the three-steps of the return and reintegration process:

Preparedness

- Voluntariness is questioned: Return is often reported as the only choice
- The quality and sources of information hamper preparedness and informed choices
- IDPs lack the capacity to mobilise the resources required for a safe, dignified return as they cannot earn enough to afford safe returns

Return journeys

- Transportation support is a key need and protection concern across all locations
- Physical risks dominate the return journey (destruction of roads, checkpoints, mines)
- The lack of housing, land, property (HLP) and assets in destroyed villages is a key need upon return
- Unmet expectations of government support and perceived bias of NGOs reduce trust amongst displacement affected communities
- The role of the private sector and communities in providing an immediate support is already important in some locations, and has the potential to provide support in others

Long-term reintegration

- Security and disaster risks continue after return, resulting in multiple displacement
- Education, health and livelihoods are the key sectoral gaps after HLP
- Youth, women and children have specific reintegration needs

As a result of these findings, the report concludes on key operational principles that can inform coordination and actions to be undertaken in the short- to mid-term. IDPs' are often the most vulnerable members of their communities prior to displacement and continue to be upon return. They perceive the assistance from the

government and aid organisations to be lacking, limited, and at times biased. They expect, above all, more support from their Government, to address chronic challenges related to local conflict or climate. This final section presents recommendations targeted at each of the phases and at the key stakeholders involved – the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, donors, policy makers and practitioners, as well as all those working to reinforce IDPs’ and returnees’ rights and protection in Afghanistan.

Six principles for supporting IDP returns

- I. Localised and area-based approaches
- II. Building on lessons learned from past programming to improve what exists and address needs
- III. Laying the foundations for sustainable return by addressing the root causes of displacement
- IV. Information sharing prior to return to ensure that IDPs have the necessary knowledge
- V. Facilitating effective preparedness prior to return by supporting resource mobilisation
- VI. Identifying the links to market systems and the private sector for livelihood interventions

In practice, these principles translate into action points:

In the *preparedness* phase, to monitor the situation of IDPs in displacement (notably forced evictions, access to services and livelihoods) to ensure that returns are voluntary; prioritise improvements in information provision and awareness raising (diversifying information sources, and expanding on information types, and the quality of information shared).

During *return journeys*, to ensure that IDPs are given cash to pay for their transportation, to monitor and address the risks on the journey home (including demining efforts and infrastructural/roads improvements), and to provide IDP returnees and their communities with housing, land and property assistance (temporary shelter and recuperation/upgrading of assets).

In the *longer-term reintegration* phase, to expand stabilisation efforts, addressing health and psychosocial needs in return communities, and bring in development actors to further support infrastructural improvements in communities while engaging with private sector and market actors to enhance a protective livelihood environment.

Glossary

Coping Strategy	Specific effort, both behavioural and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events
Displacement Affected Community	Communities which are affected by the presence of displaced persons, such as host communities or communities in areas of return or other areas where the displaced are seeking durable solutions
Durable Solution	A sustainable solution (whether return, local integration, or resettlement) as a result of which the former IDPs no longer have needs specifically related to their displacement and can enjoy the same rights as other Afghans
IDP Returnee	A former IDP who has returned to their area of origin.
Internal Displacement	The involuntary or forced movement, evacuation, or relocation of persons or groups of persons within internationally recognized state borders
Internally Displaced Persons	Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (OCHA Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement 1998)
Go and See Visit	Visits that IDPs undertake to their place of origin to enable them to decide whether they feel that conditions are conducive to their return (i.e. Whether there is adequate security, housing, services etc to return in safety and dignity).
Rights Based Approach	A conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights.
Secondary Displacement	People can be said to experience secondary displacement when, after being displaced from their homes, they are forced to flee their area of shelter or residence to another location. People living in displacement can experience secondary, tertiary, or multiple displacement.

Abbreviations

ADSP	Asia Displacement Solutions Platform
AOG	Armed Opposition Group
CDC	Community Development Council
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
ECHO	European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KII	Key Informant interview
MHT	Mobile Health Team
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

SYNTHESIS REPORT

A consequence of a decades-long humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, internal displacement is rising. In 2019 alone over 400,000 people were newly displaced as a result of conflict in the country, in addition to 84,000 newly displaced due to disasters.⁵

In the past decade the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has paid increasing attention to its IDP population, most notably in the development of the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), endorsed in 2013 and launched in 2014. While the national policy serves as an instrument for “safeguarding the rights of the displaced as citizens of Afghanistan”⁶ and initially led to improved coordination, in practice the policy has met with limited success. This is, in part, due to a lack of national ownership, as well as limited funding and capacity to sustain the implementation of the policy.⁷

As IDP numbers rise and the government continues to face constraints in applying its policy, the humanitarian space necessary to address these needs and effectively support IDPs is also shrinking. Escalating conflict, lack of respect for international humanitarian law, and an overcautious approach to accessing displacement-affected areas severely limits the capacity to collect evidence and information to effectively support IDP populations in areas of displacement and of return.⁸

Within this restricted space, the few studies on IDPs in Afghanistan have largely focused on their protection needs in displacement, and on possibilities for local integration.⁹ The lack of focus on the return process, and post-return outcomes for IDPs, is a knowledge gap in durable solutions planning.¹⁰ The National IDP Policy notes that one of the conditions under which durable solutions can be achieved “is upon voluntary and safe return to his or her former place of residence, with a place to live with security of tenure, access to basic services and livelihoods on a par with others who were not displaced.”¹¹ The policy emphasises the need for the following conditions to be met:

- Safety, security, and stability in the area of return, and while in transit to areas of return
- Restoration of housing, land, property (HLP) and services for an adequate standard of living
- Re-establishment of livelihoods or introduction of livelihoods options in areas of return

These conditions are rarely met in full, and spontaneous returns of IDPs often occur prematurely. Using qualitative primary data collection and building on existing secondary research, the research turned to IDPs in six key areas of spontaneous return to assess which factors contributed to the ability of IDP populations to return to their places of origin.

⁵ UN OCHA (2019). *Afghanistan Snapshot of Population Movements (January to November 2019)*

⁶ Samuel Hall/UNHCR (2015) *Policy Brief: National Policy on IDPs in Afghanistan*

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Samuel Hall/NRC (2018). *Escaping War: Where to Next? A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan*

⁹ ADSP (2018) *Rapid review of the evidence* provides a comprehensive review of the literature on displacement in Afghanistan and highlights that the focus on local integration of IDPs was linked to “the interest in bringing local integration higher up the agenda”

¹⁰ ADSP (2018) *Rapid review of the evidence*, by ATR consulting confirmed that “additional studies on IDP return and reintegration – including obstacles to return – may be needed”

¹¹ Government of Afghanistan (2013). *National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons*

Research objectives

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP), with funding from the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida), commissioned Samuel Hall to undertake this research study on IDPs’ spontaneous returns to communities across Afghanistan. The aim was to address the knowledge gaps on the return process and post-return outcomes for IDPs. The analysis of the IDP return process was conducted at three stages:

- In the preparation phase, at the stage at which IDPs make the decision to return
- In the immediate return phase, the journey and IDPs’ situation immediately upon return
- In the longer-term reintegration phase, considering the conditions for sustainable

The study did not seek to provide an overview of the entire Afghan context, but instead focused on six community case studies in selected provinces of IDP returns. The approach used community-based participation methods; starting in each of the six locations with a community consultation to identify the key themes for the research in each area. This allowed for a localised approach to addressing community priorities on the question of return, reintegration, and durable solutions. This synthesis report draws from the six case studies to highlight the factors which drive IDP returns as a process, including an examination of similar and contrasting priorities across areas, key challenges and opportunities upon return, and the identification of key principles for IDP returns.

Methodology and research approach

The purpose of the study is to generate evidence for understanding prospects for sustainable return and reintegration in a diverse context. Rather than an approach based on numbers, the study’s approach was qualitative, relying on a range of tools to provide a story of IDPs’ lived experiences of return and to identify community narratives (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Qualitative Fieldwork Conducted

Research Tool	Target Group	Sample Size	Total	No. Individuals
Community Consultation	IDPs men and youth	1 per location	6	103
Semi-structured Interview (SSI)	IDPs and local community	4 SSIs with IDPs 2 SSIs with locals 6 per location	36	36
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	IDPs and local community	2 FGDs with IDPs 1 FGDs with locals 3 per location	18	108
Key Informant Interview (KII)	Key stakeholders + Review of assistance	3 per location	18	21
Case Study/Life History	IDPs 1 woman + 1 man in the same HH	1 per location	6	12
Grand total				280

A participatory and thematic approach was adopted, including:

- I. Community participation: Communities prioritised the themes to be explored in each location. In each location, the research team began the first day with a community workshop.
- II. Thematic focus: The research team collected first-hand qualitative data on themes prioritized in the community consultation to provide a detailed picture of factors influencing IDP returns.

- III. Community observations and mapping. A community-based ecosystem framework was used to map key actors in IDP returnees’ reintegration process, who were then included as key informants in the assessment of needs and programmatic responses tested in a given area.

Research locations

Primary data collection took place in November 2019 in six communities and provinces: Marghundai (Nangarhar), Qargis Baloocha (Badghis), Loy Bagh (Helmand), Se Darak - District #2 (Kunduz), Ushkan (Badakhshan), and Chaharsang (Samangan). Provinces were selected in consultation with ADSP and specific locations were chosen based on three criteria: the presence of IDP returnees, accessibility and security, and diversity of initial drivers of displacement. The information was collected based on contacts with community leaders selected from the database of community leaders maintained by Samuel Hall.

Figure 1: Locations of Fieldwork

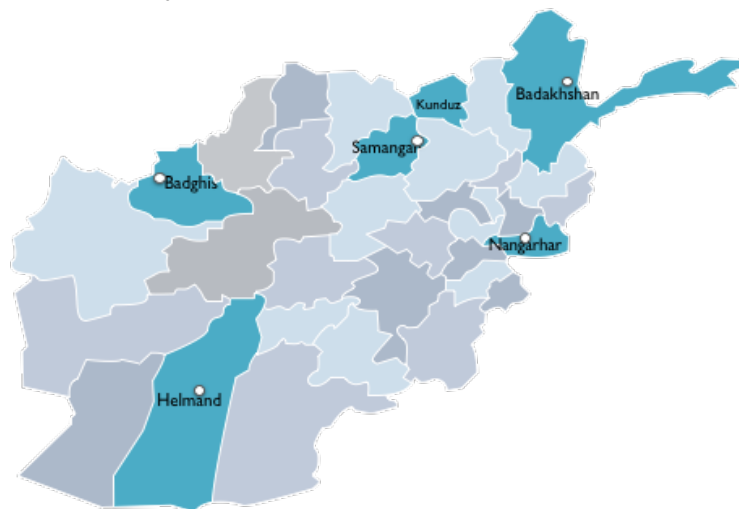


Table 2 – Selection of provinces and districts

SIX CASE STUDIES – Brief presentation						
Province	District	Village	Drivers	IDP Population	Avg. time since return	Distance from district centre
Nangarhar	Surkhrod	Marghondai	Drought	Small (est. 30 families)	3 months	12 kms
Helmand	Naad Ali	Loy Bagh	Insecurity and Intensive rains	Large (est. 1,200 families)	4 – 9 months	16 kms
Badghis	Muqor	Qarqich Baloocha	Drought	Medium (est. 80 families)	5 months	16 kms
Badakhshan	Baharak	Ushkan	Conflict and insecurity	Medium (est. 100 families)	1 month	
Kunduz	Kunduz center	Se Darak	Conflict and insecurity	Medium (est. 100 families)	2 years	5 kms
Samangan	Khuram wa Sarbagh	Chahar Sang	Natural disaster, flood	Small (est. 38 families)	3 months – 2 years	30-33 kms

Security played a constraining role in the selection of locations and limited access to more difficult to reach populations: for instance, the attack on a Nangarhar mosque in October 2019 took place in one of the communities originally identified for fieldwork. Scouting missions had to be cancelled due to this, and the original number of case study locations reduced. Security considerations also affected fieldwork: in two cases gunshots and fighting in nearby areas cut interviews short and limited interviews’ ability to conduct further field observations.

PREPAREDNESS FOR RETURN

Decision-making processes

Why do IDPs return?

Return as the only choice: questioning the voluntariness of return

Previous research reveals that, with a few exceptions, the durable solution of choice for most IDPs in Afghanistan is local integration in their location of displacement.¹² As one aid worker in Samangan confirmed, “most IDPs are not interested in returning to their province of origin, and [we found that] only 10% would like to return. They say that there is still insecurity in their area of origin, that they have lost their homes and relatives, so they do not want to return and are not hopeful for peace.”¹³

In spite of this desire for local integration, life in displacement remains deeply challenging for many IDPs, who have limited ability to access safe shelter, land security¹⁴ and appropriate livelihoods opportunities. This integration challenge results in long-lasting protection concerns, which extend not only to immediate material or humanitarian needs but also to civil and political rights and access to services.

In Helmand for instance, families who had fled their homes with nothing struggled to appease landlords or family members hosting them in nearby districts. After a few months, life became debt laden and untenable for many. As one returnee described, “For some time, we asked the [local] residents for money so we could buy food or other important things, but towards the end they refused to lend to us.”¹⁵ Host communities in areas of displacement were particularly unwelcoming, calling IDPs “dirty”¹⁶ and accusing them of being part of the Taliban. Conversely, upon return IDPs who had spent time displaced in urban areas were called infidels and seen as tainted: “when IDPs are displaced to the city, they are called Talib by the host community, but when they return, they are called infidels.”¹⁷

These challenges persist to varying degrees whether IDPs are attempting to eke out a living in a camp or urban setting. IDPs lack access to education for their children, face limited work opportunities and cannot maintain stable and warm shelter in displacement; these protection gaps lead to thoughts of return. In several instances, IDPs highlighted the coming winter and forced evictions by landlords (or lack of adequate tents in camps) as leaving them with no other choice but to pack up their families and embark on the journey home.¹⁸ Across all six locations examined, IDPs felt obliged to return, pressured by the difficulties faced in displacement. This was especially true for those who had fled because of conflict and whose areas of origin remained places of high tension between government and armed opposition groups (AOG), most notably in Kunduz, Helmand, Badakhshan, and, to lesser extents, in Samangan and Badghis. “We have not solved any problems since our return. We returned back to all of the problems we had previously faced.”¹⁹ The logic of return for IDPs in Afghanistan is more closely linked to discomfort, hostility, and inability to cope effectively in displacement: most IDP returnees, especially those who fled conflict, find themselves with no other option but to return.

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ KII INGO. Samangan, November 2019

¹⁴ Rao, S. and Turkstra, J. (2014) *Enhancing security of land tenure for IDPs*, Forced Migration Review 46

¹⁵ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶ KII IRC. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ IDMC/NRC (2014) *Still at risk – Security of tenure and the forced eviction of IDPs and refugee returnees in urban Afghanistan*

¹⁹ SSI Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

Greater readiness to return among disaster-induced IDPs

IDPs displaced due to drought or flooding evinced a greater sense of confidence in returning to a home situation that held some promise for them. One IDP from Nangarhar, where drought was the primary cause of displacement, explained this as follows: “There were no work opportunities in Kabul anymore. So, I contacted the villagers and [they] told me that the weather in Kabul was getting colder day by day, and that the rainfall will increase. [So I returned] to the village as the water in the drains had increased and therefore work opportunities had as well.”²⁰ In the specific case of disaster-induced IDPs, the return of water – and so the capacity to return to work – was the central piece of information that shaped the return decision, especially as they could not access work in displacement.

Who makes the decision to return?

A collective decision informed by community members

The decision-making process is not a straightforward one, as IDPs must balance the risks and precarity still present at home with the lack of protection and limited options they face in displacement. Return decisions are often communal, at both the community and family level. In some situations where families were displaced together, families returned together, sharing resources to better organise the logistics and transportation of a return that may not have otherwise been possible: “we returned along with my brother-in-law in a shared vehicle. Most people were sharing vehicles in order to decrease transportation costs,” noted one female IDP returnee in Nangarhar, describing a common phenomenon.²¹ In areas where some community members had stayed behind, continued communication with these people played a crucial role in influencing decisions to return: “We were in touch with relatives in our community and they were telling us to come back rather than live with strangers,”²² noted one returned IDP in Samangan.

Information and preparation: How do IDPs decide to return?

The ability to make and implement the decision to return safely, voluntarily and in dignity remains contingent on a variety of factors, including availability of trusted and accurate information as well as access to enough material resources to prepare their return.

Access to information

The limits of phone-based communication with community members

Displaced families received periodic information through phone calls from those who had stayed behind, as well as from taxi or bus drivers who were moving back and forth, for instance in Kunduz between Se Darak and the district capital. As violence seemed to diminish, families received news through these media that it was safe to return: “In displacement there was no work for us to do. So as soon as we heard it was calm, we returned to our homes so that we could begin working again,”²³ noted one IDP returnee in Kunduz. But beyond vague assurances that the security situation had calmed, IDPs lacked crucial and specific information on the state of their village and its capacity to absorb returns. As a returnee in Kunduz highlighted: “We didn’t know that there was no drinking water, they had destroyed the wells. [Or] that the electrical lines had been cut, and [that] the road back was dangerous.”²⁴

²⁰ FGD with Male IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

²¹ FGD1 with Female IDPs. Nangarhar, November 2019

²² FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²³ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴ FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

A common concern prior to return for IDPs was the state of their house, land, or other property, as well as existing levels of safety and security both en route and back in their area of origin. An IDP returnee from Badakhshan described the anxiety linked to return: “I was concerned about my home and what had happened to it, to my land and whether the area was safe again or not, and whether I could start a normal life again. I was so concerned that I wasn’t able to eat and drink.”²⁵

Gaps in formal information systems

Access to formal information sources was limited. While participants in Badakhshan, who were displaced close to their area of origin, would ask government forces whether it was safe to return, this information was not communicated formally, and IDP returnees in other provinces emphasised the fact that no official communication was given to them regarding the details of the situation back home. In the few cases where formal information was communicated through government, international organisations or the media, this was sometimes used as a mechanism to influence IDPs to return. One IDP returnee from Badghis recalled how organisations working in the IDP camp would inform them that it was fine to return and that they would receive support, without providing further detail: “[An NGO] told us to return to our community, and that if we did they would assist us.”²⁶

Go-and-see visits and split returns

Distance played a key role in the level of effective information accessed, and in mitigating preparedness gaps. For IDPs who were displaced close to their area of origin, for instance in Badakhshan, proximity allowed them to collect information first-hand, most often in the form of go-and-see visits which provided an accurate picture of what they were returning to and allowed for better preparedness in return. In these instances, family members began to materially prepare their homes or land prior to permanent return. Another returnee recounted how sending his older son on ahead had helped them gain information on what they were to face upon return: “I had sent my son to return ahead of us to see how things were. He is the one who told us for instance that there was no more water in our homes, that our walls had been destroyed, that some of our belongings had been taken.”²⁷ In Nangarhar, intermittent go-and-see visits were also a regular feature of the decision-making process. The presence of remaining family in the community facilitated such visits. “We were connected to our relatives while returning, and we were visiting our village on a monthly basis to be aware of our house’s status” described a returnee woman.²⁸ One returnee described being close enough to observe whether it was safe to return from a mountain top, watching the movement of government forces in his village.

By splitting returns, families were able to manage the danger and uncertainties of the return journey and the reintegration process. “We left our children at a friend’s house and came back with our wives. A few days later I returned again with our children,”²⁹ noted a returnee, highlighting the importance of proximity and social networks in areas of displacement in supporting these split returns.

Readiness to return: gathering material resources

To fully assess the preparedness to return, both the willingness and readiness of IDPs must be examined.³⁰ Readiness can be defined as the ability to bring together tangible and intangible resources, including social capital, to make the return and reintegration process, feasible and successful.

²⁵ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁶ Community Consultation with IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

²⁷ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁸ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

²⁹ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

³⁰ Cassarino, J-P. (2004) Theorising return migration

Lack of tangible resources

In the case of IDP returnees in all six locations, the material resources needed for return and effective preparation remained a key obstacle to safe and dignified return journey home. “A key obstacle to our return was lack of money, we didn’t have any money to get a car for our return”³¹ noted one IDP returnee in Badakhshan, echoing a common complaint heard across all provinces. As families make the decision to return, they begin collecting these material resources, whether by working or borrowing. While livelihood opportunities for sustainable and dignified living in displacement were few, displaced families and individuals, including women and children, find ways to contribute to material preparations for return. For children as young as 10, this meant working in the street to help support the family. For women, activities such as tailoring or shelling nuts helped to prepare and build some savings for the return journey, even though these activities required high levels of work for relatively little money. As one returned woman from Samangan described it: “we did not have money to pay the rent or the fare of the vehicle to return. We planned a month before our return but were concerned about not having money. We were peeling almond, walnuts, at 10-20 Afs for 7kg. We struggled day and night.”³²

Social capital and credit systems

In addition to working and saving for return, returnees across all provinces had to borrow money, most often from family or friends.³³ This exacerbated cycles of debt that continue to weigh on IDP returnees upon return, as they do not know how they will pay off these debts.³⁴ A woman from Kunduz explains: “my sister’s husband who came with me from Kunduz borrowed some money and divided half with me, and told me I could pay him back when we returned. But I still have not him paid back.”³⁵ Access to formal credit mechanisms remains limited and is a key support gap across all communities, as formal banks and lending mechanisms are scarce or non-existent.

Table 3 – Overview of Preparedness gaps

Dimensions	Examples of gaps
Willingness questioned	Return as the last resort (push factors over pull factors)
	Inhospitable contexts in locations of displacement (e.g. forced evictions)
Information gaps	On the availability of water upon return for farming
	On the status of housing, land and property ³⁶ and access to basic services
	On the availability of shops and commercial activities
Readiness gaps	Resource mobilisation
	Financial means (lack of cash due to the lack of work in displacement)

³¹ FGD1 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

³² SSI6 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

³³ As seen in ILO/UNHCR 2014 Assessment of Livelihood Opportunities for the Returnees/IDPs and the Host Communities

³⁴ Previous assessments have shown that IDPs may be able to reduce their overall budget “but they still fall short of ever recovering to a pre-displacement debt level” – OCHA *Humanitarian needs overview 2020*

³⁵ SSI4 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

³⁶ NRC (2014) Strengthening displaced women’s rights to housing, land and property

Supporting Immediate Return Movements

The unprotected journey home

Once preparations, adequate or not, have been made, IDPs embark on the journey home.

Getting from point A to point B

Transportation: a key support need and protection concern

Support in accessing and paying for safer and quicker transportation was a top need in all locations; nearly all returnee IDPs indicated that they had not received any support in organising their return. Some families from the same area were able to contribute together to the rental of a vehicle, allowing for joint returns; however, in many cases the lack of adequate transportation remained an obstacle.

Where distances were short and alternative means of transportation were inaccessible, IDPs had no choice but to return on foot, leading to additional health and protection concerns. Walking 'home' increases the length of the journey, leaving returning IDPs vulnerable: "We came back on foot and were hungry, since we could not afford [transport or food]. My child was sick and crying all the way."³⁷ IDPs reported foot injuries and exhaustion, particularly among children and the elderly.

The journey home, even if taken via vehicle, presents wider risks. IDP returnees highlighted fears of theft and assault, in particular when returning without adequate transportation "We were also worried [on the way home] about the less visible issues: would war resume here? We could still hear fighting on the way. It would reach our ears."³⁸

Physical insecurity

In areas where people were displaced due to security, and especially where tensions and conflict between government and Taliban were ongoing, the return home was fraught with security challenges. The destruction of roads added significant challenges to the return journey, as families had to navigate detours and dangerous checkpoints, in addition to the difficulties of securing transportation.

Safety was also put at risk by the presence of landmines on roads home, in particular in Helmand, Kunduz, and Badakhshan provinces, in some cases affecting the decision to return: "Some stayed in displacement, even with all of the difficulties they had there. There were problems on the road, including being confronted with landmines on the way back, so they decided not to return, to avoid the dangers of the mines."³⁹ Those who did choose to return therefore found themselves in some cases putting their lives at risk by the mere act of moving home, an indication that the security situation is likely not stable or conducive to long term safe, sustainable, and dignified return or reintegration.

³⁷ SSI4 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

³⁸ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

³⁹ Community Consultation, Kunduz, November 2019

What do IDP returnees return to?

An indelible mark on communities: "the village was like a graveyard"⁴⁰

Destroyed villages and homes

Nearly all IDPs returned to homes that were destroyed, sometimes to the point of being unrecognisable: "After we returned I saw that my house had burned down and there was nothing left for us [...] I became very upset. We were all shocked. How painful it is that you escape to another place because of the fear of being killed, and you leave your house, and when you return back your house has changed so much that you cannot even identify it."⁴¹ In Helmand, landmines that had been positioned at the entrance of IDP homes killed several returnees before the community was able to identify and dismantle these.

Returning to destruction poses a dual challenge to IDPs immediately upon return. From a practical standpoint, destroyed homes mean reconstruction, requiring additional resources which are not often on hand, and which leave returned IDPs in precarious housing situations. In addition to destruction of housing, destruction of property meant, in some cases, that returned IDPs had lost their source of livelihoods. One woman recalled finding her husband's destroyed ice cream machine upon return, a machine that had been purchased and used as a means to create income for the family and which could no longer serve its purpose. Destruction and the instability that IDPs return to is something they have to deal with immediately, but also has a long-last lasting effect on reintegration prospects.

The lack of information worsened the shock, upon return, of finding one's village destroyed. One man in Kunduz described what he saw when he first returned: "It was clear that the conflict had left its mark on the community. There was no food left. Shops had closed. There was no electricity. There was no bakery anymore. Everyone was busy picking up their own lives, everyone was in shock."⁴² An IDP returnee woman described returning to a destroyed house, no longer a home: "When we returned our home was destroyed, glasses were broken, our home was hit with bullets, we didn't have water to drink and food to eat [...] Trees were broken, and we were afraid that some landmines would explode, electricity wires were cut and we were afraid that someone would get an electric shock [...]."⁴³

The health and mental strain in the return process

The shock of what they found upon return, combined with the risks and challenges encountered during the journey and the long term pressure caused by multiple displacements have resulted in overwhelming feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and stress for many community members, both IDP returnees and those who were not able to move.

⁴⁰ SSI4 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

⁴¹ Household Case Study with Female. Kunduz, November 2019

⁴² Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

⁴³ SSI5 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

Existing support structures: support from external actors vs. community support

Expectations vs. realities in the return process

Expectations of government support

Community members count on the government and expectations of support are high across locations. In identifying gaps in support, nearly all IDP returnees and non-displaced community members identified the government as the actor they perceived as being most responsible for supporting them.

In some cases, IDP returnees attempted to appeal directly to the government for support; in most of these cases they received no response. The majority of those interviewed expressed frustration at this general lack of government ownership of its responsibilities: “The biggest obstacle to our sustainable life is the inattention of the government. The government must be aware of our life status, as Taliban, ISIS and bombings have ruined our houses, schools and clinics.”⁴⁴ A few explicitly called out a political system of corruption and hierarchy that they perceived as not caring about them: “It is unfair that during the elections they want our vote, and after that they don’t provide us with the required facilities. Every president asks for the vote but when he is elected as president and we ask for lands; he ignores us.”⁴⁵

Perceived bias in the targeting and selection of beneficiaries

Corruption in aid was also perceived as an obstacle to accessing effective support. IDP returnees in Nangarhar and Badghis highlighted the fact that, while some aid was distributed to returned displaced families, it was given to those who already held positive relationships to those distributing aid. In Nangarhar, they told of one organisation’s staff who threatened to withhold aid unless they agreed to share it. One returned IDP described this as follows: “[The staff of the NGO] were distributing the membership cards for receiving aid either to their relatives and friends, or they were distributing five membership cards to people and keeping two for themselves.”⁴⁶

In other areas, aid and support for return was available for some IDPs in the provinces of this study, but not for those from the specific communities we spoke to. This was largely due to security and accessibility issues, as IDP returnees reported being told that they would not be able to access existing support due to the location of their area of origin.

Community support: opportunities and limitations

The role of the private sector and of landowners in mobilising resources for return

In a few cases, private sector actors stepped in informally to partially fulfil the lack of financial means highlighted in the preparation phase; in Badghis, brick kiln owners and vegetable traders offered loans and financial support for IDPs to return, in exchange for their labour or their first harvest. However, this support, while appreciated, leaves IDP returnees vulnerable to exploitation, with no other options if faced with difficult or abusive work situations.

The owner of a rice processing factory in Kunduz also provides some support to IDPs to return, and described this process: “We are in contact with certain IDPs, some of them working in our firm. We have a cash grants program for them and we can pay their transportation fee when they return. And once returned we can provide

⁴⁴ FGD1 with Female IDPs. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁴⁵ FGD with Male IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁴⁶ Community Consultation. Nangarhar, November 2019

them with foods and raw materials such as oil and rice and safety requirements such as clothes. Our company is a producing company we can help IDP employees through financial assistance and basic food requirements.”⁴⁷

In Badghis, several IDP returnees had returned specifically “to work their land.”⁴⁸ In some cases, agreements between IDPs and those who remained to share the benefits of their harvest equally gave them the confidence to return and ability to work with non-displaced community members.

A warm welcome: immediate support from communities

In the absence of effective formal support mechanisms, community support fills a gap, albeit in a limited way. Community support received is not economic or material in nature, but it can alleviate some of the initial short-term stresses of return. While community perceptions of IDPs vary (see Box 1), IDPs in most locations reported receiving some initial support from community members upon return. This most often took the form of neighbours cleaning or preparing IDP homes (in areas where they had not been destroyed), providing them with tea and meals upon return, and helping to move luggage and household items.

Beyond this, community support remains limited. Both displaced returnees and non-displaced community members note the minimal resources and challenges faced by all in the community: “Our community didn’t help us, no one can help each other, they can hardly support their own lives,”⁴⁹ observed one returned IDP woman from Samangan, highlighting an observation frequently repeated elsewhere.

Box 1 – Social cohesion upon return: how non-displaced community members view IDP returnees

Reactions to displacement varied across locations, from support for IDPs to resentment towards those who had left. On the one hand, non-displaced community members evinced compassion and understanding towards those who had to flee. As one non-displaced community member from Nangarhar described it: “Those who wanted to leave consulted with us, and as we observed their life was getting worse day by day, losing their livestock and fields and not able to work, therefore we advised them to leave for other areas where they could have easy access to water.”⁵⁰

On the other hand, community members in other locations were against displacement and viewed IDPs with disapproval. In Samangan, community members noted that “When they were moving we did not help them at all, as we were not happy with their displacement. However, when they returned we did help them and provided them with whatever they needed.”⁵¹

In areas that had been Taliban held, IDPs found themselves in a state of limbo, not fully accepted in the urban areas where they were displaced and harassed by police because of their conservative appearance, but also viewed with suspicion upon return, with some accused of having lost their faith or of working for the government.

⁴⁷ KII Director of Rice Processing Factory. Kunduz, November 2019

⁴⁸ FGD2 with Women IDPs and FGD1 with Male IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

⁴⁹ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

⁵⁰ FGD2 Male Non-Displaced Community Member. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁵¹ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Member. Samangan, November 2019

Table 4 – Overview of gaps in the immediate support to return movements

Dimensions	Gaps reviewed in this section
Return journey	Transportation gap (resources for and actual transportation modalities)
	Protection concerns for vulnerable groups (health, food insecurity)
	Security challenges unaddressed (roadblocks, landmines, ongoing fighting)
Support gaps	Government perceived as not sufficiently present
	NGOs seen as biased in their targeting and selection of beneficiaries
	Community presence is limited and varies greatly
Immediate return gaps	Shelter support (destroyed housing, land and property, loss of assets)
	Demining efforts
	Food provision
	Clothing

Longer-Term Support Needed for Sustainable Return

While a minority of IDPs interviewed indicated that they had received some in-kind support in the form of the food and clothing to support them along the way, this aid proved minor and inaccessible to most: “[An NGO] supported 37 families from our community when they returned by providing them with bags of flour, a bag of rice, two cans of oil, one kilo of dry tea, one kilo of sugar, along with 6,000 – 17000 AFs cash. These supports were temporary not permanent. Permanent support would have been shelter, that was not provided to us. Except for those 37 families, the remaining displaced families have not received any support from any agency.”⁵²

Beyond the support that humanitarian aid organisations can provide, sustainable return is contingent upon being able to build a life that is stable, dignified, and safe. In communities where the original reasons for displacement persist or have caused a negative long-term impact on the community, building this stability is often compromised. Development interventions which address the needs of returned IDPs and the wider community are required to overcome these broader challenges.

Security as a prerequisite to sustainable return

Ongoing security and disaster risks after return

A minimum level of security in return communities is necessary as a foundation for longer term reintegration efforts. In none of the locations surveyed was this minimum foundation available. IDPs in several provinces – most notably in Helmand, Kunduz, Badakhshan, and Samangan – reported ongoing security risks. The same tensions that caused them to leave are still present, albeit to a lesser degree. This has led to instances of multiple movements for some families, as continued and renewed cycles of violence lead to cycles of displacement: “I have been displaced several times, there has been war repeatedly here, I have even had to go far, to Kabul [because of this].”⁵³

Similarly, the recurrent and increasingly severe nature of natural disasters reduces the sustainability of return. An NGO worker in Samangan spoke of this issue and the risks it brings for the long term: “There has been a change in the climate in Samangan, and the possibility for floods is now very high. Natural disasters are increasing day by

⁵² KII School Headmaster. Badakhshan, November 2019

⁵³ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

day, this impacts displacement. Samangan Province is one of the most vulnerable places when it comes to natural disasters.”⁵⁴

Multiple displacements⁵⁵

In many of the locations studied, conflict and/or disasters are of a cyclical nature, leading to multiple – even annual – displacement patterns. For residents of Helmand’s Loy Bagh, violence and displacement has been a factor of most of their adult life: “We spent our whole life in wars; we have never experienced a night without combat,” related one IDP, “I have been witnessing these combats before and after my wedding. We have been displaced five times since my marriage. The first time we were displaced was four years ago, and the four other times were within these past three years.”⁵⁶ Having to flee abruptly is exhausting; having to flee abruptly multiple times even more so. Insecurity makes preparedness for return an even greater challenge. The abrupt nature of most of the communities flight means that all was left behind, and land that was being cultivated was abandoned. While some community members initially tried to make return visits to continue taking care of their land and prepare their agricultural production for when they returned, this proved unsustainable: “Sometimes, when we wanted to water our crops, we used to come secretly, but when we started the water pump we couldn’t turn it off due to heavy firing,”⁵⁷ explained one returnee.

Long-term needs for IDP returnees and their communities

Whether the foundations for sustainable return are in place or not, displaced families and their communities have longer-term material development needs that they seek to fulfil upon return. These relate to three key sectors: education, health, and livelihood opportunities.

Education

Across all provinces, education is seen as key to a better life, a hope that displaced families hold for their children even if they themselves were not able to complete or obtain an education. Community members speak of the light and brightness that education can provide for the upcoming generation, a way out of the current cycle of “darkness” and displacement that they have lived through.

Returned IDPs expressed commitment to their children’s education, and lamented cases where a child had to interrupt their studies due to displacement. In several cases, access to education was a reason for return: “we were still afraid [to return]. But they told us to return, that there would be a school. They said that we could resend our children to school, we could register our children and they would follow their lessons. They also told us we could register our girls, that they would follow their lessons, they would become doctors and have good lives.”⁵⁸

The view of education as a way out of “darkness” extends to girls as well: “We need educational facilities for girls to pass their life in brightness, not like us, we passed our life in illiteracy and darkness,”⁵⁹ described a woman. Men interviewed agreed: “we need girls’ schools here, and a solution to the problem of boys’ schools,”⁶⁰ noted one male IDP returnee, as another stated that “all of the women are deprived of education therefore they should be provided with schools and universities or they should be provided with transportation so that they should

⁵⁴ KII NGO. Samangan, November 2019

⁵⁵ Humanitarian assessments confirm that “As the conflict has taken on a more protracted nature and frontlines have shifted, many IDPs have been forced to move multiple times in search of safety” OCHA – 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview

⁵⁶ SSI2 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

⁵⁷ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

⁵⁸ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

⁵⁹ SSI3 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

⁶⁰ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

commute to the city for education.”⁶¹ However, while many IDP returnees and community members express a desire for their daughters to be able to access education, in practice this is often difficult. In Samangan in particular, IDP returnees noted past incidents of vandalism at the girls’ school, as well as the distance from the village, as obstacles to allowing their daughters to resume studies upon return. They requested support in establish a bus or other form of transportation to transport them safely from village to school and back.

The barriers to education extend across all phases – in displacement, and upon return. NGO actors underlined the lack of appropriate documentation in displacement as a continued barrier and an unsolved problem. While government actors recognise the problem, and now coordinate between ministries, their efforts remain inadequate to reach all IDPs in displacement. Interviews with a school director in Kunduz noted the challenges IDP children faced in accessing quality education: “[NGOs] should provide the teachers with seminars and capacity building programs to enhance their method of teaching. This is also a kind of support to the IDPs’ children. Our school curriculum and books are not enough; even most of the children do not have books. One book costs nearly 50 AFN which is not affordable to the children. This is the most critical problem for IDPs’ children.”⁶²

Health

IDPs are at a higher risk of illness and injury while in displacement. Previous research has found that a third of IDP households contained at least one member with a chronic illness, and that displacement increases vulnerability to illness or injury.⁶³ Interviews conducted for this study confirmed that health remains a challenge in displacement, with IDP returnees highlighting multiple cases of illness or disease while in displacement, increasing both physical and financial vulnerability.

Illness or disability of one family member can put the entire family at risk, especially in case where the ill or disabled party is the head of household or the main income earner. As one woman who had returned to Badghis explained: “My husband is partially disabled, and he can’t perform any heavy work. So we were very anxious about our material and economic condition [when we returned].”⁶⁴ This increased vulnerability does not disappear when IDPs return home. The added challenges of caring for a sick or disabled family member, on top of other difficulties faced upon return, is in itself a source of stress that IDP families find difficult to cope with. Access to health facilities is limited, and many IDPs reported needing to travel to larger urban areas or towns in order to access support. In a few cases this resulted in IDP returnees dying while en route to a clinic far away. Women were especially vulnerable to this, as access to maternal health was particularly restricted due to the distance from a clinic after return, given the more limited services available in rural areas.

In addition to physical illness or disability, poor mental health weighs on IDPs, especially those who fled conflict and returned to towns that were destroyed, or who lost neighbours or family members in the conflict. While many interviewees did not explicitly use the language of ‘mental health’ to describe their psychological state upon return, descriptions of anxiety, stress, and exhaustion beyond what would be considered normal were common and long-lasting. “We are scared that the war will start again, we are not even sleeping well at night. Now we hear the sound of firing during the night, and we hear aircrafts, [and] we think the Taliban will come again and the black days will start again,”⁶⁵ described a woman in Kunduz. Others interviewed described returning to dead bodies or blown up corpses on the streets of their neighbourhoods, witnessing their neighbours step on

⁶¹ SSI6 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

⁶² KII School Principal. Kunduz, November 2019

⁶³ Samuel Hall/ NRC (2018). *A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan*

⁶⁴ FGD1 Female IDP. Nangarhar, November 2019.

⁶⁵ Household Case Study with Female Household Member. Kunduz, November 2019

landmines, and feeling constantly on edge because of the possibility of war coming again – a possibility that many had seen become reality, having been displaced multiple times over several decades of conflict. “We have a dark future coming to us if we don’t make any changes,”⁶⁶ predicted one community member.

Livelihoods

The need for economic stability, through cash and especially through access to decent livelihood opportunities, was a crucial priority in all provinces and with all interviewees. Especially for youth, livelihoods are seen not only as a core element to building a stable life, but also as a means to mitigate crime and potential radicalisation: “The youth are suffering from limited options. There are no jobs that they can apply for. [And] from the other side the youths are getting influenced by people and they are misguided. The [religious scholars] are playing a vital role in that, and they will become a problem for themselves and for society.”⁶⁷

Nearly all the communities of IDP return that participated in this study are primarily agricultural, and identified two key types of desired support: they wished for support to improve and enhance their existing cultivation activities, and also wished for opportunities to diversify their livelihoods possibilities, developing skills and capacities that are less reliant on fragile climate or security conditions. Support to improve existing work opportunities is already happening to some extent in a few areas. One farming programme in Badghis targets the agriculture sector and encourages IDPs to return to their place of origin, allocating land and seeds to cultivate sustainable crops that can thrive without too much water.

IDP views of this programme are mixed: on the one hand, they understand the future benefits for themselves and their children, and participation in the programme is well viewed within the community, leading to higher opportunities for accessing credit and resources for beneficiaries. On the other hand, frustrations relating to beneficiary selection, and project locations has lost the programme some credibility.

In the absence of more effective formal programming, in some areas of return private sector actors have supported communities of IDP return through relevant value chains. Most notably, in Nangarhar brick kiln owners have established a system of lending which allows IDPs to have a semblance of financial security upon return: brick kiln owners provide an initial loan to displaced individuals or families. In exchange, IDPs agree to work only for that employer upon return. This is an exploitive but common system: brick kilns historically use bonded labour to ensure a regular workforce in the face of challenging and often dangerous work.⁶⁸ In spite of this, IDPs working in brick kilns generally evince positive feelings towards this system, which allow them stability in employment in spite of a drought-stricken landscape. Vegetable traders in the province follow a similar model, lending seeds and fertilizer to returned IDP farmers in exchange for exclusive buying rights to their harvest, and a rice processing factory in Kunduz has also begun to offer similar support on an ad hoc basis.

The private sector has potential to provide support where government and organisations have failed; in some areas studied this potential exists but has not yet been realised. This is most striking in Helmand, where cotton is abundantly harvested and of high quality, but the lack of factories and limited access to the cotton value chain in the province has resulted in a surplus of raw material – much of it harvested by returnee IDPs and their communities – with nowhere to go. Stronger connections with these private sector actors could allow for the diversification of livelihoods opportunities, allowing returned IDPs more resilience in the face of unpredictable contexts.

⁶⁶ FGD3 Male Community Members. Kunduz, November 2019

⁶⁷ SSI1 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

⁶⁸ Samuel Hall/ ILO (2011). *Buried in Bricks: A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour in Brick Kilns in Afghanistan*

Needs and opportunities for supporting vulnerable populations

Youth

The connection between unemployment and migration

In many provinces, the link between unemployment and migration worries community members, who are afraid of the impact at both individual and community level of the loss of a generation of men who should be contributing actively to the well-being of their relatives and communities. This is especially true in our study in provinces bordering neighbouring countries, such as Nangarhar and Badakhshan.

Unemployed and lacking livelihood options besides land cultivation, the research team was told that youth are often unable to marry as they cannot pay dowry prices. Community members note that youth are more vulnerable to migration or drug addiction as a result. Reflecting on the challenges of finding work after displacement and exposure to violence, an IDP returnee viewed this challenge as generational: “we are really concerned about this generation because they are growing uneducated and living dark lives. They don’t know what to do, who they should refer to or share their concerns with.”⁶⁹

The unemployment-insecurity nexus

Community members across all provinces worry about the effect that displacement and the lack of reintegration can have on the youth, who are being increasingly targeted for recruitment by Taliban forces. In Kunduz, women and men alike spoke of this central concern. “Youth are jobless and unemployment may lead them to join the Taliban,”⁷⁰ worried one IDP woman. IDP returnees see education as key to breaking out of cycles of unemployment, insecurity, and displacement. “Our youth don’t have any prospect for work here as our school stops before secondary school, and we need more teachers in this area if we want our children to continue their education. This would help raise the levels of skills among our youth, so that they do not go towards the Taliban for work!”⁷¹ explained one IDP returnee. Private sector actors contributing to the support of IDP livelihoods recognise the importance of education: “Our society needs to realise the importance of education as the current war will not end unless we realise this,”⁷² noted the Director of the rice processing factory in Kunduz.

*Women*⁷³

Women in most IDP returnee communities play a substantial role in facilitating and rebuilding life after return. This is particularly true in situations where returned IDP families have a disabled, ill, or absent head of household. “Women unpack all of the luggage and furnish the house again to prepare for a better living”⁷⁴ described one IDP returnee woman. The majority of women were in charge of taking abandoned or destroyed houses and turning them again into functional, familial, and welcoming homes.

⁶⁹ SSI2 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

⁷⁰ FGD1 Female IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

⁷¹ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

⁷² KII Director of Rice Processing Factory. Kunduz, November 2019

⁷³ IDP women are more likely to suffer from unemployment and lack of access to basic needs – NRC (2014) *strengthening displaced women’s rights to housing, land and property*

⁷⁴ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

This work, which is often unacknowledged as such by male family or community members, is heightened in cases where husbands or male family members cannot provide for their family upon return. Most women expressed a desire for work and to support their family. Male community perceptions of this remain mixed; while several men interviewed for this study emphasised that they supported culturally appropriate women’s work, for instance tailoring, others were less in favour. One male returned IDP highlighted the risk that working could pose to women, even as he identified the need for women’s livelihood opportunities: “Now the pressure [since we returned] is that in one family there is just one income earner, so the pressures on us men have increased. Women need to work here, grow vegetables, and tailor etc. Not all men will authorise this, because the Taliban are still very close to the area. They tell us that the women are not supposed to leave their homes. If they come out [of the home] they threaten to kill our women.”⁷⁵ The desire to support their families and engage in work is there; however, opportunities for women’s work need to be accessible and not put them in further danger, highlighting the need for localised and community approaches to skills training and livelihoods.

*Children*⁷⁶

Child protection needs remain high in most areas of return. The economic impact of displacement leads to child labour in many situations. One NGO staff member in Badghis underlined this: “IDPs mainly have lost their wealth last year, (...) they are facing serious challenges to re-establish their life upon return, and so child labour is common.”⁷⁷

Beyond child labour, in some cases economic desperation has led families to sell their children to other families while in displacement as noted in the Samangan case study. As displacement exacerbates financial difficulties, children bear part of the burden, finding themselves in risky situations without robust child protection mechanisms in place to support them.

Table 5 – Overview of sustainable reintegration gaps

Dimensions	Gaps reviewed in this section
Security and safety	Root causes unaddressed – cyclical conflict and disasters
	Disaster risk reduction and resilience programming
Protection needs and Material safety	Education support – access, quality and continuity – for girls and boys
	Health – physical and psychosocial
	Livelihoods support targeting value chains and market systems (demand side), training, equipment, inputs, transportation (supply side). More formal private sector involvement.
Vulnerable groups	Targeting the elderly left behind
	Women’s resilience upon return
	Children’s wellbeing in displacement return and after return
	Youth, unemployment-insecurity-migration nexus

⁷⁵ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

⁷⁶ Previous research has shown that IDP children were often put to work to help households survive, depriving them of educational opportunities; similar trends can be seen upon return. ILO/UNHCR (2013) *Assessment of Livelihood Opportunities for the Returnees/IDPs and the Host Communities*

⁷⁷ KII NGO. Badghis, November 2019

BREAKING OUT OF CYCLES OF DISPLACEMENT IN MARGHUNDAI

Nangarhar case study

The ebbs and flows of water dictate the lives of the people of Marghundai. A village located 10 km south of the provincial capital of Jalalabad in Nangarhar, the residents of the village have been impacted by both drought and flooding. While the area has historically endured yearly dry spells, a more serious period of protracted drought in 2018 severely affected livestock, harvests, and livelihood capacities, displacing families to places with better water access such as Kama, Khiwa, and Kabul.

Livelihoods, displacement, and the critical access to water

Access to water plays a decisive factor in whether families displace or remain. The displaced in this village are primarily those involved in agriculture and land cultivation, highlighting linkages between livelihood and displacement patterns. Those whose livelihoods depend on water – primarily those who work in brick kilns or agricultural cultivation – have to move during periods of drought, while those whose livelihood is not dependent on water often choose to stay. As one non-displaced community member noted: “[because] our work wasn’t dependent on the water, we did not leave this area. We could find enough water for drinking and ablution. Since we weren’t involved in cultivation works, we were not obliged to displace.”⁷⁸

The decision by some to leave is a collective one. As one non-displaced community member described it: “Those who wanted to leave consulted us, as we observed their life was getting worse day by day, they were losing their livestock and their fields and were no longer able to work. [So] we advised them to leave for other areas where they could have easy access to water. We told them that not to return unless the village was full of water again. Even dogs were dying due to thirst and there was not enough water even for a plant to grow.”⁷⁹

Displacement from Marghundai costs money: renting a house, building a relationship with a new employer, finding a temporary place within a new community. Those who are not under desperate economic pressures to do this will not do it; those who had cars or private wells, more stable economic situations, livelihoods unrelated to water, chose to stay. Those who are displaced are amongst the most vulnerable families in the community: they are the ones who are the most dependent on access to water and who are the least materially prepared to access it in times of crisis. Additionally, even as drought affects the lives of Marghundai community members, some households have faced the double destruction of flooding and conflict. Homes located by marshes have found themselves both caught in crossfire and their houses affected by the ravages of water damage. “Our house was located along the marsh,” explained one returnee woman, “and it was flooded with water every night. The Taliban sheltered in the marsh and were fighting with the government. Our house was between the fires on each side of the combat, and so we finally decided to move to Kabul.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ FGD with Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

⁸⁰ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

Community selection of research themes

As drought receded in 2019, and before the harsh Kabul winter began, displaced families began to return. The community consultation revealed three critical lenses to understand the dynamics of IDP returns in Marghundai. The aim of this research is not to analyse all aspects of returns, but to let communities prioritise the factors most important to their experiences of displacement, return and reintegration. The three themes highlighted by community representatives were:

- 1) Community support and engagement, its potential and its limitations in supporting the return and reintegration of IDPs, from the preparedness to the post return phase;
- 2) Possibilities of private sector engagement in strengthening durable solutions
- 3) The role of women in supporting return and livelihoods post return in Marghundai

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP and host families, men, women and youth, and three key informant interviews with civil society, private sector, and community representatives. A programmatic case study was completed to compliment the needs analysis. Together, these findings seek to support opportunities for programming that centre on building the resilience of this village to external shocks.

FINDINGS

Welcome home? The state of community support

The return of water – and so the capacity to return to work – is the central piece of information that shaped the return decision. Non-displaced community members play a key role in providing this information and encouraging displaced households to return; in most cases they are the sole source of information. “We contacted the community leader,” IDP returnee reported, “and he assured us that working opportunities and water availability had increased. He satisfied us that we don’t have to worry about finding work. [So] we shared a vehicle and returned to the village.”⁸¹ Community leaders influence the decision to return. As another male returnee recounted, describing this decision: “There were no work opportunities in Kabul anymore. I contacted the villagers [by phone] and the community leader of the village told me that the weather in Kabul is getting cold day by day, that the rainfall will increase. He instructed me to return to the village as the water had increased in the drains and so the working opportunities had too.”⁸²

Intermittent go-and-see visits were also a regular feature of the decision-making process. The geographic proximity of displacement, and the availability of family links in the community among those who had stayed behind, allowed for such go-and-see visits to take place. “We occasionally visited my paternal home [in the village],” “we sometimes visited our relatives here and frequently asked about the situation,” “we were connected to our relatives while returning, and we were visiting our village on a monthly basis to be aware of our house’s status” described three returnee women, noting the importance of family ties in their families’ decision making processes.⁸³

Beyond the provision of information, community members’ role was generous, yet limited by scarce resources. On the one hand, both returnees and non-displaced community members frequently highlighted the efforts

⁸¹ FGD with Male IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

made by community members, neighbours, and family to welcome returnees home. This included cleaning and furnishing the houses of displaced families, serving tea and preparing food for them on the day of arrival, hosting disabled family members while houses were being repaired, and generally supporting in alleviating the fatigue of travel and embracing returnees back into their homes. One returnee woman described the gratitude she felt for this support: “One of our neighbours who was very close to us helped me in cleaning and furnishing the house and served us tea. This was the biggest support; at the time I was very exhausted and tired. I will never forget her helping hand.”⁸⁴

However, some IDP returnees seemed tired of living through the same individual experience year after year. “No one helps anyone here,” described one returnee woman, “everyone tolerates his or her own burdens. Whether someone is poor or rich, they are for their own self, everyone is busy with his own business. No one is aware of others’ difficulties.”⁸⁵ Non-displaced community members similarly expressed frustration at not having the material means to provide more support for their returning neighbours: “When the returnees returned, there was nothing extra in our household – in terms of foodstuff – to provide to them. I was really eager to help them but there was nothing I could provide them with as our economic situation is really bad. My husband was weak and was not able to help them in moving their household items, but my little son, my daughters and I helped them in moving these.”⁸⁶

Community support received is not only economic or material in nature, but it can alleviate some of the initial short term stresses of return. The support of the community plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion; when combined with material or livelihoods support provided by external actors and targeting both displaced and non-displaced community members, this community support could play a greater role in reintegration processes.

Of brick makers and vegetable traders: the role of the private sector

IDP and community trust in government is low, as government has, in their eyes, failed to fulfil its role in providing adequate support. “The biggest obstacle to our sustainable life is the inattention of the government,” explained one woman returnee.⁸⁷ A male returnee echoed this sentiment in a different discussion, voicing his frustrations and disillusion in light of recent political events: “we would be successful if the government had constructed houses for us, had provided us with working opportunities [...]. Life is difficult like this and it is unfair that during the elections they want our vote and after that they don’t provide us with the required facilities. This is really unfair that every president asks for our vote, but when he is elected as president and we ask for lands he ignores us.”⁸⁸

In the absence of government support, private sector actors have filled a void and directly support IDP returnees to Marghundai. This is especially true in two value chains and sectors linked to local livelihoods: the brick kiln and vegetable trading/agricultural sectors. Prior to displacement most IDPs worked in these two sectors, both of which require large amounts of water. Discussion with a brick kiln owner highlighted the cyclical nature of their work: “There are fewer workers in the summer months as the water decreases, drought interferes with our work. Our activity decreases. [In winter] we have about 150 people working here, during times of drought they go to other brick kilns and stop working here. Water is the most important resource for us – if there is no water, only 10-15 people maximum can work.”⁸⁹ A similar dynamic exists for those working in the agricultural sector: as water

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

⁸⁶ SSI with Female Non-Displaced Community Member. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁸⁷ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁸⁸ FGD with Male IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁸⁹ KII with Brick Kiln Owner. Nangarhar, November 2019

wanes so does the capacity to grow and sustain a family with the results of a harvest. Non-displaced community members highlighted the impact this had on their own lives as well: as agricultural workers are displaced, they lose access to vegetables and fresh produce and as shopkeepers or other forms of traders see their work hours reduced.⁹⁰

In order to address this, brick kiln owners and vegetable traders have established a system of lending which allows IDPs' position to stabilise upon return and guarantees that they have work to return to. This lending model follows a similar logic for both sectors: vegetable shop keepers or brick kiln owners provide an initial loan (either financial or in the form of seeds and fertilisers) to those who are displaced to support them in their movement. In exchange for these loans which provide IDPs with short-term cash, IDPs agree to work or sell only to that employer or trader when they return. The brick kiln owner described this cycle as follows:

"In times of drought, people borrow money from us with the promise that as soon as the water is back they will come back to work with us. They cannot work with anyone else but the person they borrowed money from. When they go to Kabul and other places for brick kilns, when the situation is ready for return they do the same thing: they borrow from those managers in order to come back and work here. This means they can't go anywhere else, they have to work here and they have to live with their families here."⁹¹

Vegetable traders have similar agreements with displaced agricultural workers: upon return, these workers agree to sell their harvest only to the trader who lent them money, regardless of the price the trader offers. IDPs are not allowed to sell their produce, once harvested, to anyone else. If there is cash left after the loan and commission has been paid, this is given to the returnee. This system relies on a strong sense of trust between both employers and employees; "we make sure we select people who won't steal or commit wrongful acts" highlighted a vegetable trader,⁹² and IDP returnees expressed gratitude and a sense of relief at being able to return to former employment and a sense of normalcy in work upon return. As one IDP returnee described: "during my visit to the village I had already talked with the owner of a brickyard. He assured me that he will definitely support me if I return to the village. This has encouraged me to return, [and] now I work in the brickyard and am enjoying my life."⁹³ Other IDPs noted the fact that this work allowed them to return to their "normal life", highlighting the lack of change between their livelihoods pre and post displacement: "When we returned, we started our former works again – laying bricks and working the land. This is as it was in the past and has not changed at all."⁹⁴

These agreements and linkages with private sector actors are one of the only sources of support in building livelihoods upon return. However, as previous research has shown, there are protection risks related to these practices in Afghanistan, leading to cycles of generational poverty and indebtedness, and compromises made on long-term gains to fulfil immediate cash needs. Returnees are stuck in a cycle of survival: they find themselves needing to revert to child labour and unable to take the time to access education or skills training that would allow for less precarious work. A vegetable trader known for lending money to IDPs in return for exclusive access to their harvest described the length of the cycle of debt: "We help IDP returnees who come back to their lands. [But] during the drought, their vegetables are lost. They still owe us money as a result. There are some situations and people who will take years before being able to pay me back, and sometimes it's still pending years later."⁹⁵

⁹⁰ cf. in particular FGD with Male Non-Displaced Community Members, SSI with Male Community Member. Both in Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹¹ KII with Brick Kiln Owner. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹² KII with Vegetable Trader. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹³ FGD with Male IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹⁴ SSI with Male IDP Returnee. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹⁵ KII with Vegetable Trader. Nangarhar, November 2019

The local high school director further emphasised the risk of the exploitive and precarious nature of this relationship.

We need work [instead] that addresses the root causes, and that can really root them back in their communities so they are not displaced again. For example, opening a factory here to have other means of livelihoods besides agriculture and brick kilns. So that we can have a form of livelihoods that is not vulnerable to shocks such as drought, where they can work year-round. They need a type of work opportunity that is resilient to such shocks [...] Many IDPs do not have their own homes. They need this, and their [family] privacy. Otherwise they keep being pushed in very dangerous jobs, especially for children who work in those brick kilns.⁹⁶

Beyond miring IDPs in cycles of debt and providing them with no other option for education or work, the water-dependent nature of brick laying and vegetable growing leads to a precarity of livelihood options that affect the most vulnerable.

Invisible labour, disabled husbands, and the role of women in return

The reestablishment of life after return in Marghundai is, in many ways, a female-led process. This echoes previous work on refugee returns that highlight the role of women of women in re-establishing the household through both paid and unpaid labour. Immediately upon return, it is women who have the main task of making homes again out of the houses that they return to. “The important role of the women [upon return]” describes one returnee woman, “was unpacking all of the luggage and furnishing the house again to be prepared for a better living. Additionally, removing doors, windows, and walls is one of the women’s responsibilities.”⁹⁷ These last actions are especially necessary in cases where houses were damaged due to flooding, violence, or abandonment; in these cases women are in charge of making the home habitable again.

Interviews with both men and women highlighted the fact that many IDP male heads of households are disabled or otherwise unable to fully work and provide for the livelihood of their families. “Many of our husbands are disabled,” highlighted one woman, as another woman told of her husband’s epilepsy.⁹⁸ When asked to describe positive and negative elements in their lives, the illness or disability of a husband is a significant turning point in feelings of stability and security within the home.

When their husbands are sick or otherwise incapable of working, IDP-returnee women find themselves in charge – emotionally and physically – of managing and providing for the family upon return. This family support, in addition to the labour of rebuilding and maintaining a home, results in a high level of exhaustion for women in IDP families where the head of household is disabled or ill. This can lead to resentment and feelings of entrapment within the extended families who agree to support them for a time. One woman interviewed described the situation after an accident in a brick kiln left her husband injured and unable to continue his work upon return. Taken in by her husband’s brother and his family, this familial support, combined with her husband’s inability to work, became a source of stress and of domestic violence:

Most of the time my husband's brother was hitting my children in front of me, but we couldn't show any reaction because they were feeding us. Although I was doing chores for them, my seven children's food, medicine, and clothes were a burden on my brother in law's shoulders. Finally, he told us that, whatever

⁹⁶ KII with School Director. Nangarhar, November 2019.

⁹⁷ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

⁹⁸ *Ibid*

you do, you should support your family yourself and separate from us. When we left them, I began weaving clothes for other people's children in order to support my family. But still our income was very low, and we could not afford to eat good food or wear good clothes. I am continually suffering from the situation and am crying most of the time. My husband also started working as a daily labourer, but when he works for two or three days his back pain gets worse and he has to take medicine and stay home [...] my eyes are always full of tears because of my husband's sickness and our poor life.⁹⁹

Where husbands or other male family members are unable to provide for a family upon return, women look for work and ways to support their families' reintegration and well-being. Men recognised the changing gender dynamics brought about by IDP returns: "our women did not used to work on the land but now we have no other choice – our women are forced to work [...] we need everyone to contribute. Before women did not do any agricultural work, but now they have learned a lot, and work alongside their husbands to help them. Women work on the land, they take care of the livestock, they take care of the home."¹⁰⁰ As a result, women and some men highlighted the need for women focused opportunities for skills and livelihoods building, including a desire for girl's literacy courses, greater access to hens and livestock, and skills training on socially acceptable livelihood activities. "Women need to be provided with tailoring programs or with cows and poultry so that we can run our lives thoroughly; or literacy courses so we can learn something, or we should be provided with financial assistance."¹⁰¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Gaps in support prioritised during community consultations

- 1) On the return journey: the lack of financial means to pay for transportation costs led to additional loans and further indebtedness, alongside the sale of livestock to be able to pay the journey home, and limiting the prospects of livelihoods upon return. These negative coping strategies push IDP returnee families further into cycles of poverty.
- 2) After return: participants prioritised the need for solar power to assist irrigation from deep wells, pesticide for agricultural products, and seeds to support their livelihoods. On protection concerns, the community highlighted health care – especially for women – as a vital need and gap in support. While they recognise having a partial access to school for their children, the closest clinic is "very far, located in the city. People are very poor, so our main needs are access to a clinic and to clean water."¹⁰² They cannot afford to pay for the transportation cost to the city.¹⁰³

Both of these gaps bring to the fore shortages of roads, infrastructure and adequate service delivery, and the need for short-term cash which determines all other decisions. Coping strategies, while often of short-term benefit, do not help households step out of poverty in the long term, as they are structured around power imbalances within key sectors of work (i.e. brick kiln sector and agricultural trade between rural and urban areas). The gap in access to credit hurts IDP-returnees the most as they have had to incur more costs due to their displacement. Apart from loans from employers (such as brick kiln owners) no other access to credit exists according to those we interviewed apart from informal lending within the community: "IDPs need loans, and most

⁹⁹ IDP Household Case Study; with Female Household Member. Nangarhar, November 2019

¹⁰⁰ SSI with Male IDP Returnee. Nangarhar, November 2019

¹⁰¹ FGD with Female IDP Returnees. Nangarhar, November 2019

¹⁰² FGD3 Nangarhar Male P3

¹⁰³ SSI Nangarhar Male HC

loans are informal between us. There is very little formal lending or banking system here. The interest rates that banks take are not allowed under Islam, it is haram.”¹⁰⁴

Supporting households in the face of cyclical issues?

Interviews with community leaders, the deputy of the Community Development Council (CDC), and IDPs living in shelters provided a picture of limited humanitarian programming based primarily on shelter assistance. UNHCR has provided some iron shelters, although IDPs complained of the low quality of their homes. Some had received cash grants of 6,000 Afghanis from UNHCR but other families had not, leading to discontent in the community. Corruption in aid was also raised as an issue; some IDPs our field teams spoke with noted that NGOs have come to them in the past claiming that they will provide them with money if they agree to split the money – if they did not agree to this, they would receive nothing.

All of these elements point to the need for changes in the ways programming is designed, by gaining the trust of communities, providing them with a foundation for stepping out of their cycle of poverty, while assisting those who are the most in need through health care, enhanced service delivery, and improved infrastructure.

In 2010, in Surkhrod, UNICEF piloted an education programme that worked with brick kiln owners to open possibilities for education and reduce child bonded labour in brick kilns, with the goal of breaking generational cycles of poverty. While initially sceptical, a 2011 study revealed that kiln owners had become partners of the project.¹⁰⁵ There can be means of relieving the burden of debt and dependence and improving the living and working conditions of displaced and other families in this area if private sector actors – in this case brick kiln owners, land owners and traders – are integrated in programming. For this to work, alongside initiatives such as the Citizen Charter and the role of CDCs, public-private partnerships need to be enhanced.

Partnering with private sector actors can ensure that livelihoods upon return are not only protected, but promoted in ways that are structured and less exploitive. Livelihood protection reinforces household coping and livelihood management strategies with a view to long-term benefits that can be generated, increasing the sustainability of return. Combined with livelihood promotion, the position of women can be improved through increased livelihoods skills diversifying their work into new areas of economic activity, for instance through vocational training and improved access to markets. Finally, attention to diversification of livelihoods would help to prevent exploitative practices identified in the two sectors under review. While men did not speak of a strong sense of wanting to switch work sectors, youth and women expressed a desire for diversification in livelihood training and greater investments in their education to step out of the generational patterns.

Mobile clinics can contribute to alleviating immediate pressures of reintegration. While the current response to illnesses is one of economic substitution – naming other household members as the main income earners to replace the sick or disabled individual – an approach focused on the provision of medical care would address the health needs, and psychosocial needs related to domestic violence that pressure IDP-returnee women. Mobile services can be combined with cash programming effectively in such humanitarian contexts¹⁰⁶ as a first step to facilitate reintegration. There are several criteria to decide on whether cash programme is adapted to a context – the availability of a functioning market, the supply of goods by traders, the availability of combined interventions, cultural appropriateness, and beneficiary preference for cash, voucher or in-kind support. Given the central role played by traders and shopkeepers in/near the areas of IDP returns, tailored packages of support can be

¹⁰⁴ KII with Brick Trader

¹⁰⁵ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_172671.pdf

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/about/work/task-teams/working-paper-cash-health-humanitarian-contexts.pdf>

developed to target displacement related needs. In Marghundai, many of the criteria are met; the next step is to define distribution points that protect the most vulnerable, and as much as possible, mix modalities – combining shelter and cash, livelihoods and cash, medical care and cash, or cash-for-work and infrastructure development.

CASE STUDY

Fahim*, 42, returned from Pakistan at the age of 34 to settle in his sister's home in Marghundai. Over the last six years, he has had to move from Marghundai three times. The common denominator in all of his experiences of exile, return and displacement, is his dependency on brick kilns as a source of livelihood, shaped by patterns of child labour that have continued into his adult life. He began collecting waste material at the age of three and, although he wanted to juggle work with school, he had to drop out and join the brick laying sector full-time. Since his childhood, the physical pain of brick laying has only gotten worse. At the age of 37, due to drought and insecurity in Marghundai, he left to settle in Kabul's Deh Sabz, known for its central role in brick production in Afghanistan. His first experience of return was accompanied by "theft, explosion, a car accident and other kinds of dangers. The roads were insecure. I was happy because I returned back to my village and built two rooms on my own land with money I had borrowed". His second displacement episode was not so positive. His back pains prevented him from working, and he came back with empty pockets. He is now jobless at home, and with no other skills or livelihood prospects.

* Name has been changed

THE PROSPECTS OF A HUMANITARIAN- DEVELOPMENT NEXUS FOR IDP RETURNEES IN QARGHICH BALOOCHHA

Badghis case study

A community that relies, and prides itself, on its agricultural production, but which has also suffered the impacts of drought and conflict, the village of Qarghich Baloochha is located about 15 km from the provincial capital of Badghis. In spite of this geographic proximity to an urban centre, the village remains largely rural, and access to services is limited.

While the majority of community members were similarly affected by drought or conflict, displacement occurred in segments. The decision to stay or to go was largely based on perceptions of assistance received or not received by those who had already left. Villagers kept in contact with those who had moved, to decide whether or not they should leave their homes too. Would the situation in an IDP camp make them better or worse off? “The [IDP] camp was near our house,” described one non-displaced community member, “we were in touch with people who went to this camp or to Herat. Since they did not receive proper assistance, we decided to stay in our own village.”¹⁰⁷ The IDP camps’ proximity to the village encouraged this type of reconnaissance: while some families and community members were displaced to Herat, many found themselves in Sanjidak camp, on the outskirts of Qala-e-naw.

Life in the camp was difficult by most accounts. One IDP man described the challenges faced, including the lack of shelter, noting that “when we were in the camp, we didn’t have shelter, and we didn’t receive any assistance. Our family size was 12 and there were no other options – so we were forced and decided to return to our community.”¹⁰⁸ Serious protection issues were raised: with the arrival of the cold winter, and lacking proper shelter, children were falling severely ill in the camp. Community consultations specifically spoke of the lack of protection in camps as a key reason for return. The very spaces meant to protect them did not fulfil the expected purpose. As a result, even though the situation at home had not improved, IDPs felt they had no other choice but to return: “There was no proper shelter in the camp, the weather was too cold, and nothing was accessible for us, we got sick.”¹⁰⁹ Lack of proper shelter and overcrowding were particular problems for women in the camps as well, making it difficult for them to veil themselves appropriately as required by traditional customs: “Since the tents were placed near to each other we were not able to veil ourselves properly, therefore we were forced to return.”¹¹⁰

Given the state of life in the camps, IDPs from Qarghich Baloochha found themselves with two options: return or move onwards. These options were not positive choices, and therefore the return cannot be considered to be

¹⁰⁷ SSI with Male Non-Displaced Community Member. Badghis, November 2019

¹⁰⁸ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

¹⁰⁹ Community Consultation. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁰ FGD2 with Women IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

fully voluntary. Among the respondents, many perceived themselves as being “told”¹¹¹ to return by NGOs, or encouraged by the government to return, given that the climate had improved, disregarding the fact that security remained an issue. Unable to find protection and support for their basic needs in the camp, IDPs returned spontaneously.

Others diversified their return strategies using cross-border linkages and opportunities to migrate to Iran, joining their relatives and subsequently supporting their household through the provision of remittances. Others sought loans from their relatives in Iran to finance their return home. “Some of the families have relatives in Iran and sometimes they help when needed,” reported a community leader.¹¹² The presence of cross-border relationships resulted in some instances of family separation, as some members moved onwards, and others returned. One woman explained this dynamic: “My husband decided that we should return because we did not have anything to eat [in our displacement]. My husband was then forced to go to Iran for work, and [the rest of the family] returned here.”¹¹³

Organising transportation for return was a challenge and a financial burden. Families often coped by grouping returns with other community members. “We returned four families together,” explained one IDP returnee, “and we were helping each other and the vulnerable groups during the return journey. Everyone carried their luggage with the help of donkeys as we were all really poor people.”¹¹⁴ Others felt helpless during the return process, a process which they described as lonely. Upon return, they found that the challenges families and community members faced prior to their displacement were still prevalent. This was confirmed by the research team, as outbreaks of gunfire could still be heard during the fieldwork and the interviews with IDP returnees.

The ebbs and flows of water dictate the lives of the people of Marghundai. A village located 10 km south of the provincial capital of Jalalabad in Nangarhar, the residents of the village have been impacted by both drought and flooding. While the area has historically endured yearly dry spells, a more serious period of protracted drought in 2018 severely affected livestock, harvests, and livelihood capacities, displacing families to places with better water access such as Kama, Khiwa, and Kabul.

Community selection of research themes

The community consultation in Qarghich Baloochha reveals widespread concern over the health and wellbeing of children, as displacement in the camp and return to the village has increased exposure to health hazards. The community consultation also revealed scepticism in the role of aid actors, with wariness expressed over the selection process for basic humanitarian aid delivery. Community members turned their outlook more positively to the future, thinking of ways of enhancing agricultural production. As this research does not aim to analyse all aspects of return in the community, communities were asked to prioritise the factors most important to their experiences of displacement, return and reintegration. The three priorities in the Qarghich Baloochha community are:

- 1) Health and clean water to strengthen sustainable reintegration

¹¹¹ Community Consultation. Badghis, November 2019. Consultation participants highlighted that “[An NGO] told us to return to our community and that they would assist us,” and “[An NGO] told us that if we returned to our place of origin, the organization will assist us [...]”

¹¹² KII with Community Leader. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹³ FGD2 with Women IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁴ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

- 2) Enhancing agricultural support for the community whose primary source of income is land cultivation, including the examination of how landlords have stepped in to support returns
- 3) Enhancing the role of aid and the promises of pistachio gardens in supporting displacement and return in Qarghich Baloochha, exposing challenges that existing programmes have faced.

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP families, and three key informant interviews with community leaders, government, and international organizations. A programmatic case study was completed to link the analysis on needs with an analysis on aid and response. Together, these findings seek to support opportunities for programming that can centre on building the resilience of this community to external shocks.

FINDINGS

Health, clean water, and the particular vulnerabilities of IDP women and children

For IDPs, health – in particular children’s health – was an issue during their displacement, as difficult weather and sanitary conditions in camp led to disease in those most vulnerable.¹¹⁵ One woman explains: “our children got sick [in the camp] due to the hot weather, and neither the government nor any organization supported. We weren’t able to cure our children.”¹¹⁶ Challenges in accessing clean water lead to dehydration and diarrhoea for many children in camp. In the worst cases, children died as a result: “Unfortunately when we were in the camp we lost our four children due to the hot weather, and we didn’t receive any assistance” reported a returnee from Sanjidak Camp.¹¹⁷

This lack of access to health support and clean water, and the impact it has on IDP children was, in some cases, a direct reason for returning to Qarghich Baloochha. One woman recalled the specific circumstances around her daughter’s health that led to their decision to return: “We decided to return because my daughter broke her leg and we didn’t have any money for her treatment, and neither the government nor any organisation has supported us. When my daughter did not get well, I was scared that she might lose her leg, therefore I was forced to return.”¹¹⁸

In cases where family members have passed away while in displacement or along the journey, the challenges of return are exacerbated by the logistics and risks of returning the body to the community to be buried in a dignified manner: “my husband passed away during the journey, and it was the biggest risk for us to carry him to our community” recounted another woman.¹¹⁹

However, while health risks (in particular for children) are a reason for the decision to return, these health risks do not disappear upon return, and lack of access to appropriate healthcare remains an impediment to sustainable reintegration within the community. The lack of nearby access to a health clinic is a particular issue: “we don’t have a clinic and we take our sick people to the city for treatment which is located very far from the community. Sometimes we lose our people while on the way to the hospital. Earlier we lost one child and one woman while on the way to the hospital due to the lack of clinic and car.”¹²⁰ Women are particularly vulnerable, especially when it

¹¹⁵ See Community Consultation, Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁶ FGD2 with Women IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁷ FGD3 Male IDP. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁸ FGD2 IDP Female. Badghis, November 2019

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

¹²⁰ FGD1 Male IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

comes to maternal health challenges. Male community members acknowledge this challenge as well. As one male returnee describes: “women mostly need a clinic because there is no clinic in our community, and when they get sick, they have to go to [the next town] for treatment. This is very difficult for women, especially during pregnancy, because it’s about 2.5 to 3 hours way to the clinic. And the road is not good, we have to carry patients on the backs of donkeys.”¹²¹

“We returned to work our land”: landowner support and material needs for sustainable cultivation after return

Qarghich Baloochha is primarily an agricultural community. Along with livestock breeding, crop cultivation is the main source of livelihoods. While government support for agricultural production is lacking, interviews with stakeholders involved in IDP programmes emphasised the importance of programming that supports existing sectors for sustainable reintegration.

One NGO staff member noted that programmes should “target the areas where [IDPs] are already engaged [in work],”¹²² especially given the fact that, although drought has impacted cultivation and displacement in Badghis, the subsequent good weather conditions seen in 2019 did not result in a positive impact on livelihoods and harvests. As another NGO worker said: “inasmuch as the IDPs who have returned to their village do not possess and are not able to procure seeds for cultivation, and have received no support for this, there is no big difference between this year [when there was no drought] and last year when Badghis was experiencing a severe drought.”¹²³

Three landowners in this village have become key providers of livelihoods for IDP returnees. “There are three families who own land and the rest of the families just work on these lands as farmers.”¹²⁴ Through land-lease agreements, IDPs and landowners have agreed on a “1:5” system wherein a landlord receives 20% of the crop harvested on his land, and the IDP retains 80%. This proves mutually beneficial for both landowners and IDP returnees, and those who farm the land evince positive feelings towards the security that these agreements provide: “when we lease the land on [this] 1:5 basis, I think this is good because both the owner and the farmer are getting a benefit from the land [...] through this we can make our livelihoods, and we can improve our situation.”¹²⁵

These agreements and the possibilities of cultivation are a reason for return in the face of the challenges of displacement. Several IDP returnees had returned specifically “to work their land.”¹²⁶ In some cases, agreements between IDPs and those who remained to share the benefits of their harvest equally gave them the confidence to return and ability to work with non-displaced community members: “When we returned, I was able to work with one of my fellow villagers who cultivated wheat, and I helped him in collecting the harvest. When we finished collecting, we divided [the harvest] equally amongst ourselves.”¹²⁷ Similar coping mechanisms for mitigating poverty included jointly buying chickens or livestock with other community members, and later splitting any proceeds.

However, even with this community support and access to land, material needs remain an obstacle to effective cultivation. The lack of access to fertilized seeds in particular is a key gap for sustainable reintegration and

¹²¹ SSI2 Male IDP. Badghis, November 2019

¹²² KII NRC. Badghis, November 2019

¹²³ KII NRC. Badghis, November 2019

¹²⁴ KII with Community Leader. Badghis, November 2019

¹²⁵ FGD2 with Women IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

¹²⁶ See FGD2 with Women IDPs and FGD1 with Male IDPs. Badghis, November 2019

¹²⁷ FGD1 Male IDP. Badghis, November 2019

livelihoods. A representative of Citizen's Charter emphasised this issue, noting that: "We do not have a drought anymore. However, a portion of agricultural land this year was not cultivated, primarily because IDPs who returned to their village did not have the seeds in hand to cultivate land, and they were not able to purchase them."¹²⁸ Discussions with IDPs during community consultation highlighted the same issue: access to fertilised seeds is a key community need.¹²⁹

The promise of pistachio gardens: the expectation and reality of gaps in aid

Some programming has aimed to address the agriculture sector and community concerns related to cultivation by supporting IDP returns. One international NGO activity aims to supporting IDPs and encourage them to return to their place of origin. The programme began in the summer of 2019 and allocates land and seeds to IDP returnees for cultivation.

The Department of Natural Resources has been given the opportunity to assess the relevance of this programme highlighted issues with past programmes which focused exclusively on seed distribution: "[they came to us] and originally wanted to distribute refined [...] seeds to farmers in order to help them return to their place of origin and resume activities. However [an earlier programme] had distributed refined seeds of wheat which had twice the yield of normal seeds. [The people who received these seeds] were selling them in the market or converting them to flour which was not beneficial to most. So [we] suggested building gardens for IDPs instead."¹³⁰

Planting in the gardens has yet to begin; once the gardens have been built funds will be provided for their maintenance and nurture. IDP perception of this programming varies. On the one hand, potential beneficiaries are able to project themselves into the future and envision the long-term benefits that their children may reap, as well as other opportunities for these spaces. As one returnee highlighted, "I think this [programme] is good for our children who will benefit from this in the future [...] The [...] gardens are really beneficial [...] and we can cultivate some other things inside [them] also."¹³¹ A landowner and community leader reiterated this sentiment, highlighting the good credit that comes from participation in such a programme: "This project is really beneficial for the poor people because these are planted in the mountains and need less water. This is long term project and besides, people lend money to those who have [...] gardens, as they believe that they can repay our debts. Further, it helps the IDPs to get to work for a short term."¹³²

Although IDPs recognise these benefits, there are also frustrations at the long-term structure and the selection criteria across the ten districts of this programme. In Qarghich Baloochha, the community leader highlighted initial tensions over issues of insecurity and the validity of supporting their village in the face of this: "The [...] gardens were distributed [...] three months ago. They first told us that our community was insecure and that they would not distribute the [...] gardens for us. We told them that we would not let any other community receive these gardens, if we were not included. They finally provided us three [...] gardens."¹³³

In addition to this, the planting of gardens, originally meant to be a source of work for IDPs, has been in practice handed to community councils who had stronger connections and relationships with government or participating

¹²⁸ KII Citizen's Charter. Badghis, November 2019

¹²⁹ Community Consultation. Badghis, November 2019

¹³⁰ Programmatic Case Study Interview with Natural Resources Department. Badghis, November 2019

¹³¹ Programmatic Case Study Interview with IDP Beneficiary. Badghis, November 2019

¹³² Programmatic Case Study Interview with Landowner/Community Leader. Badghis, November 2019

¹³³ Community Consultation, Badghis, November 2019

organizations. One IDP beneficiary described his frustration: “The gardens were distributed based on the community councils, and the community councils with connections received too many gardens. In our community a single family has taken two or three gardens, but in some villages where the council did not have good connections they were not provided with a single garden for over ten families. For us [in Qarghich Baloochha] there are 96 families under our community council, out of which only 12 were provided with pistachio gardens.”¹³⁴ This has resulted in a level of tension between villages and communities: “[They] came and determined that the gardens were for them. The powerful people for example, they were prosecutors, security officers, and they took the gardens forcefully.”¹³⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Gaps in support prioritised during community consultations

Based on the lived experiences of IDPs returning to Qarghich Baloochha, all stages of the return process present lessons learned and opportunities for programming.

In displacement, based on IDPs’ accounts of misinformation in Sanjidak camp, government and NGOs can reinforce information and assistance pre-return. Given the numbers of IDPs in the provincial capital of Qala-e-Naw – estimated at 65,000 individuals residing across eight IDP camps, displaced due to the 2018 droughts and ongoing conflict – more attention should be paid to ensure that returns are not encouraged based on climate and agricultural factors alone. IDPs’ ability to restart cultivation and reintegrate into their former lives should be a primary consideration. The ability of IDPs to participate in a voluntary return decision-making process remains to be reinforced. On the one hand, IDPs report needing to return out of the lack of basic humanitarian needs¹³⁶ in IDP camps and misinformation on the assistance available upon return. On the other hand, this misinformation is combined with information gaps which are inadequate to an informed return. IDPs, and IDP returnees, remain dependent on external aid as displacement, insecurity and drought continue to disrupt normal livelihoods in Badghis. Both in displacement, and upon return, information sources and content need to be strengthened.

The return journey is complicated due to the cost of transportation and fuel, but also carries risks along the way. “The biggest problems we had during the journey home were the incapacity to rent a vehicle to carry our luggage, and the insecurity along the way.” Once the return decision is made, assistance can fill the dual gap of ensuring the safety of IDPs in the return journey, and ensuring that the journey does not add to the existing financial pressures on poor displaced households. Spontaneous movements can be better organised and supported through the provision of fuel, fuel coupons and planning of the return journey to encourage families to return as groups, as is common, but not universally the case.

With regards to reintegration, the health care gap – with the closest clinic being in the capital district, making access unaffordable for many – is of particular concern for women and children. Community members spoke of the urgent need for health care and treatment for children suffering from chronic illnesses, and repeated illnesses. Basic statistics confirm the need to invest more in mobile health teams. A recent report¹³⁷ states that

¹³⁴ Programmatic Case Study Interview with IDP Beneficiary. Badghis, November 2019

¹³⁵ *Ibid*

¹³⁶ AAH (2019) Badghis IDPs rapid SMART survey report <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/assessment/rapid-smart-assessment-report-qala-e-naw-idp-camps-badghis>

¹³⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-spain-donate-35m-hospital-reforms-midwifery-capacity-building-badghis>

only one mobile health team is available across Badghis Province, supplementing the one provincial hospital, one district hospital, 24 clinics, and 331 health posts. World Vision Afghanistan has set up mobile health clinics in Badghis, undertaking nutrition screening and delivering doctor consultations to treat children as a priority but also assessing the health needs specifically for children across Badghis. These reports¹³⁸ confirm that illnesses such as diarrhoea, widely reported in this community upon return, are leading to higher fatality rates due to the lack of accessible medical facilities, and the lack of awareness amongst populations. WHO has also supported life-saving primary health care services for IDPs in Badghis. Such services, and the set-up of Mobile Health Teams (MHT) should be extended to areas of IDP returns in Badghis.

The community's focus on "wheat seeds to cultivate and gather harvest next year" calls for more agricultural production support. Most of the community are subsistence farmers and have no ability to buy agricultural seeds. "Last year, we were not able to buy wheat seeds to harvest them and this year, our economic situation has gotten worse". The Citizen Charter program implemented projects across Badghis and mainly in Moqur District from where the majority of the IDPs originated. They identified the need for financial inclusion to support the poorest families with cash assistance to purchase food stuffs such as wheat, rice and cooking oil at village food banks. This project is still ongoing at the time of this research. Interviews suggested that more needs to be done to provide IDP returnee households with economic support and empower them to re-establish their own income generating activities: these include the provision of fertilised seeds, as requested by the community members themselves, and distribution of livestock like sheep and goats. On the former, some portion of the agricultural land was not cultivated due to the absence of labour during the displacement phase, and upon return, as a result of the lack of seeds or money to purchase more. As a result, agricultural production did not resume as hoped by community members and leaders. On the latter, in most cases IDPs sold or lost their livestock. Having spent their money during displacement, they were unable to restock upon return. As their main income source was herding, livestock provision will be essential to their reintegration prospects.

Pairing humanitarian and development interventions in Qarghich Baloochha, through a complementary health care – agricultural pilot or programme, could greatly contribute to building resilience and improving reintegration prospects. While increasing agricultural productivity is a priority for the community, so is the health of children and women.

¹³⁸ <https://www.wvi.org/es/node/31746>

CASE STUDY

Abdullah was 8 years old when he was first displaced due to the drought. Able to stay with relatives while other members of his family went to Iran to work, he and his family worked together on their lands before their return a year later. At the time, “I was able to go to school, and I was very happy,”¹ he recalls. However, Abdullah’s family faced difficult times, and he moved to Iran to support them and send his younger siblings to school. Eventually deported, Abdullah was returned to his home community with none of the money he had earned. Still struggling to repay his and his family’s debts when drought hit again two years later, they found themselves displaced in 2018 to Sanjidak Camp.

In the camp, water, inclement weather, cold, and lack of shelter proved to be significant issues: “We were living in tents, and when it rained the water came into our tents [...], and the tents were falling due to the winds. [When this happened,] our women and children would pass the night without tents and sleeping in the winds.”¹ On top of this, Abdullah recalled how existing services did not always fulfil needs adequately. When it came to water for instance, “too many children were gathering to get water”¹ and would fight to get it. As a result, the driver of the tanker would get angry and not allow anyone to access water.

Eventually these challenges led to his return with his family. At home however, access to services remains a difficulty, and Abdullah now finds himself having to resume a life that has been made ever more fragile by repeated displacement with no sign of change.

* Name has been changed

INSECURITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN LOY BAGH

Helmand case study

Previously Taliban held, in 2017 the small agricultural community of Loy Bagh in Helmand found itself caught in the crossfire between Taliban and government forces. Households on the frontline had to flee immediately; families farther away soon followed as violence increased. “We left the house without even putting our sandals on,”¹³⁹ recalled one woman. Another returnee similarly remembered the suddenness of their departure as violence erupted: “One day, early in the morning, American forces equipped with heavy ammunitions and jets landed in an area near us [...] Suddenly war broke out between the two parties and everyone fled their houses and left everything behind. So we also started running, and fled from our house with our bare feet.”¹⁴⁰ As a result of the conflict the entire town was displaced. Virtually everyone in the community is a returnee, although displacement and return occurred in a staggered manner.

Life in displacement was a challenge. Families who had fled their homes with nothing struggled to appease landlords or family members hosting them in nearby districts. After a few months, life became debt laden and untenable for many. As one returnee described, “For some time, we asked the [local] residents for money so we could buy food or other important things, but towards the end they refused to lend to us.”¹⁴¹ Host communities in areas of displacement were particularly unwelcoming, calling IDPs “dirty”¹⁴² and accusing them of being part of the Taliban. Conversely, upon return IDPs who had spent time displaced in urban areas were called infidels and seen as tainted: “when IDPs are displaced to the city, they are called Talib by the host community, but when they return, they are called infidels.”¹⁴³

Several returnees recalled being forcibly evicted by their landlords: “After spending one year [in displacement], the house owner ordered us to leave the house, and so we were obliged to return back.”¹⁴⁴ IDPs felt in most cases that their financial and livelihood situation was impossible to manage, and so that they had no other choice but to return: “It was our financial problems that forced us to make the decision to return. As we are farmers, we had left our lands, [but] we didn’t have anything to do in our displacement.”¹⁴⁵

While the decision to return was forced by circumstance and largely made by male heads of household in consultation with their families, there was at least one instance of women-led decision-making. One returnee woman recalled the importance of her mother-in-law in making decisions when her husband was not able to: “We were in people’s houses and they asked us for money and we said that we didn’t have rent, so they forced us to evacuate [...] My old mother in law was with me, she told us: ‘Let’s go! They do not let us live here!’ My husband is alone [in his family] there is no one else to make a living. Therefore, regardless of bombardment or war, we

¹³⁹ SSI with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴⁰ SSI with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴¹ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴² KII IRC. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴³ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁴ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴⁵ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

returned to our homes. When my husband's brother was killed in the war, he went crazy, so my mother-in-law made the decision as she leads our family."¹⁴⁶

This decision to return was largely forced upon them by inhospitable circumstances, influenced by hardships faced in displacement rather than any true sense of security at home. However, returnees did collect information as best they could prior to their return. Those who were displaced nearby visited the village regularly, and passed information via phone to those displaced farther away: "A lot of people had frequent visits to the village, and we got information about the situation of the village from them."¹⁴⁷ While families returned at different times, at the time of fieldwork for this study most had been in their village for at least two years.

Community selection of research themes

The community consultation in Loy Bagh revealed three key themes through which to examine the impact of return on the community and future support needed. As this research does not aim to analyse all aspects of return in the community, communities were asked to prioritise the factors most important to their experiences of displacement, return and reintegration. According to community consultation, the three priorities for the returned Loy Bagh community are:

- 1) Insecurity and its impact on preparedness, immediate return, and the post-return phase
- 2) Livelihoods and the need to better leverage existing resources such as agricultural capacity and cotton production in the region
- 3) Education as a hope for the future and a means for a younger generation to cope with and extract themselves from a lifetime of war

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP families, and six key informant interviews with government, international organizations, and private sector actors. A programmatic case study was completed to link the analysis on needs with an analysis on aid and response.

FINDINGS

"The village was like a graveyard": the impact of insecurity on displacement and return processes

For some Loy Bagh community members, violence and displacement has been a factor of most of their adult life: "We spent our whole life in wars; we have never experienced a night without combat," related one IDP, "I have been witnessing these combats before and after my wedding. We have been displaced five times since my marriage. The first time we were displaced was four years ago, and the four other times were within these past three years."¹⁴⁸ Having to flee abruptly was exhausting; having to flee abruptly multiple times even more so: "There is one condition to live a good life, and that is to have no war. Whenever we are displaced, our houses are looted,

¹⁴⁶ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴⁷ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁴⁸ SSI2 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

but when we return and start to live, war comes yet again, and forces us to leave once more. We are facing extreme poverty. It is winter and we have neither plants nor stove. We are living a tiresome life.”¹⁴⁹

Insecurity also made effective preparedness for return a challenge. The abrupt nature of most of the community's flight means that all was left behind, and land that was being cultivated was abandoned. While some community members initially tried to make return visits to continue taking care of their land and prepare their agricultural production for when they returned, this proved unsustainable: “Sometimes, when we wanted to water our crops, we used to come secretly, but when we started the water pump we couldn't turn it off due to heavy firing,”¹⁵⁰ explained one returnee. Another community member highlighted similar issues: “Sometimes, a person for the village or house used to come here to look after our properties and livestock secretly. But later, when the war got even harder, we were not able to send someone. As a result, we lost everything.”¹⁵¹

Shelter became the key issue upon return, directly related to consequences of conflict. Homes were used as “trenches and rifle pits”¹⁵² by both Taliban and government, and most community people returned to destroyed houses, unable to access them to rebuild prior to their return. Some families had tried to appeal through community leaders to either government or the Taliban to depart their houses so they could rebuild prior to return but this was not fruitful, and IDPs found themselves having to start from scratch, returning to homes that were destroyed and emptied of all furniture and home goods. “When we returned to our community, our houses and community was totally changed. Our houses were destroyed, doors and windows were broken, household goods were stolen, grass had grown on our lands which were not ready for cultivation, the roads were destroyed due to mine explosions.”¹⁵³ Additionally, Taliban had placed landmines at the front entrance of people's homes as a trap for government forces, while themselves escaping through holes they bored; this has left many homes in Loy Bagh with gaping holes in their walls, visible to this day.

The destruction of roads created significant challenges to the return journey, as families had to navigate long detours and dangerous checkpoints, in addition to the difficulties of securing transportation. “A key constraint towards our return was the road blockage: it [normally] takes 30 minutes to travel from Lashkargah [where we were displaced] to our village, but due to landmines, security checkpoints, and fighting it took 7 to 8 hours of travel.”¹⁵⁴

Landmines also posed a danger to returning community members in the village itself. Landmines had been laid not only on roads but also in houses and surrounding farmlands. Many returnees lost family members, including children, as mines exploded upon entering their homes again. One IDP recalled the impact this had on his family: “The ways were paved with landmines, and we were afraid and concerned about these landmines exploding on us. Unfortunately our concern came true, as my cousin was taking something from his home a mine exploded on him and his friend, and they were killed.”¹⁵⁵ Another woman remembered feeling trapped upon return by the presence of landmines outside of her home: “No one was able to get out of the house because everywhere was covered in landmines. The village was like a graveyard.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ SSI4 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁰ Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*

¹⁵² Community Consultation. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵³ SSI1 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁴ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁵ SSI2 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁶ SSI4 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

After multiple appeals, some government support was provided for demining efforts: “We raised our voice and requested through our parliament representatives that the government do something; eventually, they demined all our houses. Even our agricultural lands were not safe due to existence of mines which lasted for 2 to 3 months until they got demined. Finally, we could resume our cultivation works after demining completion. But even now the empty houses are full of landmines.”¹⁵⁷

Beyond the material challenges that this violence posed during the journey home and upon return, it also posed psychological stress, both during the decision to return and after return. One woman recalled her family’s anxiety throughout the process: “Our men said ‘Let’s go, there is no fighting anymore.’ But we had the fear of bombardment in our hearts, we could not dare, our children were afraid, they did not want to come. They said, ‘they will bombard us again’ and they were crying.”¹⁵⁸ Other returnees reiterated this anxiety: “We still have fear in our hearts that the war might restart. We are afraid of having to flee again. We are tired and we don’t want violence to ruin our lives anymore.”¹⁵⁹

Livelihood support: continued stagnation upon return and the need for stronger crop market links

Violence and insecurity have had an impact on the material livelihoods of the returnees of Loy Bagh. A mainly agricultural community, reliant on the cultivation of crops such as corn, peanuts, and cotton, the inability of community members to care for their lands while they were displaced has had a lasting impact: “A negative impact [of our displacement] has been that we left our crops to dry, and when we returned they were all vanished. We had borrowed and spent money on our crops so that they could help us. But when they were left to dry because of our displacement we remained in debt, and the people who we borrowed from now want their money.”¹⁶⁰ Displacement has therefore not only increased levels of debt but affected the very livelihoods upon which people rely for its alleviation.

When asked what support would have been most useful upon their return, many highlighted agricultural support, which would have helped them to sustain their livelihoods in spite of the destruction they faced upon return. As one returnee said: “No one helped me rebuild my house and lands. We should have been provided with tractors, refined seeds, and fertilizers. All of these were a big burden for us [when I returned] and we prepared our land with the help of some people and borrowed money.”¹⁶¹ Interviews with government actors in Helmand recognise similar agricultural livelihood support needs for sustainable reintegration: “when the people return to their area of origin, they are not prepared to cultivate crops as they don’t have access to seeds because of their displacement. So, they need agricultural tool kits and improved seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides.”¹⁶² Loy Bagh has access to water for cultivation from a river that runs through the town; however, the infrastructure necessary to use this water for irrigation is lacking. The community has come together to spend its own money on wells and a generator for a water pump, but the effectiveness for cultivation remains limited and expensive.

Beyond support for cultivation, returnees noted the need for a stronger market for the harvested crops: “We have been involved in cultivation work both before and after our return. But there needs to be a stronger market for

¹⁵⁷ Household Case Study with Male Family Member. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁸ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁵⁹ SSI4 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁰ SSI3 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶¹ SSI1 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶² KII with DoRR. Helmand, November 2019

our crops. And we need to be provided with cold rooms so we can save our crops, and greenhouses.”¹⁶³ The lack of connection to a value chain has had a visible impact in Helmand: bags of cotton, many harvested by IDPs, litter the streets, with no one to buy and process the raw material.

The lack of market for crops, compounded by the challenges of re-establishing agriculture on destroyed land, has had a particularly negative effect on young people. Unemployed and lacking livelihoods options besides land cultivation, they are often unable to marry because of an inability to pay dowry prices. Community members note that youth are more vulnerable to migration or drug addiction: “our youth are jobless and most of them migrate to other countries or are addicted to narcotics, and some of them even join the army. We are really concerned and worried about the future of our children,”¹⁶⁴ described one returnee. And another, reflecting on the challenges of finding work after displacement and exposure to violence, viewed this challenge as generational: “we are really concerned about this generation because they are growing uneducated and living dark lives. They don't know what to do, who they should refer to or share their concerns with.”¹⁶⁵

Education: The path out of darkness?

A third priority in IDP consultations, education is seen as a path towards a better life. Community members speak of the light and brightness that education can provide for younger generations, a way out of the current cycle of “darkness” and displacement that they have lived through: “we spent our lives in darkness and like blind people, and our aspiration is to help our children to become something in the future,”¹⁶⁶ said one woman, reflecting on her children's future. “We want our new generation, with education, to brighten the future of the family and country.”¹⁶⁷

The view of education as a way out of “darkness” extends to girls as well: “We need educational facilities for girls to pass their life in brightness not like us, we passed our life in illiteracy and darkness,”¹⁶⁸ described another woman. Men interviewed agreed: “we need girls' schools here, and a solution to the problem of boys' schools,”¹⁶⁹ noted one male IDP returnee, as another highlighted that “all of the women are deprived of education therefore they should be provided with schools and universities or they should be provided with transportation so that they should commute to the city for education.”¹⁷⁰

In some cases, education was an impetus to return. One IDP parent described the hesitation they felt in returning, and the sway that access to education for their children had on their decision: “my mother-in-law and the children were afraid to return, [even after the community people] gave us the information that there was no more fighting. We were still afraid. But then they told us to return, that there would be a school. They said we could resend our children to school, we could register our children and they will follow their lessons. They also told us that we could register our girls, that they would follow their lessons, they will become doctors and have a good life.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶³ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁴ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁵ SSI2 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁶ SSI4 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁷ SSI6 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁸ SSI3 with Female IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁶⁹ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷⁰ SSI6 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷¹ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

Access to education remains a challenge, especially for IDP children. In some cases, displacement itself was a barrier to education. One youth returnee recalled the difficulties he faced when trying to integrate into a new school while in displacement: “I left school when we were displaced and was not admitted to the school in Lashkargah [where we were displaced] due to the unavailability of transfer documents. Due to the lack of these documents, I was not admitted to school.”¹⁷² He continued to describe the obstacles he encountered in attending school upon return: “When we returned back, our school started five months later, which caused a one year delay in my school career.”¹⁷³

Interviews with an NGO actor underlined the barrier to education due to a lack of appropriate documentation in displacement: “the problem of lack of documents for school enrolment remains unsolved. The IDP students are required in their displaced place to provide the school with formal documentation stating that they have studied until grade X and would now like to travel to X school. Otherwise they are not allowed to.”¹⁷⁴ While government actors recognise this difficulty and now coordinate between ministries, most notably DoRR and the MoE, these efforts remain inadequate.¹⁷⁵

Finally, access to education upon return remains largely inaccessible due to the lack of school facilities: “We don’t have a school in our area. A school is located 8km away, but it has neither a proper building nor any professional teachers to educate the students properly. When it’s raining, school is off because there is no proper building. We lived our lives in wars and revolutions and didn’t study anything but now education grounds should be provided for our new generation.”¹⁷⁶

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Gaps in support prioritised during community consultations

A minority of IDP returnees interviewed noted receiving some level of in-kind support, often from unknown organisations. “We received donations last year [of flour, oil, nuts and beans]. But not all the people received these, only ten people were listed to receive them. No other support has been received so far.”¹⁷⁷ The vast majority of IDP returnees interviewed for this study emphasised the fact that they had received no support from government or organisations.

The majority of displacement in this area happened where aid organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could not access populations in need of support. The key to supporting them, according to a local NGO key informant, is to help them during their displacement so that they do not lose access to their agriculture and their livelihood. While some assistance – notably from the World Food Program (WFP) – has addressed IDPs’ needs in towns and cities of refuge for a period of three months, other more sustainable solutions need to be found in an area hit by recurrent violence and insecurity.

¹⁷² Household Case Study with Male Youth Family Member. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷³ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁴ KII IRC. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷⁵ KII DoRR; KII IRC. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷⁶ SSI6 with Male IDP. Helmand, November 2019

¹⁷⁷ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Helmand, November 2019

A consensus among key informants was the need for “the government to pay attention to the private sector, to invest in job creation so that you can learn the required skills through capacity building programmes” that directly contribute to the local economic activity, according to one representative of the Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR).

There is strong potential for the private sector to expand its capacity to integrate IDPs but, as previous attempts have shown, it will require external support and investment. While a government cotton factory in Helmand does exist, it has been inactive since 2014, despite keeping staff on payroll. Moreover, the factory's failure to connect effectively to wider cotton markets, and therefore command higher prices, has ultimately had a negative impact on small cotton producers: “[Our factory] has not worked on its marketing strategy. The products and packaging are not based on market requirements – we provide [cotton] in barrels instead of in proper packaging. We are not connected to the internet, traders and businessmen cannot contact us unless they visit in person. And we are not connected to markets outside of the country, which would be crucial for such a factory.”¹⁷⁸

Other public-private partnerships exist in the area close to Loy Bagh in Helmand province: the Carpentry and Lithography Factory is jointly run by the Government and the private sector, which holds 51% of the shares. However, while this factory has a technical team and machinery, it lacks raw materials. Solutions to this dilemma may include integrating the value chains from Loy Bagh and involving IDPs in the factory to create a stronger link between the production of raw materials harvested by the Loy Bagh community (such as cotton) and their processing. Another recommendation is to strengthen cooperation with the Ministry of Mines to extract raw materials at a lower price, with the minerals required coming from other districts in Helmand, as well as Herat and Kunar provinces.

While there are no specific social cohesion issues in Loya Bagh, there is an opportunity, according to the private sector, to improve economic cohesion with the return of IDPs. The private sector is seen to “benefit from the presence of IDPs and returnees because they cause an increase in manpower which reduces the level of wages and salaries in our companies. The salaries and wages of the workers and staff increase when there are no IDPs and one can then hardly find labourers as well. The factories' authorities usually train professional workers or bring them from other countries which cost them too much”, according to the Vice President of the Carpentry and Lithography Factory. According to him, there are opportunities for skills learning and capacity building for youth that can be capitalised on. Beyond the work opportunities, he believes that the private sector in Helmand can also support with “cash, foodstuffs, home appliances and dishes”, indicating the willingness to be part of the support to IDPs as well as returning migrants.

In order to do this, however, they call for more government support to the private sector in Helmand. The private sector representatives interviewed also warned against the risks posed – socially and economically – by a large unemployed and displaced youth labour force. “Unemployment and idleness have directly affected the security and economic situation in the area. If the youth are recruited into public and private sectors, we may witness a significant positive change in security conditions in the area as well.” For the Vice President of this company, the joint role of the Government and the private sector is central to addressing some of the root causes of displacement in the area.

¹⁷⁸ KII with Head of Government Cotton Factory. Helmand, November 2019

CASE STUDY

“I am 40 years old and I have spent my whole life in war” says Hassina*. Years spent migrating back and forth have left her weary and tired of war that never seems to end: “The main reason for our migration has always been war and fighting. When I was a little girl and living with my father, we had to move all the time due to fighting that was going on with the Soviet Union. I have seen my houses destroyed so many times. It is the same every time we move out due to war, and when we come back everything is destroyed. As far as I can remember my life has been the same, displacing out and returning to our demolished houses, and start making a life again.”

In the past decade Hassina has been witness to her children be injured due to bombing and their roof collapsing, has seen her husband and her nephew killed in war. Her only happy memory is seeing her oldest son get married in 2019: “This is the only happy memory in my life” she clarifies.

In spite of these tragedies, Hassina has tried to support her community and the education of children, donating part of her house to the government to become a school. However, although the school hosted a teacher for a while, it now stands empty. “We have raised our voices to the government so many times,” Hassina says, “but our voices have been ignored. If the government can’t hear our voices, who would?”

* Name has been changed

RETURNING TO A CHANGING CONTEXT IN USHKAN

Badakhshan case study

Surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the small and largely agricultural village of Ushkan, on the border of Baharak and Warduj districts of Badakhshan, was governed by the Taliban from 2014 until 2019, when government forces reclaimed the town after several months of fighting. During this period, residents of the town witnessed and experienced brutality and hardship, particularly for women. As one female returnee described: “[When the Taliban took over] there wasn’t much damage to the village but they were killing people, cutting off their heads [...] several women were killed during this period for different reasons: one woman in the next village said something about their governance and they killed her too.”¹⁷⁹ The influence of Taliban occupation remains visible, even after the town was retaken: “There were still effects of the Taliban in the town, the looks of the people were as of the Taliban, when we entered the village it was like a prison, youth with long hair as in the style of the Taliban. The small river passing through the village was the only source of noise.”¹⁸⁰

The presence of the Taliban is still a reality for the population of Ushkan. Field researchers noted an uneasy cooperation between Taliban and government forces, highlighting that while road construction in the area is funded by the government, and the town of Ushkan is now under government control, surrounding roads remain largely Taliban controlled.

Straddling the border between Taliban and government held areas has had an impact on Ushkan. Prior to October 2019, when it was retaken, Ushkan was a strategic area of fighting between government and anti-government forces: “the location of our village is such that fire was exchanged over our village, and that forced us to leave.”¹⁸¹ Flooding has also been an issue, as noted during the community consultation: “We have also suffered from flooding, not just war [...] It has been six months since our village was split in two by the floods, and some homes and lands were damaged due to this.”¹⁸² However the overwhelming majority of returnees and community members interviewed stated that being caught up in conflict was the core reason for displacement from Ushkan village. As one IDP returnee described: “we left because there were heavy fights between the Taliban and the government forces, we did not see any other way around, we wanted to survive.”¹⁸³

Even those who were not able to move describe a context where displacement would have been preferable, although it was not always possible, particularly for households located directly in the path of crossfire. As one non-displaced community member described it: “when the war started we couldn’t escape. I went to the underground part of our home along with my mother to be safe from being hit with bullets. We stayed there for 11 days, hungry and thirsty. We obtained some food and water down there with difficulty but otherwise we were hungry and thirsty and we didn’t have any other choice.”¹⁸⁴ Other non-displaced community members highlighted

¹⁷⁹ Household Case Study with Female IDP Household Member

¹⁸⁰ Enumerator Field Observation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸¹ SSI1 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸² Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸³ SSI4 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸⁴ FGD2 with Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Badakhshan, November 2019

similar experiences: “We were trapped in the middle of the war, so I didn’t have any other choice than to hide somewhere.”¹⁸⁵

Families that were able to flee were, for the most part, displaced nearby for a short period of time; generally for one to two months. During this time they relied on family members and social networks to host them. This caused occasional tension, as displaced families stayed with relatives whose livelihoods were limited who faced difficulties supporting themselves: “We had many problems [where we were displaced]. There were twenty of us living in one house in Baharak, and the financial situation of the relatives where we were staying was not good either.”¹⁸⁶ As soon as displaced families received word that the situation in Ushkan was secure, they returned to their homes.

Community selection of research themes

The community consultation in Ushkan highlighted three themes through which to examine the impact of return on the community and future support needed. As this research does not aim to analyse all aspects of return in the community, communities were asked to prioritise the factors most important to their experiences of displacement, return and reintegration. According to community consultation and interviews with community members, the three priorities for the returned Ushkan community are:

- 1) Insecurity in return, particularly with relation to preparedness (or lack thereof), risks on the return journey, and fragile situations upon return
- 2) Material needs since return, including aid related challenges and tensions
- 3) Youth unemployment, and the vulnerabilities and risks that this presents upon return

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP families, and three key informant interviews with community leaders and local officials. A programmatic case study was completed to link the analysis on needs with an analysis on aid and response.

FINDINGS

Risky return journeys to an uncertain context

The need to flee suddenly limited displaced community members’ ability to prepare effectively for both their displacement and their return. One returned woman underlined the bare minimum that IDPs had with them: “When we were leaving we didn’t have time to take clothes or anything else with us. We went only with what we had on us and we returned like this and with this only.”¹⁸⁷

While families fled abruptly, they did not go far (although displacement on foot resulted in journeys that felt long and were tiring). The majority of displaced families ended up elsewhere in Baharak District or in nearby Warduj District, enabling them to gather information on conditions at home from a variety of sources, both formal and informal. “We would always ask the government forces – in their tanks – about the situation back home. They

¹⁸⁵ FGD2 with Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸⁶ SSI4 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸⁷ FGD1 with Female IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

would ask us where we wanted to return, and they would tell us when there was still risk for us,”¹⁸⁸ noted one returnee. Another emphasized the importance of community sources of information, as some undertook on ‘go and see’ visits and reported back: “Some of the villagers went [to the village] by motorcycle and saw the situation, and when they came back they told us that the village [was] in a normal condition.”¹⁸⁹ In one instance, a returnee described being close enough in displacement to observe for himself whether it was safe to return: “I could see from the top of the mountains what was happening in our village – I would watch carefully what was happening. When I saw government forces I came back towards the village.”¹⁹⁰ However detailed information on what they would find upon return, and what life they would be returning to was lacking, and a source of anxiety for respondents. One returnee, echoing a common worry, said: “I was concerned about my home and what had happened to it. About what had happened on my land and whether the area was safe again or not, and whether I could start a normal life again. Whether you believe me or not, I was so concerned that I wasn’t able to eat or drink.”¹⁹¹

One way of mitigating the risks caused by information gaps was to split returns, with some family members returning to the village first, and then going back for the rest. This strategy was possible due to the relative proximity of displacement sites to the village: most returnees noted that in general it was at most a 30-minute drive or a few hours on foot between Ushkan and areas of displacement. By splitting returns families were able to manage the danger of the return journey and, by gaining an accurate idea of what awaited them, to better support the returns of more vulnerable family members. “We left our children at a friend’s house and came back with our wives. A few days later I returned again with our children,”¹⁹² noted a returnee, highlighting the importance of proximity and social networks in areas of displacement in supporting these split returns. Another returnee recounted how sending his older son on ahead had helped them gain information on what they were to face upon return: “I had sent my son to return ahead of us to see how things were. He is the one who told us for instance that there was no more water in our homes, that our walls had been destroyed, that some of our belongings had been taken.”¹⁹³

These split returns allowed some returnee families to be better prepared, at least mentally, for the destruction they would face upon return. However, the journey home itself, although geographically close, remained challenging and dangerous – at least one returnee recounted trying to return home two times before succeeding: “We moved to Pas Bagh [a nearby town] and stayed there for three days. But the combat got heavier there too, so we tried to return back to Ushkan. But we couldn’t return to our house there due to fighting, so we went into hiding for eight days with almost no food. After eight days, we started to be able to move to[nearby] Zardew village, and after a three-day journey on foot suffering from hunger, thirst, and a thousand other difficulties. [...] Then we got informed that the National Army had crossed into our village and we decided to turn back.”¹⁹⁴

Beyond insecurity, IDPs wanting to return also faced risks related to food security and sickness. Moreover, transportation posed a challenge. One returnee reported that transportation was scarce, even for those with financial means: “When we heard that the area had calmed down we could not find a car or donkey to take our children and our women back. The drivers were scared to go that way because there was still war ongoing not far from the main roads. The government should have organized our transportation back so that at least we didn’t

¹⁸⁸ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁸⁹ SSI6 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹⁰ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹¹ FGD 3 with Male IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹² Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹³ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁴ SSI5 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

have to worry about our children in return.”¹⁹⁵ More frequently, returnees did not have the financial resources to arrange transportation and had to return on foot, which was particularly challenging for children and older returnees: “We were suffering from so many difficulties while returning. We had no money to rent a vehicle, no food for eating, so we were obliged to come on foot. My legs and feet suffered from pain as I am of old age and travelling along a four-hour route is very hard for me [...] and the children were bitten by mosquitos and worms and the signs are still visible on their hands and legs.”¹⁹⁶

Material needs and access upon return in the face of approaching winter

Once they managed to return, most IDP families found their homes destroyed and their livestock gone, leaving them effectively with no economic resources. “The Taliban had taken our assets; our livestock was either eaten or taken, there was nothing left in our homes when we returned. If we had received help it would have made a huge difference in our lives. We needed money. We needed clothes to sleep in at night. We were very scared, we left in our slippers, not even our shoes. When we returned our feet still only had slippers. If we could have received some clothes, food, cash... basic aid would have greatly helped. The assistance that would have helped the most never reached us.”¹⁹⁷

Some aid was distributed to returnees in the region while they were displaced, mainly through an international NGO which provided cash and in-kind food items to some displaced families in Baharak. In some cases this aid was a draw, as families reported changing their displacement movements in order to access support, although this was not always successful. As one returnee recalls: “we had gone to Warduj. After six days we went to Baharak District to get on the lists of [the NGO] – but we arrived too late and were not included.”¹⁹⁸

In general, not many families from Ushkan received this support: “Only 37 families benefitted and received support – they gave them 6,000 Afs and 17,000 Afs for each family, and goods such as flour, two boxes of oil, tea and sugar.”¹⁹⁹ Some returnee families expressed frustration at the lack of aid available to them, and the perceived connections needed in order to access aid: “We had no money and no food when we were coming back, and my children were under great threat. No one helped us. The aid came, but they didn’t give us anything. It was only distributed to specific people who had contacts with the aid representatives.”²⁰⁰ Others echoed this frustration, highlighting perceived promises and lack of follow through: “One month has passed since our return but, unfortunately, we haven’t received any support. Some other people in the village did receive support such as money, rice, flour, blankets... A committee came several times and took a list of people, but no news has come of them.”²⁰¹

Beyond security and immediate material needs, access to health infrastructure was key to building a sustainable and dignified life after return. The lack of accessible health services was a major concern for several returnees. “The problem of our village is the lack of a clinic – there is one in Baharak District but that is far from us. [...] When children become sick parents don’t take them to the doctor due to the distance and lack of finances, and they hope the child will get better on his or her own. Women give birth at home. Elderly people can’t be taken to the doctor at all because they cannot walk.”²⁰² Insecurity and displacement have exacerbated health issues and

¹⁹⁵ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹⁶ SSI5 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹⁷ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹⁸ Community Consultation. Badakhshan, November 2019

¹⁹⁹ Household Case Study with Male IDP Household Member. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰⁰ SSI1 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰¹ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰² Household Case Study with Female IDP Household Member. Badakhshan, November 2019

increased the obstacles to accessing treatment: “[This displacement and insecurity] made the women and children suffer many diseases. For instance, children got diarrhoea [due to bad water] and women were unable to walk or run for longer periods of time. The feet of some women were damaged.”²⁰³

The local school Director went on to summarise the urgency of some of these material needs as winter approaches and returnees face freezing temperatures within their damaged homes: “Healthy water is completely disconnected. People are forced to pay money to connect water to the village – but water pipelines are damaged and water is supplied only through wells. [So] the children have become sick, and their parents have had to carry them to the health centre on their backs. And the people did not have money to buy food, so they borrowed money and spent their life savings. Our region is too far from the cities and we are facing a heavy winter. Prices have dramatically increased in the market. We do not have food for ourselves or for our animals. And it is hazardous for us; snow completely covers our village during the winter and makes us unable to go outside.”²⁰⁴

Youth unemployment: long term risks and opportunities

In spite of material difficulties and the need for greater support, IDP returnees generally expressed happiness and gratitude at having been able to return to their homes. “Now we are in our home and happy. We are happy that we didn’t get killed in the war, and I have started a new life along with my family. As we have seen a lot of problems during displacement and return, now we are happy that we are in our own home and we are thankful. We are happy and we visit our relatives and can take care of our own home and assets,”²⁰⁵ described one returnee. Another echoed this: “Now that I am home among my own people, I am happy. We live together in the village; we share happiness and sorrows.”²⁰⁶

In the long term however livelihood possibilities have changed and the destruction that the returnees they come home to makes it difficult to resume their previous lives. “I had a car and was earning my living from that car, but when the war started a rocket hit my home, and my home and car were destroyed. It was really hard for me to see my car like that, it was my only source of income,”²⁰⁷ explained a former driver. Another highlighted the change in livelihood situation before and after displacement: “We had a normal life before displacement. Our income was from agriculture. Our village was secure, and we were living along with our relatives together here. Our children were going to school and were studying. [But] our life totally changed after return, and all our agriculture was damaged and lost, our homes were destroyed and the school was damaged. We were concerned about what to do because our lives were very difficult [...] They should create job opportunities for us so that we can work and support our lives.”²⁰⁸

Unemployment and challenges accessing sustainable livelihood possibilities after return particularly affect young people. “The concern amongst villagers [after the war] is the unemployment of the youths of the village. Most of them do not have anything to do, they are of no help to their families, so most of them are leaving for other countries. We want the government to provide employment opportunities for them so that they will not leave for other countries.”²⁰⁹

²⁰³ KII School Director. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*

²⁰⁵ Household Case Study with Male IDP Household Member. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰⁶ SSI6 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*

²⁰⁸ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

²⁰⁹ SSI3 Male Non-Displaced Community Member. Badakhshan, November 2019

Beyond the fact that unemployment after return can be an impetus to onwards movement, returnees and community members note that unemployment and stagnation put youth at risk of joining more radical groups. One returnee described this dynamic with some concern: “The youth are suffering from limited options in front of them as well. There are no jobs that they can apply for. [And] from the other side the youths get affected by people and they are misguided. The scholars and Mula Imams [religious scholars] are playing a vital role in that, and they will become a problem for themselves and for society.”²¹⁰ In addition to ideological recruitment, in some cases youth join anti-government forces because they have no other option for livelihoods if they want to stay in Afghanistan: “Joblessness is the biggest threat for youth, [because of this] they have to go to Iran or join anti-government groups.”²¹¹

In order to address and mitigate these risks, community members need skills training, adapted to a changing context. While a school is open and education is accessible to community children, more support for work is needed in order to maintain sustainable and dignified reintegration: “Since work is an essential element for human beings the government should provide work opportunities for all of the youth who are jobless. For creating more job opportunities in the community, the government needs to establish some short-term programmes and courses in livestock farming, beekeeping, livestock, tailoring and so on – the opportunities would help the people to have a better return.”²¹²

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

The Taliban’s presence in the area during the last six years has inhibited its development. Although infrastructure investment has since increased, more support is required for local economic development.

Some infrastructure work has begun on the only road connecting the two districts of Baharak and Ishkashim, which passes through the village. The majority of the labourers for this project were drawn from the local community, with an estimated one in five households involved in the road work. Given that 90% of the road is currently under Taliban control, this work has been facilitated by an agreement between the government and the Taliban. The Taliban supervised construction of the road, and have also engaged in other negotiations with the Government, notably on school attendance for boys: “the Taliban themselves are very serious on the issue of road quality, [and they] have allowed a children’s school in an area that is 5km away from here, where they are fully dominant. The salaries of the teachers are paid by the government, but the schools are under the Taliban.”²¹³

Within the village two schools have been built (one for girls and one for boys) allowing close access for Ushkan’s children. A new mosque has also been built and is an indication that the social life of the community is resuming. Electricity is provided as well, with the returnees satisfied with the overall quality and availability. As a result, participants agreed that “our social situation is improving day by day.”²¹⁴

Security and the economic situation remain the principal obstacles to sustainable reintegration, as well as an obstacle for access to the village for external service providers and private sector actors. The main actors able to

²¹⁰ SSI1 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

²¹¹ FGD3 with Male IDPs. Badakhshan, November 2019

²¹² SSI6 Male IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

²¹³ Field Coordinator Fieldwork Observation Journal. Badakhshan, November 2019

²¹⁴ FGD2 Male Non-Displaced, Badakhshan, November 2019

access the village are government and local actors. In the past, the National Solidarity Program had positively contributed to local development through the establishment of a water supply system that is still active today, benefiting local and returnee populations, with about 12 different water points available in the area. More can be done to revive the work of the community development council (CDC) to channel government efforts.

A key priority identified by the community is the need to launch skills and employment programmes for youth which can address local needs. The loss of assets and livelihoods and the inability to provide for basic needs has largely put a stop to economic activity in the area. “We are living in fear and panic of wars and we are scared that our children will join Taliban groups”²¹⁵ a female IDP returnee explained.

The fear of conflict returning, and of youth participating in it, is present in the conversations held for this research. The community prioritised the establishment of working opportunities for youth, whether it be the establishment of farms, aviculture, or sewing and weaving programs for women. As one returnee woman explains, “it would be great and helpful if women were provided with vocational courses and literacy learning courses. [If women] gain tailoring skills they will be able to have a mini income for themselves. [And] it would be nice if women were provided with trainings in cultivation, beekeeping,²¹⁶ and gardening so that they can build these skills and work.” There is a demand for such training and products, and the supply can be supported locally. The fears of youth radicalisation, and of cycles of poverty and vulnerability, need to be addressed through community development councils and the government’s prioritisation of support to strategic areas such as Ushkan.

CASE STUDY

Ahmad*, a schoolteacher in Ushkan, and his family were displaced from the village in 2019 due to fighting between government and anti-government forces. After receiving information from friends that the area was safe for return, Ahmad, his wife, and their children made the decision to return. The journey of return however was difficult and weary, as vehicles and resources were scarce. Ahmad described some of the hardships faced while on the return journey home: “[During our return trip] I was worried about my home and what had happened to it. We took a piece of bread and two bottles of water with us, [but] women were getting tired during the return journey. We stopped by Atum Beik village where the women and children drank some tea. Then we started our trip again on foot. We walked for about 2 hours.

The only [available] cars were army and police cars. Taxis were afraid of that the war would restart, there was a risk of landmines, [so] the drivers were afraid. We had money for car rental but drivers weren’t going to our village and were afraid. So, we along with our wives and children came on foot. When we came to our village the first thing we did was to search for food. I bought flour from a shop in exchange for cash and bought beans, rice and potatoes and took them with me to my home.

We started our life again after return. Homes were all destroyed, agriculture lands were damaged and there wasn’t any drinking water. Windows glasses were broken. All of our home assets such as blankets on the ground in the yard. We started to visit with our relatives. On the first days, neighbours were bringing cooked food for us. We are living our normal life now, and impacts of war are still there. We were only able to return home, but our home and walls are still all destroyed and damaged.”

* Name has been changed

²¹⁵ SSI5 Female IDP. Badakhshan, November 2019

²¹⁶ *Ibid*

SE DARAK: A SPLIT COMMUNITY IN NEED OF AREA-BASED REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

Kunduz case study

Se Darak is a community that continues to struggle under the weight of conflict. Located just west of the provincial capital of Kunduz, the village is split into two areas: Se Darak Sector #1 and Se Darak Sector #2. Research mainly took place in Sector #1, which remains a strategic fighting point on the edge of the Char Dara District and as such is on the frontlines of conflict between Taliban and government forces. “The Taliban start their war from this village because the Char Dara District is their retreat point. The mountains and deserts of the Char Dara District are the central point of the Taliban,”²¹⁷ explained one returned community member.

This has resulted in recurring conflict since 2015. “Our village, Se Darak, is a strategic place for the enemy,” described another returnee, “it is a key point. War has happened in this village three times. The first time they started war from within the village itself, and Kunduz fell and the Taliban took over. The second time war started during the parliamentary elections. And the third time [September] they started the war on Afghan National Army headquarters, and the situation was very bad, so people left the village.”²¹⁸

Frequent and multiple displacements have left their mark on the village’s inhabitants over the years. While displacement is often for a relatively short amount of time – a few months – families are displaced widely and to multiple locations, depending on the severity of violence and resources available. One woman described this pattern: “I went to Kabul, but only during the heavy wars. [Otherwise] I went to Ali Abad three times, I went to Mazar once. And I went to Char Dara four times.”²¹⁹ Families found themselves displaced in a variety of locations near and far, including to Kabul and Samangan. Life in displacement was isolating for most IDPs. In some cases, displaced families stayed with relatives in other provinces, where their welcome was short lived. “The Taliban had a plan to take over the airport, so then we had to move to Kabul. We stayed there in my sister’s house, but after three days her husband started to fight with us, he didn’t want us in his home. [So] my other sister lent us money and we had to return to Kunduz after two days.”²²⁰ Other families highlighted similar challenges. In cases where displaced families were unable to be hosted by relatives, difficult material living conditions in displacement – including inability to pay rent and lack of access to education – resulted in returns as soon as these were deemed feasible; IDPs often cited feeling ‘forced’ to return because they had no other option.

Many were forced to return out of the lack of other options – rather than the possibility of a safe return. The lack of choice also affected those who could not afford to move. Not everyone has the resources to move in the first place, even in the face of danger. While in the minority, some remained in the village throughout fighting. Those who stay behind in Se Darak are those who could not afford to move and were among the most vulnerable, including elderly and disabled community members. One woman described the obstacles that displacement

²¹⁷ SSI1 Male IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²¹⁸ FGD3 with Non-Displaced Male Community Members. Kunduz, November 2019

²¹⁹ SSI4 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²²⁰ SSI4 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

would have presented to explain why she could not move: “My husband was shot with a bullet in his kidney during the combat seven years ago. We had no money and therefore we could not afford to move, and my husband is ill. During the combat our house was hit with a rocket and a tank burned beside our house. But we could not go anywhere due to lack of money.”²²¹ In some cases, families found themselves caught in crossfire and physically unable to leave their homes. For those who stayed behind, the impact of displacement was a difficult one to face. Shops were shut down, accessing food was a challenge, they were isolated: “When our neighbours weren’t around the whole place seemed like a cemetery. All the shops in the village were burned, people couldn’t leave their homes. [This] greatly impacted our spirit and the economy.”²²²

Community selection of research themes

Displaced families began to return once they received news that the situation had quieted in Se Darak. Community consultations and subsequent interviews with returnees and non-displaced community members revealed key priority issues for return and (potential) reintegration. The aim of this research is not to analyse all aspects of returns, but to hone in on priorities and key community needs. Three key themes that emerged during community consultations and discussions were:

- 1) The psychological and social impact of displacement and continuing insecurity upon return
- 2) The role of government in supporting material needs
- 3) Livelihood and education needs and possibilities, including links with private sector

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP families, and three key informant interviews with government, private sector, and community actors. A programmatic case study was completed to compliment the needs analysis. Together, these findings seek to support opportunities for programming that takes into account the realities of the context and best supports IDPs in their displacement and return.

FINDINGS

Returning to nothing: the pressures and exhaustion of returning to an insecure context

Displaced families received periodic information through phone calls from those who had stayed behind, as well as from drivers who were moving back and forth between Se Darak and larger cities. As violence seemed to diminish, families received news that it was safe to return: “In displacement there was no work for us to do. So as soon as we heard it was calm, we returned to our homes so that we could begin working again,”²²³ noted one IDP. The journey home itself presented risks and difficulties, including economic challenges in securing transportation to return and security risks on the road. “We were coming back from Kabul and of course there were risks on the

²²¹ SSI2 Female Non-Displaced. Kunduz, November 2019

²²² FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Kunduz, November 2019

²²³ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

way,” described one IDP returnee, “War was going on still. And the weather was also very cold and the children were getting sick.”²²⁴

Beyond vague assurances that the security situation had calmed, IDPs lacked crucial and specific information on the state of their village and its capacity to absorb returns. As one returnee highlighted: “We didn’t know that there was no drinking water, they had destroyed the wells. [Or] that the electrical lines had been cut, and [that] the road back was extremely dangerous.”²²⁵

This lack of information led to a shock for many as they returned to a village that was destroyed. One man described what he saw when he first returned: “[When we returned] it was clear that the conflict had left its mark on the community. There was no food left. Shops had closed. There was no electricity. There was no bakery anymore. Everyone was busy picking up their own lives, everyone was in shock.”²²⁶ An IDP returnee woman described this shock upon returning to a destroyed house, which was no longer a home: “When we returned our home was destroyed, glasses were broken, our home was hit with bullets, we didn’t have water to drink and food to eat [...] Trees were broken, and we were afraid that some landmine would explode, electricity wires were cut and we were afraid that someone would get an electric shock [...]. It was very frightening and looked like it had been 100 years since anyone had lived here. The structure of our home was totally changed and we were not able to identify our own home.”²²⁷

The shock of what they found upon return, combined with the risks and challenges encountered during the journey and the long term pressure caused by multiple displacements have resulted in overwhelming feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and stress for many community members, both IDP returnees and those who were not able to move. “After return I saw that my house had burned down and nothing was left for us. [...] I became very upset; we are still very upset and tired. We were all shocked, how painful it is that you escape to another place because of the fear of being killed, and you leave your house, and when you return back your house has changed so much you are not even able to identify it.”²²⁸ These feelings were echoed by other community members interviewed: “I was shocked when I returned and saw my house, saw where I used to work [...] I am really tired,”²²⁹ shared a returnee. “I have a mental problem because of all of these wars, tensions, and life problems,”²³⁰ reported another.

Those who were not displaced also feel the weight of this exhaustion, in addition to concern about the cost of displacement on the social fabric of the village: “If people are displaced from this community again it will be exhausting for us, and no one would be able to stay in the village, stability would be destroyed. God knows about the future. But my outlook is that the situation will get worse. We have a dark future coming to us if we don’t make any changes,”²³¹ predicted one community member who had not been displaced in the most recent conflict.

While the current situation is calm and normal social life has resumed, community members remain on edge. “We are scared that the war will start again, we are not even sleeping well at night. Now we hear the sound of firing during the night, and we hear aircrafts, [and] we think the Taliban will come again and the black days will start again. And this time we will not have the ability to move physically because we are so tired, and also because of economic reasons,”²³² described a returnee woman. Experience has confirmed the validity of this worry in the

²²⁴ FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

²²⁵ *Ibid*

²²⁶ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²²⁷ SSI5 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²²⁸ Household Case Study with Female Household Member. Kunduz, November 2019

²²⁹ SSI6 Male IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁰ SSI4 Female IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²³¹ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced. Kunduz, November 2019

²³² Household Case Study with Female Household Member. Kunduz, November 2019

past due to the cyclical nature of conflict in the area: “I was very worried before returning [...] about whether our village would ever be secure again, and whether my children would be able to go to school safely. These were the concerns coming to my mind and worrying me because once before I was trapped by war in Kunduz. Last time, when I returned to the area, on the first night of my return war started again and I had to escape again.”²³³ In community consultations, participants highlighted the fragility of the ‘calm’ in Se Darak: “We know the Taliban can turn the calm around in just 30 minutes. Near the main road, the enemy is still there. But the government too. They can just send one rocket and it all starts again. If the government doesn’t provide longer term support [beyond just removing the Taliban], our lives will never be back to normal. We will be displaced again.”²³⁴

Material needs and support: the role of government, expectations and realities

Community members count on the government, and expectations of support are high. “The government is the sole body responsible for ensuring security ...It is the sole responsibility of the government to provide houses to the IDPs, because their houses got destroyed as a result of insurgent attacks,”²³⁵ noted an education official, and others highlighted the role expected of the government in supporting access to food, clothing, and other material needs: “The government should help us. During the conflict, all the shops closed. There was no food provision, where can we get our food now? It was difficult when we returned to even buy food for our families. You would buy bread for Afs 50.”^{236 237} Community consultations revealed that food security and education needs were amongst the most pressing material issues for the government to address upon return.” It would have been useful if they had supported us with cash and food items such as flour, rice, oil, and beans, because we didn’t have money for renting a car and we had no food at home [when we returned],”²³⁸ highlighted one IDP woman, echoing a common sentiment.

Most IDP returnees also see government’s responsibility for security and supporting access to livelihoods as interconnected issues. “If the government doesn’t provide longer term support, beyond just removing the Taliban [when they take over], our lives will never be back to normal [...] But if there is security, then we know we will have opportunities to work and improve our finances, to work in agriculture and so on,”²³⁹ highlighted community consultation participants. Subsequent interviews confirm this perception: “If security is established, all families including my family will live in peace [...] and God willing we will find a job. [But] when there is no security we cannot do anything,”²⁴⁰ highlighted another returnee.

In practice however, virtually all IDPs interviewed for this study noted that they had not received any form of material or financial support, whether from government or other organisations, during this round of displacement. A few acknowledged having received some support during first phases of displacement in 2015. “No actor is providing support to this community. Only when the village fell the first time we received 2000 Afs from the government, but since then no other organization or authority has supported us. We went and talked with the government a few times when we needed help, but they did not help or support us,”²⁴¹ one non-displaced community member reported, citing a frustration common to both IDP returnees and those who were

²³³ FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁴ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁵ KII School Principal. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁶ The cost of bread in Kabul in December 2019 is, on average 10 Afs; 50 Afs for bread is very expensive, at least five times the normal cost

²³⁷ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁸ FGD1 Female IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

²³⁹ *Ibid*

²⁴⁰ SSI1 Male IDP

²⁴¹ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Member. Kunduz, November 2019

not able to move. “We didn’t receive any support for return [...] not from government or any organization,”²⁴² reiterated an IDP recently returned.

There is a disconnect between existing programming and the actual support received by IDP returnees and their communities. Interviews with the head of the village address this partially, highlighting that while Se Darak is split into two sectors, Se Darak Sector #1 – where fieldwork for this study took place and which has been most affected by conflict related displacement – has not been a recipient of most recent aid or support, and has previously received limited amounts aid and programming, whereas Se Darak #2 has been a recipient of support. “The people of Se Darak #1 sector were the main victims of the recent wars which occurred in 2019, but no support has been provided to them [thus far].”²⁴³ Interviews suggest that this is due to the fact that the village has largely been under Taliban control with community members noting that the government has in the past accused the village of providing safe haven to Taliban members. They believe that access to government support was influenced by politics and conflict dynamics: “When we referred to the government for help, they just told us that ‘since your area is in the blacklist we cannot help you.’”²⁴⁴ Attempts to call police hotlines for help have been similarly ignored: “We have even called the number 119²⁴⁵ to ask for help, but the response was ‘your area is a Taliban area. We cannot help you.’”²⁴⁶

Livelihood and education needs and possibilities

Unemployment is a priority issue and challenge for youth returnees in particular, who are at risk in several ways. “Youth are jobless and unemployment may lead them to join the Taliban,”²⁴⁷ worried one IDP woman. Another IDP said that “when youth are jobless [upon return], their mental situation may not be good, and so they may begin to do illegal things.”²⁴⁸ Others interviewed echoed similar concerns emphasising the links between returnee youth unemployment and insecurity.

In order to combat this dynamic, IDP returnees see education as key to breaking out of cycles of unemployment, insecurity, and displacement. “Our youth are at risk of being recruited by the Taliban. They don’t have any prospect for work here as our school stops before secondary school, and we need more teachers in this area if we want our children to continue their education. This would help raise the levels of skills among our youth, so that they do not go towards the Taliban for work!”²⁴⁹ explained one IDP returnee. A returnee woman further emphasized the importance of this: “Now we need peace that my children would be able to continue their education and reach their aspirations in order to have a better life. I don’t want my children to experience the life that I had. When I was in school I displaced many times because of war and when I returned I hoped and expected to go to school again but it did not happen and finally I couldn’t finish school because of those migrations.”²⁵⁰

At the primary school level, access to education was an impetus to return for displaced families with younger children: “We decided to return because I did not want my brother to miss their studies and school,”²⁵¹ noted one

²⁴² SSI2 Male IDP. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴³ KII Head of Se Darak Village. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴⁴ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴⁵ 119 is a commonly known and well-advertised police hotline number used at a national level

²⁴⁶ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴⁷ FGD1 Female IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴⁸ FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁴⁹ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁵⁰ Household Case Study with Female Household Member. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁵¹ FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

man, and another returnee highlighted that “we decided to return so that my children could go to school.”²⁵² While Afghanistan’s national IDP policy explicitly recognises the right to education for all IDP children,²⁵³ many returnees interviewed for this study similarly reported that having their younger children attend school was one positive aspect of their return, and the interruption of studies as a particularly negative aspect of displacement.

However, while Se Darak has a primary school, secondary education in the sector remains difficult to access, and even at the primary school level challenges persist. The primary school principal highlighted both the positives for IDP children and some of the particular obstacles to education they face upon return: “When the IDPs returned, we [...] admitted their children in the same classes as when they had left. We have no issue with IDP children and they are really happy with us. [But] the salary of our teachers is 6,000 Afs which is not sufficient for filling their life’s needs, and organizations should provide teachers with seminars and capacity building programmes to enhance their method of teaching; this could also be a kind of support for IDP children. Our school curriculum and books are not enough [...] one book costs 50 Afs which is not affordable for most of the children. This is the most critical problem for IDP children’s [education].”²⁵⁴

Private sector actors contributing to the support of IDP livelihoods recognise the importance of education: “Our society needs to realise the importance of education as the current war will not end unless we realise this,”²⁵⁵ noted the Director of a rice processing factory. Beyond emphasizing education, this rice processing factory has in fact been one of the few sources of livelihood support for some IDPs in the area, hiring them and providing loans. “We are in contact with certain IDPs and some of them are working in our firm. We have a cash grant programme for them, and we can support their transportation fee when they return. [...] Our company is a production factory company, so we can support IDPs through financial assistance and meeting basic food requirements, [but] we cannot help them in education because we are not a service company.”²⁵⁶

Women’s livelihoods and ability to work emerges in conversation with both this private sector actor and community members; displacement and war has negatively affected the ability of women to work. “Before the war women had a good life – they took care of livestock, of the dairy production for the rest of the village, they could earn money themselves and spend it on the household’s basic needs. After the war, all of our livestock was killed, [women] can only take care of the children now. [So] now the pressure is that there is just one income earner, so the pressures on us men have increased. Women need to be able to work here – to grow vegetables and tailor clothing for example. But not all men will authorise this, because the Taliban are still close to the area. They tell us that women are not supposed to leave their homes, they threaten to kill our women.”²⁵⁷

The director of the rice processing factory highlighted a need for women’s livelihoods fit to the context. It would not make sense to hire women in the rice processing factory, he noted, but “both the women and youth should be provided with opportunities such as having livestock whose products, such as milk, cheese, yogurt, they can sell easily.”²⁵⁸ And re-emphasizing the importance of education for future stability, he highlighted that “educational opportunities should be provided for our youth, as most of the youth IDPs are illiterate because the ongoing war has affected them. Imagine a situation in which a child does not attend school and is raised in the traditional way

²⁵² *Ibid*

²⁵³ See National Policy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Internal Displacement, Section 7.1.8 “The Right to Education”

²⁵⁴ KII School Principal. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁵⁵ KII Director of Rice Processing Factory. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*

²⁵⁷ Community Consultation. Kunduz, November 2019

²⁵⁸ KII Director of Rice Processing Factory. Kunduz, November 2019

in our society? How will his or her future look like? Educational opportunities need to be provided by organizations.”²⁵⁹

Building stronger access to secondary education for both girls and boys, and to appropriate livelihoods opportunities for both women and men is crucial to building sustainable reintegration; however, while some linkages can be made now, as long as security remains fragile, establishing programming that is effective in the long term will remain challenging.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

The population's expectations of Government support in Se Darak is the result of prior patterns of government involvement in the area. Understanding the history of government involvement can help pave the way forward for improvements that are needed in area-based interventions and their links to reintegration. The head of the Community Development Council (CDC) in Se Darak explained the history of external involvement in the village.

In 2015, when most of the village was first displaced and the village was conquered by the Taliban, the displaced moved to Takhar Province where they received cash assistance representing 12,000 Afghanis per family. This constituted a life saving measure for 60 displaced families who were able to acquire foodstuffs, and sustain themselves until their return. In displacement, they were given other support by humanitarian organisations.

Upon return, the government provided structural support to the area, asphaltting the local streets with funds from the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). In 2017, the Citizen Charter set up the new council to govern every 400 houses of the area. The newly built Kunduz-Baghlan highway crossed through the village of Se Darak, splitting it into two communities – the two sectors of Se Darak #1 and Se Darak #2. As compensation, the government promised the CDC a cheque of 11,300 Afghanis per family to “cover all 600 families of Se Darak sector #2, [however] only 37 families were paid this amount in Se Darak Sector #1.”²⁶⁰

Since then the Citizen Charter has continued its work in Se Darak, especially in Sector #2 – notably by hiring labourers from the village to work on retaining walls, and other local construction needs. This created a sense of collaboration with the Government. In 2019, after another displacement episode, families in Se Darak Sector #1 received donations of wheat bags from the Directorate of Agriculture in response to the drought; while those living in Se Darak Sector #2 received infrastructure support in the form of paved roads by UNHABITAT.

But the external involvement had created two new communities – sectors #1 and #2 – and the difference in support provided to each community has, with time, created tensions. For instance, the streets in Se Darak #1 remain unpaved, in contrast to Se Darak #2. Similarly, while the upper village of sector #2 has had wells constructed by the Government, sector #1 considered its 3 or 4 water wells to be insufficient. Complaints arose over the fact that the public water wells in Se Darak Sector #2 had decreased ground water levels by four to five meters, thereby affecting the lower village's access to water.

In 2018, an NGO came to the area – through the Citizen's Charter in Se Darak – for food distribution. When beneficiary selection had to be made, the population was classified into three categories: medium poor, poor, and the poorest. Those in the “poorest” category received a bag of wheat, a bag of flour, a can of oil, and a bag of rice. Community leaders recalled “trying our best to prioritise the poorest families in the provision of donations. But

²⁵⁹ KII Director of Rice Processing Factory, Kunduz, November 2019

²⁶⁰ SSI male community member, Kunduz, November 2019

there are no differences between the local residents and IDPs in the area; all the families left during the wars and returned back to the village.²⁶¹ They consider them all to be in need of support and the constant segregation, of the community – geographically or on the basis of needs – has not helped ease tensions or improve wellbeing. The community would prefer a common, area-based approach across both village sectors.

The villagers believe that they are being discriminated against as they are perceived to be close to the Taliban. “Most of the attacks against the Government are carried out from our village; therefore, we are defamed and accused of cooperation with the Taliban. It is untrue. We are just located between Char Dara, where 80% is under control of Taliban, and Kunduz City. The insurgents hide behind our village. Our village is a red line of the war”.²⁶²

CASE STUDY

Malalai*, a forty year old mother from Se Darak who has experienced multiple displacement, has always seen education as a hope and a joy both for herself and her children: “When I went to school it was the best and sweetest moment for me, I was very interested in education. And my family was very happy because I was going to school, especially my father, he was always saying ‘My daughter is going to school.’”

Growing up in a family that respected and valued education, Malalai’s schooling was nonetheless interrupted as war broke out. Displaced multiple times throughout her adolescence, Malalai’s education was interrupted so often that it became difficult for her to re-enter school, and at 15 she was married, to keep her safe: “I got married because there was no other choice for me because commanders were asking for my hand to get married. My father was worried about it, so finally he decided that I should get married to a good boy. I was very satisfied with this decision. I was very happy after marriage and I loved my life.” One year after being married, Malalai had her first child and faced displacement due to conflict again.

Some of the best parts of her return were related to her children’s education: “After the Dostum war, the city became calm and we returned [...] I was very happy because my children enrolled in school and they commenced studying and I really enjoyed those moments.” Encouraging her children to continue with their studies in spite of continued and growing insecurity, Malalai defines the graduation of her daughter from university as one of her happiest moments: “My daughter graduated from university and I became very happy. For a mother, there is nothing more precious than her children’s success, and this is a privilege for me that at least my children reached their goals in spite of the bad conditions we were in.”

Malalai continues to worry about her younger son’s opportunities as insecurity has increased and she is reminded of her own interrupted education: “I passed my life in war and now I don’t want my children to experience that, because I couldn’t continue my education. All children stay back from their studies, which has a negative impact on their lives. Instead of studying they find a way to escape and migrate, and what will happen to their future? Even one day missing school is not good for students, but [here] it happens that schools are closed for days and months in a year. Is this fair? How long will people be required to live in this situation?”

* Name has been changed

²⁶¹ *Ibid*

²⁶² FGD2 Male IDPs. Kunduz, November 2019

MIXED PERCEPTIONS OF DISPLACEMENT IN CHAHARSANG

Samangan Case Study

Samangan province is mountainous, prone to harsh winters and climate challenges. These have been heightened in recent years as changing climate conditions have led to more severe and less predictable instances of both flooding and drought. One NGO worker in Samangan highlighted the region's increasing environmental vulnerability: "There has been a change in the climate in Samangan, and the possibility for floods is now very high. Natural disasters are increasing day by day, which impacts displacement — Samangan Province is one of the most vulnerable places when it comes to natural disasters."²⁶³

The village of Chaharsang, a small agricultural community in the Khurm u Sarbag district of the province, has experienced these natural disasters first hand: "the majority of the people left the area due to some natural disasters, as most of the people were busy in cultivation,"²⁶⁴ underlined one community member. An IDP-returnee further explains: "The reason for our displacement was drought; we had a little land and also worked on other people's lands. When the drought happened there were no work opportunities, and so we were compelled to move."²⁶⁵

However, while drought and flooding have been primary reasons for displacement, insecurity in the area has also exacerbated these challenges and contributed further to displacement: "The people of our village were displaced due to drought, flooding, and also insecurity,"²⁶⁶ clarified a returned IDP. Insecurity, especially fighting between government and opposition groups, combined with natural disaster "hit our village and destroyed everything."²⁶⁷

Security remains a concern in the village, both for those who stayed and those who have returned: "The security situation is worse than in the past. Before, we would freely go to the mountains and collect wood for burning, but now we can't."²⁶⁸ A returnee woman further emphasised the security concerns she has faced since her return: "The only risks and threats are from the Taliban who impose their ideas on our village. We are really afraid of the Taliban, especially when men go into the city they cannot come back until night time because the Taliban are detaining people on the way and asking them for money and goods."²⁶⁹ Two community elders were killed by Taliban while on their way to Kabul. "By these actions they want our village to have no leader, that way they can easily control our village,"²⁷⁰ explained a community member.

For many, however, the challenges of urban living in displacement outweighed the security risks associated with staying in their own village. Many displaced families from Chaharsang remained within Samangan Province — many in Samangan city, the provincial capital — and while they had high hopes of improved lives once they moved, they found life in displacement to be challenging. "We were living displaced in Samangan city for two

²⁶³ KII Afghan Aid. Samangan, November 2019

²⁶⁴ FGD 3 with Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Samangan, November 2019

²⁶⁵ SSI4 Male IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁶⁶ SSI4 Male IDP. Samangan November 2019

²⁶⁷ SSI2 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁶⁸ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Samangan, November 2019

²⁶⁹ SSI2 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷⁰ SSI5 Female Non-Displaced Community Member. Samangan, November 2019

years, and I was a daily labourer. [But] in Samangan city we had to pay for everything, even for fuel. We couldn't pay these costs, and so we returned,"²⁷¹ explained one IDP. While many families were displaced for several years, in the end the high cost of living, especially of renting accommodation, spurred an eventual decision to return: "My children are small and they do not work. We couldn't afford to pay house rent [while in displacement]. Most of my children are girls, and since all of my boys are too young my husband was the only one working. We were buying everything, and our expenses were so high. Here in our village, water is free, fuel is free as we collect leaves [for burning]. I can cook bread here and feed my children."²⁷²

In general, in spite of ongoing security concerns, IDP returnees are satisfied with their decision to return: "This is a good village, and we are near to our gardens and plants. We have access to a school, mosques and clean water. We are all from one tribe, there are no arguments and problems amongst us, and we live happily."²⁷³ Families with children especially have found it to be a calmer and more affordable place in which to raise children: "The condition for children is good here. As there are so many things in the city to buy, when the children were out [in they city] they would ask me to buy fruit or desserts. But here there are fewer possibilities for this and distractions for the children, and we are calm as they are not expecting more things from us."²⁷⁴

However, the return and reintegration experience remains challenging in many ways as limited access to services, uneven social cohesion, and the impact of climate change on livelihoods continue to pose protection and reintegration challenges.

Community selection of research themes

This case study will examine these challenges and the return and reintegration experience through three key themes that emerged in community consultations and interviews with returnees and community members in Chaharsang. This research does not aim to analyse all aspects of return in the community, but rather main priorities that the community highlighted as being most important to their experiences of displacement, return and reintegration. The three priorities for the Chaharsang community are:

- 1) Uneven levels of social cohesion between displaced and non-displaced families arising from mixed perceptions of displacement, and the subsequent impact on community support
- 2) Health and education needs, particularly for women
- 3) Livelihood programming and formal support from the government and NGOs.

These themes were explored across three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, two case studies with IDP families, and six key informant interviews with government, international organizations, and local officials. A programmatic case study was completed to link the analysis on needs with an analysis on aid and response.

²⁷¹ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷² FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷³ SSI2 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷⁴ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

FINDINGS

Gaps in social cohesion and community support

Despite the presence and impact of drought, floods and insecurity, not all households in Chaharsang were displaced. Those who stayed did so largely because they did not have the means to move: “We stayed because we could not afford to move to the city; we did not have any house nor source of income there. Whether we faced floods or were killed, we had to face that here in our village, because we had no money. So we stayed here,”²⁷⁵ described one non-displaced community member. Another reiterated this sentiment: “We would have been homeless if we had moved. As it is commonly said, if you remove a stone from its place it will lose its value. So, we didn’t move as we did not want to face more economic difficulties.”²⁷⁶

Those who stayed evince some level of disapproval towards those who were displaced, and some recall trying to convince families not to move: “Those who were intending to move went to the mosque to ask for advice. We were giving them friendly advice, telling them that Allah is merciful, and that they did not have to displace their families. Their displacement was not in the interests of the village, the village was empty of people.”²⁷⁷ Another non-displaced community member expressed a similar sentiment, noting the negative impact of displacement on the community: “We weren’t happy about their displacement as the population decreased. And, for instance, we were paying 100 Afs to daily wage workers before the displacement, but now since the population is smaller we need to pay each worker 300 Afs. We tried our best to convince them not to move, but they felt very obligated to move, and also we could not support them, so eventually they left.”²⁷⁸ A different participant in the same discussion further emphasised this: “Their displacement was not to our benefit, instead their displacement is harmful to our village. Upon their displacement we lost our strength.”²⁷⁹

This frustration translated into a lack of community support towards displaced families when they initially moved, although those who remain reported that this stance changed when families returned: “When they were moving we did not help them at all, we were not happy with their displacement. However when they were returning we helped them and provided whatever they needed.”²⁸⁰ Non-displaced community members actively encouraged displaced families to return, providing information on conditions back home and emphasizing the difficulties families were facing in urban environments: “We were in touch with relatives and our community and they were telling us to come back rather than live with strangers.”²⁸¹

IDPs’ experience upon return differed greatly. Some confirmed that they received a certain level of community support, with neighbours providing meals to the newly returned and welcoming them warmly: “The people were behaving very well with us [when we returned], they were really happy. Some people supported us in the provision of fuel for burning, plants for growing, and home appliances. They also served us a meal and our neighbours were really pleasant.”²⁸² This approach was advocated by the community leaders. The wife of one such leader who had remained in the village highlighted the importance of welcoming returnees in a positive manner: “When they returned we provided them with some support, such as fuel and food. Before their return, we

²⁷⁵ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷⁶ SSI5 Female Non- Displaced Community Member. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷⁷ FGD3 Male Non-Displaced Community Members. Samangan, November 2019

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*

²⁸¹ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²⁸² SSI3 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

gathered everyone and instructed the villagers to behave well with the returnees, because they are all our own tribesmen. When they return, they should feel that it's their own house. They should not feel any strangeness."²⁸³

Despite this injunction from the community leaders, some returnees noted less welcoming behaviour on the part of certain community members: "Most of the local people have had good behaviour with IDPs, but there are some people that make fun of us, and saying "Oh you moved to the city, why did you come back?"²⁸⁴ Another returnee highlighted further incidents: "We are treated badly after our return. They call us coward and say that we were displaced because we were scared but then we returned back to them."²⁸⁵

Other IDPs reported very limited or non-existent community support upon return: "We didn't receive support from our community [when we returned]; these people don't help each other,"²⁸⁶ Another returnee in the same discussion further described the lack of support she received upon return from the community and her family: "We were in touch with my aunt who had returned before us, but they did not prepare [for our return]. Our community didn't help us. We were sleeping hungry some nights. They could have helped us with a bowl of yogurt or milk but they didn't."²⁸⁷

It seems, therefore, that community support for returnees was uneven. Interviews with international organisations go some way towards understanding the challenges communities face in supporting returnees: "People who are living in the villages are poor and vulnerable. They cannot support someone else's life, it's enough that they could run their own. So, we don't have any example [of community support] at the moment. Honestly, it is impossible in Samangan Province, because people are living in extreme poverty."²⁸⁸ Therefore, while community leaders emphasised the need for a positive welcome, negative feelings about displacement combined with a lack of material capacity to provide effective support limit both social cohesion and community effectiveness in support return and reintegration.

Challenges for women upon return: health and education

The community consultation highlighted health and education as the priority issues for long-term integration: "The main problems for returnees and community members are with health and education services — because the school and clinic are far away and our village is an hour away from these facilities."²⁸⁹

Education in particular is a clear priority for displaced families with school age children, and provided an impetus to return, in spite of the fact that school facilities for Chaharsang students remain difficult to access: "Our only concern in displacement was that our children could not go to school in the city. Here we are not worried about our children's education because our children can have education in this village. Now I am happy that my daughter and my son are going to school."²⁹⁰ However, while difficult access to education is seen as better than no access to education, returnees continue to highlight challenges: "The school is far away, it is around a 2-hour trip to get to the school and hospital. Our biggest need is for a closer school, and experienced teachers, especially for mathematics and English."²⁹¹

²⁸³ SSI5 Female Non- Displaced Community Member. Samangan, November 2019

²⁸⁴ SSI4 Male IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁸⁵ SSI6 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸⁸ KII ACTED. Samangan, November 2019

²⁸⁹ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹⁰ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹¹ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

The distances children must travel to get to school have a particularly negative impact on returnee girls' access to education: "If we had a car or a bus to take our children from the village and drop them off at school it would be very good, because the long distance between the school and the village is disappointing to us, and we will not allow our daughters to go to school in the coming years."²⁹² A returnee woman further emphasized the negative impact of displacement on her daughters' ability to access education: "My girls dropped out of school when we left [...] But I cannot allow my girls to go to school again, because the way is too far."²⁹³ Other returnees also highlighted ways to address this issue and ensure that girls could access education in a safe manner, reiterating the need for effective transportation or access: "We suggest that our daughters should be provided with a bus to take them from the village and drop them off at school. If this is not possible we need a school in the village so that we can allow our daughters to go to school in a nearby location."²⁹⁴

Community acceptance of girls' education remains divided, and in the past girls' schools in the village have been attacked, exacerbating the challenges for returnee girls: "One of the reasons girls are not allowed to attend the school is that three years ago there was an incident. Some unknown people sprayed a chemical in the water at the school and all of the girls fainted and got sick. After this incident, most of the fathers have not been allowing their daughters to go to school. The condition of one girl is still not normal since this incident."²⁹⁵

Instead of sending their girls to school, early marriage is a common coping mechanism, one to which returnee girls are particularly vulnerable upon return: "Fathers are imposing compulsory marriage on their daughters. If the girls reject this, all the villagers speak about her and say that she is immoral."²⁹⁶ The lack of access to healthcare, and the incidence of early marriage have an impact on the girls and women of the community: "due to the clinic being far away, women have lost their lives during childbirth."²⁹⁷ A returnee youth further highlighted women's health needs, noting their particular vulnerability: "The main problem for women is the lack of access to a gynaecologist or a midwife. The qualified women live very far from our area, and if the community women have an obstetrics problem it is very difficult to take them there. Some women have lost their lives. For instance, one of my aunts and her baby passed away two years ago."²⁹⁸

One IDP returnee woman summarised problems faced by women upon return to Chaharsang, and their capacity to better support their families in return if given the opportunity: "Women need to be given their inheritances. The families [of this town] have been listening and giving some attention to the ideas of women since the Citizen's Charter program began to work in the village. However, there are still underage and compulsory marriages in the village. As an example, one man in our village lost his daughter in a bet while gambling, but the rest of the family did not let the father give his daughter as repayment. Instead they married the girl and gave the dowry that they received from her marriage to pay off the gambling debt...We just want to be able to have some sort of job and support our families when we return."²⁹⁹ Women therefore find themselves to be the bargaining chips in addressing or improving their families' financial circumstances, most often through marriage decisions beyond their control. If given the chance to earn money, through culturally appropriate livelihoods means, women expressed hope that they would be able to support their families more productively, although community reactions to women working remain mixed.

²⁹² Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹³ FGD2 with Female IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹⁴ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹⁵ SSI6 Female Non-Displaced. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*

²⁹⁸ FGD4 with Male IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

²⁹⁹ SSI2 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

Building bridges between livelihoods and child protection needs

Money and livelihoods support were key needs highlighted by non-displaced community members and also by returnees, who struggled to access livelihoods in displacement and make enough money to return. Once they managed to return – often by incurring debts – displaced families went back to their previous jobs in agriculture, facing cultivation challenges that had existed prior to their displacement, such as the seasonal nature of the work: “Before displacement I was working on the land, cultivating, and now that I am returned I am also working on land and agriculture. And in the winter all people are jobless and they are sitting in their houses.”³⁰⁰

While there is a prominent child protection narrative across all of the interviews – education being, for instance, a reason for return to the village – schools are not equipped and as a result, children are found working, alongside their schooling in cases where they attend school, in agriculture and in shepherding activities. One female IDP returnee explains that “Most of the hard work is done by children. They collect old goods, and some are shepherding and doing hard work. The family members are doing well.”³⁰¹ The need to contribute to the family livelihood can be at odds with protection needs – a reality of which the adults well aware. Another woman, this time among the non-displaced in the community, explains that “the children go to the mountains and collect plants and stones – these types of work do not suit their age.”³⁰²

In some cases families had to resort to drastic measures to survive shocks. Villagers recounted two instances of families who had to sell their child. “Some of our villagers sold their child to another family when they migrated to the new village of Samangan. Another family in the village, who were blessed with twins, have since sold one of the newborn babies because the father was disabled and had a very weak economic situation.”³⁰³ Altogether, children in the village are vulnerable during displacement and upon return. This was reiterated during an interview with an international NGO operating in the area, recognising the need to address the nexus between displacement, livelihoods and child protection: “we have seen children on the streets who are displaced and are doing very heavy work like daily labouring, clay works, and etc. We would like instead to create employment opportunities for youths through vocational trainings and distribution of mini grants and working tools for them to invest money, start their work and make an income.”³⁰⁴

Some IDP returnees blame the government for a failure to support their access to work after return, especially after facing challenges and losing family members in displacement: “The government is not paying attention. I lost my son during displacement and we would have had the right to have a house through the president’s office, but no one has paid any attention to this. Our biggest problem here is a lack of working opportunities, because there are no opportunities.”³⁰⁵ However, returnees noted that there were no better job opportunities to be found while they were displaced, and that at least upon return some resources, such as water, are more available to them: “When we were living in Bambar Qambar village [while in displacement] there was no clean water or schools for children. The only concern we have in this village is the lack of work opportunities; however, in Bambar Qambar village there were also no work opportunities.”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁰ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

³⁰¹ SSI2 Female IDP. Samangan, November 2019

³⁰² SSI6 Female Non-Displaced. Samangan, November 2019

³⁰³ SSI2 Female IDP, Samangan, November 2019

³⁰⁴ KII ACTED, Samangan, November 2019

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*

³⁰⁶ FGD1 with Male IDPs. Samangan, November 2019

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Returnees highlight skills gained in displacement and follow up training as opportunities and areas where support could lead to improved livelihood possibilities. One non-displaced community member observed that “the [displaced people’s] return to the village was important, because the village seemed empty without them. The IDPs have learned some vocations when they were displaced, for instance [my neighbour who is a returnee] has become a good metal worker.”³⁰⁷ Other returnees note that they have received some formal support upon return, including vocational courses for women: “We received some support [when we returned] in terms of having chickens, and vocational courses for women such as tailoring and cooking. This has been provided for the most vulnerable people, including the disabled, IDPs, and those who do not have guardians in their families.”³⁰⁸

One project which has offered a temporary level of employment for IDPs is the construction of a bridge in the town. This project, which addressed an infrastructural need within the village (“a main problem for return was the lack of a bridge, stopped people passing from one side of the river to the other”³⁰⁹ in the words of one returnee), was overseen by Citizen’s Charter. The main engineer for the bridge, interviewed during the course of this fieldwork, noted that: “10 to 20 laborers are working on this bridge. They receive a daily wage of 350 Afs, and the workers are from Charsang village [...] The selection of the workers is up to the community leaders. The [returned] IDPs in this community are also daily workers, and it is their right to utilize the benefits of this bridge as a daily worker and the same as the local community members. The community leaders are hiring them like any other community member in the construction of this bridge.”³¹⁰

A returned IDP now working on the bridge highlighted that returned IDPs and vulnerable people were prioritised in identifying labourers for the construction, and that work on the bridge had addressed vulnerabilities that may have led to further displacement: “The people who don’t have lands or are returned IDPs, they have more chances for working on this bridge [...] this year no one went to other provinces for work because they are working in this project. Most of the people in this village are receiving working opportunities from this bridge, some of them are working as daily workers, and remaining are providing needed materials like stone and sand. This is a good project and a permanent help for the people of the village. The construction work of this bridge is temporary and not permanent, but it is good that it allows us to earn money for our daily expenses.”³¹¹

Work of this type fulfils a gap and mitigates to a certain extent the need to take displacement risks related to the impact of natural disaster on cultivation or agricultural production by diversifying livelihoods. Finding similar ways to employ IDPs in times where harvest and cultivation is not possible remains imperative to building sustainable bridges to reintegration. However, although positive initiatives have also included other initiatives centred around pistachio seedlings and plants, most of these interventions, such as bridge construction, are of a temporary nature and do not sustainably address the relationship between displacement, livelihoods and protection issues identified in this village.

³⁰⁷ FGD3 with Male Non-Displaced Community Members

³⁰⁸ Community Consultation. Samangan, November 2019

³⁰⁹ SSI1 Male IDP. Samangan, November 2019

³¹⁰ KII Bridge Engineer. Samangan, November 2019

³¹¹ KII with Bridge Labourer. Samangan, November 2019

CASE STUDY

Faisal*, a father of six, found himself needing to move multiple times while in displacement due to financial and family challenges. As he tells it: “Our home was beside the river. Floods destroyed it and ruined our home and our lands. Then we decided to go to Aybag city – I lived there for almost 3 years. While we were living in the city, we were displaced several times from one house to another because of my six children; landlords would ask us to leave their house due to noise.” During this time Faisal’s wife got sick, and in spite of selling their lands to pay for her treatment she passed away while in displacement.

Raising children alone in this time was a challenge, and Faisal’s oldest child went to work at the age of 10. “I and my children lived in Samangan for two more years without my wife. When we returned to the village, my children were still young and no one was there to cook them food. I also wasn’t able to do this for my children. Another problem was that one of my children was 18 months old, and taking care of him was very difficult. I had to send two of my children to my father-in-law’s house, and they are still living with him now.” After their return, they were displaced again due to flooding: “After this I again left the village and displaced to Aybak city. I lived there for a further two years.”

While Faisal got remarried in this time, the lack of work opportunities and livelihoods options while in displacement were a source of stress, and the family eventually moved to Pakistan in search of work. The family found life in Pakistan expensive and difficult, and eventually returned in 2019 to their home village. Now Faisal is working on the construction of the bridge, and, while the money is limited, he hopes to continue to be able to provide for his family.

*Name has been changed



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The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International, which aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive solutions to displacement in Asia. Drawing upon its members' operational presence in the region, the ADSP engages in constructive dialogue and evidence-based advocacy.