



Afghan refugees in Pakistan – Protracted displacement or protracted settlement?

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ADSP Expert Commentary #1

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Overview

The last 40-plus years have demonstrated the limitations of the traditional ‘three durable solutions’ to displacement for Afghans in Pakistan.¹ Whilst there have been instances of large-scale **return** (notably in 1992 and 2001/2), much of this has been temporary or circulatory; third country **resettlement** is negligible (9,000 people between 2003-2022);² so this leaves local **integration**.

For Afghans in Pakistan, integration is taking place in specific social, cultural, and economic ways, but not politically or legally. Whilst the Pakistan government has provided sanctuary and (varying levels of) support over the last four decades, they have not yet provided legal long-term settlement rights for Afghans, or options for naturalisation.

This expert commentary explores what protracted displacement in Pakistan means for Afghans, as well as the possibility of durable solutions in the short- and medium-term.

The commentary is based on ongoing work for the **Protracted Displacement Economies** project, an international research project that explores **how displacement economies operate** and if there are **ways they can be supported to thrive**, rather than merely survive. We start with a brief overview of how we have framed the Protracted Displacement Economies research, before sharing findings from the first phase of data collection for the project in Pakistan, which indicate some of the livelihood-related challenges faced by displacement-affected communities. We conclude with suggestions for operational and advocacy activities that could support Afghans in Pakistan.



1. From theory to practice

“Most of Pakistan’s longer-term Afghan populations know that formal citizenship is not accessible. Despite this, they still carve out their attachments, responsibilities, and sense of community in the localities and cities in which they live.” **Dr Sanaa Alimia.**

The term **‘protracted displacement’** raises questions; many Afghans in Pakistan were born in Pakistan and may well call it ‘home’ even whilst recognising the limitations they face as non-citizens. Can we call a population ‘displaced’ when they have lived somewhere all their lives? Indeed, in our household survey of Afghans in Haripur, Chitral, and Peshawar (n=3,189), 97% answered yes to the question, “Have you always lived here?”. Thus, in this commentary we reflect on what it means to provide support and solutions to protractedly displaced populations whose reality is one of protracted settlement, albeit without citizenship.

Our research’s focus on **‘displacement-affected communities’** is needed to recognise the diversity of people’s experiences in the communities people are displaced to. For example, people already resident there might have their own experiences of displacement. A more inclusive understanding of the ‘displacement-affected’ also decreases the distinction between people who are visibly displaced and those who are not, which in turn helps break down simplistic oppositional categories such as victim-rescuer, guest-host, receiver-giver. By doing so we challenge the image of the refugee or internally displaced person as being solely a passive recipient of assistance. By looking at the activities of the displacement-affected community as a whole, we create opportunities to witness the ways in which mobility, displacement and global connections create new possibilities for supportive interactions that operate both inside and outside traditional humanitarian assistance.

In Pakistan, data collected between September 2021 and December 2022 includes almost 3,200 household surveys (encompassing 26,600 individuals) and 150 oral history interviews. The data was collected in three field-sites that were purposively chosen to represent a ‘traditional’ refugee camp (Haripur Refugee Village), a more rural area (Chitral), and an urban area (the city of Peshawar). Importantly, the sample does not just include Afghans. Households were sampled from a selected geographical area; inevitably the Haripur site is majority-Afghan, but the other sites represent mixed communities affected by displacement, rather than solely Afghans. All three sites are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, home to the largest populations of Afghans in Pakistan.

¹ ‘Afghans in Pakistan’ encompasses Afghans living there in a range of circumstances, including refugees, labour migrants, and children born in Pakistan to Afghan parents – i.e., in various political and legal categories. Whilst the vast majority might be recognised as refugees in a socio-cultural sense, not all are registered with the Pakistan authorities with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, or Afghan Citizen (ACC) cards. This commentary is based on research that includes both documented and undocumented Afghans in Pakistan.

² Retrieved from the UNHCR resettlement data finder, December 2022 (<https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#7bRy>).



2. Key findings – First phase of the research project

In the following sub-sections, we outline findings from the first phase of the project, which illustrate aspects of the everyday life of protracted displacement – both challenges and sources of support, in the form of livelihoods and income, debt, and mutual aid, support and development, within Pakistan’s displacement-affected communities.

Livelihoods and income sources

In the household survey, we asked respondents to reflect on the question of, which was “most helpful” out of all the sources of income and/or support their household received. Income from employment or a small business were seen as the most helpful by almost half of households (28% and 23%, respectively), followed by government support (3% of households)³ and agriculture (3%). Only 0.1% of households ranked NGO or UN support most helpful, and only 1% of households (all but one of which were in Haripur Camp) ranked remittances as their most helpful source of support – although qualitative interview data suggests this may be artificially low, suggesting there may be some sensitivity about reporting remittances in survey responses. Of the respondents who were in employment, the vast majority were in elementary occupations, such as daily labourers; followed by those working in services, sales, or in craft-related trades.

The survey data indicates a very different context from popular imaginings of refugee and displacement-affected populations as the passive recipients of aid. Such representations are likely based on images and narratives from initial phases of displacement; and indeed, in the 1980s, Afghans in Pakistan did receive substantial international aid. Older interviewees remembered the support they received in the 1980s as substantial, whereas today they receive little to no financial or food aid. A combination of ‘donor fatigue’ common to protracted displacement situations, as well as the specific political context at the end of the Cold War, meant that international interest in providing aid to Afghan refugees has waned since the 1990s. Interviewees also raised the issue of decreasing sympathy, and even open hostility, from certain Pakistani public sector institutions since the Pakistan government began promoting repatriation to Afghanistan throughout the 2000s.

Whilst the Pakistan government still enables support in terms of land for camps and settlements, administered via the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR) and UNHCR, and there are still some NGO-organised support activities, Afghans in Pakistan are largely left to provide for themselves, within the socio-economic context of their displacement-affected communities.

“I have seen many transformations. I was brought up in this camp, had kids and now my kids are educated. I gave my children education here. And we had been provided with generous funding by the aid agencies, we lived off that help [in the 1980s].”

Middle-aged Afghan woman, Haripur, who is now reliant on loans and food from family, whilst she waits to receive remittances from her husband, a migrant labourer searching for work in the Middle East.

“Afghans passed through a lot of distress and trauma. At one time there was some facilitation provided to us. It was the time when there were rations [food aid] available. However, when the mujahideen succeeded and the Soviet Union disintegrated we got into hardship because all the aid stopped... Work and labour is hard to find. People are even satisfied to get just bread to feed themselves. Here in Chitral we don’t receive any aid. You ask about aid; there is no aid.”

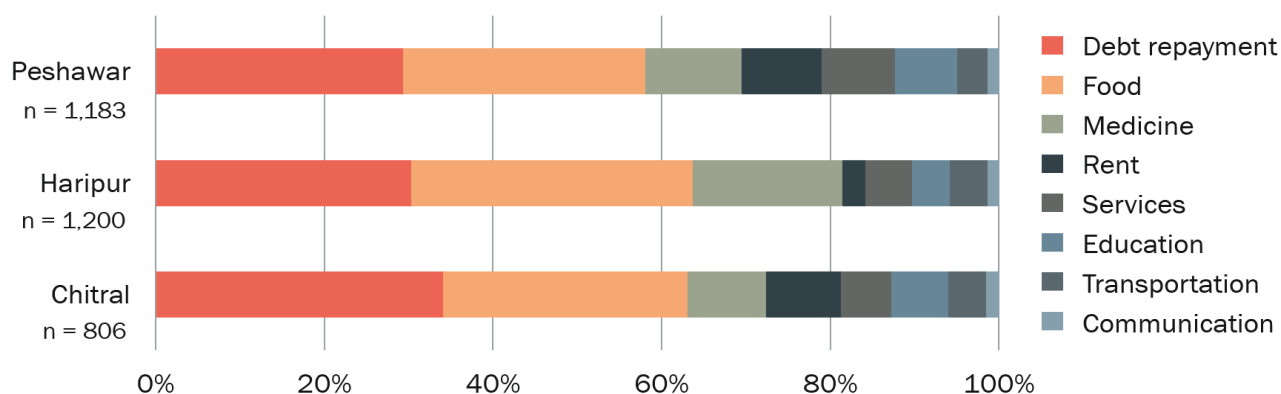
Middle-aged Afghan man, Chitral.

³ This was perhaps related to the survey timing, as some registered Afghan households had just recently received a COVID-support payment.

Debt

Debts – largely informal debts to family and friends – are an important survival tactic for many people in low-income settings, and our survey respondents are no different, with only 21% of households surveyed answering *no* to whether they had borrowed money in the previous 12 months. This is in comparison to 70% of the Pakistan population as a whole who had not borrowed any money in the previous 12 months, according to World Bank financial inclusion data.⁴ What is striking is just how prominent debt repayments are as a proportion of monthly household expenditure (see Figure 1); debt repayments (around 30% of monthly expenditure), are around the same proportion, or even higher, than food costs.

Figure 1: Proportion of monthly expenditure by category (n = 3,189 households)



Borrowing for health reasons was the most common explanation for taking on debt; this was particularly the case in Haripur, where 69% of debts were incurred for health reasons. Other reasons included investing in a small business (12%), taking out a mortgage for house or land (4%) and financing migration (3%). Over 80% of debts were taken from friends and family, 15% from shops (although the qualitative data suggests this category often overlaps with friends and family, as people were often borrowing from shopkeepers who were friends and family-members), and only 2% from formal sources. Borrowing money from formal sources is not common in Pakistan as a whole, but Afghans face additional barriers as it is only since 2019 that Afghans with Proof of Registration cards have even been allowed to open bank accounts, and by March 2022, only 9,997 such accounts had been opened.⁵

Debts can be both positive and negative: on the one hand, a debt can represent an opportunity and an investment in the future; on the other hand, it could represent a burden and a problem for the future, particularly if people are borrowing for day-to-day survival, or borrowing for a health-related emergency, which they are not sure they can repay. **The significance of family and friends (and local shops) as a source of loans, indicates a form of mutual financial support within and between communities.** In the next sub-section, we examine the idea of mutual aid within displacement-affected communities, both financial and non-financial.

Mutual aid, support and development

Mutual aid and peer-to-peer support is often overlooked in research and discussion about aid to displacement-affected communities. Formal and institutional responses, channelled through governments, the UN system or international NGOs have received much more attention. However, qualitative ethnographic work with displacement-affected communities has shown multiple ways in which people support each other, even in difficult circumstances. We examined this in our quantitative survey and found that the giving and receiving of mutual support between neighbours was common (see Table 1).

Over the last five years, 22% of survey respondents had received financial support from neighbours and 40% received non-financial support (e.g., childcare, food). The figures were very similar (20% and 38%, respectively) for *giving* support too, indicating a high degree of reciprocity. Unsurprisingly, given the often-precarious livelihoods of respondents, non-financial mutual aid (particularly sharing of food) was most common.

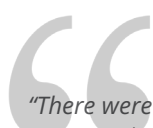
⁴ Retrieved from the World Bank Global Financial Inclusion DataBank, FINDEX, November 2022 (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/global-financial-inclusion>).

⁵ 'Questions for Oral Answers and Their Replies to Be Asked at a Sitting of the National Assembly' (Question from Ms Shagufta Jumani, answered by the Minister for State and Frontier Regions). Pakistan, May 12, 2022 https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/questions/627cc74474e15_516.pdf

Table 1: Support to and from neighbours in displacement-affected communities in Pakistan

	Chitral	Haripur	Peshawar	Total
Support received from neighbours				
Financial	197 (24%)	223 (19%)	287 (24%)	707 (22%)
Non-financial	420 (52%)	343 (29%)	521 (44%)	1,284 (40%)
Support given to neighbours				
Financial	197 (24%)	214 (18%)	234 (20%)	645 (20%)
Non-financial	402 (50%)	329 (27%)	496 (42%)	1,227 (38%)

In oral history interviews, we heard numerous ways in which Afghans had been supported by Pakistanis, and how Afghans had contributed to the development of new economic activities and business ventures, which had benefitted both Afghans and Pakistanis. That is not to say inter-group relations are always smooth in displacement-affected communities. However, our research does support the findings of other researchers⁶ working with Afghans in Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi, which found that relations between Afghans and Pakistanis were largely those of acceptance, and in certain cases more than that, with relations improving over time, which is perhaps unsurprising given the large numbers of Afghans who were born and grew up in Pakistan.



“There were troubles in the beginning wherever they [Afghans] settled in Pakistan. (...) house rents were increased. It was a sort of burden for the local people. But gradually they were a source of enhanced economic activity (...)”

[my hometown] was developed because of them. They initiated new activities. For example, they were the ones who brought with them the idea of digging wells for agriculture purposes [i.e., tube wells rather than just getting water from the spring]. They also brought the skills to grow tomatoes and so many other things (...) Agriculture was not that much developed before their arrival.”

Elder Pakistani man, Peshawar.



“These [Chitrali] people are very poor people themselves. How would they support us? We are still thankful because they allowed us to collect wood from the mountains they own. They had nothing to offer us. At the very beginning they would offer us food when we came to the camps. But they have no money and limited resources so they could not offer much. We have taken their timber and grazed the grass and they have never objected to that. We still do that.

The people of Chitral have shown sympathy to us. However, they couldn't offer money, they had no money themselves. The locals are still helpful in other ways. They would go with us to police stations for bail [good character reference], if needed. Who else will do that for us? The locals are very kind.”

Middle-aged Afghan man, Chitral.

Nevertheless, inter-group relations within displacement-affected communities can also be problematic. This is particularly the case where barriers to formal legal integration of Afghans in Pakistan create systems of dependency and unequal patron-client relationships. For example, Afghans are often reliant on Pakistani citizens for employment, and even more so for access to property and business ventures, because as non-citizens, most Afghans are unable to access many of the formal structures for business ownership. Some Pakistani interviewees admitted that one reason they were happy to employ Afghan labourers was because they could pay them less, and Afghan workers were less likely to complain about working conditions.

Whilst Afghan interviewees expressed their sincere gratitude for the support they had received from Pakistani friends, neighbours, colleagues, and employers, **they simultaneously expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities they had due to their legal limbo, and the insecurity they face in relation to Pakistan's authorities.** Younger Afghans, in particular, bemoaned the lack of access they had to government jobs or the professional sector, despite – in some cases – having received an education similar to that of their Pakistani peers. Qualitative interviews suggest that such frustrations, combined with the impossibility of finding any opportunities (or security) in Afghanistan, leads to aspirations for further migration, for example to Europe.

⁶ Alimia, S. Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022; Mielke, K. M., et al. Figurations of Displacement in and Beyond Pakistan: Empirical Findings and Reflections on Protracted Displacement and Translocal Connections of Afghans. TRAFIG Working Paper. Bonn: BICC, 2021.



3. Conclusions

After four decades, Afghan communities in Pakistan are established, resilient and an integral part of local communities, economies and social networks. They receive very little international aid (at least post-1980s), and have largely had to draw on their own, and community, resources. They are living precarious lives, having to rely on the Government of Pakistan continuing to provide permission to stay (or 'turning a blind eye' to their presence), working in too-often insecure employment, and borrowing/lending money to make it through difficult times such as illness or unemployment. Despite the difficulties faced, there are also numerous positive examples of mutual aid and solidarity within and between displacement-affected communities, as well as many contributions Afghans have made to local and regional economies, through the development of new business niches, and by introducing new agricultural skills and ideas.

Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that **despite Afghans' protracted settlement and relative socio-economic integration in Pakistan, they are still politically and legally displaced**, with all the pressures and precarity that brings with it. Securitisation, particularly that associated with the global war on terror, as well as negative narratives about undocumented migrants, has led to increased controls on Afghan geographical mobility between regions of Pakistan, which in turn limits their ability to access livelihood opportunities obtained through internal migration. Meanwhile, a government discourse of temporariness and the cyclical promotion of repatriation has led to Afghans feeling insecure about whether they will be allowed to stay in Pakistan long-term. As another study of Afghans (in Karachi and Lahore), points out, "we are thus speaking of a daily sense of insecurity and limbo",⁷ with all the negative effects that entails on mental health, wellbeing, and the ability to plan for the future.

Based on the data collected for the Protracted Displacement Economies project, we propose recommendations for international stakeholders with influence and operational activities in humanitarian and development fields relating to protracted displacement. These are categorised under three themes: 1) advocacy; 2) 'traditional' humanitarian and charitable assistance; and, 3) innovative interventions that can enhance existing protracted displacement economies.

Advocacy

- Advocate for **legal – not just social or economic – settlement of Afghans in Pakistan**, particularly for those who have lived in Pakistan for decades; giving legal stability to established socio-economically integrated communities and allowing them to purchase property and establish registered businesses independently.
- Advocate for a **reversal of the increased restrictions on Afghan mobility** increased since the international withdrawal from Afghanistan, giving Afghans in more remote areas (such as Chitral) access to urban health care, and enhancing internal labour migration opportunities.
- Encourage the government of Pakistan to explicitly acknowledge and **include the presence of documented and undocumented Afghan populations in public services and development planning provisions** such as health, education, water and sanitation.

Humanitarian and charitable assistance

- Given the high proportion of expenditure on debt repayments (and the significance of ill health as a reason for taking on debt), **subsidising better, more affordable, healthcare options** for people in displacement-affected communities, will free up household resources for more productive expenditure. This will require **partnerships between migration sector actors and health care service providers**, both public and private, in Pakistan.
- In Haripur Refugee Village there are no schools for girls above elementary levels, and for travel cost and security reasons, parents do not want their daughters to travel to government schools in Haripur itself. Research participants have invested what they can in their children's education, but with only limited resources and a pragmatic understanding of the current labour market, have focussed on boys' education. International aid could **match-fund existing community investment in boys' education with support for girls' schools**.

Interventions that enhance existing protracted displacement economies

- In recognition of the existing skills and activities within local economies, NGOs and other stakeholders should **procure services from and within displacement-affected communities**, to address pressing needs (e.g., the failure of current water supply systems to refugee settlements in Chitral) and support **reinvestment of income into local community needs**.⁸
- Extend seed funding and other resources to **enable the expansion of existing Afghan-led businesses**, to wider markets, and the setting up of new enterprises, where existing skills are apparent (this could be particularly aimed at supporting **women's participation in home-based paid labour**, something that our research participants emphasised as a need).

The primary data reported on in this commentary is from the [Protracted Displacement Economies](#) project, an international project involving data collection in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Myanmar and Pakistan. The project is mid-way through data collection, having collected 14,000 household surveys and hundreds of oral history interviews.

The project team is currently preparing for phase two of data collection (follow-up panel survey, and further qualitative interviews) and we welcome comments and suggestions from stakeholders. Please email them to Sunit Bagree (s.bagree@sussex.ac.uk).



4. Suggested further reading

Alimia, S. *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

Mielke, K. M., et al. *Figurations of Displacement in and Beyond Pakistan: Empirical Findings and Reflections on Protracted Displacement and Translocal Connections of Afghans*. TRAFIG Working Paper 7. Bonn: BICC, 2021.

Protracted Displacement Economies Project Website (www.displacementeconomies.org), where we will share publications and reflections from the project, as they emerge.

Zaman, T. *The 'Humanitarian Anchor': A social economy approach to assistance in protracted displacement situations*. ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper. London: ODI, 2018.

⁸ See a model for this in, Zaman, T. *The 'Humanitarian Anchor': A social economy approach to assistance in protracted displacement situations*. ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper. London: ODI, 2018.