



Ending the displacement trap: new opportunities for Afghans to achieve durable solutions

Suffering from the combined impact of severe drought and worsening insecurity, and host to unprecedented numbers returning from abroad, Afghanistan is in the grip of an acute humanitarian crisis. The policy discussions which have occupied 2018 have repeatedly acknowledged the complexity of responding effectively to displacement and have emphasised the necessity of focusing on solutions. While new policy commitments are to be welcomed there is little evidence that they are translating into concrete action where it's needed, on the ground in Afghanistan, where the numbers of displaced increase daily and the current humanitarian architecture is ill-equipped to do more than provide short-term emergency response to the displaced.

In the year in which we anticipate the signature of the Global Compact on Refugees, celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the fifth anniversary of the Afghan National IDP Policy, and mark 1,000 days since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Afghan Durable Solutions Platform (ADSP) calls upon the Afghan Government and the donor community to put their words into action, act upon policy promises, and support improved access to durable solutions for those affected by displacement.

For Afghan civilians life is dangerous and challenging, and becoming increasingly more so. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reports increasing numbers of civilian deaths in 2018 compared to the same period in 2017. The conflict, which this year has affected 32 out of 34 provinces across the country, has driven more than 250,000 from their homes. They join the 1.2 million already displaced by previous waves of violence.

In addition to struggling with a conflict which, on its own, would constitute a humanitarian emergency, the west of the country is beset by drought. There are currently

approximately 150,000 IDPs who are considered to be 'drought-affected', but these numbers should be treated with caution, as it is all but impossible to state categorically that conflict played no role in their displacement. The majority of these IDPs have poor access to shelter and services, are highly food insecure and are almost entirely reliant upon humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. Return to their areas of origin is often a distant hope, either because of the high levels of debt incurred while trying to survive initial stages of the drought, or because of the presence of ongoing violence.

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The Afghan 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 for Afghans affected by displacement. Drawing upon its members' operational presence in the region, the ADSP engages in constructive dialogue and evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displaced Afghans.

Added to the challenges posed by conflict and drought, more than 500,000 Afghans have returned this year from Iran, representing a massive increase on previous years. These numbers are thought to be driven by Iran's economic crisis and associated currency devaluation. Data collected at the border suggests that an increasing number of those returning are highly vulnerable, with approximately 20% in need of humanitarian support upon arrival. Recent research suggests that three-quarters of those returning to Afghanistan from abroad will be unable to return to their areas of origin, and instead face a future in continued displacement.

These crises all play out against the backdrop of the deterioration of the Afghan economy and ongoing currency devaluation and, as a result, it is never easy to identify conclusively the drivers of displacement. People do not live in a vacuum, affected solely by the one, headline-grabbing, crisis plaguing their area. Instead, displacement is more often driven by a confluence of factors which combine to create a sense of unsustainability; a convergence of vulnerabilities which eventually undermine resilience and erode coping mechanisms. Once displaced, people's needs increase. IDPs in Afghanistan are poorer, have reduced access to education and livelihoods, and face significantly increased protection risks as they struggle to make ends meet. Unable to access solutions to displacement, their plight further contributes to Afghanistan's instability and feeds the cycle of conflict.

Unfortunately, the mechanisms of the humanitarian response system are fundamentally ill-equipped to respond to the challenges posed by such a complex displacement context. The system enshrines the principle of response determined by the cause of the need, not its severity, hampering humanitarian agencies' ability to support the most vulnerable. It also inhibits the development of programming which would provide displaced people with a continuum of support, connecting traditional emergency response activities and innovative solutions-focused activities.

However, the fertile international policy environment provides an opportunity to bring about improved access

to solutions for Afghans affected by displacement, providing that the policies currently under discussion amount to more than empty words. To that end, efforts must be made to reinvigorate stalled policy processes, and ensure that they are translated into concrete and enforceable commitments for action.

Key to the success and coherence of this process is ensuring that the work of the Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiRec) is transparent, accountable and participatory. Beyond that, further work is required to enact the national IDP policy, which has existed in draft form since 2014 but is yet to be properly implemented. Similarly, while significant progress has been made at a national level to overhaul the deeply flawed petitions system used to guide aid distribution, there is little evidence of the impact of modifications on the ground, where the change is most required.

ADSP members have been actively involved in the discussions around the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and look forward to receiving the final text. The news that Afghanistan has signed up to participate in a pilot phase of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is also greeted with interest. However, despite the opportunity that these policies may present for displacement-affected communities in Afghanistan significant concerns remain, specifically around the GCR's emphasis on the role of voluntary repatriation. While preference for this solution is agreed in principle, it must not be accepted unquestioningly. In a context where asylum opportunities for Afghans are under sustained erosion, both in the region and in Europe, and despite the widely acknowledge deterioration of security conditions, such an emphasis is unjustifiable and should be publicly acknowledged as such.

Plans to use the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) as the basis of any forthcoming CRRF action plan should be treated with caution. While the SSAR represented progress by bringing together the regional governments in the quadripartite process, its lack of transparency and limited consultative scope mark it out as a policy whose time has passed. The adoption of the GCR and launch of the CRRF offers a golden opportunity

for a comprehensive reconsideration of the SSAR, reframing it as a strategy which complies with the whole of society commitments enshrined in the GCR.

Progress in all of these processes would signal both within Afghanistan and abroad that, in the year when the world recognises the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and adopts the first

major refugee policy development since 1967, the Afghan government and donor community are committed to delivering meaningful improvements for populations affected by displacement. Rarely has there been such a window of opportunity to engage with the issue of Afghan displacement. The confluence of opportunities for positive action is too great to ignore, and now is the time to put policy words into action.

Recommendations

To the Government of Afghanistan

- Capitalise upon current international policy momentum in order to reinvigorate flagging national policy processes relating to people affected by displacement.
- Ensure that the performance of mandated bodies such as DiRec is measured against clearly agreed milestones and deliverables, and that progress is made to fully implement the IDP policy.
- While the ADSP applauds the government's recent efforts to transform the petition system, further sustained effort is required to ensure that positive policy language translates into substantive developments at field-level.

To donor governments

- In advance of the roll out of the CRRF and in recognition of the concerns around its emphasis on voluntary return, reiterate the firm commitment to providing asylum and preventing the refolement of Afghans.
- Ensure a continued commitment to working with and for Afghans affected by displacement, in recognition of the fact that the GCR and CRRF represent the start of a process, and not its conclusion.
- Provide the required technical and financial support to ensure that policy commitments can progress beyond platitudes and deliver improved access to solutions for the displaced.

To UNHCR

- Ensure effective and meaningful participation from NGO and civil society partners when approaching the overhaul of the SSAR and development of the CRRF action plan for Afghanistan, ensuring that the multi-stakeholder approach is built upon strong foundations.