

Towards Self-Reliance and Sustainable Reintegration: Solutions for Afghan Refugees

Position Paper

(London Conference on Afghanistan, 3-4 December 2014)

1. Context

Over the past three decades the voluntary repatriation of Afghans has taken place in waves during moments of change when refugees considered that prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan had improved. These return movements have been overlaid with refugee outflows during the times of conflict. Since 2002 more than 5.8 million Afghan refugees have voluntarily returned home. About 4.7 million of them have been assisted through the largest voluntary repatriation operation in UNHCR's history. These returnees currently make up more than 20 per cent of the total population of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, after more than three decades of protracted displacement, millions of Afghans still remain outside of their country, constituting over 20 per cent of refugees globally and 40 per cent of the world's protracted refugee population. The overwhelming majority are hosted by only two countries – the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan remains the world's top refugee hosting country (1.6 million registered Afghan refugees) while the Islamic Republic of Iran is host to the largest urban refugee population globally (950,000 registered Afghan refugees). In addition, according to estimates, there are over 2 million undocumented Afghans in these two principal host countries. The majority of Afghan refugees are children and youth, a fact that underlines the vulnerability of the displaced communities but also points to the significant human capital that these new generations can offer in the context of the future reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

Key Facts

- 5.8 million returned to Afghanistan
- Every fifth Afghan in Afghanistan is a returnee
- One in five refugees worldwide is Afghan
- 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees in 86 countries
- 96% hosted by 2 countries: the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan
- More than 50% of Afghan refugees are children

Afghanistan's limited absorption capacity, linked to the overall underdevelopment in the country, has contributed to declining voluntary return trends and affected the ability of those who have already returned to reintegrate effectively. The lack of long-term opportunities has further driven tens of thousands of Afghans to move on further afield, including to Europe and Australia, in search of better prospects. With some 16,000 returnees, the rate of voluntary return hit a historical low in 2014, a 65 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2013. The main obstacles to sustainable return and reintegration, as identified by refugees and returnees, include limited access to basic services, livelihood opportunities, shelter and water, as well as the unpredictable security situation in some areas.

2. The Kabul Process and displacement issues: linkages

The Afghanistan Compact, adopted at the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2006 committed the Afghan Government and international community to provide rehabilitation and reintegration assistance to all refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) opting to return by end 2010, including through national development programmes, particularly in key areas of return. The sector strategy for refugees, returnees and IDPs was elaborated within the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) under Pillar VII – Social Protection. The importance of voluntary, safe, and gradual return of Afghan refugees in dignity, and the support of the international community to this process, was further reaffirmed in the **Kabul Communiqué** adopted at the 2010 Kabul Conference on Afghanistan and echoed in the **Communiqué of the 2010 London Conference as well as Conclusions/Final Declaration of the 2011 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan**.

The Tokyo Declaration adopted at the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan held in July 2012 recognizes that sustainable return and reintegration of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons is essential to security and stability; and makes a direct reference to the commitment of the international community to support the implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). This includes efforts to enhance the development and reintegration potential in Afghanistan to create communities that are viable in the long-term and to support return of refugees from neighboring countries.¹

3. London Conference: Rationale for engagement and key messages

Following a series of complex transitions in 2014, notably the first democratic handover of power, Afghanistan now enters a new chapter in its history. The establishment of the Government of National Unity offers a unique and unprecedented impetus to further advance the pursuit of solutions and support the fulfilment of the legitimate aspirations of Afghans outside the country to return and take active part in the rebuilding and reconciliation processes in their homeland. The open call of the newly elected President, Mr. Ashraf Ghani, for all Afghan refugees to return home, needs to be accompanied by targeted measures aimed at creating incentives for return and conditions conducive for sustainable reintegration. These measures should be an integral part of the National Priority Programs of the new Government. Such enabling conditions can only be formed through broad-based partnerships, regional cooperation, long-term international commitment and strong synergies between humanitarian and development interventions.

The upcoming London Conference offers an opportunity for the new Afghan Government and the international community to intensify efforts to address Afghanistan's long-standing displacement issues by placing them firmly within its broader development agenda.

¹ See provision 10 of the Tokyo Conference Declaration
http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/tokyo_declaration_en1.html

Against this background, UNHCR will seek to promote the following **key messages**:

- Afghans outside Afghanistan (particularly the youth) constitute untapped human capital and have to be seen as an integral part of the nation-building and reconciliation processes. In order to incentivize their return, anchor returnees' (distinct) skill sets as part of the country's asset base, and stabilize returnees within their communities, it is imperative to ensure their inclusion in the development planning and programming at local, provincial and national/sector levels.
- The National IDP Policy, endorsed by the Government of Afghanistan in November 2013 and formally launched in 2014, provides an all-encompassing framework for the Government to address the needs and promote solutions for displaced persons within the country. The policy pursues an area based approach targeting the communities in which IDPs live and envisages the development of action plans at the Provincial level. Support for the implementation of the IDP policy will further contribute to the development of areas of high return and benefit entire communities, including returnees.
- Sustainable return and reintegration of Afghan refugees is key to the future stability and security of Afghanistan and the sub-region. Unprepared return without prospects for full and effective integration can trigger further displacement, constitute a disproportionate burden on local communities with meagre resources, induce tensions and prompt resort to negative coping strategies including radicalization of dispossessed people, particularly the youth.
- The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)² provides a regional multi-year framework for solutions, developed by the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, with the support of UNHCR, and endorsed by the international community. In order to operationalize the Strategy and mobilize donor support, in 2014 the concerned Governments, in cooperation with more than 50 humanitarian and development partners, developed country specific portfolios of projects. The implementation of the next phase of SSAR (2015-2017) will require reinvigorated engagement and support of the international community.

Proposals for action:

- Aligning the provision of development assistance to Afghanistan with the National Priority Programs (NPPs) and ensuring that returnees and displaced fully benefit from these programs by channeling investments into both rural and urban areas of high return. Relevant NPPs include, inter alia:

² The Solutions Strategy and the country specific portfolios of projects developed in support of its implementation are available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4f9016576.html>

Human Resource Development Cluster: *Facilitation of Sustainable Decent Work through Skills Development and Market Friendly Labour Regulation; Education for All; Expanding Opportunities for Higher Education; Capacity Development to Accelerate National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan; Health for All;*

Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster: *National Water and Natural Resource Development; National Comprehensive Agriculture Production; National Rural Access Programme;*

Infrastructure Development Cluster: *Urban Planning Technical Assistance Facility;*

- Utilizing the National Solidarity Program (NSP) which has a significant potential to reach returnee and internally displaced communities and contributes to their sustainable reintegration due to its wide national coverage, community-based and participatory approach, as well as credibility among donors, service providers and beneficiaries;
- Prioritizing community-based (bottom-up) investments and quick impact projects with high visibility benefiting both returnees and local communities in areas of high return;
- Enhancing the return grants with provision of an additional reintegration package to each Afghan (refugee) returnee family to strengthen their coping mechanisms and kick start the reintegration process, with subsequent dividends for local economies;
- Exploring existing funding mechanisms such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and new partnerships (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc.) to support reintegration efforts;

4. Proposed engagement:

UNHCR will seek inclusion of the above key messages into the main discussions and outcomes of the Conference and its side-events, including through advocacy efforts with key actors throughout the preparatory process.

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